

Chapter 1: The Haj Festival

The setting desert sun cast a polished bronze glow across young Nasser's sweaty face. He paused, a ragged soccer ball in his hands, to take in the glory. "Rozhdahat" he called to his friend Maher in the hard dirt clearing ("The sun is going down"). "Time to go home." "Epedstorakhodey!" Maher and two other nine-year-olds called out in unison to the majesty of the setting sun (by God's permission). It was a term of reverence to God's law expressed to this majestic symbol of their God who brought both life and death to them, often in rapid sequence.

They lived in Kocho village, a small smattering of mud-brick homes about 18 kilometers south of the town of Sinjar and about 30 kilometers from the base of Mount Sinjar in northern Iraq near the Syrian border. Sadaam Hussein had forced their grandparents away from the safety of the mountain to this land to keep them exposed to his power. It was the most southerly Yezidi village surrounding Mount Sinjar, and the closest to the desert and the Arab south. The muqtar (sub-mayor) of the village counted 1,826 residents in Kocho that year, but 500 had gone to work in other towns or sought safer places, leaving only around 1,300 people. Most were Yezidis of the Mereed caste, Zindini clan, engaged in farming.



The view of Mount Sinjar from the roof of a school in Kocho, previously used by ISIL, but now abandoned after the militants were flushed out by Shiite militias helped by Yazidis.

Nasser kicked the ball for the last time that day in the direction of his one-story flat-roofed mud brick home and his brother Habib and friend Maher chased after it to retrieve it. As long as the boys were chasing the ball they thought of little else. Nasser and Maher dribbled the ball toward the rice and lamb that was being set on large round stainless steel trays on the floor cloth in their living rooms. They didn't think of the diced tomato or cucumbers, the slivers of onion, sour pickles, or large disks of fire-baked flat bread that would be placed beside the lamb, but they would enjoy those too. Parting to their separate homes at last, Nasser thought for a moment about the sheepskin he had tended earlier in the day, and how he would keep it away from the wild dogs on the mountain during the night.

He jumped the last concrete step into their walled garden, breathing in deeply the scent of the pink-yellow peace roses in bloom along the walkway. His bare feet touched down on every third flat-stone in line with the front door, sending skinny chickens fleeing in all directions. His older brother Habib was on the porch filling an ancient clay

pitcher with water for dinner from the large round metal tank at the corner of the house. There was also a tank on the roof, but this lower one filled from the source by gravity and was more reliable and convenient, though it had less pressure. Nasser splashed some sun-warmed water over his hands, feet and face and shook his hands as he entered the house.

Nasser caught just a glimpse of his older sister Ala'a, Habib's twin, as she carried an armload of freshly cooked bread disks from the clay-mud oven outside the kitchen toward the living room. The twins were three years older than him, and dominated the banter of childhood around the house. There was an economy of speech in their home, by tradition, and emotional rants were infrequent. Nasser mostly just listened, not because he thought he had lower status than others, but because there was some greater unspoken need for the twins to interact verbally with each other throughout the day.

His father, Farhan, was already sitting cross-legged on the floor in his usual position, back against a large firm upholstered cushion opposite the television. The walls were rough sun-baked mud bricks, rather than the smooth painted plaster the neighbors had, so the cushions were important. They would plaster the walls at some point, but it was not a priority for a young family with little cash income.

Farhan was sometimes employed building with concrete blocks in Suleimaniya, but other times tended his sheep, walking every morning to his duty, clicking, whistling, and cooing at them as his dogs barked and chased them into submission. There was always grass there waiting for the sheep, twice green and twice brown throughout each year as the seasons passed. The brown months were in the majority. This was the primary work in Sinjar District, and an army of shepherds dispersed into the flat planes in view of Mount

Sinjar with their donkeys and their dogs each morning in search of fresh grass and returned each evening almost year-round. Only when temperatures dropped and snow fell in January and February did they house the sheep in short mud-brick enclosures to keep them warm and dry and safe from big wild dogs.

Nasser's mother, Shereen, brought the large platter of rice with a few pieces of lamb on top into the room hurriedly and bent over almost double to set it in the middle of the floor-cloth in one swift, seamless motion. Her lower center of gravity balanced her in this task in a way no man could duplicate, which was taken as a natural law that made this her portion of the daily work. There was a precise efficiency about everything they did, worked out over thousands of years of experience in that singular location.

Rising up easily, Shereen wiped oil and water from her hands onto the apron covering her floor-length white dress as she left the room. Her dress was made from a single piece of cloth with a crew neck and long sleeves, gathered at the waist. All Yezidi women wore similar dresses unless they wore the brown of young widows or the black of older widows. She had just one more dish to bring, the ripe black olives—small ones, not pitted, from the trees in the field.

Soon they were all sitting together. The last to join was Farhan's elderly mother in her white dress, moving slower than Shereen, heavier, prematurely aged, joints aching from decades of work, and finding a cushion to break the shock of her drop to the floor. They always sat in the same position at dinner, day after day. But they did not always have lamb. This was a special dinner though its significance was not something the children knew. It was the Haj festival, celebrated by Muslims more than Yezidis, in the time the Muslim pilgrims go to Mecca each year, but the Yezidis employed by Muslims were given the day off, and celebrated that release with a

feast of their own. It was the nature of their life, to take their leave from Muslims who patronized their labor pool, their sheepfolds, and their freshly baked bread while quietly despising them for their religion and periodically welcomed extremists who attacked them with genocidal campaigns.

Lamb was too precious for them to eat often. Instead the lambs were sold routinely in the hillside open-air market on Fridays, starting at 5 am and lasting until noon to beat the heat of the summer sun. Each man would stake out the sheep he had for sale there, and barter with enthusiasm with his friends, neighbors and local Arabs throughout the morning. The cadence was slow, the tenor soft, hands touching elbows intermittently, face to face, until the final “tamaam,” meaning “agreed.”

The food was eaten with bits of bread used as pinchers against small pieces of lamb and rice. Farhan spooned clear lamb broth from a bowl and laid it over a portion of the rice on the platter immediately before drawing it up in the piece of flatbread, over his considerable moustache and into his mouth, grains of rice falling onto the floor-cloth below. The broth helped the rice stick to the lamb and the bits of bread raised to the mouth. Potatoes, pickles, and parsley were side dishes. He ate quickly and enthusiastically, as was their way. If any guest were present, the men would eat first, then women and children in another room. But there were no guests that night. There was no discussion as they focused on eating, then rose to wash their hands again while the women cleared the dishes and the boys swept rice from the floor and shook out the floor-cloth before rinsing it with water.

Kocho was a dusty dry flat collection of simple mud brick houses between the mountain and the desert with little green to please the eyes. Shereen’s parents lived eight kilometers away in Hatemiyah

Village. These two villages were part of a string of small villages that circled Mount Sinjar as a necklace draped over a sacred shrine. In danger the Yezidis would always flee up its steep banks to their several historic temples, or walk the road that meandered up to the top through welcoming valleys. Other Yezidis lived closer to Kurdish or Arab (or mixed) cities or had fled abroad, but these Sinjari Yezidis held more closely to the mountain and to their traditions.

Dinner was quickly over, and Farhan focused more on the television, watching a Syrian channel that offered news in his native Kurmanji dialect of the Kurdish language. There was talk of war in the news and in the village, of the emergence of ISIS and its extremist form of Islam. Yezidis always lived in fear. It would spread among them like waves of wildfire unchecked by any collection of facts or careful analysis. And the worst news, real or imagined, was always about their mortal enemy, extremist Muslims. Nasser and his friend Maher paid little attention to these matters. They did not live in the world of ideas and felt safe enough in their own routines and among the people of the village.

Their entire village, and most of the region, was populated with adherents to the Yezidi religious/ethnic group. They had ideas that were consistent with Hebrew, Muslim, and Christian traditions and some unique to their own tradition. They worshipped one God and various angels, chief among them Taus, the “peacock angel” whom, they believed, God had put in charge of the earth. They had no concept of a devil, or bad angels, though the Muslims and local Christians often falsely accused them of worshipping the Devil. Some angels were “above” and some “below” but none were malevolent toward humans or rejected by God. They believed in a hell that is for punishing bad people and a heaven for rewarding good people after death. But the angels that are down were not being punished

themselves; they were good angels administering punishment to the bad people. At one brief period around the time of the creation, they believe that Taus refused to honor Adam because God had told originally told him to worship Him alone, but soon the misunderstanding was resolved, and he honored Adam to a lesser degree than God, according to God's explanation. This was similar to Islamic teachings. Jesus was resurrected by Taus three times, they believe, and was the Son of God, soon to return to the earth, but He was not seen as their "Savior."

Yezidis had many rules such as not eating lettuce, broccoli, or cabbage, not wearing clothes that had been worn by Christians or Muslims, not allowing non-Yezidis to sew the necklines of dresses, not wearing v-necked garments, and others. They had temples, special feasts, days they didn't bathe, traditions of circumcision before marriage, killing sheep to share with neighbors for funerals, circumcisions, healings, and weddings. They were treated as second class citizens by most Kurds and Iraqi Christians, and lived often in isolated villages.

The Kurds called the Yezidis Kurds and the Arabs called them Arabs, so the ethnicity listed on their IDs depended on which of the two ethnic groups was controlling Yezidi lands around Mount Sinjar at the time. Yezidis were never given much control of their own lands. They were divided into higher and lower castes and tribes. One could not convert to their religion, or marry into their religion, nor could children born of one Yezidi adherent and one non-adherent be allowed to live in their houses or villages. They had spiritual, political, and ethnic leaders, some of whom were hereditary, living abroad, respected and criticized at the same time.

Yet there had been cases where the blood of Yezidis was mixed with that of other peoples. Farhan's family, like most of those in Kocho,

descended from a mixture of Armenian Christians fleeing the Turkish genocide and local Iraqi Yezidis who had given the Christians shelter. They had fair complexions. Their men usually had big mustaches but no beards. They sometimes wore blue clothes, which was eschewed by other Yezidis. As a result, other Mereeds were not likely to marry them. They could not marry people from the higher Sheik or Peer castes, but they could marry Faquiers. If they met a Sheik or Peer, male or female, who was 13 or older, they would have to kiss his hand and give him a little money if they had some.

Muslim extremists disliked Yezidis more than Christians because Mohammed left a question mark about the status of Christians, less disfavored than Yezidis as they were “people of the book” and strict monotheists. Because Yezidis were not able to produce any “book” of their own, and had no affinity for Hebrew, Christian, or Muslim books, and seemed to worship a multiplicity of angels as much as a single God, they were subject to annihilation by Muslim extremists. Yezidis counted 73 genocides against them by Muslims though there was no written history to verify that number. In every case, they had fled to the top of Mount Sinjar from their small villages at its base when attacked.

Yezidis had been introduced to the world, and perhaps defined, by a single act of horror that gripped the world for an instant in April 2007. A young Yezidi girl, Du'a Khalil Aswad, a 17-year-old living in Bashiqa village which had a mix of Muslims, Christians and Yezidis, had started talking to a young Muslim boy, and the two stayed out too late one evening. They realized that they could not return home at that hour without her incurring the wrath of her father, and if he realized she was with a Muslim boy, she could face death. They decided to seek refuge with the village Muqtar in hopes he would protect them.

It was August 1, 2014. As they waited there and the Muqtar sent for her father to resolve the situation, word got quickly out in the village. Villagers, including some of her relatives, incensed at this major infraction, had gathered as a mob outside the Muqtar's house. As the mob pressed the Muqtar, he caved, and handed the couple over to them. The boy was banished from the village, and Du'a was dragged and taunted through the streets. When finally surrounded and castigated, her dress was pulled off her and men began throwing stones at her. In a final act of filmed brutality, one of her relatives picked up a concrete block and smashed her head. Uniformed police were standing by watching, doing nothing, in assent. Her body was tied behind a car and dragged through the streets, then was buried with the remains of a dog, then later dug up to check her virginity before being buried again.

The video of this act, made possible by the recent advent of cell phone technology, was spread around the community and made it quickly to the international news as sensational violence always does. The world was understandably shocked and horrified that such primitive violence still existed. Honor killing had been long present in the world, but never before filmed in such graphic detail.

I was in the area at the time vetting organizations to receive US State Department (USAID) funding for "access to justice" projects, and briefly visited a local Yezidi organization. In the interests of assuring diversity among the selected organizational partners, I was anxious to fund this particular Yezidi group. Everything was going well with the site visit until one of the leaders showed me a three inch binder full of photos of teenage Yezidi girls who had been stoned to death. I looked at only the first two pages to see the trend then closed it. They had seen their role as humanitarians to chronicle these cases. But the cover of the binder read "Suicides." Incredulous, I asked if

these girls had picked up rocks and thrown them at themselves until they were dead. The man rather sheepishly demurred, and the site visit was over. I would not recommend them for funding. The images are still stuck in my mind. They were part of the cover-up that helped the perpetrators avoid punishment by local authorities.

Several of the youths I spoke to had heard of such stoning deaths in the Sinjar village of Tel Azer. They detailed cases very similar, where Yezidi girls were talking with Muslim boys, and perhaps wanted to run away with them. More often the boys were banished and the girls were stoned, usually by the relatives of the family, sometimes led by the father or an older brother.

The outrage in the world over this behavior changed the Yezidi community, and such stonings became rare events after the story of Du'a was widely circulated. Such incidents were not entirely out of context in the broader population, as the coroner from the Muslim city of Erbil published in that year that 170 women had died from being doused with fuel and lit on fire. Medical authorities documented in that same year that 70% of women in Erbil were circumcised, most of them with radical circumcisions. "Honor killing" (perhaps more appropriately called "dishonor killing") was a widespread Kurdish Muslim, Arabic Muslim, and Yezidi practice though Christians were rarely practicing such barbarism in that time.

The distinction between the religious groups killing girls was that the Muslims were burning, while the Yezidis were stoning, perhaps due to traditions that were thousands of years old. Underlying this act for both groups was the hatred between ethnic and religious groups. The Muslims called the Yezidis devil-worshippers, and the Yezidis were not adequately countering this error through the modern means of story-telling that had come to the world through electronic media.

The world saw Yezidis as a primitive and barbaric people at that time. People couldn't shake the video of Du'a's stoning death from their minds, if they had seen it. Perceptions would soon be tempered, however, as the reality of their constant victimization by extremist Muslims, which drove them to live in the isolated areas, became widely known.

It was the hottest part of the summer, and 104 degrees Fahrenheit (40 Celsius) the day when Shereen and her family were preparing their meal before the holiday. Only in the nights and mornings were the temperatures tolerable in late summer. At other times, one needed assistance from water coolers, fans, and the shade of concrete roofs and lingering cool of their masonry walls and floors from the night to remain conscious. Clothes were draped over the head and entire body against the sun. They were made of light cotton to allow air flow beneath. Women wore a scarf but not a hijab. Modesty was enforced by the sun, and seared into Yezidi culture.

Only after the sun set did people begin to fill the streets and trade stories about dangers that were being seen in the broader area. Farhan's fears that the extremist militant group Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) was preparing to attack the region were real. The overthrow of Saddam Hussein and his Baathist Party in Baghdad by U.S. and coalition forces had thrown Sunni Muslims out of leadership, and put Shia Muslims in, with their ties to Shia Iran. Cities like Mosul, Iraq, and surrounding villages, predominantly Sunni Muslim, despised their new Shia overlords, and longed for a return to Sunni leadership. ISIS, an outgrowth of several small extremist militant groups left over from the Gulf War, was Sunni, so Mosul and the Arabs living in villages and towns on the southern desert side of Mount Sinjar were favorable to them as a liberating force.

Men and older boys from the village kept vigil at night with their old Kalashnikovs just outside the perimeter of Kocho, taking turns, without salary. This seemed enough to the children to keep them safe. It both alerted them that danger was in the world and led them to believe that it would not touch them. But there would be no battle that day, and the family went to sleep with a separate peace even as the enemy was mobilizing to attack the entire region.

There was a picnic on the mountain the next day, August 2nd, to celebrate the Haj Eid work release. Children loved feasts and flocked to them, young people sought courting opportunities in them, and a few older ones joined to reminisce about their youthful festivals there, to dip their feet in cool streams, and to assure that the Yezidi traditions were followed among the youth.

Nasser was the first to awaken that morning, after his mother, who was always baking bread at sunup. The large sack of wheat flour was a ration from the government, and she added yeast, cooled water, and salt. She first patted it into round balls to and covered it with a damp cloth to allow the yeast to leaven, then drew them out one by one, stretched them over a padded round board, and slapped them against the inside wall of the round oven heated by coals inside at the bottom. Then she used tongs to draw them out when they were cooked.

Birds were at Nasser's window that morning, in harmonious chatter with the chickens, helping him win the race against the sunrise which they had already won for themselves. The sounds of morning were programmed into his brain as part of his own biological clock, and he seldom ignored them. He slept in his nylon football shorts and his hand-made off-white sleeveless cotton undershirt, which was obligatory for Yezidis. His socks had been washed out the night

before and were hanging up to dry nearby, and his shoes had been set outside the front door.

Nasser joined his mother outside in the cool of the morning. He needed that private moment with her. Little was said, and just a glance from her eyes and a quick upturn in the corners of her mouth were enough. Yezidis generally did not hug or hold their children much above the age of a toddler. This left older children hungry for affection. Nasser was Shereen's youngest, her "little bird," so the bond between them was tender though no longer physical.

Shereen had prepared some kuliches, small sweet pastries with cinnamon, coconut, or walnuts inside, for her children to take to the mountain. Nasser was first to sample them that morning, and was careful not to take too many in his pocket cloth so there would be some for the festival to share with his siblings Habib and Ala'a. He collected his slingshot and a few pebbles he had saved in hopes of adding a bird or two to their lunch as much as for the sport of it. Then he was off. He knew where to meet up with Habib and Ala'a on the mountain later, beside the temple that was the hub of activity.

His best friends were gathering nearby under the only tree in the neighborhood, and keeping the same ragged football airborne between them in their little circle for as long as they were able. This was the most important ritual in their lives, the evening matches they played running a close second as they involved boys who were not as close to them but had the greater intensity of "battle." They feared failing in front of the better skilled older boys, so this little circle of younger boys was safer. This little football circle was reconstructed quickly in any location where they might find themselves together with a football on a relatively flat surface. It was more important to them than worship in any Yezidi temple on the mountain.

Ala'a was up next and after washing her face and hands and combing her long sandy sun-streaked hair she joined her mother in the garden, sliced some cheese and milked the family goat to prepare yoghurt. She fell easily into this daily ritual as if it were effortless. She didn't need to be pressed to do it, and she did not resent that the boys left this to her. At the age of twelve, she had already accepted the idea that females had different roles than males. Some of the female tasks she preferred to male tasks, like gathering wood for the bread oven, or going to the shop to fetch needed items, or tending the sheep. Girls were kept closer to home at all ages, and their lack of experience in the world gave them a shyness that was considered a virtue in their culture. All children, especially girls went to cities rarely or never.

Habib was up before his twin sister Ala'a was finished with her chores. Slower to rise and slower to his morning tasks, he wore the entitlement of maleness as if it were already familiar to him. He stretched more in the mornings as he had more muscles than Ala'a and used them more during the day. He yawned more because he was up later playing games on his little phone, which Ala'a might also have done if she had a phone herself. It was not an expensive phone, so the games were limited, but they were still an antidote to the boredom of village life. He washed less, and spent little time on his hair, as it was closely cropped, even shaved on the sides.

Habib arrived to eat, hunger already churning in his stomach. He burned more energy than Ala'a in the day and even in the night when his pulse remained somewhat elevated from the day's exercise, so by morning he was famished. He knew Nasser had already taken his own share of kuliches, so he was not shy about taking more than half those remaining, eating just two with his morning bread, yogurt and tea. He would just sit and rest awhile, as his friends were never as

eager as the younger boys to rise up in the morning. His lean body draped over two cushions in the living room where Ala'a had placed the yoghurt and where Shereen had placed bread. Tea would be on its way soon, and he would rise to receive it as a gesture of appreciation though he would not make the tea himself. That was his grandmother's work, and everyone had a unique role to play.

Farhan returned from his night watch on the perimeter of the village and would sleep that morning, leaving the sheep in the care of a relative in a carefully arranged job-share on which the lives of several families depended. The sheep were everything to them, wool for clothing, mattresses, pillows and blankets, milk for babies, yoghurt for others, cash for items from the shop, and occasionally meat for festivals. Chicken was more often eaten in the home than sheep, if meat was on the menu at all. Chicken was half the price of lamb. Their diet was light in meat protein but supplemented by both brown and white beans.

Farhan, Habib, Shereen and Ala'a were briefly together for their breakfast. Farhan's mother was busy with the tea and joined them later. She wore a frown that was as much weariness as sadness, though she was basically content with her lot in life, and enjoyed her many children and grandchildren. Shereen had been bought into the family in the arranged marriage with her cousin, so she was also related to her mother-in-law by blood. Her price had been half the current rate of \$1,200 per woman. Men were allowed several wives but usually could not afford more than one. Family ties were close, and did not stray from their particular tribal group and caste. As their gene pool was shrinking, congenital deformities, weakness of structure, and propensity to illness were becoming more common.

They talked of the festival that day, who was going, where they were going, conveyed messages to cousins who would be there through

Habib and Ala'a (as phones were not yet widespread among them), and packed a cloth for lunch with some bits of food to enjoy and share with others at the festival. Shereen asked Ala'a to be sure to meet her teenage cousin Nisreen there.

The twins were on their way before their father rose from breakfast to find his bed to recover from guarding the village at night, and Shereen and her mother-in-law cleaned up from the breakfast and settled into cleaning the house and washing the clothes. Shereen then busied herself with mending clothes by hand, and sewing a new undershirt for Nasser, as his had been so darkened and torn by his rough play at football.

Ala'a could not travel without Habib or her father. Her brother's role was mostly to preserve and protect her from other boys. She could talk to anyone along the way, boys and girls, so long as Habib was present and the boys were respectfully separate from her spatially and not allowed to speak to her freely. Any transgression from another boy would be met with a darting stare and furrowed brow from Habib, but would seldom rise to a level that required his verbal rebuke or physical challenge.

Their group of friends grew as they walked further from home toward the cars and trucks that would take them to the mountain. Their chatter and movements increased as they went. Boys had no particularly macho style, and were not mature at age 12, often not until 15 or 16, so they were somewhat separate from the girls joining them. Romances were driven by societal expectation more than hormones in that age-group, were held more at a distance, and were more the subject of within-gender revelations than between-gender interaction. Girls matured at 14 usually, nearly 2 years later than average in the world, and their drives were almost fully suppressed by strong societal norms.

Ala'a had noticed a boy who was slightly older at 13, and sometimes cast a glance his way if she could do so without detection, but Habib had not noticed any particular girl yet. There was a hint of excitement within her at the possibilities for the future, but she knew little about the ways of a boy with a girl. Habib knew more, in the skewed ways that boys think, as it was a subject of comical discussion and prodding among boys. The boy Ala'a noticed was with them that day, and her thoughts of him pressed her further away from him spatially, as if to hide her feelings behind the bodies of her friends. Apart from this distraction, she was taken up with her girlfriends and their rapid chatter about older girls and their admiration of various boys.

They travelled in the back of trucks going in the same direction toward the mountain. The hills gave way to steep climbs as they approached the mountain along the road to the temple. There were few cars passing, few Yezidis could afford cars, and walking up a portion of the mountain was part of the historic culture that was cheapened by the use of vehicles. Donkeys were busy with the shepherds, so they were also not used for the festivals, as sheep could not be left without shepherds, donkeys, and dogs in the daytime. But it was noticeable how the teenage shepherds drove their bands of sheep a bit closer to the road where the girls were passing on the festival day, and closer to the temple where the people would be gathered. They longed to be part of the activities, but this was their turn to be with the sheep.

The temple itself was a small building with a star-shaped cone above, able to hold few people at once. The grounds were already filling with people, resting on blankets under the many trees, cooling their feet in the downstream waters, or milling about in small bands to see who and what there was to see. The upstream waters were

preserved for drinking and washing dishes in a carefully arranged tradition that everyone knew.

Nasser and the other little boys were venturing further up the mountain in back of the temple in search of adventure, physical tests, and birds to shoot with their slingshots. The birds usually won in these battles, but the boys never tired of trying. They would descend to the temple only when the crowds grew larger, to feel the excitement generated by the large crowd, and to watch the dancing from a distance as they chatted and fidgeted with their slingshots and bits of rock they had collected for ammunition.

The leader of the line dance was an enthusiastic older teenage boy with few social skills and a willingness to embarrass himself to get attention from the girls even from a distance. He whipped the shimmering red cloth rapidly in circles over his shoulder and lifted his knees up higher than most of the other boys as if to encourage them to get into the spirit of the dance. A less socially anxious boy might have chosen a green cloth to swirl and raised his knees only to a moderate height.

The music was loud, facilitated by a battery-operated bullhorn, a florid song belted out in a nasal tone by a heavy middle-aged man, accompanied by a drummer and two men playing the tambour, a long-necked seven-string instrument. Bolder older boys would break into the line next to a girl they thought they might like, and were rewarded with her hand, if not her eyes. All looked straight forward, with an oddly dour expression, as if they were afraid to show that they were enjoying it, or perhaps because these infrequent events were still unnerving in the sudden proximity they afforded to boys and girls. Feet, knees, and shoulders moved in an intricate pattern well practiced by every teenager among their same sex friends before participation in dancing with the opposite sex.

The dancing and music formed the most engaging entertainment these youths would experience. Even if they didn't dance themselves, they were as near to it as they could be, walking around in small groups. Nasser was with Maher and another friend, moving in and out along the periphery, their hunger growing in their bellies.

Ala'a caught a glimpse of her cousin Nisreen through the crowd, and made a bee-line to her. The girls embraced and kissed one another repeatedly on the cheeks. They were very close friends as well as cousins, but more like sisters. Nisreen was 17, and in her last year of high school. She loved school, and was very studious. She wanted to prepare for college, which was unusual for Yezidi girls. The five years age difference between them didn't matter to them.

"Shereen said she wants to sew you a new dress," Ala'a reported. She called her mother by her first name, as Yezidis often did.

"She will go with you to choose the fabric." "What color do you like?"
"Do you want shiny material?"

"That's nice of her to think of making me a dress," Nisreen said politely, "But I don't really need one right now, I have this one."

The dress she was wearing was nylon, patterned with curved lines of green and black, floor length and long-sleeved with a round collarless neck. It had no sparkles or bright trim, as she did not want to stand out from the crowd when it was made for her by her own mother the previous year.

"But why don't you want a new dress?" Ala'a asked, for she would love a new dress for herself.

“I know Shereen wants me to marry, so does my mother, but I want to focus on my schooling” she explained, though she would not say such a thing to her mother or to Shereen.

“I want a green velvet dress,” Ala’a thought out loud. “With a green and gold belt, and gold around the neck and long sleeves.” “Don’t you think green and gold look nice together?”

“Oh yes,” Nisreen said quickly, assured that anything Ala’a chose was the very best, prettiest, and most appropriate.

Shereen had wanted to encourage Nisreen to marry, and a new dress might make her think of boys, and make her more attractive to boys. But in Nisreen’s mind, there would be time for marriage later. Now she wanted to focus on her governmental exam for seniors. The score from that exam would be used as the sole criterion by which the government would offer her a place in a particular university and one or two options for academic programs. She hadn’t decided on a career, but would take whatever was the highest career she could achieve with her exam scores. The youths with the highest scores could be physicians, but Yezidi students had poor schools and fewer well educated teachers, so their chances of competing well against Arab students or Kurdish students were usually limited.

Nasser, Habib, Ala’a, and Nisreen met up in their usual place under a big tree when it was finally time to eat. There was some sharing of food between families, but it always started with family groups together opening their own food. Rice, couscous and bread were staples for any meal. There were special foods for the feast, cupa, dolma, briani, and pacha. Cupa was sheep meat, onions and spices inside round bread boiled in water. Dolma was lamb, tomato, onions and spices boiled inside hollowed onions, potatoes, squash, tomatoes, eggplant, and grape leaves. Briani was yellow rice with

herbs, almonds, and bits of lamb. Pacha was either boiled sheep heads or portions of sheep meat and entrails stuffed into sheep intestines and boiled. The brain of the sheep was a specialty food often taken by the men. There was more than enough food for all, despite the great poverty of the village.

Habib was the more talkative one at the age of twelve, and guided Ala'a in assuring the food was spread out in the best way. "Put more briani in this dish" he offered, wanting to be sure his cousin could reach it conveniently. "Do you like the eye?" Habib asked Maher, who had joined him for the lunch. "Yes, but I can't chew it, I have to just swallow it whole," he explained, before demonstrating with an exaggerated gulp. Habib did the same, and they both laughed as Ala'a's face wrinkled with disgust. Girls sometimes liked to eat the eyes, but she didn't. Habib had first choice as the oldest male in the group.

"Don't spill the soup," Habib told Nasser, who was not as careful as his brother thought he should be. His hands were small, and the soup bowl was heavy. No spoon was provided, so they just poured it over the briani near the edge of the platter, and Nasser had missed his target a bit, spilling soup on the ground. Nasser never defended himself, as there was no point. Habib would always end with the upper hand in any competition.

Instead, Nasser turned to Maher, and engaged him, "Barcelona is the best!" "No, Real Madrid is better!" Maher said, and they began to punch each other in a sporting way and laugh at their artificial rivalry. They occasionally followed the football/soccer matches on the television in a shop near their houses. But the punching and wrestling drew more from "Masaraa" matches on television involving characters like Randy Horton, Mark Henry, and John Cena. Football and wrestling were their only obvious links to the rest of the world.

Ala'a was busy with Nisreen and her friends and other cousins, which became physical only with rocking back and forth and light leg slapping when friendly insults were made or indiscretions were voiced. "He was talking to her over by that big tree today," Ala'a said. "His mother will never allow him to marry her," Nisreen advised. "He is Peer," she added, giving voice to centuries old caste distinctions.

There were biases between the castes, but these were lost on children and sometimes on teenagers. Sheiks only marry Sheiks of a particular tribe, and could not marry every Sheik, nor could they marry any Peer, or Mereed. It was an absolute rule. No Yezidi could marry anyone who was not a Yezidi without being banished from their religion. Secretly many Yezidis questioned their own rules, and more educated ones followed rules less closely when they were away from other Yezidis.

Some revealed to outsiders that they didn't believe in God at all, or were agnostic, yet they faithfully followed Yezidi rules. Others claimed there was indeed a small cult of true devil worship among them, people who believed the devil's power came from God, so he was worthy of worship no matter how malevolent he was, but evidence of this was absent. They all were cautioned to keep their religion secret, and such 'revelations' from Yezidi converts to other religions were not trustworthy.

With these brief exchanges and a little horse-play between the boys and some whispering between the girls the meal was quickly over and they busied themselves about gathering up the dishes to wash and pack up for the trip home. There was less dancing and more talking after lunch. Laughter moved about from group to group on the grounds, punctuating the low hum of many quiet conversations. Heads turned to take in the loudest groups for a moment and to wonder at the source of the humor.

The event wound down as the day wore on, and by 3 PM people were heading home to beat the coming darkness. They had few flashlights and were afraid of the wild dogs and extremist Arab Muslims at night. The small boys were the first to go home, as they had their sunset football match planned with higher than usual participation and an audience from all the people returning to the village beside their hard dirt clearing.

Ala'a and her friends relished the last moments and the older boys saved their most intense performances for that moment when the dance would end. It was a joyful ritual, made even more special by the excitement of the festival. They were off to bed again as soon as the sun sank below the horizon.

That night, Kurdish Peshmerga soldiers fled all of Sinjar area upon the news that ISIS was launching a well-armed large-scale invasion. The Yezidis were not fully aware that the Peshmerga had left, though some of the Yezidi men who had been guarding villages knew. These Yezidi men stayed to guard the villages after the Peshmerga left. This act of withdrawing in the face of an enemy destroyed all trust among Yezidis for the Kurds. They would not rely upon them in the future. But they did not realize how weak they were in the face of the threat that ISIS was posing that night. The Kurds had more accurately appraised the significant threat of this invasion.

Chapter 2: The Attack

It was early morning, Sunday, August 3rd, 2014 in Kocho Village when the Kurdish Peshmerga soldiers left their guard-posts and headed to the Kurdistan Region for safety. They left behind a rag-tag force of local Yezidi men and boys who were ill-equipped to face an attack of any kind.

Later that morning, an Arab Sheik from Baaj called Kocho Muqtar Ahmed Jassim to a meal in a private home. He had joined ISIS, and was delivering a message through Jassim and the mayor of Hatemiya village nearby. The residents of both villages were told to raise white flags on their houses, and when ISIS entered their villages, they would be treated well and there would be no changes in their lives. The muqtars returned to their villages and spread the word to all the families. Most people proceeded to raise a white flag above their homes.

At about 3 pm the same afternoon, two truck-loads of ISIS fighters approached the security perimeter set up by the local villagers. The guards at the checkpoint had been told by Muqtar Ahmed to let the ISIS fighters into the village, and they passed through without resistance, driving directly to his house. They exited their vehicles and spoke with Muqtar Ahmed for a short time. The men had long hair and long beards, and wore tunics and loose-fitting brown pants. They were mostly Arabs from local villages.

They required all villagers of Kocho to bring their guns to them, and most complied. A few of them buried guns near their houses in case they would be needed later.

For the next several days, villagers moved about as usual, with no incident. Women walked around as freely as men. The ISIS fighters

were generally avoided, but did not press the people in any way once the guns had been gathered.

Farhan kept his phone with him. Soon it began to ring. "Hello." He listened silently. Shereen ran to his side to find out who it was, but he was simply listening to an outpouring of news. "Let us know what you decide to do" was all he said before closing the phone and recounting the call to Shereen. It was his first cousin, who had been a childhood friend, calling to say that his village was being attacked, and that he had heard news of other villages being attacked as well, and many people were being killed.

Several other calls came from relatives and friends, urging them not to trust ISIS promises, as they had all proven to be lies in other villages, resulting in many deaths. They were urged to escape if they could. Farhan and Shereen discussed this but decided to stay.

Farhan went to the muqtar's house to weigh the risks to his family.

"Stay calm," Muqtar Ahmed urged to the small group of men gathered there. "Daesh (the Arabic acronym for ISIS) has invaded Tel Azer and other villages in that area, and are on their way to Sinjar, but don't seem to be coming our way with any force." He offered no more details or evidence, and moved into discussions with individual men who probed his knowledge more deeply and discussed options for dealing with the threat. Farhan returned home to tell Shereen and the children what they had already learned from their relatives by phone.

The family settled into an uneasy late breakfast and began to look for items that might be needed in the event of an evacuation or fire. Farhan took his rifle, an AK-47 made in Russia, and fussed over it, checking his ammunition as well. Shereen looked for bags to carry things, pulled a necklace of dried figs down from the round wooden

rafter, and rinsed dust from it under cool water briefly. The children went about their morning chores of gathering water and milking the goat with a heightened sense of danger in their hearts. They fidgeted nervously rather than playing, and all waited for more news to come by telephone or visits from neighbors. Several neighbors moved in and out of the house sharing similar news, so that the little anyone knew was widely known.

By lunch time there were enough activities to keep them busy, and there was nothing new to say. They settled into their usual mealtime ritual, and it seemed to calm them to have such normalcy in their movements even though their minds and hearts were racing to fears of losing their lives, and their loved-ones.

The fighting continued all night, so by 9 pm the 3rd of August, many families were preparing to escape to Mount Sinjar. Maher's family left in two cars, one with his brother, and the other with his father driving. As they approached the mountain they saw ISIS fighters and drove another direction. The second time they ran into ISIS fighters they stopped and talked. ISIS said they would not harm them, so they should return to the village. ISIS took his father Khalil Ismail and his brother Ibrahim and told the rest of the family to return to their home Kocho. ISIS fighters took them back to the village.

The ones who took Maher's father and brother said they needed to question them to determine whether they had served in the Iraqi Army or Kurdish Peshmerga. They were taken to Kalo Village nearby for questioning, and then returned to their family in Kocho. They were cleared of participation in the armies, so they were told that if they changed their religion to Islam they would be okay.

The Yezidis showed no signs of converting to Islam. By August 8, the patience of the ISIS fighters toward the villagers of Kocho was

growing thin. The women of Kocho were widely discussing their fears of rape and enslavement, and the men feared death. They contemplated, and then threatened, mass suicide.

A small team had formed in the U.S., including Leann Cannon and her colleague Doug Padgett, both early career professionals in the Human Rights Department of the State Department, Deputy National-security Adviser Ben Rhodes, Sarah Sewall, the Under-Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights, and Advisor on Iraq Andy Kim. They were being assisted by a few Yezidis, Haider Elias, a biology student at the University of Houston, Hadi Pir from Khanasour but living in Lincoln, Nebraska, and his friend Murad Ismael, an Engineering student. These had all served as interpreters for the U.S. military in Iraq before emigrating to the U.S. with their families, were in touch with people on the ground in Kocho. Colonel Chuck Freeman, a Department of Defense adviser at the U.S. consulate in Erbil was also in touch with this group.

The base of operations for this Yezidi group was a seedy motel in Virginia, 40 minutes from D.C. Eating little other than pizza, they were sleep deprived and losing weight. Most contacts between the Yezidis and the government officials, other than a couple of meetings, were by text message and phone calls.

Over time, a loose system developed in which the Yazidis e-mailed and texted Cannon and Padgett reports that they received by phone from Mt. Sinjar. Cannon then forwarded the reports to an e-mail chain that quickly grew to include some two hundred officials, including more senior people, such as the U.S. Ambassador in Baghdad.

Several options to intervene were discussed, including air strikes on ISIS positions and a small land force to protect civilians. Cannon had

determined that U.S. planes would probably not be allowed to land near Kocho. Providing air cover might aid villagers in their escape toward Mount Sinjar, using the few guns they had hidden from ISIS. The coverage of ISIS was weakest on the northwest side of the town and clear all the way to the mountain. On August 9, the three Yezidi men suggested that U.S. air cover could allow Yezidi fighters in Syria to come to the aid of Kocho villagers.

The situation was deteriorating as the patience of ISIS leaders grew thin and Yezidis showed no signs of converting. The pressure on the situation was suddenly increased by the escape of Hatamiya villagers on the night of August 10th toward Mount Sinjar. Life in Kocho began to change. No food entered the village to be sold in the markets so food supplies in homes were running low. Women did not leave their homes for days.

At around 4 pm on August 11, local ISIS commander Abu Hamzeh al Khatouni from local Baaj village, roared into the front of muqtar Jassim's house with 3 other men. With hard expressions on their plump, hairy faces, still in their usual brown Arab clothes, they moved with common, unspoken purpose from the vehicle, slamming the doors, and marching toward Jasim as he appeared at his door. Abu Hamza walked with a limp.

They greeted Muqtar Ahmed in Arabic as they had done many times in past meetings, "Salaam Alecum," and he responded politely, "Alecum Salaam." They held each other's shoulders in turn and kissed once on each cheek, in turn, in a centuries old tradition that was more important than conveying any real tenderness or true desire for peace among themselves. Ahmed ushered them into his home, and they kicked off their shoes at the door.

They sat in his reception hall on an ancient carpet with upholstered pillows at their backs against the plastered wall. Abu Hamzeh did not wait for other polite discourse before launching into his message.

“We want to help you make peace with ISIS,” he began.

“Yes, I desire that.” Muqtar Ahmed agreed.

“The people of Kocho must not fight us, they must serve Allah with us.”

Ahmed held his peace at what he knew was an ultimatum that the Yezidis all convert to Islam. This was the expected requirement for peace with Islamic extremists. The demand had been made 73 times before throughout history, and it had been refused 73 times. Neither man truly expected his ultimate answer to be any different than the answer of past muqtars of the region. But it was not the type of answer one rushed to give, nor was it asked as a question, so Ahmed did not answer.

“We will give you 3 days to decide,” Abu Hamzeh said simply, communicating a deadline for the muqtar’s initial answer. All knew that such deadlines were primarily a date for a second meeting and further dialogue, but not likely to be enforced strictly. Nevertheless, the men went through the standard motions of this negotiation by which Islam had long pressed its way into thousands of villages in a wide swath of the Middle-East.

What would happen if Jasim said “no?” If the village had been Jewish or Christian, it would have been evacuated and the people banished from the area, set into flight for refuge in other cities. But these were Yezidis, despised as “devil-worshippers,” not “people of the book,” and their initial refusal would certainly mean the death of key people, increasing pressure on the villagers to convert, until ultimately, if the

village did not submit, the Islamists would withdraw and let a decade or two pass before trying again.

Up to this point of invasion and demands for conversion, this was the standard course of Islam in the ancient world, and the muqtar responded in the usual way. It was not the “moderate” persuasive message of peace purveyed by intellectual Muslims in the West. This was the Middle-East, home territory for Islam, and a new brand of cruelty was in place to punish centuries of obstinate Yezidi refusals to convert to Islam on Muslim home turf. Economics and streamlined efficiency were to mark their modern methods of coercion. So the course and outcomes were different than what that Ahmed could have reasonably anticipated as he embarked on the centuries old ritual of soft refusal.

A large stainless steel tray was brought into the room by his wife, with clear hour-glass tea cups with rims of gold on matching saucers filled to the brim with black tea, with a half-inch of white sugar at the bottom of each cup.

The entrance of the tea was a welcomed distraction for Muqtar Ahmed, a stepping stone to escaping further awkward dialogue on his way to escape from his nemesis. The tea was consumed silently, in another time-honored ritual in which contentious issues were laid aside and peaceful communion was the absolute rule.

Food was offered and easily refused on the earliness of the hour, for all knew it was not mealtime and it would take more than an hour to kill a lamb and prepare the type of meal required for such an auspicious occasion. None of the men had the stomach for long social discourse in the midst of the sea-change sweeping them into either exaggerated importance and wealth or obscurity and death. They were all nervous about which of the two would be their fate,

and wanted to be busy about assuring the possibilities for the former while actively preventing the latter.

As soon as the last man drank the last drop of tea, Abu Hamzeh rose to his feet from his crouched position on the carpet, the other men rising only seconds later, and muqtar Jasim last, as was the tradition. A further greeting signaled their departure, and Jasim followed them out as was his custom, to their shoes, and toward their waiting vehicle.

Jasim was immediately approached by a crowd of onlookers who had waited a safe distance away from such dangerous visitors. He had to address them quickly, as they pressed him.

“The Sunnis in villages around us are our friends, and we work together,” he offered, though he was not being frank and had miscalculated to a degree. “They say they will make sure we are protected,” he added. He did not fully believe this himself, but this is the way of leaders in all the world, to coax their followers into calm ignorance while working undisturbed toward the outcome announced as if it were already a reality. The common villagers, he thought, would be protected, ultimately, after his own death and the deaths of other key leaders who communicated the refusal to convert. A sacrifice had to be made, and he was anxious that it not be his own life.

After the ISIS men left his home, Muqtar Ahmed set out to meet the muqtar of Hatimiyah, to seek council, in hopes that if the two men stood together they could effect a better outcome. The two men agreed to evacuate their two villages in the middle of the night while there were few ISIS fighters in the area to catch them. The roads around both villages were blocked and guarded by ISIS men, and anyone who had tried to escape on those roads had been either killed

or turned back, but they could travel off-road on the plains toward the mountain they had decided.

But Muqtar Bussein violated the agreement and secretly pursued an early escape for his village that he felt would be betrayed by a larger simultaneous evacuation including Kocho village. His plan was effective, and the people of Hatimiyah escaped to Mount Sinjar undetected in the early morning hours of August 12th.

Later that morning, when Abu Hamzeh went to Hatimiyah again to receive their answer about their willingness to convert to Islam and found it mostly deserted, he was furious. He gathered up the only remaining family from Hatimiyah and took them to Kocho. There he confronted Muqtar Ahmed and accused him of being party to Hatimiyah's betrayal of ISIS.

He positioned his men in the only school on the edge of the village and made it ISIS headquarters. Arab men dressed in new black clothes, some with new black scarves, carrying new black ISIS flags in their hands or on their vehicles increased in number in the school and around the village. They did not approach the residents often at first, but increased their presence in the village to assure the residents did not escape.

The muqtar's brother, Naiv Jassim was out of country but involved in the rescue attempt. He called Sheikhs from the Khatouni tribe, including Kassem al Hamzeh and Malek al Nouri Jarallah on the western side of Kocho. They talked as though they would help, but they didn't.

The muqtar's son prepared a sumptuous meal of lamb for the area's Arab sheiks at his home on the 14th of August, and the Arabs all talked like they would work things out with ISIS. They did not speak for the ISIS leaders, as was soon evident.

Nasser's life changed in those days. He did not go to play football. He didn't venture further than the corner store. He missed his friend Maher. All of the family stayed closer to home, and watched television to take in what was happening in the region. They didn't talk much about it among themselves, as the whole village was settled into waiting for the regime change that seldom affected remote villages as much as it did big cities where greater wealth provided stronger incentives.

On August 12th, checkpoints were added around the village and people were told to stay in their homes.

The ISIS demands that Kocho villagers convert to Islam became more aggressive. They were given a deadline of Sunday to convert. Then the deadline was extended to Monday, and then more days were given as the week passed and the people delayed announcing their decision not to convert.

There was no action on the ground to defend the Yezidis. By August 14, the team of Yezidis in Virginia had reported many ISIS locations between Kocho and Mount Sinjar, but none of them had been hit. They asked for permission to go themselves and asked for US air cover. Murad Ismael threatened to light himself on fire in front of the White House in a desperate attempt to get attention. But they were told the situation was too complicated. "Helping an individual village amidst a conflict is a more complicated endeavor than dealing with an isolated area like a mountain," Rhodes said.

There was a considerable amount of intel coming from the ground in Sinjar District. The satellite imagery showed men being shot in the back of the head and pushed into low-lying areas. The three men had their own sources for such information, more often phone reports and texts than images.

The three men sent out a desperate message to those they thought might be in a position to respond: “Help Help Help. *ISIL KILLING MEN IN MASS AND TAKING WOMEN IN KOCHO. HAVE AIRPLANES GO THERE.*” Murad Ismael called Padgett with a suicidal plea: “They are saying just to bomb the whole village,” he said of the people of Kocho. “They would rather they all die.” Padgett did not respond.

On August 15th around 11 am, just as the families were sitting down to lunch, a large ISIS convoy entered and surrounded Kocho. Part of that convoy included two excavators driven by local members of the Matewti tribe. The ISIS choke-hold on the village was quickly in place, and there was no longer any chance of escape.

Sunnis from Anbar to the south came to assist local ISIS terrorists in a convoy of brand new Saudi Arabian vehicles mounted with machine gun turrets. Many local Arabs joined immediately with a relish, pushing Yezidi neighbors from their homes, confiscating their properties, participating in mass killings of men and older boys, and conforming instantly to the narrow extremist policies of their new ISIS overlords. It reached every part of Sinjar District before it came to Kocho.

With the fall of Mosul, and the exodus of Christians from the city, a trove of American and Iraqi arms and many Yezidi residents fell into ISIS hands, empowering them to take more land in Iraq and Syria. Their rapid move to take over oil fields, banks, and other engines of wealth propelled them to great, if temporary, power.

In a sweeping campaign, they took all the Yezidi villages around Mount Sinjar one by one, the Kurdish Peshmerga forces and Iraqi Army fleeing before them. Christians were allowed to leave, but what they took with them was limited more and more as the grip of ISIS on the city became stronger. Few Christians were captured or

killed. Yezidis were to be converted into cash in the most efficient way possible or killed to assure they did not inconvenience the campaign.

This genocide was as coldly efficient as Hitler's annihilation of the Jews in the mid-twentieth century, equally barbaric, but sometimes even more immediate. Villages were approached from multiple sides in rapid shock attack that drove the old men and boys from the defense. Busses arrived to take girls to the market for selling, hardened gunmen gathered men on the roadsides and executed them, and elderly and disabled people were shot dead or buried alive as they had no economic value. As soon as the human resources were stripped, the furnishings, windows, doors, water tanks, televisions, and appliances were stripped and carried off in trucks for sale in Syria. This process was well underway in villages a short distance from Kocho, though it was not well known by many residents at the time.



Shereen Omar Amme

Shereen had been preparing lunch that day, and her family was just sitting down to eat when they heard the sounds of gunfire and loud shouting coming from the direction of the village school.

The children's heads jerked instantly to face the sound of the gunfire, and they jumped up and ran to the windows to see people running between houses outside. "Get away from the windows!" Farhan barked. Shereen reached out for Ala'a and held her closely, stroking her hair nervously, in shock herself. "Don't worry," she said, "I will keep you safe." Ala'a didn't speak, but searched her mother's eyes for any strength that could give support to her words.

“The sound is coming from the school,” Nasser said. “Yes,” Habib said, “Some of the men must be fighting them there.” “Are you going to fight?” Habib asked his father. “Be still,” Farhan replied, and he rose to get his rifle and check his ammunition closely again, as if he had not already done so repeatedly in the recent days. He went to the window, holding his AK-47, but did not go outside. He remained there, watching. “Go back into the family room,” he barked, and all complied. They gathered the little furniture they had around themselves in case bullets came through the windows or walls.

They knew from the shouting voices that it was ISIS that had entered the school, though they didn’t dare go outside to see what was going on. Nisreen called Shereen on her cell phone, speaking in a terrified voice.

“Daesh is calling us to the school!” she sounded the alarm.

Shereen felt a chill reaching down into her body, and cast a pained expression toward her children.

“Lock your door,” Shereen advised, as she could think of no stronger response. It was not useful advice.

“OK,” Nisreen agreed, but neither woman was convinced this would provide protection.

“Tell your mother not to worry,” Shereen added, knowing Nisreen would get more encouragement if her mother were less fearful.

“Oh, Shereen, I’m so scared,” Nisreen said with enlarged eyes Shereen could almost see, knowing her expressions well.

“I will come to you if I can,” Shereen offered to comfort her.

“OK I will see you soon,” Nisreen said, ending the conversation and rushing back to her mother’s side.

Muqtar Ahmed was compelled by the ISIS leader to tell all the residents of Kocho that they had to convert to Islam within three days. He conveyed this message by bullhorn so that all could hear at the same time.

The muqtar spoke over a loudspeaker to the entire village for the last time, repeating the ISIS ultimatum. Abu Hamza (“father of Hamza”) was also known by his actual first name of Ameer.

ISIS members started going from house to house collecting rifles, handguns, and ammunition that had not been readily handed over earlier. Farhan knew he didn’t stand a chance using his rifle against ISIS, so he wrapped it in a cotton sheet and buried it in the dirt floor of the front patio. He buried it near the surface so he could retrieve it easily.

A group of Arab ISIS fighters roared up in Saudi vehicles to the door of their house soon after he finished, opening the door forcefully. A stout bearded man in black appeared inside the doorway with his rifle pointed forward. Farhan met them alone at the front door.

Shereen hid the children in the back room where they had their meals. She started shaking, and the children’s eyes grew large, internalizing the shock of the intrusion through their mother’s response.

“Give me your rifle and bullets!” he ordered in Arabic. Farhan answered “I don’t have a gun, as I am a poor man.” They didn’t necessarily believe him, but were not instructed to check houses and frighten families at that point as they were trying their “soft” form of persuasion to convert to Islam. With this, they left as quickly as they

had come, slamming the wooden door and marching back to their vehicles before racing off in a cloud of dust. In like manner, the ISIS fighters moved among all the houses in the village with crisp efficiency, schooled by fresh experiences in other villages.

As the ISIS fighters left, Farhan locked the door again, though he knew this afforded little protection. He joined his family in the next room and held them, trying to console them with his presence and his strong hands. But they had seen him give up the only powerful defense the family had, and knew their lives would change now, but they didn't know how much, or in what manner.

They stayed in that room, drawing sleeping mats, food, water and other essentials into the space. They needed to be close together now, to comfort one another, to feel stronger. This was the power families had. But how would it stack up against the power of these Muslim extremists and their genocidal strategies remained to be seen.

"Shhhh," Shereen calmed Ala'a, who was the most frightened in the group, "Shhhhh." Habib was impetuous and sensed that this was a time for action. "Let's escape and go to the mountain," he suggested to his father, his voice interrupting Shereen for a moment. "No, the village is surrounded by Daesh," Farhan said. "They would kill us."

They did not realize that in the same hour Nisreen and her family had tried to escape to the mountain. Her friends had called to warn the family that ISIS was coming, they had started to flee to the mountain on foot, carrying nothing, and had walked for about an hour toward Hatemiyah, where they had been falsely told by Arab ISIS-sympathizers that ISIS was everywhere, and they would not hurt them, so they had gone back home. It was a deadly mistake.

Back at home, feeling nervous about what would happen next, Nisreen with her family, and Shereen with her family, sat down on floor mats and waited for the inevitable. They could not leave the house, and had only a few brief conversations on the phone with friends and relatives during that time. Their relatives from Zakho encouraged them by phone to run away, but they could not escape the presence of ISIS terrorists circling their village. They didn't even dare to look out their windows, which were covered with curtains. They just waited.

The muqtar's voice came over the loudspeaker from the school again relaying the ISIS demand that they convert to Islam or go to the mountain. All the families discussed this in their homes, and all were defiant that they would rather die than convert to Islam.

"They are going to kill us and take the children," Farhan's mother told him aside, so that Shereen and the children could not hear. "They already killed my sister's son and carried her off with the children in trucks," she said. Farhan couldn't answer anything.

Shereen just held the children. They came to and went from her nervously, playing with little toys, fidgeting now and then, going to the bathroom or kitchen from time to time, and otherwise staring into space and thinking about random things from football to the recent picnic, to their closest friends. Nasser even pulled out a school book and started reading, as if he were preparing for an exam that would never come. He had no way of imagining the scale of what was about to happen.

Shereen and her family were trapped in their house for three days, from the 12th to the 15th, too afraid to go outside. They didn't have much food or water. They were drinking their tears by the end of the third day.

Nasser's friend Maher, 11, his older brother, 24, and younger brother, 4, older unmarried sister, mother, father, his brother's wife and her 3 children also stayed in their house avoiding the streets. His married sister was also visiting with two of her four children for the Eid holiday. They were all seeking a way to escape, but failing this early on, were just waiting and hoping that ISIS fighters would leave their village without disturbing them. They didn't know what to expect, but they never lost hope. There was no electrical power, but they had a courtyard garden that was tolerably cool in the morning and evening. They had simple meals of rice with beans and tomato soup made from canned tomato paste.

There were many calls on the telephone in those three days. They were seeking information about ISIS fighters surrounding the village, potential weaknesses in their lines, opportunities to escape. Their friends and family were scouring news stories to seek what could be known about ISIS positions, and sharing the information with them. Maher kicked the football around with his younger brother in the courtyard much of the time, but they were so far apart in age and skill that it was not like playing with their neighborhood teams. His older brother was taken up with the crisis of the moment and seeking solutions.

On the 15th, ISIS men spread the word to all families that to bring all their belongings and come to the school, saying that they would have to move to another place. The families heard from their neighbors at about 11 am that all were required to go to the school. Maher's mother was cooking, but was so frightened that she didn't even turn off the stove. They didn't carry anything with them. They had an immediate fear for their lives, and complied fully with the instructions of ISIS. The school was near to their house so they walked there. They could see families going to the school and the ISIS fighters

positioned around the school with facemasks to cover the truth that many were people they knew from local villages.

Reluctantly, all the villagers slowly emerged from their houses in their family groups, walking or driving their cars to the school, which assured that ISIS would have access to their cars and keys at the same time. By noon most of the villagers had gathered there, about 1,300 people, and ISIS members began going from house to house to assure there were none left behind.

Farhan's family gathered little bags of clothing as if they were moving away or going on a short vacation. Farhan drove the family to the school. They knew many Yezidis had already been killed by ISIS in surrounding villages, but they didn't know about the systematic killing of men and older women and the bussing of women and younger children for sale or the raiding of household items.

Nisreen and her family also drove the short distance to the school, carrying their few valuables with them. They were forced from their car, which was taken by ISIS terrorists, and they were stripped of their valuables, including an English dictionary and an accompanying CD Nisreen had treasured. She felt a great loss. They had no gold to bring.

There were many ISIS members on the school grounds, all carrying AK-47 rifles, some foreign fighters wearing the black uniform of ISIS, and local Arabs wearing their usual robes. There were also many Yezidi men with ISIS, identifiable by their use of the Sinjari Kurmanji Kurdish dialect, carrying rifles, helping them corral the Yezidis of Kocho. The Yezidis were dressed as the ISIS fighters with the tunic extending down to the knees, with loose pants underneath, of several different colors.

As the families walked into the school, ISIS fighters laid blankets on the ground and told the men to put their cell phones there. Then they walked among the people and asked for jewelry from the women, as well as money, other valuables, and IDs that had not been immediately deposited at the front of the school. Then they split the families into two groups. Women and children were taken to the left side of the courtyard downstairs, and men and boys with hair on their face were taken to the right side. The Kocho muqtar, Ahmed Jasso, was with the men on the right side. Maher and his little brother Nechirvan went with the women, while Maher's older brother Ibrahim went with his father and the other men. Shereen and her three children remained together, as did Nisreen and her mother and mentally disabled brother. Shereen clutched her children closely to her, sinking slowly into the background to escape notice.

Eventually they separated the younger women and older girls and took them upstairs. The young women and children age five and under were taken upstairs to the second floor, older women and children were left downstairs, and men were kept elsewhere at ground level. Maher and his younger brother and unmarried sister were taken upstairs with their mother. All the women and children were crying. Muqtar Ahmed was later taken upstairs with the girls and held there briefly.

ISIS fighters with machine guns were perched on the rooftops of surrounding houses and milled about the school grounds and rooms, intent on their tasks.

As Farhan was pulled away from his family, he briefly looked at each of them tenderly, hugged and kissed them, and simply said "bekhatreta," meaning "goodbye." Then ISIS pushed him away with the other men.

Maher had no time to speak to his father or brother as they were separated. They didn't know they would never see each other again.

The three men in Nisreen's family were taken with other men, and Nisreen and her mother were taken to the garden where they stayed with about 30 other women including Shereen, Ala'a, and her two boys Habib and Nasser, Maher, his mother Goze, and his younger sister Sipan (14) and younger brother Nechirvan.

ISIS moved about the people, telling them they needed to change their religion, and if they did, they would not be killed. But no one agreed to do so, and all therefore knew their fate. They were quite sure by that time they would be killed even if they said they would change their religion.

ISIS had told them they would all be moving away from Kocho, but they didn't say where, and no one believed them. Some said they would be taken to the mountain. Nasser wasn't very afraid, having never experienced the barbarism closing in on his family. But he could see the concern in his parents' faces and hear it in their voices.

Ala'a saw Nisreen entering the courtyard with her mother, father, 18-year-old brother and 13-year-old brother. Her younger brother had a severe mental disability. He had to be held by his mother's hand at all times, and was usually struggling to get away from her. Ala'a motioned to Nisreen to come near them, and the women from the two families quickly merged into one. The horror closing in on them was greater than they could imagine. Nisreen's 18-year-old brother was pulled away with the men, and she fought to prevent that without success.

ISIS approached the men in the school and threatened to kill them if they didn't convert. The women and children heard this ominous threat and shuddered. The others who would convert were told to

stand up and raise their right hand up. Maher, Habib, Nasser and all the other children and women were on the second floor, and in a crowd of taller people, so they didn't see who stood up to convert, or how many, if any did at all.

They had been there only 15 minutes, long enough for militants to collect valuables from the men, when an ISIS leader said over the loudspeaker that they were taking the men to the safety of Mount Sinjar, which made no sense to anyone after the death threat had already been announced. They began loading the men into trucks. Farhan was taken with them from inside the school, managing only one parting glance toward Shereen and their children across the courtyard that separated them. Then he disappeared into the bright sunlight with the other men, including Nisreen's father and older brother, Farhan, and Maher's father and older brother.

About 20 of the men were loaded in the Kia truck with Farhan and driven east from the village. Several other vehicles were also filled with men and travelled in different directions to prepared mass grave sites. By separating the men and taking them to various sites nearby, ISIS knew they had less likelihood of being overpowered by the Yezidi men. Farhan stood at the back of the truck he was in, watching the door of the school that held his family as long as he could, yielded to whatever fate was to follow him, whether to be pressed into war, labor, prison, or death. He had no way of knowing which fate he would suffer, nor what would happen to his family.

Muqtar Ahmed was one of the last men taken.

The method of this genocide had been carefully planned in a meeting of ISIS leaders before the invasion. It was precise and economically driven. It would add a new chapter to the horrors of the collective

human experience, taking on greater importance than this one village, or the lives of its few people.

The truck carrying the men and boys stopped about half a kilometer from the school at a group of dry irrigation ponds. The men were forced out of the truck into a gully, and required to give up any gold or valuables on their persons that they had hidden. Then they were huddled together on their knees. An ISIS terrorist took a photo of them there, huddled, awaiting death. Again ISIS told the Yezidi men to convert to Islam or they would be shot, but they refused, hoping this gully experience was just meant to frighten them into submission rather than the alternative, to bury their dead bodies easily.

The next hour was spent with ISIS leaders hurling insults at the Yezidi men, praising their Caliphate and Mohammed, and demanding repeatedly that the Yezidi men convert to Islam. This was a well-practiced drama that had already been played out in many other venues. By the end of the hour, several trucks full of men had been taken to mass grave sites.

Some of the Yezidi men recognized some of the militants as Arab men they knew from neighboring villages who had joined ISIS in their campaign. Some were from the Matwewti and Khatouni tribes. The Yezidi men pleaded with the militants not to kill them. Several languages were being spoken by ISIS fighters that local people could not understand.

The muqtar, in the final grand speech of his life, communicated the villagers' defiant refusal to convert to Islam. A Saudi man then shot the muqtar dead without a word. Shereen knew this because the killer bragged about it on his return to the captives. Farhan shuddered to think of his fate and what would happen to his young family after his death.

After they took the men away, they brought the women and young children back down to the first floor of the school.

The Yezidi men and their captors had been gone from the school for about two hours when suddenly the women and children heard shooting in the distance. About 10 ISIS fighters stood behind the backs of the men and boys at each site. At one site, Abu Hamza and a Saudi man, shouted 'God is Great' ['Allahu Akbar'] and shooting started from behind the men, catching them by surprise. They fell forward, dead, dying, or faking death, lying perfectly still.

There were around 60-80 boys and men who died including Farhan, Khider Matto Qasem (28), Ravo Mokri Salah (80), Ghaleb Elias (17, a student and occasional day laborer), Nasser Salah Qasem and his 12-year old son Asem, aged 10-12. The father and six brothers of Nadia Murad were among them.

Seventeen men survived by pretending to be dead. Elias Salah Qasem (59, a nurse) was only grazed by a bullet in the knee, When ISIS fighters left the scene, the survivors ran to the safety of a nearby village and sought help from sympathetic Arabs. Also among the survivors was Khuder (17), who escaped with a superficial bullet wound to the back, and Khalaf (32), a father of 3, who was shot in the left hip and left calf. Saied Murat (22), was hit in his chest, left knee, and hip by bullets, the bullet to his chest apparently having passed through another body before it hit him. He received medical attention from a Muslim Kurdish family nearby, then walked in the night the long distance to Mount Sinjar hoping to find his family. Kisho Amo Selo also survived.

The shooting continued for what seemed about an hour but was probably not more than 10 minutes, the shots becoming less frequent as the minutes passed. The men fell dead or wounded upon

each other. Some were still moving, so the fighters moved among the bodies shooting those still dying. Then the militants collected the remaining IDs and hidden valuables from their bodies and roared back to the school in the same trucks.

In those few minutes, shepherds, block-layers, tile-men, locksmiths, grocers, shop-keepers, soldiers, schoolboys, fathers and sons came to a brutal and sudden end to their difficult lives. Families became fatherless, women became widows, and bereaved also of their prize sons, and children lost their older brothers who had been their guides. The entire village of Kocho was snuffed out by the loss of its men.

Mourning for them was also stolen. In Yezidi culture, the dead were always immediately lamented by the entire village for hours, while young men scurried to organize a truck, gathered some stout wood and a strong blanket to make a stretcher, filled the truck with benzene, and prepared for the journey up the slopes of Mount Sinjar to the cemetery.

There would be no large tent raised and filled with plastic chairs to accommodate hundreds of men who would otherwise come to sit, eat lamb, and smoke hand-rolled cigarettes for 7 consecutive days. And there would be no twelve monthly lamb dinners for relatives in their home to remember their loved one throughout the first year after his death, and on the first anniversary of his death. They had been robbed of these traditional ways of mourning a loss.



Farhan Amme Salah

A few boys who had been taken with the men and older boys were later considered too young to kill, and after witnessing the murders, they were carried back to the school.

The ISIS fighters returned to the school after massacring the men. A young woman, Zehra, called to one of the militants.

“What have you done to the men and boys?” she asked, knowing the answer already.

“Those shots you heard were just men shooting at unfamiliar cars passing by,” he offered, in a failed attempt to calm her.

Shereen was still clutching Ala’a and Nasser, and rocking back and forth to calm them. Militants were moving about among the people and gathering in small groups to talk, as if checking the accuracy of

their division of the girls and women, their confiscation of all valuables and IDs, and preparing for next steps.

Another woman called out to a militant passing by her, “What have you done with the men and boys?”

She spoke to him as she would speak to an Arab in the marketplace, just another man, possessing no particular power over her, someone with whom she might argue over the price of tomatoes he was selling to her.

“We killed them all because they refused to convert to Islam,” he said, plainly giving voice to the only truth spoken in the room that day.

Shereen, Nisreen, their mothers, and all the women who heard this immediately threw their hands to their faces and beat their chests in grief and a loud wailing arose from the school. This unnerved the children, who cried because their mothers and grandmothers were crying, more than because they had understood that their fathers were not coming back. Some women refused to believe their husbands and sons were dead and simply watched the others grieve with blank expressions. They were not yet able to grieve themselves.

The children were all numb with shock, and not speaking. Unable to cry for long periods, they were well spent by this time and just clutching their mothers without a sound. It was the silence of the lambs before slaughter, something their mothers knew from experience.

The ISIS fighters were completely indifferent to them and huddled in toward their leader to receive instructions for the next steps and split off to discuss what they had just experienced as if it were merely a rite of passage or a football match won handily.

While they were distracted, a 13-year-old boy slipped in through a back door, and quietly slinked up to his mother in the school, crying and covered by dust. He fell into his mother's arms but could not stop crying.

"They killed them! They killed them all!" he said softly, in complete shock that did not lessen in the telling, unable to look into his mother's eyes. She knew her son, and she believed him, though others still did not accept that such an atrocity had occurred or was even possible. He had been an eye witness, small enough to escape between the bullets fired upon the larger men.

"We will cut off your hands and feet if you don't give us your IDs now" one militant shouted.

Shereen didn't believe this threat, despite having witnessed so callous a murder only moments before, so she hid the family IDs in her clothes. Ala'a hid her ID in her own clothes. IDs were critically important to Yezidis, as bureaucratic officials were unyielding in providing services to those who lacked them and replacement of IDs was difficult, and sometimes impossible.

Soon after they left, Nisreen heard from other women that her father, Havin Khushna Rasho, was killed with the other men and boys. He was 45. Hameed Havin Khushna, her older brother, 18, was captured by ISIS and taken away.

The women and children were then loaded into the cars the people had left outside the school, and driven by ISIS fighters to Sinjar Institute in Solaq, east of Sinjar city, at about 3 PM, and Nisreen and her mother, and Shereen and her children, were put in the institute with about 150 women and their small children. Maher (11) was also there with his smaller brother (Nechirvan, 4) and two older sisters (14 and 27).

At first the women were together inside the building and in the garden. In the evening ISIS came and took the younger women away to another room. The Saudi man removed the picture of the Kurdistan Region's President Masoud Barzani, broke it in front of the captives, and stamped on it with his feet, which was his way of showing the greatest disrespect. They left them with many guards. They put up black pictures with white letters carrying ISIS slogans.

The ISIS fighters returned early the next morning and moved among the grief-stricken women and children, appraising the women and girls like prostitutes in a brothel. They touched them intimately and violated them. They asked them if they wanted to convert to Islam, and they all said yes, they would convert. Shereen had been hiding Ala'a behind her in hopes they would not take her. Shereen prevented Ala'a from being taken with the other young girls who were being put in trucks. Maher's sister Sepan was taken on a bus to Mosul, where she would be sold in the slave markets.

Then they separated the older women, including Shereen's elderly mother-in-law, from the younger women and youngest children. They told the older women they needed fresh air, and took them outside. As her mother-in-law moved to leave, Shereen was unable to say goodbye because she was taken quickly, and she was still grieving inconsolably for the loss of her husband.

About 80 older women were then ushered out by the ISIS fighters to an area near the institute. Some of the younger women were able to see what happened to them. They were loaded into the same trucks that had carried the men away and driven to a nearby field. There ISIS fighters pushed the women into an empty concrete swimming pool. Some who fought vigorously were shot dead and thrown into the pool.

The operator of the excavator fired up the machine, picked up large buckets full of Iraqi soil, and dropped it on top of them, burying them alive. Some died from the crush of the weight upon their bodies, some bodies falling upon other bodies. Others struggled under the soil, unable to move, unable to breathe, until the life slowly ebbed out of their bodies. The young women watched this from a distance with horror on their faces, their hands over their mouths, afraid to cry out. Shereen was still too grieved about the loss of her husband to watch. She couldn't stop crying, and could hardly bear the news the other women were telling her about the massacre of the older women, including her mother-in-law.



Mother of Farhan Amme Salah



Site of Mass Grave of Older Women near Solaq Institute

The fighters returned late in the evening to take the older boys away. Habib and Maher were taken in separate cars, but Nasser was left behind. At 1 am, while Maher was sleeping on a piece of cardboard, ISIS woke them up. Maher's mother told him they had heard gunfire in Kocho, and were sure the men had been killed, including his father and older brother Ibrahim. She hid her boys in the cardboards they had been sleeping on, but they were found. ISIS fighters then told the boys and their mothers they would teach the older boys the Islamic religion, but everyone knew their purpose was to brainwash them to make them child soldiers fighting for ISIS, as this pattern was well established from recent events in Raqqa and Mosul.

Shereen fought the ISIS terrorists, holding her older son Habib tightly, but they hit her with their rifle and she was unable to overpower them. She begged the terrorist not to take Habib, who was crying hysterically. She wept bitterly as he was taken away from her side, and was inconsolable. All the other women and children were crying too, as were all the older boys who were being taken away.

Maher's mother also fought for him, trying to hide him under the cardboard. They told his mother to walk closer to them, and then they saw Maher in the cardboard and called him out. They didn't see his little brother, so he was left behind. His mother cried and begged them not to take Maher but they didn't listen to her.

They loaded about 40 or 50 boys on two busses and took them to Tel Afar Village, and put the boys in a large house. All the boys were crying hysterically for their mothers and fathers. Maher was alone among the boys, and crying. Habib and Nasser were together and crying with the others. They were sure they would never see their mothers and fathers again, and most likely they would be killed.

The women who remained, in addition to Shereen, Nisreen, and Ala'a included many others, including Nadia Murad Basee Taha (21) and her sister Khayriyah Murad Bassee (30), Zehra (20), Ceylan (10) and others.

Later, the old women were put on one side of the room, and the younger women and children on the other side. A militant came walking through the crowd of young women like he was looking for a prostitute in a brothel. Character, wit, charm, shared values, intelligence—these were not among his criteria for acceptance of a wife. He merely wanted a girl with physical qualities that appealed to him. That was enough for a "marriage." Her opinion of him did not matter to him. He selected her, bought her, and she was his. Nisreen cried as she was pulled away from Shereen and Ala'a, and they cried too, but there was no point in fighting.

As the fighters resumed walking among the girls, appraising their looks and figures, one settled his gaze upon Dalal, the 19-year-old daughter of the Muqtar. "Werra, werra!" he commanded, not touching her, meaning "come." She refused to move at first, taking in

the eyes of the women around her, too full of their own grief to show a sympathetic look, then rising helplessly, on weak legs. She was beautiful, without any makeup or special clothes.

As they moved to leave the room, another militant opposed him.

“This girl is mine,” said the challenger, “I’m taking her with me.”

“No, she’s mine, I’m going to marry her,” the first man said, clutching her arm for the first time.

The challenger attacked, pushing him across the room with a single violent thrust, drew up his Kalashnikov, and shot the first man dead. The kidnapper-turned-victim fell to the ground, looking up in the same disbelief that was on every face in the room.

The victor ignored the dying man, and grabbed Dalal’s arm, pulling her to himself and heading toward the door.

The two had not gone five paces when an older, higher ranking militant, saw the two, and the militant dying on the floor, recognized her special beauty immediately, and demanded that he release her.

“You can choose any other girl, but I’m taking this one!” he stated plainly, seeing no need to raise his voice or to fight. It was as if a father was calmly chastising two of his bickering sons, and asserting his authority over them in a family squabble.

All the ISIS men in the room began laughing at the irony of this defeated victor, left standing in the room to take in the insults of his peers for just a moment before he too left the room, too dispirited to seek out another girl as his prize. Dalal’s first admirer was breathing his last breaths as the man left the room, and had lived just long enough to see the shame brought upon his killer. There was a casual

cruelty in their common experience that made such murders of one another incidental.

When the humor of the event died down, some of the militants began moving among the women again, scolding them for hiding their IDs.

Nisreen was sitting at her mother's feet, feeling sick, when they took her away. She thought they were just taking her to eat some food, and would return her to her mother. She had no time to say goodbye, and didn't realize they were being separated.

She was taken to a room with more than twenty females aged 9 to 30 years. One of her cousins was in the group of girls and women.

In the night, this group, including Nisreen, was loaded on a bus and driven to Mosul. Later that night, she later learned, her mother was bussed with the remaining older women to Tel Afar.

The boys were in Tel Afar for 3 days without food and only occasional water. They were told to sleep on the bare floor, but it was only the second or third day before any were able to sleep given their trauma and fears, the hardness of the floor, and the continued intermittent crying of the boys. They were locked in the house and guarded outside by ISIS fighters. Habib, Nasser, and Maher joined up and huddled together.

After 3 days the boys were moved to a school in Tal Afar with about 200 other Yezidi women and children. They stayed there about 15-20 days, receiving dirty rice and soup with maggots, but they were so hungry they ate it anyway. They were given hot water to drink from the tank on the roof in the summer heat. The building was stifling, the August sun beating down upon them. Their breakfast was a little bread and cheese, but not enough to calm their hunger. ISIS told

them they would be returned to their mothers, and they wanted to believe that, but still they feared they would be killed. Some of the boys were given phones by the ISIS fighters to call their mothers in an attempt to get them to stop crying. Maher didn't call his mother because he was too upset. Habib talked to his mother, Shereen.

The boys were moved to a school where the women had been held. Maher was with this group, but he didn't find his mother there. He slept there that night, and when an ISIS fighter distributed food to the boys that evening, he found that Maher alone had not found his mother. After eating, the ISIS fighter took him to Qasser Mugharab Village, where he was finally reunited with her. They were overjoyed, crying and hugging one another. She probed him for his story of all that had happened to him while they were separated. The fatherless families were placed in vacant houses, 3 or 4 families per home.



Mass Grave in Sinjar near Solaq institute

They stayed there 20 days weeks until a Syrian from Idlib called Abu Muhammad Al Adnani came there looking for Maher because he had bought his 14 year old sister Sepan, and had taken her to Syria, and she had convinced him to come to buy Maher to be with her. Maher

went with his sister's rapist, Abu Dar Lebnani, another ISIS fighter, and two other ISIS fighters to Mosul for the night. They were met by an ISIS fighter from the home who escorted Maher to a room where he slept alone on a bed with guards watching outside the building.

They travelled the next day to Raqqa, Syria, where Maher was reunited with his sister in a two-storey home. She lived there with her rapist and two other Yezidi women, Sahira and Khalida, about 16 to 17 years old, who were also "married" to the same man. Maher's sister Sepan told Maher she had been forced to marry, and she was raped constantly. Abu Muhammad told Maher he would have to learn Islamic rules, study the Koran, pray like Muslims, and obey all their instructions, and if he didn't do well, they would kill him and his sister. Sepan told him to do exactly as he was told so they would live.

All three girls and Maher slept in the same room together behind a locked door at night, and Abu Muhammad would take one girl at a time to rape her. The girls were constantly in fear of these rapes, but knew they would not stop. They returned hurt and deeply distressed each time. Whenever the girls resisted, he beat them. There were no other people living in the house. There was no TV, and there were no toys for Maher to play with.

Maher remained there about three months with his sister. Sometimes Abu Muhammad took Maher out of the house with him in his truck. Abu Muhammad would stay in the truck at all times, and send Maher out to run for food, threatening him not to go anywhere else.

Maher recognized a Yezidi from Mosul named Daqul Qute, who was not wearing a mask but carried a rifle, and was working with ISIS.

Shereen, Ala'a, and Nasser were loaded into vehicles again and continued. The second leg of the trip to Mosul took about two hours,

and the girls and women were parched with thirst in the heat on the journey. They drove up to a house in close proximity to one of Saddam Hussein's former palaces. They were kept there with about 40 girls for 3 days. They were all crying constantly, and though they were given bread, cheese, and other food, none of them could eat. They realized they were going to be given in sham marriages to ISIS fighters and abused as sex slaves. There was one cell phone in the room, and the girls and women passed it around in a feeble attempt to call for help. Nisreen was not able to use the phone herself, so none of her family knew where she was being held.

About 150 of the girls from Kocho were taken to a big building in Mosul where thousands of Yezidis from many villages were being kept for sale or given as gifts. Each day some of the girls were taken to the Shari'a court and photographed. The photographs were posted on a wall in the court, along with the phone number of her current owner, so that fighters could choose women and girls to buy or trade among themselves.

After three days, Shereen and her children were loaded into buses again at about 4 AM and taken to Raqqa, Syria, a journey of about 12 hours. They received some food and water along their way. They came to a big garden, where they waited with about 60 other young women and girls who were destined for sexual slavery. Nisreen was there for about 6 days. Each day, buyers would appear, move among the girls, look them over carefully, and take about 15 of them away, buying them from the "Caliphate."

Abubakir Al Baghdadi, supreme ISIS leader, who was in charge of selling the women and girls, was moving about the room. He approached Nisreen at around 4 PM.

"What's your name," he demanded.

She told him her name quietly.

“You will be moved tonight,” he informed her coolly, before passing on through the women, selecting those to be sent to the marketplace to be sold that night.

At about 4 AM, a man called out her name, but she didn’t answer. One of the militants who had been with Al Baghdadi when he selected her then recognized her, and took her outside.

There they met the waiting Abu Annas from Mugharab, Morocco. No words were spoken as Nisreen passed from the authority of one man to the other.

“Come,” he spoke softly to her, and she did not delay to follow him to her fate. He didn’t speak to her or touch her as they drove in the darkness of night toward his home in Raqqa. She could think only of what this man was likely to do to her, and how she would get away from him. No solid plans formed in her mind as they moved silently on their way.

They entered the house he shared with his wife and six children. His wife, Ranna, looked Nisreen over carefully as they entered, in a businesslike manner. She wore a black robe and black hijab that would be the required uniform for women of ISIS officers both in their home and out on the streets.

“He didn’t pay any money for you; you weren’t worth any amount of money,” she attacked, in the way she would insult the cucumbers a man would be selling in the market. Her purpose was to enter with a strong position on what would inevitably become a barter toward some weaker, but still acceptable, agreement.

“You will be my servant,” she continued, announcing the first portion of Nisreen’s fate. Nisreen had no counter offer in mind.

They had visitors in the house at the time, Abu Annas’ brother and his wife.

“What is your religion,” the sister-in-law demanded, also fully covered in ISIS black.

“Yezidi,” Nisreen replied, looking down. That seemed to be all the woman cared about. Eyes met eyes around the room in every possible direction but no more words were said.

The 15 year old daughter of Abu Annas, Hadiya, entered the room in a figure altogether lost within the black robes she wore, and took Nisreen away to a bedroom at her other’s request.

“This will feel uncomfortable at first, but you’ll get used to it,” Hadiya said, passing over a full length black robe dress with full hihab to cover her head. It was the uniform of her new life, and her life was to be as black as her robes.

Hadiya helped Nisreen properly don the robes and hijab then took her back to her father and his brother and sister-in-law to talk for a short time around midnight.

Nisreen was weeping, which attracted the attention of her new owner.

“Why are you crying? You have a good house to live in and good food to eat here. You will be a Muslim and will go to heaven. It is a place with a lovely fragrance, and you can eat anything there that you desire, even bananas, so you shouldn’t cry any more. But first you have to marry me.”

Nisreen drew back and looked more seriously at the floor.

“I don’t want to marry,” she said boldly, not knowing what to say next.

“You should be happy to marry me. I’m better than any other man you will be forced to marry if you refuse and I have to sell you to someone else.”

“I want to finish my schooling,” she added, unaware of how completely impossible that would be, as if he would be interested in her getting a western style education.

“You can do that,” he lied, trying only a little to convince her to marry him so that he could have sex with her. His wife had become cranky, bossy and demanding, jealous of some women, hateful toward others, indifferent to her husband. He wanted a young girl, slighter of build, demure, innocent, to restore the power of his former desire.

Nisreen slept until they woke her up at 4 AM with the call to prayer blaring from a local mosque. The family dressed and gathered in a central room. They showed her how to pray, kneeling down, and told her what to pray. She was then allowed to return to sleep.

She awoke again at about 9 AM, and couldn’t sleep anymore. They called her to breakfast, and she sat down and ate with the family. She would join the family routines for the many days to follow in her captivity.

That day Abu Annas came clean on his lie about her continuing her schooling.

“It will not be possible for you to go to school. You will use all your time and energy cleaning the house and helping with the cooking,” he said, as if his wife had driven that point home plainly in the night, and

now he had to make this announcement so that she could hear it simply to make peace with her.

His wife seemed to glow approvingly to his statement, her sternness evident to Nisreen.

“Do you want to marry Abu Annas?” she asked, as if consent had any role to play in this twisted plot.

“No,” she answered, “I don’t want to marry anyone.”

With that, the conditions of her life were set, and there would be no change for the year to come. They would not marry.

Chapter 3: Captivity

Soon after they finished killing the older women at Solaq Institute, the ISIS fighters returned to the building housing Shereen and her children. Among them was a militant with a big sword. They loaded all of the remaining captives into four big trucks and took them to Tel Afar. Shereen was still hiding Ala'a in her clothes as they climbed into the trucks, with Nasser close by. The journey was short and hot, the August sun searing them if ever it touched their skin. They longed for water but none was given.

They were taken off the trucks in Tel Afar and ushered into a school building. ISIS had not been able to handle the boys they had taken, as the boys would not comply with any request and were crying for their mothers, believing they had been killed. ISIS fighters first tried to calm the boys by allowing them to speak to their mothers on the phones they provided. Shereen spoke to Habib, and he bravely said he was okay, but that he had only received one meal that day.

This effort did not solve the problem of the boys crying, even though now they knew their mothers, if not their fathers, were still alive. Their ISIS caretakers finally tired of their crying and brought the boys back the next day, including Habib, as they could not be consoled until they had seen their mothers alive again. The tearful reunion of Habib with his mother, brother and sister drew little attention as it was repeated simultaneously throughout the room in other families. They all cried softly with brief joy laid upon their profound sorrow.

The boys were allowed to stay with their mothers for the remaining nine days. They stayed twenty days as captives in that school.

ISIS soldiers were visiting the women there every day, and taking the youngest girls and most beautiful girls and women to be raped in sham marriages and kept in other houses. Some would be second

wives to bigamists, others would hang themselves using sheets or curtains before they could be raped, or jumped from tall buildings after they were raped, or were killed after repeated beatings did not stop their escape attempts. Many girls and young women died in these early days of the genocide.

Shereen was always careful to hide Ala'a when visiting men were milling about, and she became an expert at this. Some of the girls smeared ashes from the fire on their faces to appear dirty, rubbed dirt into their hair and on their clothes, and frowned to appear undesirable. Often this trick worked, and spared them for a later insult. Each one would have a horror story to tell eventually, and would have to choose whether to end her life, attempt to kill her captor, or more often, when and how to run away and make the impossible journey to her family in Iraq.

ISIS fighters entered the school where Shereen remained with her children on the twentieth day and told the captives they were going to send each family into the house of an Arab Muslim family in the area. In a cruel lie meant to control their movements, the terrorists said they would bring their husbands to meet them once they were placed in the Muslim homes. Not one of the women was taken in by this trick.

Shereen and her three children were taken to an empty rural home and stayed there for four months, along with several other Yezidi families. There they were supervised by ISIS operatives, and forced to learn Muslim prayers.

Of course the husbands never came. They were told to read the Koran, and friction arose when the Yezidis informed the Muslims guards that they could not read Arabic and so could not understand the Koran. This was no ruse, for although they spoke some Arabic,

they were scarcely able to read and write it. They knew that ISIS was coming into the homes to take away the girls and women for sex at will. Shereen cooked and cleaned in the home for those four months. Ala'a and Nasser were not given work to do, and stayed in a separate room.

Nasser had no books by this time, and no toys to play with. He spent his hours doing absolutely nothing, and learned how to do that well, and patiently, the way other children might learn to play the violin or the piano, or learn to recite poetry. He was not the subject of interest to visiting terrorists, and not called to labor. He pretended to read the Koran when they were milling about, so as not to be beaten. He ate his food quickly because he was so hungry and the food was so bad. He took some comfort in being close to Ala'a during the day, and Shereen during the night. There were few other comforts to be had.

After Shereen and her children had spent four months in the farmhouse, ISIS operatives came and told all of them to get into big trucks parked outside covered with plastic, with other people in them already. They didn't tell them where they were taking them, but by the time they arrived, they knew they were in Mosul, in a big hall. Shereen huddled together with Ala'a, Habib, and Nasser, not knowing what would happen next.

They were being given food and water once a day. By this time Nasser and Ala'a were used to doing nothing, to going into a special place in their minds where Yezidis danced on mountainsides, boys played football, and girls giggled about the boys they liked. There were people to watch, and they learned faces more than names, and heard stories they didn't want to hear. They suffered more deeply with each passing week.

In their last days there, many Sunni Muslim Arab men had been milling about them choosing which families they wanted to buy. The families were sold as lots, rather than being separated and sold as individuals. After twenty days, ISIS operatives told them they would take them to another farm in the countryside to live as a family. They were called by family name and loaded into three large trucks covered with plastic and taken near Raqqa, Syria. The journey took the entire day, from the morning until late night, and they were given no food or water on the journey.

Outside Raqqa, they were taken to a farmhouse near a forest, and separated according to the buyer who held their names. It turned out to be just another waiting station for selling them to others or providing them to ISIS fighters. The four room farm house held fifteen people in each room. They stayed there for about fifteen days or more, receiving one meal a day. They were required to clean the house throughout that time. Nearly every day, the younger and more beautiful women were being taken by ISIS soldiers at will, sold by their traffickers to older Arab Sunni Muslim men.

Shereen and her children came to know two of the other captors there by name, Abu Fuad and Khatab, two of the ISIS fighters who had brought them their daily food, and who were responsible for the boys. An Arab Sheik, an ISIS leader, came to the farm house after fifteen days. He was responsible for the sale of the women and girls. That day, Abu Fuad and Khatab took Shereen's sons Habib and Nasser away from her, with all the other boys, to be put in training camps for Islamic extremist brainwashing and training as ISIS child soldiers in Raqqa. Shereen fought them as they pulled him away, crying and pleading, but to no avail. Nasser screamed, all of them did, but the men fought them and bullied them along to the trucks waiting outside, and they drove off.



Nasser Farhan Salah, top, third from right, and Nasser, bottom right in burgundy shirt looking to his left, with other “cubs of the caliphate” and ISIS terrorists in a training camp in a school building for training in Raqqa, Syria – ISIS Propaganda Photo



Right to left, Saddam, Nasser Farhan Salah (called Abu Abdulla), Fuad, Emad, and Mohammed, in training as a “Cub of the Caliphate” – ISIS Propaganda Photo



ISIS training camp for “Cubs of the Caliphate” where Nasser and Habib were trained – ISIS Propaganda Photo

Maher stayed in the house for 2 months with his sister, then was taken away from his sister to the market where teenage girls were being sold in Raqqa. The younger girls had already been sold before they arrived, the girls told the boys. There Maher was reunited with Nasser and Habib and about 13 other Yezidi boys. The three were there two days.

At night, the boys and girls were able to move about freely. Maher talked to several girls he knew from Kocho Village. The girls were talking about what would happen to them, and asking Maher what he thought would happen. Maher was sure they would be raped, and sold again repeatedly. Abu Muhammad had told Maher that was the tradition. Maher also read in the Arabic Koran in his days with Abu Muhammad that the men should be killed and the girls and boys should be taken and sold.

In the day, the Yezidi girls were sitting on the floor in several different rooms. Men of every age from Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Turkey, Libya, Somalia, Lebanon, Russia, America, Australia, England, Ukraine, Syria, Iraq and other countries milled about in the room choosing which ones they wanted to buy.

The girls were crying, trying to resist being taken away when they were selected. Girls blackened their faces, hid their faces under veils, and ruffled their hair to appear less attractive in hopes of not being sold. After they were taken away there was a negotiation about the price to be paid, and the money changed hands. One of the girls had run away from a Saudi Arabian fighter, and was beaten in front of the other girls to make an example of her, then gang-raped by three ISIS fighters, including her owner, in a room nearby. Some of the Yezidi boys were consoling each other in their room.

Nasser, Habib, and Maher were taken to an ISIS military base in Slouk section of Raqqa, Syria. They were put into tents with about 50-60 boys, guarded closely, given little food of poor quality, and trained in the extremist version of ISIS Islam, weaponry, and fighting skills. Drugs were put into their food. They taught them about cutting heads off. One ISIS fighter took a captive man of about age 22 who had been accused of being a Syrian spy in front of the boys, and cut his head off with a large knife and put the severed head in his bag while the boys watched. Maher thought his father and brother were probably killed in the same way, and that this would also be his ultimate fate.

All the boys were beaten with a hose or a stick nearly every night. The reason given for the beating was that they were not doing well with memorizing the Koran passages that had been assigned to them. Some of the older boys were taken away, and Maher tried to comfort them, that they would return again. An ISIS fighter came and beat

Maher with 16 strokes of the hose, but Maher didn't cry. Then the ISIS fighter said he would bring Maher's father there and Maher would have to kill him. In fact, he was already dead.

After two months of training they were all moved to Tel Aviat. Abu Omam was the manager of the camp and participated in the training. They were taught Islam again, as well as the use of weaponry including Kalashnikov rifles, Glock pistols, and others.

During this training they were taken out at times to participate in fighting on the battlefield. The first time they were required to eat drugged food before the fight. Maher didn't want to fight, but after eating the drugged food, he was not afraid and was ready to fight and kill. In his first battle, Maher was one of three Yezidis forced to fight. They were given Kalashnikov rifles to carry into the battle. Alan from Kocho and Yassir from Solaq were with him.

They went to the small village of Tel Shaeer near the Turkish border and conquered it. The Free Army then encircled them on all sides and bombed all the ISIS fighters. The three Yezidi boys ran away and narrowly missed being bombed and shot. Two of the boys were injured, one in the leg and one in the arm, and Maher helped them limp to the safety of an ISIS building with ISIS fighters. The Free Army then approached them and they ran away with the ISIS fighters. Maher was wounded in the hand and foot from crawling in broken glass. ISIS fighters took Maher to a hospital in Bab al Halab, while the other two boys were taken to a different hospital in Raee.

One day later, Maher joined his two Yezidi friends in Raee. They were surprised to see him, thinking he had died in the battle. The boys were separated again, and Maher was taken back to Raqqa to a different ISIS group in a house. They told him that they had to be ready to go to battle throw hand grenades. Maher's name was

recorded and he was trained in throwing grenades in a brief 10 minute session.

He went with half of this group to Dier Ezzor for a week, staying in a house and patrolling it on shifts. Then they returned to Raqqa and sat idle in a house for a month before they were assigned to clean weapons for a month and a half in another building in Raqqa. Then a man came to tell him he would take him to stay with his sister in Raqqa. The visit lasted only 3 days, then he returned to cleaning weapons.

Abu Homan came to ask him about his views on the Koran. He asked him if he wanted to stay with ISIS or leave them. Maher said he read, understood, and memorized portions of the Koran but that he wanted to leave ISIS. As a result, they wrote his name on a list of boys to be assigned as suicide bombers. The man gave him \$50 to buy a motorcycle, and a paper saying he was free to travel. The man said he would soon explode himself and go to paradise.

Maher saw this new temporary freedom as an opportunity to try to escape. He stole a mobile phone from a member of ISIS. He had his brother Bajat's phone number in Qanqi Camp, in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, and his brother called a trafficker named Hassan. His brother took his location and set a meeting time and place. While waiting for the meeting, Maher went for a swim in the river, leaving his clothes on the banks, and someone stole his freedom document from his clothes. When he went to Samra Raqqa Village without the freedom paper, he was stopped at a checkpoint. He thought he would drive fast through the checkpoint rather than stopping. The guards screamed for him to stop but he continued on as fast as he could. There was another checkpoint, and again he drove hurriedly through it, the ISIS fighters shooting in the air over his head and yelling at him to stop.

He eventually arrived at the meeting place, but the trafficker didn't show up, so he drove his motorcycle back to Raqqa through the same two checkpoints, again driving fast and being shot at. He knew Abu Ibrahim, a Syrian Kurd, whom he trusted, and went to him for help. He didn't tell him he was trying to escape ISIS. He needed benzene for the motorcycle and didn't have money to pay for it, so this man loaned him a thousand Syrian Dinars (about \$8). He then found the internet network and called the trafficker again.

This time the trafficker arranged for a YPG member named Zagros to call Maher. Zagros said he would come to him to save him at the same place in Samra, Raqqa. Again he drove as fast as he could through the same two checkpoints, but this time they didn't fire at him. He arrived at the meeting place and waited for two traffickers to arrive. The code sentence was "do you want to go out?" The men took him to another place in Syria, two of them riding a single motorcycle.

Maher was in their home for 3 days waiting for \$9,500 in ransom money to be delivered from his brother in Iraq. They left their motorcycles and walked about 500 meters past the ISIS border, then broke into a fast run to the YPG border in Syria. He was there 15 days and interrogated during that time. Then he was taken by the YPG in a car to Kobane, where they spent the night. From Kobane they drove to Sinjar early in the morning, arriving in the evening. His brother drove to Sinjar the next day to meet him and took him to Qanqi camp.

Nasser was taken separately to a desert camp mud house for younger boys for eight months, learning ISIS weaponry and tactics. By the end of this time, he was teaching two Yezidi boys and about 38 Muslim boys aged 10 to 15 to use weapons. Habib was digging tunnels under

houses, to help ISIS terrorists and their family members and captives avoid bombs, far away from Nasser.



“Cubs of the Caliphate” at an execution – ISIS Propaganda Photo

For days after Nasser was taken away, Shereen and Ala’a were completely grief stricken, unable to do anything. Shereen knew their time to be taken away would come soon. She, and probably her daughter, would be forced into sexual slavery. She begged the ISIS soldiers to sell them to a civilian Muslim rather than to an ISIS soldier, hoping that would get them free, but they said only ISIS fighters were taking them, as a reward for their bravery in fighting the Yezidis.

The buyer who emerged to claim Shereen and Ala’a was called Abu Annas. He was a Moroccan from Mugharib, not to be confused with the man with the same name from the same city who had taken Nisreen. Shereen had never seen the man before. He was not one who regularly came among them. He also used the Syrian name Adil

Al Maghrabi. He was in his middle 40s, she estimated, and of medium height and thin build with a long black beard, no mustache, and curly black hair. He was the one who gave the salaries to the other ISIS workers, including guards, cooks, and those distributing the food. He had very poor vision and wore glasses with clear rims. He usually wore black Afghani dress, loose pants with a top that dropped to the thighs. Sometimes he wore a long black Moroccan robe. He occasionally wore a military uniform typically worn by ISIS soldiers.

Abu Annas entered the room alone, saying nothing, and took Shereen and Ala'a in his black SUV to another house in Dhawar Anyim, a marketplace in the middle of Raqqa. He told them they would be married to ISIS fighters. When they objected, he replied that it wasn't up to them as they were servants to ISIS.

Abu Annas took them both into the house he had appropriated for himself. He gave some medication he had brought from the pharmacy to a man who was there in a wheelchair, unable to use his legs. His name was Abu Waleed Almugarabi, another Moroccan from Mugharab.

Abbu Abbas told Shereen that she had to marry Abu Waleed and take care of him. He was about 33 years old, and had been injured by American shelling. They wanted her to clean him up, as he was covered with his own urine and feces. She refused at first, but Abu Annas beat her and forced her.

As she began to clean him, she vomited. She started laughing aloud at herself, finding her situation absolutely ridiculous. She went insane for a moment. Ala'a was still with her, and Abbu Abbas forced Ala'a to take some white pills and sit down on the floor nearby while they took effect. There were no other people in the house.

Abu Annas, with Abu Waleed watching, immediately began to tie the hands and legs of twelve year old Ala'a. Both Shereen and Ala'a fought him, begging him not to rape her. Shereen pleaded with him, clawing and scratching him. In retaliation, he beat both Shereen and Ala'a with a rifle until they were black and blue all over their bodies and left them laying bruised and bleeding on the floor. Then he viciously raped the drugged and beaten little girl without mercy beside her mother on the floor.



Ala'a Farhan Salah

Immediately after raping Ala'a, while she was still lying on the floor unconscious, Abu Annas prayed in the Muslim tradition toward the east, rising and bowing to the floor repeatedly with great piety. Then he untied the limp hands and feet of the little girl. Her mother went immediately to her and held her closely, crying from the depths of

her soul. After an hour, her Ala'a regained consciousness and complained to Shereen of great pain. She was still under the influence of the drugs she had been forced to take and not entirely coherent.

Ala'a couldn't move for three days after the rape. Abu Annas came and told Shereen that she had to marry Abu Waleed. She refused, saying she was already married, so she became his sex slave. He told her that if she refused sex, he would sell her to another person. He forced her to take the same white pills he pressed Ala'a to take, which lessened her ability to resist. Ala'a was not required to take the pills after the first rape.

After watching her young daughter viciously raped, Shereen was then awkwardly raped by the paraplegic, Abu Waleed, under the control, facilitation and eyes of Abu Annas. It was a horror about which she would never speak in detail, but would relive in her sleep and even in wakefulness a thousand times, more. The details of the rape are too hideous and vulgar to repeat, a farcical devolution of love-making into a grotesque parody.



Abu Waleed, Injured ISIS fighter, Shereen's first rapist

Shereen and Ala'a spent the night alone together, the men sleeping in the other room. The next day, and the next, and the next, for four months, both Shereen and her daughter were raped every day by the two men. Ala'a was "married" to Abu Annas at age 12.

Over time, Ala'a came to feel safe there, and saw her marriage as her own choice, which was necessary to give her status among the other women who moved about them. She simply conceded to the lie, and lived it. She did not worry about the safety of her mother, as there were no threats to them from the outside. Shereen, however, saw this situation for what it was, sex slavery. Ala'a lost all thoughts of her home in Sinjar.

Shereen soon learned that Habib and Nasser were in an ISIS training camp for “Cubs of the Caliphate,” and began pressing Abu Waleed and Abu Annas to bring them to her and Ala’a. Finally, Abu Waleed brought Habib and Nasser from the camp, and they lived with him and Shereen for two weeks a month for several months in Raqqa. They were sent for further training three weeks each month. Ala’a stayed with Abu Annas in a second house during this time.

They were forced to convert to Islam and given new names and new ID cards. Habib was renamed Abu Younis. Nasser was named Abu Abdullah. It was as if the terrorists were selecting the names of the future children of the boys, good Muslim names, a rape of their future. Ala’a was called Um Annas (wife of Abu Annas).

Abu Waleed also took a wife from Africa in this time, though she was there by choice rather than as a hostage. There was no common language between Shereen and this woman.

After Nisreen had been in the home of Abu Annas for one year, helping with the housework, tending to the smaller children, she was approached by Abu Annas. She told him she wanted to go back to Iraq. He told her she would have to stay to serve his family. She continued to cry, and complain loudly, so finally he agreed to send her to Iraq.

One day a friend of Abu Annas, a driver by the name of Abu Osma, around 40 years of age, and his 10-year-old son came to the house. Abu Osma told Nisreen she would be taken to Iraq and given in marriage to another ISIS terrorist. He did not pay any money for her. On the long journey back to Iraq, he didn’t speak to her.

They drove directly from Raqqa, Syria to a wedding hall in Mosul, where there were two other Yezidi girls. One of the ISIS terrorists there told her they would choose a husband for her from among the

ISIS terrorists. Nisreen was there for a month with other Yezidi girls who came and went. Her daily routine included preparing food for about 10 ISIS terrorists who were living there.

Suddenly one day a bomb was dropped on the building from a helicopter. She was able to see the helicopter approaching in the sky, and the girls all ran away together to another building nearby. Several of the terrorists were wounded but none of them died. Four Christian boys were kept there separately from the girls, and they all died in the blast.

The girls were found by the terrorists, blindfolded, and taken to a vacant house in Mosul. They were told they would stay in that house, and they stayed there for about 25 days, until the other girls were married and taken away. Nisreen was told she would stay alone if she refused to marry. She was very afraid of the helicopters buzzing overhead, but she steadfastly refused to marry.

Six days passed, and as her fears grew, she finally pretended to agree to marry, just to get out of the building. She was taken to another house, where five ISIS terrorists in their 20s and 30s came, all seeking to marry her. She refused at first, but finally relented under severe pressure. She chose an Iraqi by the name of Younis Omar Mohammad, who was 36 years old. He took her to his sister's house, fearing his own wife would not approve of the second marriage. He repeatedly raped her there. Then he sold her to a third man, Ahmed Abdullah, and he repeatedly, constantly, raped her. She became pregnant with this man's child.

After some months, Abu Waleed sold Shereen to another terrorist named Abdul Menan, but called "Emir." He sold Habib to Abu Baseer Ako Jazrawi. He sold Nasser to a Moroccan friend called Abu Habib al Magrabi.

Emir took Shereen to his sister's house in Raqqa at first, for a week, until he could gain his first wife's approval for the second marriage, as is required by Muslim Sharia law. Then Shereen was "married" to him as his second wife. He raped her for a week. One day he went out to fight, and his wife went to an office where she was changing Shereen's religion from Yezidi to Muslim and forgot to lock the door, so Shereen escaped.

Shereen went to see her daughter Ala'a at Abu Abbas' house. Ala'a would not leave with her, thinking by this time that she was in a consensual marriage.

She went to another house but the family living there wouldn't help her. She sought help in three more houses but no one would help her. After this, a man who was working on a motorcycle asked his mother if they could let her into their house. She told him they bombed her house, all her family died, and she survived alone. They said they could not let her come into the house, because Daesh would kill them, so they took her by car to a home for single Yezidi women. They found that all the women were gone from the house. She asked him what they could do now. He said he would take her to his father's house. When they arrived, his father refused to allow her to live there. The man rejected her at that point, and told her she didn't see him and he didn't see her. He put her out of the truck.

Then she went to another man, saying she was his daughter and he was her father, asking to be taken into his house. The man told her he couldn't take her into his house, but she could stay in a vacant house nearby. He took her there and she stayed there one and a half days, receiving only a piece of bread and some water.

The man came in the night to her and Shereen gave him her brother's phone number and asked him to call her brother so her family could

come and take her. He said she could stay there, but he didn't have a phone and couldn't call anyone. The same man said he could bring more water and bread for her, but Shereen said she couldn't stay there.

She saw another house with two little girls playing in front, and asked the children to see if their mother would let her stay with them. The Muslim woman agreed, and she stayed with them one month and 10 days, with her two girls.

Shereen eventually found a phone and called her brother. He worked with human traffickers to arrange a payment of \$2,500, which was paid for by a Kurdish organization. The spokesperson for them was called Ameer Maali.

Eventually she made her way back to Iraq and on March 6, 2016, after a year and 10 months in captivity of the worst sort, and she was free. She came to Seje, a 1,600 year old Christian village near Dohuk in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, where she found her parents and siblings. She arrived in Seje on June 9, 2016. Her parents had been there since January 1, 2016

Chapter 4: On the Run with ISIS

At some point the two terrorists, Abu Annas and Abu Waleed, and Shereen's three children all moved to Mayaddin, Syria. Nasser and Habib lived with Abu Waleed.



Disabled ISIS terrorist Abu Waleed, Habib (left) and Nasser (right) in Raqqa, Syria

Abu Waleed later gave Habib and Nasser to another ISIS fighter named Abu Habib. This man beat Nasser with a hose frequently because he wasn't memorizing passages from the Koran well.

Six months later, after further training in ISIS tactics, Abu Habib took Nasser to participate in a battle in Damascus, Syria against the New Syrian Army. Nasser fired AK-47s, M-16s and M4, and SMG and mortars in that battle, and thinks he killed three Syrian soldiers with one mortar. This battle continued for two months, during which time they were sleeping in tents and caravans between skirmishes. This was the only time Nasser fought in battle. They once gave him a suicide belt to go into a crowded area and explode himself and he agreed, but then he went out and threw it away.



Nasser Farhan Salah in Syria – ISIS Propoganda Photo



"Cub of the Caliphate" – ISIS Propaganda Photo



Habib Farhan Salah in Syria



Habib Farhan Salah (left) and Nasser Farhan Salah (right) in Jizrah, hiding from YPG

Chapter 5: Seeking Release of the Children

On May 25, 2017, Mahdi Muhandis, the deputy head of the mainly Shiite Hashd al-Shaabi, an Iranian paramilitary group that had become part of the Shiite-controlled Iraqi Army, entered Kocho with his men and fought against ISIS for two days. On May 27th, he announced that his group had “liberated” Kocho from ISIS terrorists, and would remain there to “protect” it from further invasions. This was a land grab for Iran, part of a grand scheme to build a pipeline across Iraq to Syria and Lebanon, ending at the Mediterranean Sea. The mass graves there were not protected or exhumed. The evidence lay buried or was subjected to grave robbers or those seeking their dead.

Some of the Hashid forces were 180 Yezidis, part of a thousand Yezidi soldiers who had been frustrated that the Kurdish Peshmerga were unable to pay their salaries, so they had joined this Iranian-controlled force just to have money to feed their families. That choice would place them opposite the Yezidis who remained with the Peshmerga, and the two Yezidi groups, ordered to fire on one another, would refuse. The result would be that 1,300 Yezidi Peshmerga would be fired in one day, and Hashid Yezidis would take control of the entire Sinjar Region, with the exception of forces that remained independent under Yezidi General Qassim Shasho, to promote the Yezidi cause free of either Iranian or Kurdish influence. The battle for Kocho lasted about two days.

Seven mass graves were found in the vicinity of Kocho, six of them near the school.

Over the months following her release, Shereen sent voice messages to Abu Waleed in an attempt to free her children. He tried to get Shereen to return to him in Syria, and she played along to get in

touch with her children. She recorded conversations with each of her three children and received photos periodically.

Shereen carried on a conversation on WhatsApp all summer with her children, pretending she was in Syria and wanted to come to them, but trying to find their location and to get at least her son Nasser out of the house and to a public place where her agent could take him and bring him to her in Kurdistan, as it seemed her daughter Ala'a and her son Habib were harder to reach.

In early summer, 2017, Shereen received a phone call from her older son Habib. He was in Mayaddin, Syria. He told her that he was in touch with her other son Nasser and daughter Ala'a. Her daughter was pregnant with Abu Annas's child at the time. They were all in good health. The two sons were still in the home environment but being taught the ways of ISIS terrorists.

Abu Waleed knew the children were talking to Shereen, and didn't mind.

In July 2017, a year after Shereen escaped, Ala'a gave birth to a little boy in Mayaddin, Syria whom his father named Annas, and Shereen received a photo of the baby two months later.

In August, 2017, Shereen was again contacted, and this time received photos of all Habib and Nasser, her new grandchild Annas, and the terrorist who had raped her, Hussein/Abu Waleed, along with voice recordings from the terrorist. She immediately gave this information to me and to the Kurdish human traffickers. I forwarded the information to the US CIA, and later they arranged a meeting between Shereen and Kurdish Secret Service in Dohuk. Shereen pretended to be going along with Abu Waleed's plan for her to go to Turkey and into Syria to ransom the children and grandchild, though she had no plan of actually going back into Syria.

Her older son Habib (then 15), her younger son Nasser (then twelve), and Ala'a (her daughter and Nasser's twin, fifteen), had been in captivity with ISIS with Daesh for nearly three years, and the control exerted over their minds and bodies was very strongly evident. They spoke in their native Kurmanji dialect of the Kurdish language from Sinjar District of Iraq except when delivering hardline messages dictated by their captors, in which case they spoke in the little bit of classical Arabic phrases they had memorized in captivity. Shereen spoke to them in Kurmanji, but when the terrorists finally got involved in the conversation, they spoke in classical Arabic, rather than Iraqi Arabic, showing they were not from Iraq, and Shereen spoke to them in Gulf (Iraqi) Arabic. The conversation between Shereen and her older son Habib (16) was as follows:

Shereen: Habib, my little bird, I am your mother. I will be a sacrifice for you.

Habib: You will feel sorry later, because you will go to hell. Here is truth, and nowhere else is better than here. Everyone wants to come to join us. Come, let's go to paradise together, God willing. Do you understand? Nasser wants to blow himself up. I told Nasser, you are still young, and it's early now. Nasser replied that after he sees his mother he will explode himself. How are you? Are you fine? Where are you? Who gave you my phone number? I tried many times to get your phone number but I couldn't. How are you? Where are you? Where did you get my phone number? I hope all of you are good. Why don't you come? You left us. You left us alone. Don't you think your grandson Annas is very beautiful? Come to us and let's live together, and God willing, we will go to paradise. Who is there? Who didn't come? All of you will go into fire. It's not a good life to be escaping all the time. [He laughs] Nasser is tickling me [because he wants to talk to you]. I'll let you talk to him. Because of you, I don't blow myself up. If you don't come, I will blow myself up. What can we do without our

mother here? If you come we won't blow ourselves up. If you don't come, we will do it. Why don't you come here? Come here and stay here in the house of Islam. It's better than there.

You left us. Everyone is here and I know all them, and I have seen all the Iraqis here. Why don't you come? Except you, no one else left us. They asked us, how could your mother leave you? It has been two years I've been looking for your phone number, and no one had your phone number. Thank Allah I heard you, and I listened to you. I swear to God if you come, it's good. If you don't come, they won't allow me to talk to you. We are in the nation of Islam and they don't allow me to talk to you, do you understand? He's [unnamed person] taking the phone and he doesn't allow me to talk to you. Be careful. Where are you? I'll give him the phone back and he doesn't allow me to talk to you.

Nasser (Shereen's younger son, twelve): Peace be upon you. Why don't you come here? I miss you. Come please. Here is good. If you don't come you will go to Hell. We are going to Tel Ward. Why don't you come here? Come. How are you? How are you? Thank God you opened [the internet]. Oh Shereen, where are you now?

Ala'a (addressing her mother Shereen): We want you to join us very, very much. But you won't take us back and destroy our house [you won't take us out from ISIS]. If you do this [tell us to escape from ISIS], Balo will take our phone and you won't get any information about us. You won't know anything about us, and they will take Abu Abdullah's [phone] too. It's your choice. You will be very sad about us. We say thank Allah we found your phone number and we can talk to you. You are coming to send a spy. All of you are like that. She [unspecified person] was here. She was saying I

won't go. Her son escaped and also Ivanka. What a liar you are. She gave you the phone [number].

Nasser: Hi Shereen. How are you? Are you good? Allah willing. Thank Allah we are fine, me and my brother. Allah willing. How are you all? How are you doing? Thank Allah we are fine. You are lying to us and you want to take us out of here. We won't come. We gave you false information and we can't tell you our address where we are now. They don't allow us to tell you where we are. Do you understand? If you really want to join us, we have a man, and if you are really serious, you can talk to him. If you are not serious about coming, it cannot be [we can't tell you our address]. We cannot come. And if you do like this, I swear by Allah, we cannot even talk to you. They will take our telephone. Do you understand?

Ala'a: They are coming here and I cannot talk to you every day. Every week or every other week I can talk to you. We have no internet, do you understand? Say hi to all of them, and send me Salwa and the others' pictures. You, Shereen, try to come here. Your pictures are beautiful. Thank Allah we are fine, we are good. You are beautiful. We are fine, and how are you? How are you doing?

A few months later, Ala'a called her mother again by mistake:

Ala'a [thinking she is talking to her childhood friend Tammer who is carrying the message to Shereen]: Hi, Tammer, how are you? Thank Allah we are fine. Come on, come on. All of them are good, and Abu Annas is good with me, thank Allah, and now he is with me. Abu Abdullah and Nasser are with me but I don't know anything about Habib. It's been 2 or 3 months I haven't known anything about Habib. I know about Nasser, and Nasser knows their house. Nasser's friend knows Habib. God willing I will try to bring him here. That's it, and

I'm free now, and no one can sell me now. I do what I like to do, I'm free now. Whatever happens, no one can sell me. I thank God I heard your voice.

Unknown girl or little boy: I don't know anything about Renna. Renna's daughters are asking about her. If Renna is with you, have her send a voice message so her daughters can hear her voice, and send her phone number if she is with you.

Ala'a [thinking her message will be passed to an unnamed relative]: How are you, and how are the others around you? Are they good? Salwa, Ammer, Maher, are they good? And Sharif and Ammar, are all of them good? Salwa and others. Rannia and Monera. Send me their pictures. I miss all of them. Allah willing, I hope all of you will come here and join us. Thank Allah, we are very good. How are you doing? Nasser is with me now. He is sleeping with me, and he is eating and drinking with me. Do you understand? How are you? Good? Allah willing. Is it true Wadha died in Germany or is it a lie? How are you doing, are you good? How are your kids doing? Send me their pictures, and your daughter, and also Nofe's kids' pictures. Thank Allah we are very good, Nasser and I. It's been several months I haven't seen Habib and I don't know anything about him.

Nasser: Peace be upon you. How are you, how are you doing? [in Arabic] I am Nasser. How are you doing? [back to Kurmanji Kurdish] [Unclear name mentioned] How is he/she doing? How is Nofe doing? How are Tammer and others doing?

Nasser: I'm not Ala'a, I came to open internet for Ala'a. I am Nasser.

Shereen: I'll be sacrificed for you, my little bird. Take care of your sister. Try to reach Habib so he can talk to me and send me Ranna's daughters' phone number. Their mother wants to talk to them. She is sad and wants to talk to them. Please do that. My sweetheart.

Unknown young child: Good, her mother is good.

Unknown young male child: We are with her [unspecified person] daughter. We are with her daughter. We are with her daughter and she is saying Hi to you. Ala'a is with her [Ranna's] daughter. Next time we open the internet I will give Ranna's daughter's phone number to her to talk to her.

Shereen: I will be sacrificed for you, my little bird, my Habib. I will kiss your eyes. Where is your little brother [Nasser]? Send me a voice message, my little bird. Where are you now? Stay with each other, my sweetheart. Give me Ranna's daughter's phone number.

Nasser: I'm online with Habib's phone now, but I will be on my phone soon and I will talk to you with my phone. How are you? Are you good? When are you going to come to us? I miss you. Habib is with someone, and my friend knows where they live. I will go to him. I will send you his voice message.

Shereen: Nasser, where are you going, my sweetheart. You saw Tammer's picture and you said it's not Tammer. Here are our pictures. [pictures included] These are Babu's kids. These kids want to join with me. You are my eyes, and my little bird, and I will sacrifice for you.

Nasser: Ok, Ok.

Nasser: We will talk to you.

Nasser: Where is Ameer, where is Farhan, let them talk to me.

Shereen: My sweetheart, they are not with me, I went to the Bazaar to buy some things. My sweetheart, when I go home, I will have Farhan and Hanifa talk to you. I will be sacrificed for you. Farhan and the others are asking when we can connect with each other. We are all together, Farhan, Hanifa, my sweetheart.

Nasser: I didn't say, Ala'a said.

Nasser: You are saying you are at Qamishlu [Syria].

Shereen: My sweetheart, you are with Abu Annas, and who is Habib with? I heard Habib is with someone else.

Nasser: [unclear portion] I'm with no one, I'm with Ala'a. I have no master. I'm the master. We made new money for our state.

Nasser: They are in the jail. (He thinks his relatives are in the jail]

Nasser: [unclear brief message]

Shereen: Oh you became a master! Surprisingly. My little bird is good. And if you are a master, bring us to you. So we won't be killed. My little bird, I'll be sacrificed for you.

Nasser: Ok, Ok.

Shereen: Where is Ala'a? Where is she now? Let her talk. I'll be sacrificed for your eyes. God willing, me and my father will come to you. You and Tammer and Radhwan stay with each other. I'll be sacrificed for your eyes.

Photo message: (pictures of knives)

Shereen: If you have knives, we are afraid of you. You make us afraid when you send pictures of knives. You are my life.

Nasser: Ok, Ok.

Shereen: Do you have money? If you don't have money, I'll send enough money and phones for you. If you don't have it, let me know and I will send you money.

Nasser: How are you going to send it, who's going to bring it?

Shereen: If you tell me where you are, I can tell someone where you are and he can bring it to you. I'll send as much as you want. [You are] my patience and my life. If you need money I can tell Jassim to send it to you. Do you remember Jassim, our Muslim friend, who was holding your legs when you were circumcised? If you tell me where you are I can send you money. If you want to.

Nasser: Let him bring.

Shereen: Ok, how much do you want? I can get as much as you want and give it to Jassim to bring to you. I will sacrifice for you. I will give it to Jassim and he will give it to you. How many millions?

Nasser: 3 million.

Shereen: I will send you 3 million. Just tell me where you are now so I can send it to you and give you the money. Don't tell the state. If you like, you can come with Ala'a or you can come alone. I'll be sacrificed for both of your eyes. Any day you want to get the money I will send it. I will send the

money, if you want 3 million or 4 million. I will send it and he can give it to you.

Nasser: Do you have a bursa [place for sending money]?

Shereen: I can't understand you, can you say that again? Where shall I go? If you won't be angry, I will give him your phone number, and he will give you the money. Please don't tell the state about the money because they will take the money. This money is for you and Ala'a. I'll be your sacrifice, and I'll give him your phone number and I'll give him three million to give to you. Tell him your place and he will give it to you. My sweetheart, do you understand me? I know you don't have money now. You need money, I'll be your sacrifice. If you won't be angry, I'll give him your phone number. I will give him the money and you can go. Just tell me where you live, and he will give you the money. And don't tell anyone.

Nasser: Do you want something?

Shereen: I cannot understand, what are you saying? I'll be your sacrifice my little bird. Please just send a clear voice message. If you want it, he will give you three or four million for you and Ala'a, just don't tell anyone. I'll be your sacrifice. Tell me where you are. If you want, I'll give him your phone number, if you don't I won't. As you like. If you want me to give it to him I will, if you don't, I won't. Do you want money or not? I will send you 4 million. Just tell me where you are. If you want, I'll be your sacrifice and I'll give him your phone number.

Nasser: Let me ask Ala'a.

Nasser: I'm hungry and I want to eat something.

Nasser: Let the man come into my house, I cannot go out to get money.

Shereen: He will go to the bazaar, not to your house. I will give him your phone number, and I will tell him to go to one of the stores. I didn't ask you to come to us. Jassim will give you the money, and tell Jassim Shereen and her father will come to you.

Nasser: I will stay here and I will talk to him.

Nasser [accidentally recording his discussion with another person who is with him]: Will you be angry if I give him your telephone number, and if he sends you the money?

Shereen: My little bird, I will give you four million and he will bring it to you. You can spend your money. You can buy a phone for yourself. Masoud will be pleased when he sees you. Maher said he will join you. Maher also said we will visit Habib and Ala'a and others and Tammer said he wished he was with Habib now, and he was carrying a rifle.

Nasser: [Islamic song plays in the background, encouraging people to join the fight].

Nasser: I swear to Allah until I ask Ala'a I cannot do anything.

Shereen: My sweetheart, I'll be sacrificed for you. If you talk to Ala'a, she will say she doesn't need money. Don't ask her please. Don't tell Ala'a my sweetheart, my little bird, I will give it to you. Listen to your mother. Don't listen to Ala'a, listen to your mother, my sweetheart.

Nasser: I need a phone and I'll talk to Ala'a.

Shereen: My little bird, my little bird, tell Ala'a Shereen will send you money. I will send the money through Jassim. If Ala'a says no, she doesn't want it, you come alone. I will give him your phone number and tell him which shop you will go to, to meet him. If you tell Ala'a, Abu Annas will take your money. I'll be your sacrifice. You are my eyes. Don't tell Ala'a. I know you have no money. I will send you a phone and I will give Jassim four million to give to you and don't tell Ala'a.

Nasser: I cannot do that, I have to tell Ala'a.

Shereen: Tell her, and if she says she doesn't want it, I won't send it to you. If you don't tell her, I will give all the money to you. If you tell her, she will tell Abu Annas. If you tell Ala'a, she will say no because she will not listen, she is not a good kid.

Nasser: I have to tell her and she might say yes.

Shereen: Tell her and if she says no, ask her not to tell anyone else, especially Abu Annas. The money is for you and Ala'a and Annas [Ala'a's baby]. I'll be your sacrifice. If she says yes, then yes, if she doesn't say yes, you come alone. Always come online and talk to your mother and whenever you like, I can give Jassim your phone number. I know you are hungry now, go and eat something.

Nasser: She said no, and they will give us money. The state will give us money.

Shereen: Ok, its fine, if you have enough, its fine, but I will send extra money to you. I will send you the money. I know they are giving you money and food, but I'll let you have extra.

Shereen: I'll be a sacrifice for you. Don't show this message to them. They will be angry if they see it. You can spend this for million for buying a bicycle or motorcycle or clothes. I will send you a nice phone. Ok my little bird. Now you are hungry, go and eat something. You are your mother's bird.

Shereen: Wadha's daughter-in-law and her children went to Canada. They are sending others to other countries. Before ISIS came, Wadha had cancer and she died in Canada from the cancer.

Shereen: If you really want to come, we have people to get you here. If you don't want to come, answer me soon, don't delay.

Nasser: Abu Annas doesn't allow me to call you because he says you are in non-believer's land. Do you understand? [the following is in Arabic:] Come and become a Muslim and promise Baghdadi and promise to the State, die for Allah and God will gather us in paradise. That's how the true life is. The world is nothing whether you know it or not. I hope God will turn on your mind so it will work.

Nasser: Fawzia [Shereen's sister-in-law who lives with her], how are you, how is Shereen doing, how about Nofe and my mother? Are all of you good? Allah willing. Thanks for Allah my brother and I are good.

Ala'a: God willing, Nasser will go to find Habib. He will bring him back to us. Thanks for Allah, we have money, so tell Jasim we don't want money. We have enough to eat and drink. We get enough money. Why don't you come with Jassim. Instead of sending money with Jassim, why don't you come with Jassim. If you want to come, come. If you don't want to come, this is my last message to you. Say hello to everyone,

and send me Nadia's picture. I haven't seen her in a long time. Allah knows.

Unknown boy: Hi, how are you. Tell my mother, Hanifa, to send a voice message. And also Farhan. Do you understand or not? Thank God we are fine, and I gave my phone to Abu Abdulla to open it for me. If you really want to join us, I will give your phone number to a man who will bring you. Think deeply about it and let me know how many of you will come. Ranna's daughter needs her mother's phone number. Ranna's daughter can't give her phone number to her mother. Ranna's daughter's husband will not allow her to give out her phone number. If you aren't serious about coming to us, he will cut the communication.

Shereen: Ala'a, my sweetheart, I will be sacrificed for your eyes. We will come for sure but we don't know yet which day. When you come online I want to send you a message and you will go offline. If you are able to open the internet you will talk to Salwa, Munera, and Rania. Say hello to Abu Annas. He is a kind man because he lets you talk to me. We will come, but why haven't you given us a date to come? Please tell us what day we should come because we don't know when to go. Hanifa and Farhan fought with me and they are staying with Daham in Dohuk and we are in Qamishlu [Syria]. They fought with me and said "why didn't you get your kids with you?" Even if I die I will come to you. Without you I have nothing in this life. If we don't get together, I will kill myself. Say hi to Abu Annas and take care of your brother.

Nasser: You have one week. If you come, it's good. If you don't come, we will cut our relationship. Abu Annas told me that. He doesn't allow me to talk to you any more if you don't come. Just like other people don't talk to their family, so you could also not talk to us. We are the same as other

people. This time I tried very hard to talk to you. It is a sin to talk to nonbelievers, that's why they don't allow me to talk to you. Say hello to your house and your family and to Farhan. Allah willing you will come to us. I swear to Allah I missed you. You come and become a Muslim. We will stay together and we will go to paradise together. God willing, all non-believers will go to hell, and all Muslims will go to paradise. It's God's promise. God promised believers. You heard us, we were talking about religion a lot. Did you hear us? Do you pray or not. Do you use the Hijab to cover your whole face and your body? The woman cannot use the internet. If you don't cover yourself, it's forbidden. If you don't cover yourself, it's forbidden. If you don't cover yourself, it's forbidden! No man can see a woman except her own husband. Allah said cover yourself with the hijab. Why is Rania talking like this? Let her come and be a Muslim and we will find her a very handsome husband.

Unknown person: How are you doing? I hope you are all fine. How is my grandfather doing? I hope they are fine. How are you? How is my mother? How is Farhan doing? Thank Allah we are good. Tell Raniya and Muneera to talk to us. Abu Annas listened to your messages. Do you remember when you told us when the Kurds come to us we should say we are Yezidi. Abu Annas said you want to take us out, you don't want to join us. Abu Annas said, "why is Shereen talking like this and why isn't she going to paradise?" He told me you are a liar and we are going to paradise, not you.

Shereen: How are you doing, how is your brother doing? Why don't you open your internet, and why don't you ask us to come. If you were doing that, I would be there. The Kurdish and Shia are fighting and we might get killed. Open your internet and listen to my voice message and tell us how we can come. Munera, Salwa, and Fawzo want to come and we are praying together. We are afraid we cannot go to

Kurdish people, as they will kill us. Open your internet please and set up a date when we should come to you. If we come by ourselves, the Islamic State might kill us. Just tell us the date and we are coming on that date.

Nasser: How are you doing? Are you good? Thank Allah, my brother and I are good. Naza is telling me you are lying. I sent you a voice message, but women are not supposed to use the internet. If this was allowed, I would open it and talk to you. Abu Annas said every day you are saying you will come but you don't come. If you want to come, we have a special force that can get you here. Answer me soon. Hurry.

Nasser: It's very good that Kurdish and Shia are fighting now. Let Allah send the fire on them and we will relax. What else is going on there? Anything new? Answer me. Do you understand? It's been a long time that I have been waiting on you. If you want to come, I will give your number to the special force, and they will get you here. Send me the picture of whoever else is with you and send me a picture of Rania and her kids, and Farhan and the others. Why did you fight with Farhan and the others?

Shereen: Farhan and the others fought with me because they thought I meant to abandon my children. Farhan told me to go to my family. Hanifa is with Daham, and no one is with me now. I am staying with my father in Qamishlu [Syria]. If they don't kill us, let Abu Annas come in front of us and we will go to you.

Shereen: My little bird, Jassim will help me to come to you. What place should I go to? Which area should I tell Jassim to take me to? You have to tell me your address, so I can tell Jassim to get me there. Give me the kind ISIS man's phone number so I can talk to him and get information about your address. Then God willing, I will come to you. I swear to

God, if I don't get to see you I will kill myself. I miss you a lot. From morning until evening I am crying for you. I will be your sacrifice. I wish I could see you one day before I die.

Shereen: Ala'a, how are you, how are you going? How is your baby doing? How is your brother doing? How is Abu Annas doing? I will be your sacrifice. Please let Abu Annas talk to me.

Shereen: [in Iraqi Arabic] How are you Abu Annis, are you good? I hope you are good. Where are my kids? Where is Habib? Where is Nasser? I need to hear your voice message. I miss you a lot, I want to see your picture.

Abu Waleed (the paraplegic terrorist who raped Shereen for a full year and then sold her): [In non-Iraqi, standard Arabic] Peace be upon you. Shereen, how are you doing, are you good? It's Abu Waleed. Are you good? Where are you? Thank Allah, all of your kids are good. Thank Allah we are good.

Shereen: [in Iraqi Arabic] We are fine, and God willing, say hi to my kids. Where is Nasser, where is Habib, where is Ala'a? Why don't they answer me? It's Ala'a's phone number. Where are you? How are you doing? How is it going? I need your picture. And I need a picture of Habib, Nasser and Ala'a. Say hi to all of them. How is Abu Annas doing? I hope you are well. I want to join the Islamic State. We are in Qamishlu. We won't go to Kurdistan. Kurdistan is not nice, and is full of fighting, and it's not good.

Abu Waleed: [sent a photo of himself]

Shereen: Don't move, there is fighting in Tal Afar and Mosul. I hope you will be fine, and take care of my kids. Where are

you? I will come to you but you won't come to me. I need your new picture, not your old picture. That's an old picture.

Abu Waleed: Peace be upon you. Islamic State doesn't allow women to use the internet. All of the women stopped using the internet. Internet is only for the men, do you understand? All of the women here are our sisters, and it is forbidden for them to use the internet.

Abu Waleed: Thank Allah I'm close, I'm close, and there is some movement in Mosul. Allah is great, Allah is great. Mosul belongs to Muslims and we will take it again. God willing, Mosul will go to Muslims again.

Abu Waleed: Why don't you come, why don't you come to us? I don't move that much, why don't you come to us? Now I'm going to Homs [Syria]. I will meet the leader of Homs.

Shereen: It's Ala'a's phone. It's Ala'a's phone. Why doesn't Ala'a answer the phone? Where is Habib? Where is Nasser? Just let me listen to their voices please, and I will kiss your hands and kiss your feet. Why don't you come to me? I really want to join the Islamic State and I'm in Qamishlu now. Kurdistan is not nice. Kurdistan is a big traitor. We got this problem because of Kurdistan. Kurdistan was the reason for our trouble and our suffering. I swear to God I want to become a Muslim but I am afraid to come to you.

Abu Waleed: Peace be upon you. Abu Annis is working now. Abu Annis and Um Annis went to visit someone, and he has work to do. He is gone for three days to another village. Then they will come back. I saw Um Annis and immediately I said there is someone with a phone. She heard your voice messages, but the problem is that women aren't allowed to have the internet. It is forbidden for women. Voice messages are only for men, not for

women. Nasser told me his mother is a liar. She said she would send me four million but she has no money. I don't trust my mother, she is a liar.

Shereen: Lies, lies, lies. Nasser didn't say anything like that. All of that is lies. Send me a new picture and let Nasser use the internet.

Shereen: I swear to God I have a lot of money, and if you want money I can send you money, I swear by God. I have a lot of money. Nasser didn't say something like that, never. I want Nasser, Habib, and Ala'a.

Abu Waleed: Nasser went to Homs. I am not in Homs now. Didn't you tell Nasser I will send you four million? And you said you will send it through someone. You are the one who is lying to us. You are saying to Nasser that he has no money. Nasser doesn't lie.

Abu Waleed: I know what you are trying to do. You want to take the kids to you, and I will not send you any picture or anything. Do you understand me? Your kids will stay away from you and they will stay with the Islamic State. Your kids will not go to a non-believer's area. If you want to become a Muslim, you can stay with us.

Shereen: I swear to God I never lied to you. If you come and Nasser comes, I will give you a lot of money, and I have a lot of money. I'm working in Qamishlu, and I'm staying there. Say hi to my kids. Say hello to Nasser, Ala'a, and Habib. Let me talk to Nasser and Habib.

Abu Waleed: If you say you have a lot of money, send me \$1000. I'm giving money to Nasser, always, and I'm helping Abu Annas too. Don't you know that? Do you understand that? All of them love me.

Shereen: I swear to Allah, I swear to Allah, I swear to Allah. I will join the Islamic State. It's not a religion. I am praying and fasting. I won't go to Kurdistan. I don't go to the bazaar without a covering. Islamic State is very good. Zareva said if Abu Ahmed doesn't kill me, I will join the Islamic State, and she will meet with Abu Ahmed. I swear to God, I swear to God, I will join the Islamic State.

Abu Waleed: Nasser told me that if we get four million we can buy a car and he told me he will give me 2 million and I said no, no. I told Nasser that if your mother sends you money, you can keep the money for emergency times.

Shereen: I swear to God, if I come, I have a lot of money, and where are my kids? I want my children. Where are Nasser, Habib and Ala'a?

Abu Waleed: If you don't want me, I don't want to talk to you, and I will not send you your kids. We will tell them not to talk to their mother. Nasser said my mother is a non-believer and she is living with PKK in Qamishlu. I will not let you listen to their voices anymore. Did you hear me well? That's all my talking. Peace be upon you.

Shereen: Who said I don't want you? I swear to Allah, Allah, without any lie, I want you. How are your brothers, how are your relatives? I want you, and God willing I will come, but I'm afraid of PKK. I would love to join the Islamic State, God willing.

Abu Waleed: Abu Ahmed got married to a beautiful wife, and they are living in Hama [Syria]. They work in Hama.

Shereen: Zarifa said I want Abu Ahmed, and God willing I will come, but I'm afraid of going to the Islamic State. If the

Islamic State does not kill me I will come. I don't want to live with non-believers. I want to come to the Islamic State.

Abu Waleed: We won't kill you. We are not non-believers, and we are not bad people. Do you understand me? God said I will open the door for anyone who wants to join Islam. We will treat you in a very good way. Abu Ahmed will treat Zarifa in a very good way. He will buy her some good things in the bazaar. Now it's your choice. Don't ever think the Islamic State will kill you. But if you want to cheat us or trick us, we will kill you. If you love Islam very much, no one will touch you, and you can live in the Islamic State.

Shereen: Abu Waleed, when should I come? As soon as I get a chance to come I will come. I swear to God I'm not lying to you, I swear to God. But if you won't kill me I will come to you. But why don't we make a place to meet each other. If Islamic State doesn't kill me I will go and join them. I swear by Allah the religion of Islam is a true religion.

Abu Waleed: Don't worry, don't worry, Islamic won't kill you. It's the opposite. If you come you will live a good life.

Shereen: Zarifa and the others always say "why should we live with these non-believers, and we want the religion of Islam." Zarifa said that if Islamic State won't kill us, we will join, and I will go with her. We will come, but why are you selling us?

Abu Waleed: Islamic State won't kill you. If you want to join us, we will provide a way, and Nasser was with me but he went to Homs. Do you understand me? I don't have any problem with your kids. Other things are not my problem. I just bought you and Younis [Habib]. You were with Abdulmana, and you escaped, and you are not my problem anymore. Now it's good. When I see Nasser in the village I

call out to him, and I ask him if he has money or not, and he says yes. I know he has no money, so I help him and give him money. If you don't believe me you can ask him. Do you understand? When I see Abu Annas I ask if he has money, and he says, a little. I give him money and tell him to buy milk and diapers.

Shereen: You are in a camp in a tent. You are staying in a tent, right? We are in Qamishlu, and working there. God willing I will join you, but I'm afraid of the PKK. I'm afraid of the Islamic State. When I see they won't kill me, I will join them. I escaped from them one time. If you don't kill me, I will join you.

Abu Waleed: Islamic State won't kill you. Find a way and come to us, and never think the Islamic State will kill you. If you become a true believer, we won't touch you, we won't do anything, understood? Come to Islamic State and say I escaped and I thought I would have a better life but now I am bored living with non-believers and I want to live with believers. No non-believers helped us, so I want to be with Islamic State.

Abu Waleed: God willing, God willing. Send me something to show to Um Annas. Send me a voice message or something else, and I will show it to Um Annas.

Shereen: I will come, me and my relatives, all of us will come, I swear by Allah, but if you don't kill us. Just tell me when shall we come? Just tell me the time my relatives and I should come. God willing, we are not in Kurdistan, we are in Qamishlu. We want to cover ourselves with the hijab and we want Islam. No problem, over my eyes, if you talk to your mother, say hi, and say hi to my children. Say hello to Habib, Ala'a and Nasser. I miss you. Without any lie, I swear to

Allah. And God willing, we will come and join you if the Islamic State won't kill us.

Abu Waleed: If you want to join us, you can go to Turkey, and in Turkey you can enter Syria through Etleeb. Understand? When you enter Syria, say we are Jebha Nusra. They are safe, just like our brothers. Don't tell them you are a brother of ISIS. Just go there and say hello to our brothers and say you want to join the Islamic State. Then they will take you until here.

Shereen: Ok, Ok Abu Waleed, good, God willing I will come, I will swear to Allah without any lies. Why did you sell me to someone whose wife was hurting me every day, so that I couldn't face it anymore? Being with you was better than being with the other man. I had to run. I haven't seen my kids, and now I'm like I was dead. I will kill myself if I don't see my children. Life is nothing without my children.

Shereen: Ala'a, how are you are you good? How are your brothers? How is your son? How is Abu Annas? How is it going? Take care of Habib and Nasser. Please one time send me your voice message my little bird, I will be your sacrifice, I miss you a lot. Did you give your phone to Abu Annas?

Shereen: Abu Waleed, where have you gone? Did you go home or what? Are you online? Send me a message. You are not very nice Abu Waleed. You were very nice before. When you were with me you were very handsome. What happened to that?

Abu Waleed: If you want to talk like this, you are not a Muslim. You are a non-believer if you say that. The Muslims won't kill themselves. The non-believers kill themselves. Is this phone number always with you? If you are using this phone number I will save it and I will contact you later.

Shereen: No problem, No problem. This phone number is mine. Say hi to everyone. Waleed, why did you change? I swear to God I miss you a lot, you and your kids, I miss all of them. Say hi to Nasser and Ala'a and Habib, where is Habib. This phone number is mine, and if you talk to Ala'a and Habib, tell them I said help and kiss them.

Shereen: I want a picture of Ala'a, Nasser and Habib without hijab. Let Ala'a send a picture without being covered up. I'm pleasing you Waleed. You are a very kind man. God willing you will go to paradise.

Abu Waleed: I cannot send you Ala'a's picture. It's forbidden. I cannot see her. Are you crazy? A woman cannot be shown to others. Don't say to take off the hijab. She became someone's wife, so it's not ok. Do you want Abu Abbas to get into trouble? When I see her, I cannot see her face, we just talk. [unclear text] I have a really big house with two rooms, and a hall and lobby and bathroom.

Shereen: Why doesn't she send me her picture, I'm not a stranger. I'm not a man. I'm her mother. Why can't I see Ala'a's picture. Let me see my daughter. I swear to God I really miss her.

Abu Waleed: If you want to see your daughter and Nasser you have to come and see them, not by picture. Come here. Do you hear me? And then you can see all of them. And now you are in unbeliever's land and you want to see them?

Shereen: I am not in non-believer's land, I'm in Qamishlu. All of Qamishlu's population prays and fasts and they are not non-believers, but Kurdistan has nonbelievers. God willing I will come. If you don't kill me I will come, I swear to God I will come, but don't kill me.

Ala'a: [baby Annas crying in the background]: How are you, What's going on? Thank Allah we are fine. Please send us your pictures and say hello to all of them. Internet is not for women, so that's all the time we have.

Nasser: We sent you a picture and you have to send us a picture.

Shereen: My little bird, I didn't see you were texting me. I will sacrifice for you. Let Nasser send me some pictures, my little bird, my sweetheart. Please take care of yourself and your brother. Tell Abu Annas, I told Abu Waleed too, to take care of you. Where is Nasser? Tell him to send me some pictures. God willing we will come to you. All of us. I'll be your sacrifice. Jassim said his home is in Syria, and he can help me to get there. Fawzo, Salwa, Rania, and Munera are going to come with me, and Ammer is also saying hello to you. Are you good? Thank God I heard your voice. My father and mother [I love you very much]. You are my darling. God willing I will come to you, my little bird, if you open the internet I will send you pictures and my father and others want to talk to you and meet you, all of them. Why is the baby crying, take care of the baby. You are my heart, you are my little bird.

Abu Waleed: I don't have new pictures. I don't have them. I just have old pictures. I am staying in Syria now. We can do our things only in Syria. I was in Mosul before. You will come to us Allah willing.

Abu Waleed: There is a war in Raqqa, there isn't any way from Raqqa, not now, not now. The way is so hard now. Be patient in Syria until Allah gives us victory. I contacted my brother and sister. My brother just got married today with a Moroccan lady.

Shereen: Ala'a, my heart, how are you, are you good? I'll be your sacrifice. We arrived at Tel Wazee. We will come to you Allah willing. My little bird. Jassem brought me to Tel Wazee, and that is near Raqqa. Give us more directions how to go. Now we are at Tel Wazee.

Shereen: We sent you all of the pictures. Monera's, Rania's, Nadia's, Rayo's, his brothers, Tammer's, Radwan's. We sent all of their pictures. I will be your sacrifice.

Nasser: Peace be upon you. Send us video.

Shereen: Nasser, my little bird, I'll be your sacrifice. Now where are you my sweetheart? Just tell me where you are. We will be there. We are at Tel Wazee now. Tel Wazee is close to Raqqa. Should we come from Raqqa or where? Just tell me where to come. Just tell me where you are, we will be there, my little bird.

Nasser: Send us Ranna's and Ala'a's pictures. Ranna's daughter when she was with Ala'a.

Shereen: Ok Nasser. I have sent you Ranna's daughter's pictures, but anyway I will send them again. Did you give this phone number to Ranna?

Nasser: I told her, I told her.

Nasser: Send me all of your videos.

Shereen: My grandfather [I love you], now I will send you the whole videos. Is it ok if I send you wedding videos? Is it forbidden? I will send you any video that you like. Tell me whose picture do you want?

Shereen: Nasser, my little bird, now I will send you everything. I will reach you. Just tell me where you are, my heart. I will be your eyes sacrifice. My sweetheart, I will reach you. I swear I will come to you. Where is Ala'a? Where are you? Tell Ala'a I will reach you.

Nasser: Don't send the wedding videos, they are forbidden.

Nasser: Shereen, Abu Waleed is with me. Do you want to talk to him?

Shereen: Yes, yes, I want to talk to him. Yes, tell him I want to talk to him. I miss Abu Waleed. Tell him, if Shereen comes, she will choose you. If you want. I like him very much. Tell him I never forgot him.

Shereen: [in Arabic]: Abu Waleed, how are you? How are you doing? I hope you are well. Allah willing I will come to you. If Allah wants.

Abu Waleed: Peace be upon you. How are you, how's it going? If you want to come to us, there is no way now. We will find a way, and we will tell you. We are very far from you, but we will get to each other.

Shereen: Allah willing, Allah willing. I will come. But now I am at Tel Wazee. Close to Raqqa. Yes, it's hard. Abu Waleed, please help me to get to you, to get to my children and you. I never forgot you. I swear by Allah. I miss you a lot. I miss you very much. Very much.

Nasser: Abu Waleed is busy with his phone.

Nasser: It [the internet] was very strong. It was very fast. Thank Allah.

Shereen: Thank Allah, thank Allah. Allah willing, I will come. Nasser, tell Abu Waleed to pray that I reach you. Please tell Abu Waleed. Please tell him your mother is going to come. Tell him she didn't forget you. Tell him she always thinks about you. Every day she remembers you.

Shereen: Abu Waleed, how are you, how is your health? I hope you will be good. Don't try to move too much. How is your mother, and how are your sisters? If you talk to them tell them hi.

Nasser: It's good. Allah willing. It's good.

Shereen: My little bird, I didn't understand you. My sweetheart. Send another voice message. Is Abu Waleed with you? Who is he talking to? Tell Abu Waleed your misses you. Tell him your mother didn't forget him. You and Abu Waleed. Allah willing, I will come and see you. We are at Tell Wazee. If we find a way, Allah willing, we will come. We will reach you. Just tell us which way we should go. If the army doesn't arrest us, we will come.

Nasser: [unintelligible]. You send it to me.

Nasser: He's talking to his father in Morocco.

Shereen: Ok my sweetheart, I'll be your sacrifice, my little bird. Be as you like. I'll be your sacrifice, my darling. Allah willing I will reach you. Where is Habib? Where is Habib? Let Habib send me a voice message my little bird.

Nasser: Send Ranna's daughter's pictures and send videos. Come on, send me Ranna's pictures. Come on, hurry up. Or the internet will be slow.

Shereen: Ok my sweetheart, I'll send it to you now, my little bird. Ranna's pictures. I'll send them to you. Say hi to Abu Waleed and kiss Ala'a's eyes and the baby's eyes. I'll send them now.

Nasser: Hurry up, hurry up.

Shereen: Nasser, I sent many pictures to you, but I don't have Ranna's daughter's pictures. I'll be your sacrifice. Who else do you want? Who else do you want?

Nasser: I need all of your videos. I need all of your videos. I want all of the videos that you have.

Shereen: My little bird, I have sent you all of my videos, and I don't have any more. Here are Ranna's daughter's pictures. Let Ranna's daughter talk to her mother, my little bird.

Nasser: Ok, Ok.

Shereen: I'll be your sacrifice. Say hi to Abu Waleed. Say hi to Abu Annas. I wish I could hear Habib's voice. Please ask Abu Waleed to take care of you. Do you have fighting in your area? Now we are at Tell Wazee. In these days if the fighting stops, we will come. We are in an Arabic village close to Raqqa, and we will come to you. Where are you? Are you in Mayadeen or where? Tammer and I and all of us will come.

Shereen: My little bird, how are you, how are you doing? Nasser, we are tired. We are at Tell Wazee. Allah willing, after 2 days we will reach you. How are you all doing? Why don't you tell us how you are? Don't you remember, I gave you something in the store and you didn't ask me how I am? Didn't you miss us? I swear, we missed you a lot. Where is Habib? Let me hear his voice. My little

Nasser, thank God I heard you. I'll be your sacrifice. Where is your brother? Where is Habib? Where is Ala'a? Why is Ala'a angry? I swear, if she gets angry, we won't be angry. I'll be your sacrifice. Say hi to Abu Waleed. I miss you a lot, and I miss Abu Waleed a lot. Say hi to Abu Waleed. Let him take care of you, my little bird.

Nasser: That's all.

Shereen: Nasser, send it to me, my little bird. We got closer to you. We are at Tell Wazee. Where should we go through? Which way is good for us to go through, my little bird? We will come to you, Allah willing. What do you want me to bring? Money or what? I have 3 or 4 million. I will bring it to you, my little bird, my sweetheart. I will bring you money, for you and Abu Waleed. Let Abu Waleed buy a car for him and you and me. We will stay together. You, and me, and Abu Waleed. We will stay together, my little sweetheart.

Nasser: [unintelligible] Ala'a.

Abu Waleed: Peace be upon you. Where are you Shereen? Where are you? Where are you going? Where?

On September 2, 2017, I was in Shereen's father's house bringing aid when suddenly the phone rang and Shereen came to me with great excitement, gesturing and whispering to me while she talked to Nasser. He was still with Adel/Abbu Annas and Ala'a, and Ala'a's baby Annas in Mayaddin, Syria, and his older brother, Habib, was living with Abu Annas's friend Hussein/Abu Waleed nearby. Shereen was thrilled, and talked with Nasser for a long time. Nasser also talked to his young cousins, Fawzia's sons. He asked for photos of their previous home in Kocho. He said he would send photos later.



Ala'a in captivity with her son Annas by an ISIS terrorist



Ala'a's Son Annas Adil Almagharabi, abandoned in Syria in a cruel trick

As the coalition forces and the PKK closed in on Raqqa, Syria, the captors and children all moved to Der Ezor. It was to be the last stand for ISIS in Syria towns. Afterward, those who were left would flee to fight in the desert.

Shereen continued many months in the sewing program I offered in Seje, making dresses for her relatives and orphan girls, curtains for the safe home they were building for escapees from ISIS, and other

items. Over that time she emerged from her grief into a stronger woman fighting to free her children.

Chapter 6: Release of Nisreen

In late August, 2017, Shereen's cousin Nisreen, 8 months pregnant with an ISIS terrorist's child, was freed and arrived in Seje at Shereen's house. Her mother and mentally disabled teenage brother were living in nearby Qadia camp, and the issue of the pregnancy was weighing upon them. The child could not be allowed in their house, or in their family.



Nisreen, upon her release from captivity from ISIS

Nisreen, now 22 years old, came to interview at MedEast's compound on August 30, 2017. She had just been liberated from ISIS in Tel Afar two or three days before. She was brought to the compound by her cousin, Shereen, who wanted Nisreen to tell her story as she had done herself some months before, and she was willing to do so. Nisreen sat quietly for two hours, telling me about her family members and the first part of her story of capture, sexual slavery, and eventual escape from ISIS.

Her mother, Zakhia, about 46, and her brother Daher, who had a mental disability, about 16, lived in nearby Qadia Camp.

She was eight months pregnant with terrorist Ahmed Abdullah's child when Tel Afar was attacked by Iraqi and Coalition Forces and bombs were falling everywhere. He was a 40 year old Sunni Arab Muslim from Mosul. She believed he was killed in the invasion of Mosul.

During the bombing, she fled alone to the mountain with a blanket and pillow, and slept there one night. Then she found the Kurdish Peshmerga soldiers. They took her to Zumar where she called her family to come and get her.

Her mother was living in Qadia Camp in the Kurdistan Region, with her mentally disabled 16 year old brother. She was reunited with them and stayed with them for one day before her relatives said that she could not live with them in the camp. This was because their Yezidi religious leader, Baba Sheik, refused to accept babies with non-Yezidi fathers into Yezidi homes and villages. The mother could be baptized in Lalish to return to the Yezidi faith, but the baby could never be a Yezidi.

Baba Sheikh declared that anyone who was kidnapped by ISIS was still Yazidi. Though the women had changed to Muslim by force, a

new ritual, a sprinkling by water, was introduced to return them to the Yezidi religion.

She was taken to Lalish Temple to be baptized back into the Yezidi religion. She asked Baba Sheik if he would baptize her baby, but he said no, that could never happen. She said that if he wouldn't baptize her baby, she wouldn't be baptized as a Yezidi either. Thus her religion remained "Muslim" during that time.

Her mother and her cousins said her baby was ISIS, and they would not accept him because the Yezidi culture would not accept their sheltering him. Nisreen's heart was broken, and she told them they were wrong. She said the baby didn't know what religion or culture are, and should be treated as a human being. She came to realize that she would have to choose her baby over her family. She told her family that if they do something to her baby, she will kill herself.

All of the ISIS survivors that Mababuba knew, including one of her cousins, gave up their babies as soon as they were born. Hundreds of babies were so abandoned in Syria, Mosul and Dohuk. Yet Nisreen he never wavered from intending to keep her baby.

An enterprising Priest in the area earned the trust of one such 14 year old pregnant Yezidi girl, who said she couldn't keep her baby because it would remind her too much of ISIS captivity. She gave the baby secretly to the priest, who placed it with a Christian couple who then registered the birth as if it were their own natural child. No red tape, no government involvement, and no public announcements. The girl came to live in our Gula Nissani Safe Home.



Gula Nissani Safe Home in Northern Iraq, operated by MedEast Organization

Nisreen's relatives took her to the hospital in Dohuk and asked the doctor to abort her baby. The doctor asked her if she wanted to abort the baby, and she said emphatically "No!" She then told her relatives she would not go with them anywhere if they tried to kill her baby again.

I gave Nisreen some money to get started, thinking she would join the same sewing program with Shereen at MedEast. But she was staying in Qadia Camp, and attending meetings with the Health Ministry's Center for girls and women returning from ISIS, supported by UNFPA.

I told Nisreen that I would help her keep her baby if that was her choice, and she trusted that. I introduced her to Lilly Axelsson, the Swedish Director of our Gula Nissani (April Flower) safe home, and Lilly loved her as a daughter. The two felt very close in their first meeting. They arranged to go to Family Mall together. Lilly helped her choose clothing she liked. She said she wanted to burn the dress she was wearing, which had been given to her by ISIS. She returned to Qadia Camp that night.

I prepared and executed a rather involved plan to find and speak to Nisreen or her mother, just to see how she was doing and what she needed. I prepared a telephone for her with internet access and prepaid phone credits, loaded with the phone number of her cousin and our taxi driver and interpreter, and put a tracer on the phone in case she was moved to Erbil the next day, as her doctor had indicated this was a possibility. We explained that this phone would help us find her location, wherever she was. We gathered fresh bread and fruit and sweets as she had requested. Her mother followed our instructions to go outside the building, flag down a taxi driver, have him call my driver to get their location. Then I picked up her cousin, our female staff member who had visited her in her home, and went to find her.

The day after Lilly took Nisreen shopping, on September 1, 2017, word came from Mababuba's cousin that she had experienced back pains and called her government doctor. A driver came to take her and her mother and disabled brother to the hospital for treatment. The message sent was that she was now in an undisclosed location and being told by her doctor not to go out and not to talk to anyone. The reasons for this secrecy were unclear to me at the time. We traced her phone to locate her.

It was the Haj Eid holiday for Muslims, the holiday Nisreen had celebrated with Ala'a, Habib, and Nasser on Mount Sinjar just before the 2014 invasion of Kocho. The phone lines were busy, but finally we got through, Nisreen and her mother came down to the street, and we met them there. They had been taken to a small hotel on a back street in Dohuk and given dry goods for food.

We sat for a while on the curb talking, before we determined that there were no government or Yezidi people watching her. Then we went into the small lobby of the hotel to carry on the rest of the

conversation. Her mother went upstairs to bring her brother at my request, and I tried to befriend him, though his capacity was severely limited. His mother constantly tended him, held him, gave him water, moved him around the room as he desired, careful that his every need was attended to. It was a beautiful picture of motherhood juxtaposed against a hideous picture of motherhood that she presented to get Nisreen to abort or abandon her child. This unnatural state was a creation of the Yezidi society and religion and its ban on babies born from one non-Yezidi parent.

We tried to counsel Nisreen that the baby was hers, not her mother's, her cousin's, the doctor's, the government's, or the Yezidi people's. She had told us in the previous interview that she wanted to keep the baby. She assured us that the government doctor had said she had every right to keep her baby if she wanted to. We were incredibly relieved to hear that. But what came next shocked us all.

She said she wanted to run away, perhaps leave the country, with her baby. All three women, Nisreen, her mother, and her cousin, stated repeatedly and adamantly that Baba Sheik would not allow any Yezidi girl to keep a baby or a child fathered by an ISIS terrorist (or any Arab, Christian, or Kurd for that matter). They said she had to hide in this hotel until she gave birth, or her male relatives might kill her. Nisreen equated these extremist Yezidis with ISIS terrorists, and said they are all devils. They all agreed loudly and repeatedly that there was no way she could live freely with her child among Yezidis.

It was clear to us that she felt entirely trapped into giving up her baby, though she wanted to keep it. She had said in the initial interview that nobody was going to take her baby from her, but that resolution was now slipping into the reality of what her cousin and mother were telling her in both ears with great emotion and conviction. She was beginning to believe that she HAD to give up the

baby. The Yezidis would not allow her to keep it. This was a shock to me, as I had been living among the Yezidis for three years, and had a Yezidi foster son for seven years. This had never come up though I had inquired from many people about what happens to the children Yezidi girls bear with terrorists.

Feeling her sense of being trapped, I offered a suggestion and my help. She could tell the government that she wanted to keep the baby, and tell any Yezidis who contacted her by phone that she wanted to give it up, remain in hiding in the hotel until the birth, and then when released from the hospital, come to Seje to a house we would prepare for her, her mother and her brother. She would come to work every day supposedly to sew, but be entrusted with the care of babies and children sired by ISIS terrorists with Yezidi girls and women, including her own child, that would legally remain her own.

Lilly and I, among others, would care for the baby in the nights in our compound, so that she could create the appearance that she was not raising the baby in her house. Our NGO, MedEast, had been, for several months, running a pilot sewing program for Yezidi girls and women who had returned from ISIS, and was nearing completion of a 28 bed dormitory and sewing factory on the same compound.

This arrangement was the only solution because she was unwilling at that time to separate from her mother. Of course she would be free to stay with us indefinitely with her baby, and her mother and brother could even stay with us for a short time, or allow us to resettle them in the village near the Safe Home, but at that time, these options were untenable to them.

If caring for babies and children was an essential part of caring for these women who had escaped sexual slavery, we were ready to do so. We had made inquiries in the past about the fate of the children

of these unions, but had not been accurately informed that all children were being given up. We could offer a security guard, cameras, watch dogs, and other protections, as well as our reputation in the village for defending the afflicted. We had built a 40 room facility for receiving women and girls and their babies.

Equally disturbing was the realization that we didn't know, and the Yezidis didn't know, where the children were going to when their mothers gave them up. I had personally discussed this matter with the Kurdish Minister of Health in Dohuk, and with the Kurdish Minister of Labor and Social Affairs. Their answer was that the babies that were given up for adoption were placed in a system with a waiting list and a process with prudent restrictions. These Kurdish leaders did not indicate at the time that ALL Yezidi women with the exception of Nisreen were giving up their babies, a rather glaring omission. I wonder now whether they even realized this was happening. We were not able to get any sense of how many babies were going into the hands of the Kurdish government until much later.

Although Baba Sheik had issued a remarkable order from the beginning of the repatriation of Yezidi girls and women that they were to be accepted into marriages with Yezidi men, it suddenly dawned on me that he had glaringly omitted any mention of the children of these women. I had wrongly assumed, as had others, they were welcomed with the Yezidi women into their marriages. Checking with local Yezidi men afterward, I was told that would never happen.

I checked with my lawyer about inter-faith adoptions. The law held that no Muslim baby could be adopted by someone of another religion. All babies abandoned by a mother of any religion went to the state for adoption, and was classified as a Muslim. The baby's

original religion/ethnicity and parentage were expunged from their records before adoption, so adoptive parents would never know.

We learned however that any Yezidi-Christian marriage would only be accepted in court if both husband and wife converted to Islam. And we heard testimony that any baby going into the adoption system would be offered only to Muslims who offered the most money to the government agency, not to the first on the list. Corruption was rampant in the government, so this was believable. And we were told that Christians would never be allowed to adopt a Yezidi child.

We established relations with Sukaina, the head of widows and orphans for Nineveh Governing Council in Mosul to learn more about the fate of the survivors and their babies. She had 17,000 cases on file, and many were Yezidi women with ISIS children. All were separated when they came to her, sometimes the mother to one city and the baby to another, making it difficult for mothers to see their babies. Babies abandoned in hospitals at birth were sent to Baghdad to over-crowded orphanages and health center. But we learned from UN staff in the camps that all of these babies were dying within a few days of being transported to Baghdad.

I left Shereen with Nisreen to spend the night and gave them money to go shopping for fresh vegetables and other needed items: tomatoes, cucumbers, onions, potatoes, fresh bread, and sweets. They would call our driver the next day for her cousin to get a ride home, and to let us know if the mother needed a ride to a doctor herself.

I immediately called my most connected, and wisest Yezidi friends, and was again shocked at their responses. "Where is this woman, and who is she?" they tripped up immediately, as if they wanted to find her and silence her. "The UN needs to find a way to help these

babies,” was the next reply, which also assumed the policy of Yezidi girls and women giving up these babies was inviolate.

I responded forcefully, explaining how their responses were evidence of their own bias, as enlightened as they were. When they asked what I thought should happen next I was quick and clear. They all need to try to contact Baba Sheik and convince him to make a pronouncement that these children were to be protected and accepted.

On the second visit, we took her separately to a local restaurant around the corner from the hotel, and she said she wanted to keep her baby. We again provided money to help with basic needs, things she could buy in a market down the street.

On the third visit we encouraged her further to make her own choice, and to be strong in her opinion.

Nisreen was scheduled to deliver the baby by Caesarean Section in the Maternity Hospital in Dohuk in November, 2017. She had an advance visit to the Maternity Hospital for a checkup. At that time, one of the Yezidi nurses, a young woman, tried to get her to notify her when the baby was delivered, so she could “help her” with the baby, meaning to help her get rid of the baby.

When the time came for the baby to be born, the Health Ministry put Nisreen in the Maternity Hospital, but Shereen would not tell us how to find her, because she knew we wanted her to keep her baby. Instead Shereen took another American girl there to see if she could get them to convince her to give up the baby. This American had worked with us before, and wanted to be involved with Nisreen and us in the future, but failed to inform us of this meeting and was sanctioned by our organization as a result and not allowed to participate further. Several Yezidi nurses and staff attending Nisreen

also tried to get her to give up the baby, as did mid-level Yezidi women working for the Health Directorate in the section responsible for Yezidi girls returning from ISIS.

Shereen gave birth to a healthy baby boy, whom she called Khalid Ahmed Abdullah, the second and third names taken from his biological father, her rapist. He was labelled Muslim at birth.

When she woke from the surgery her cousin called her and said she had to give away her baby.

The Yezidi nurses did not allow her to see her baby in the hospital, and tried to force her to give the baby up for adoption. Nisreen refused to agree with them and grew anxious about not being able to see her baby. So after a few days she left the hospital without permission, without her baby, and sought help from the police to get her baby back and to have protection from her family and the Yezidi nurses in the Maternity Hospital. We were asked by the government not to see her during this time. We had not yet earned their confidence, and they felt they could meet all her needs, though clearly they couldn't.

Nisreen was placed in police care in a Women's Shelter in Dohuk with her baby because she had sought police protection. The manager there tried to get her to give up Khalid for adoption to a Kurdish family. She told her that it was not her decision to have the baby, so it wasn't her decision whether to keep the baby or not. Soon after, the woman was removed from her post, fortunately.

Nisreen felt this Shelter was like a jail. She couldn't leave without a police escort. She and her baby were in a big room with seven Muslim women who were unkind to her.

She asked for milk for her baby, and was given very low quality powdered milk. Khalid cried a lot and didn't like this milk. She asked for clothes, but they wouldn't give her any other help for Khalid. They were giving clothes to the babies of the Kurdish girls, and their families were supporting them with their babies, but she couldn't get any help from the shelter or her family. Her family refused to bring her clothes to her, unless she returned home to them without the baby, and they gave nothing for the baby.

The Muslim girls there laughed at Nisreen and provoked her. She asked them to help her to get an ID for her baby, but they refused and said she would never be able to get an ID for him because he was an ISIS baby. There was an Arabic Muslim girl living with her who argued with her that this baby was from ISIS and she should not keep him.

A Yezidi officer named "Faleh" from the Government's office of Genocide Issues came to her in the shelter and tried to get her to give up her baby. She could tell he was lying to her. He said that if she remained with her baby in Iraq, her baby might be killed, and if he survived, no one would marry her son, not Yezidis, Muslims, or Christians. He said that only a Muslim would ever marry here, not a Christian or a Yezidi, if she kept her baby. Her only chance to be married to a Yezidi would be to give up her baby. She cried and told him she wanted him to call me, and gave him my phone number, but he never contacted me.

She asked to have visits from Lilly and me, but they said the shelter staff didn't want us to visit her. She had my telephone number in her phone, but they would not allow her access to her phone because they knew that we wanted to help her keep her baby. Finally, she was able to convince her cousin Shereen to tell us where she was, and Shereen took us to her. Shereen was still hoping I would take the

baby as my own. The shelter personnel were not able to refuse our visit. Lilly and I met with her and saw the baby, and brought her good quality milk and clothes for the baby.

Then Lilly began visiting Nisreen on a daily basis and I attended these visits sometimes, and worked behind the scenes to try to help buying items for the baby and working with the lawyer to get her ID back and to get an ID for Khalid. Lilly made her feel welcKhalid to come to the Safe Home, and she trusted she would be well cared for with us. Lilly wanted us to rush to get a dorm room ready for Nisreen and her baby, which we did, within a week after the request. We hurriedly put up curtains and provided supplies so the new room would be comfortable. Carpet came shortly afterward.

During that week of preparations, she sought our help getting an ID for her baby, and I hired a lawyer to work on this. He met many obstacles in the government. He, with us in tow, went to several offices to try to find who had kept her ID card. We finally found it at a police station in Dohuk. Our lawyer went to the court to allow her to have her ID in her own possession for the purposes of getting an ID for her baby.

Our lawyer then continued to go up against many obstacles to getting the ID for the baby. He was informed that for \$1500 we could get the ID with any name we want quickly, but for \$1000 we could do it slowly, first by getting her official religion changed from Yezidi to Muslim, then having her declared a widow, which would be a slow process. We refused to enter into this corrupt system, and left it to the Ministry of Health to facilitate her baby's ID card, which they proceeded to do. We needed a legal solution that would work for mothers and their babies for months to come.

After another week, Nisreen informed the shelter staff that she wanted to leave their custody. They resisted somewhat, and offered the alternative of returning to a hotel, but she did not trust her mother. She also informed Lilly that she was ready to come, called her relatives, and they brought her to us. She had been in the shelter more than three months.

We put her into our new Gula Nissani Safe Home dormitory, and put her mother and brother in a room down the hall. They were our first residents. Normally we wouldn't have accepted a mother and brother there, but as the other rooms were all empty, we allowed it.

The next day, her mother had never seen her baby before, and refused to kiss him, carry him, or look at his face, but did briefly rock its cradle. We were briefly hopeful that her heart would soften toward her grandchild. But the second day there, as Lilly was taking Nisreen to the pharmacy to get medicine for her Khalid, her mother approached me with one of my translators and requested forcefully that I kick her daughter out of the safe home and take the baby to raise it myself, so her daughter could be returned to her. I refused. She saw Khalid as her enemy, separating her from her daughter. I could not move her from that view.

While visiting her, Shereen's parents both asked me to kick Nisreen out of the Safe Home and raise the baby boy as my own. I asked if they would kick their daughter out of their house. Shereen's mother replied "Yes, if she was dirty." I asked "Do you think Nisreen is dirty?" "Yes, she said, if she doesn't give up her baby and come back to her family" she answered. I told them that I would never kick her out of the safe home because she wanted to keep her baby, and that was her choice. Hearing this, both of Shereen's parents rose to their feet and left the room mumbling in disgust. They became oppositional to

us after that meeting though they would repeatedly return to seek my help afterward.

The following day Nisreen's relatives came and spoke roughly to her, saying they had nothing to say to her and refused to see baby Khalid. They took her mother and brother away to Qadia Camp, feeling they would not get any help from us in getting the baby away from the mother.

That same day, Lilly took Shereen's daughter Ala'a to Family Mall shopping. In that short visit, Ala'a said she wanted to keep her baby. She said her mother had tricked her into leaving him, at the age of a year and eight months, in Syria to travel to Iraq separately, while telling the Syrian Yezidis not to return the baby to Iraq. He had just begun to speak in simple words, and to call her Mama. She loved him deeply, and said she would leave her family if she could keep her baby, and didn't want to go to her mother in Canada if she couldn't take her baby. She wanted our help to try to get her baby back.

I made inquiries and began searching for her baby boy Annas at that point. It would be a long and difficult process, and would never succeed.

The call came from the UNHCR to take Nisreen to Erbil for medical evaluation and paperwork required for acceptance to go to Canada. Lilly and our lead translator went with her and took care of her overnight for the two-day meeting. She wanted to leave Iraq, and the open door to Canada was closing soon. The race would be on to get IDs for both her and her baby, and passports. We would have to get IDs for them as the government had failed to do so.

But meanwhile, she felt safe at Gula Nissani, and was very thankful to us for building the safe home and to the funders of the safe home for making a safe place for her and her baby. She would still be in the

government's Women's Shelter in Dohuk if she had not been able to go to Gula Nissani. She felt that she and her son would finally have a better life. She wanted Khalid to grow up to become a doctor so he could help people.

She began to open up more and relax after all this was behind her, and began visiting more with Lilly and other staff at Gula Nissani.

She was called to receive immunizations and to attend orientation for going to Canada in the government center for Yezidi girls returning from ISIS, and Lilly and our translator took her there. Our staff were not allowed to remain with her, though they wanted to.

Shortly after I arrived home, while she was still in the training, she grew ill, dizzy, feverish, and faint. We called our driver to take her straight to the hospital where Lilly and I met her and assured that she was treated and received needed medicine. A British mother on our staff looked after Khalid while we were caring for Nisreen in the hospital, and soon the mother and baby were reunited.

Nisreen decided to have Khalid circumcised, so this was arranged by the husband of the government's Ministry of Health officer working Nisreen's case. This man was a surgeon in the local government hospital. We did the pre-op exam with her, then took the mother and baby in for surgery the next morning. I stayed with Khalid in the hospital while Nisreen went to her second day of training in the survivor's center, as this could not be waived or delayed if she were to go to Canada. I comforted him as best I could, and he cried as he came out of the general anesthesia for about 20 minutes before accepting the pacifier and falling asleep in my arms. The Yezidis in the room gave me rather strange looks and tried to help me with Khalid. After two hours I took him home.

The afternoon of the circumcision we held a traditional circumcision celebration, with briani and other ethnic foods shared with all our staff. Khalid made a brief appearance as guest of honor with his mother, before they both returned to rest in their room for the remainder of the day.

A few days later, Nisreen's relative came again with her mother and brother, trying to visit her, but I told them she was still in Dohuk and wouldn't return for four hours or more. Eventually they gave up waiting and went home. A few days later they called again saying they would return on Friday. They asked if the mother and brother could stay over at Gula Nissani for a couple of days but we said no, as there were other ladies staying there by that time. We also told the male relative that no men were allowed to visit at any time in the dorm. He stayed outside.

The mother came with her son, and Nisreen decided to come down to meet them while Khalid was sleeping. She took them up to her room.

Her mother immediately began telling her to leave the baby and return home with her right then. Nisreen insulted her mother for being so evil twice, then left the room. She came to my office in the staff house with Khalid and sat down to rest while our staff removed her mother and brother from the compound. Their meeting had lasted only 15 minutes. Nisreen was gaining strength in her decision to keep and protect Khalid, and in resisting her mother and her other relatives.

The government had lost control of Nisreen when she left the shelter, except to call late in the night to check on her safety. The relatives had given the police our number. We put Nisreen and her baby in one of our rooms. Lilly stayed with her while I ran out to buy baby

supplies. I had already sent someone to buy supplies in advance, but that person had kept the supplies until she personally could visit Nisreen, even though my money was used for the purchase.

The next day, the relatives showed up, though Lilly and I did not see them, and before our security protocols were fully implemented and staff were trained, the relatives were allowed to enter the safe home and visit with Nisreen's mother. They told Nisreen they had nothing to say to her. As a result, that night I had a staffer tell her relatives they were no longer welcome on the compound. But Nisreen would at times soften and allow her mother and brother to visit.

Her relatives called one day saying she had an appointment with the Canadian organization working on her emigration to Canada. I didn't believe this, as they were against her going to Canada. So we investigated, and found that a Yezidi policeman in the Genocide Office of the government had encouraged the family to whisk the mother and baby away. Her offence was wanting to keep her baby, and the baby's offense was being half Arab Muslim Terrorist. To them, the father's half meant more than the mother's half.

We of course refused to let them take her, saying we would take her to the meeting. The relatives were unable to tell us the location or time of the meeting, or the name or contact information for the organization involved. So after running around Dohuk in circles, we knew our suspicions about the family were correct, and we all returned home. The relatives called Nisreen's phone, castigating her, so we changed her phone number. That was the last contact between her and her family for a while.

We helped her through her next days with care. Lilly took the lead in these activities and "adopted" Nisreen as her daughter and Khalid as her grandson, taking great interest in them throughout the days.

There were visits to Maria, and trips to fetch medication and special food for the baby, as well as outings to give Nisreen a change of scenery at one of the local malls.

Chapter 7: The Release of Ala'a

The camp where Nasser was teaching boys weaponry while living with Abu Habib was bombed, but Nasser and the students escaped and Nasser moved to another camp. He was teaching boys how to use AK-47s, RPGs, BKC machine guns, American M16s, and pistols.

His owner, Abu Habib, was killed by a rocket, so Nasser escaped from his house and sought out his sister Ala'a at Abu Annas' house. Shortly afterward, in December 2017, Abu Annas, Ala'a's rapist, was killed by a missile from an airplane in Der Ezzor while travelling in a car to retrieve his salary. He was with several friends, one of whom survived to tell the story to Ala'a. She was alone without supervision for two weeks but did not run away. She had somehow seared the memory of being raped by Abu Annas and had revised her story to say she married by choice. This gave her higher status among the ISIS widows.

About two weeks after Abu Annas went missing, Ala'a received word of his death from his friend, and she and Nasser went to stay with his friend, Shereen's rapist, Abu Waleed, in Der Ezzor. Ala'a stayed about two months there with Abu Waleed. She then went to the home for widows of deceased ISIS fighters in Der Ezzor. About 100 widows were staying there. Nasser was hanging around the widow's house when some of the ISIS guards nearby noticed him and allowed him to sleep with them. He remained there five months. Ala'a and her baby lived in the house for widows of martyrs for seven months. The location of the widow's house was changed several times to avoid bombing during the time that Nasser moved to live with an ISIS militant named Salah, who knew him from the camp.

Shereen began working with a human trafficker to win the release of her three children. Khalil Asaf handled all advance conversations by

telephone. The following are his messages to Shereen. Shereen refused to share her own portion of these conversations, because she didn't want us to know she was trying to trick her daughter into leaving her baby behind. This hampered our attempt to draw full information to pursue the trafficker to get her ransom payment back later.

Khalil: Don't talk to anyone until we trick her (Ala'a) and get her (without her baby). Now we are working on the girl (Ala'a). Our friend might get her tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, but the other one (Nasser) doesn't want to come with our friend. We have to send someone else (to get the other one). I can't recognize their names. The small one (Nasser) will come, and we will work on the older one (Habib). My sister, the small one (Nasser) says he is willing to come but he doesn't want to come with our friend. So we have to send someone else.

Khalil: It's going to take some time, but I assure you they will come.

Khalil: It needs some time, but they will come safely, I assure you.

Khalil: It's going to take more time. Soon we will bring the younger one (Nasser) so he can trick the others (twins Ala'a and Habib). He (Nasser) is okay and everything is going great. He's (Nasser's) going to go (with us) to Turkey and he will talk to his brother (Habib) and ask him to come to him. We can't easily trick the girl (Ala'a). It's difficult.

Khalil: Hey, how are you. If we tell the boy (Nasser) to come to PKK he won't come to us. We're going to trick them as if we are going to Turkey. The younger one (Nasser) will tell the older boy (Habib) that he's safe and to follow us. When the older one (Habib) comes we will bring them both together. It's like that. The girl (Ala'a) is not coming.

Khalil: They will try again, after the boys are finished. The girl (Ala'a) says that she wasn't a sex slave, she was freely married, and she has a baby, so she doesn't want to come.

Khalil: We're going to get the younger one (Nasser), and through him we will get the older one (Habib).

One day there was a battle near the widows' house in the Der Ezzor Bazaar. ISIS told two Muslim drivers to take the girls and their children either to Idlib, Syria or to Turkey. The two trucks went in different directions. Ala'a and baby Annas were loaded on a big truck with 12 widows and a lot of kids about sunrise and headed into the desert toward Idlib. They arrived about sunset to a small village.

As they were arriving, about 15 PKK soldiers came on foot to stop the truck. They revealed that these were ISIS widows and their children. Ala'a mentioned that she was a Yezidi, the only one in the group. The Muslim women and children were put in jail there but Ala'a was freed and stayed with PKK soldiers for a week.

Ala'a told them that her mother was in Qamishlo, Syria, as Shereen had led them to believe that in her phone conversations. Two PKK men and a PKK woman took Ala'a to Qamishlo. Ala'a stayed in a house for Yezidi girls awaiting the arrival of their family members for a week or 10 days. Three elderly ladies and one elderly man, all Syrian Kurds, were taking turns staying with them to help them. She told the PKK operatives her family names and they found her mother's phone number and called her in Canada. Ala'a talked to Shereen.

One day as they were leaving to find their families in Iraq, they were taken to a big building. Ala'a was told she couldn't take her baby then, but it would come later to her. Another Yezidi girl there with a baby, who had become her friend, was in the same situation. Two

other Yezidi women they didn't know, one with two children, the other with one, all children of ISIS terrorists, were with them. All the girls were told by these PKK operatives in Syria to leave their babies there with a family they didn't know. All five children were left there. The two girls and the brother of the other girl went with her and a PKK female soldier and a male soldier to Khanasir in Sinjar District, Iraq.

Ala'a slept one night there in the home of a Yezidi family. Then her uncle Ammer came the next day and took her to her grandparents in Seje.

She arrived on February 9th, 2018. She told her family she didn't want to be in Iraq without her baby, but wanted to return to Syria to be with him. She said her mother had tricked her into giving up her baby in Qamishlo, saying they would travel separately and all would live together in Iraq. Then in Qamishlo, her mother told her she couldn't bring the baby to Iraq. She told her mother in Canada that she would never forgive her for separating her from her baby, and that she would rather live with her baby in Syria than with her mother in Canada. She carried many photos in her telephone of her baby boy, and often looked at them after she returned to Iraq, though her grandfather said she was never to speak of him and should put him out of her mind.

There was a sweetness about Ala'a, a shyness, typical of teenage Yezidi girls. She played with a girl her age, whom we learned was her first cousin, in much the same way other girls played. They walked to the shop on the corner and bought sodas and candy and chips. There was no evidence of the horrors she had just lived through for three years. She was guarded around her grandparents. We would have to visit her separately to see what was truly on her heart. She did not

cry like many victims did upon returning to their families. She still maintained that she was not raped, but married by choice at twelve.

The following day Lilly and I met her with our translator, and the day after that, Lilly took her and her female cousin of the same age, fifteen, out to shop at the local Family Mall. Ala'a was too shy to accept anything, until Lilly said she would choose something ugly for her if she didn't choose something she liked for herself. She finally agreed and bought some clothing she choose for herself.

Lilly wisely separated Ala'a from her cousin briefly in the mall and asked her about her baby. She started to cry and said she loved her baby and wanted to keep him, but was tricked by her family into giving him up in Qamishlo, Syria.

Lilly asked if Ala'a would like to get her baby back and live with him in our safe home, or eventually in Canada with her mother if her mother accepted, even if it meant breaking with her relatives. She said yes, she would choose her baby over her relatives, even her mother. This might mean she would stay with us in Iraq rather than joining her mother in Canada, who had continued to be adamantly opposed to taking Ala'a's baby there. Meanwhile I spoke with a Yezidi Canadian woman who was helping Shereen, and urged her to work with Shereen on accepting Ala'a's baby, in case the baby was returned and Ala'a kept him. Otherwise Ala'a and Shereen were going to end up separated just like Nisreen and her mother.

Chapter 8: The Release of Nasser

After Ala'a left Der Azor for Qamishlo, Nasser stayed on there for about twenty days. As the coalition forces closed in on the last hold-out for ISIS, a Syrian Arab Muslim man named Salah was working with Nasser in an ISIS camp in Raqqa. The man asked Nasser to go to his house one day, and they went together. The man invited Nasser to live with him in the house. There were some women there, but Nasser wasn't allowed to see them. There were some girls living there, but no boys. Nasser only talked with Saleh.

Saleh was very good to Nasser, giving him clothes, about 7 cell phones, and a lot of money, 25,000 Syrian dinars every day (about \$50). He used the money to buy bread, food, memory cards, chargers, and other things. Nasser would ask Salah to save money for him. They loved each other, and often kissed on the forehead and cheek as was the custom.

They sometimes went to the bazaar in Raqqa together. The two went to the camp each day to work, and Nasser stayed in the camp during the day. He and another Yezidi boy, Fahad, spent the days together in the camp, and Salah came and went from the camp doing his work. Nasser didn't know what his work was. The two boys helped prepare food, move tools, clean out bombed houses, carrying bags in the bazaar, and other routine tasks. When women were caught with cell phones, they were confiscated, and Nasser's job was to break the phones. He kept some, and sold some, and broke others.

When the bombing increased, Salah and Nasser moved to the military base and the man sent his wives to Idlib. Nasser was talking with his mother, Shereen, on the phone in Canada from Salah's house. The man asked Nasser if he wanted to go to his mother, Nasser said yes. Shereen was asking Salah to bring Nasser home. Salah told Shereen

he would take Nasser to Shereen. He didn't ask for any money. Shereen didn't trust that he would return Nasser to her, so she was still making arrangements with a trafficker to bring Nasser back, without telling Salah.

The PKK was approaching to liberate Raqqa, so Salah and Nasser decided to leave the area. They left around 9 AM one morning in an old car, with two of Saleh's friends. Salah didn't say where they would go, but they were going to stay together.

They spent the night in the home of one of Saleh's friends, a trafficker, near Tel Abeath. The next day a fifth person, another trafficker, joined the group saying he would take them to Turkey and make a PKK ID for each of them and they would live in a house in Turkey.

It is probable that Salah was using Nasser as cover to escape coalition forces, but Nasser took his involvement as motivated by love and concern.

The trafficker tricked both Saleh and Nasser, and instead of taking them to Turkey, he took them to the PKK base.

The PKK frisked Salah and Nasser, taking their money, phones, and valuables. They took about \$4000 from Salah. They took Salah away, and Nasser never saw him again, which saddened him.

The PKK soldiers asked Nasser to sing ISIS songs, but he said he didn't know them. They called him a liar. They did everything they could to embarrass him, but they didn't hurt him physically. They asked him many questions about Salah, to see if he was working with ISIS. Nasser said he was from Syria, and he didn't know if he worked with ISIS or not.

The PKK took him to An Essa, Syria, about a day's drive. They met with the staff of the Syrian Democratic Council, called the media in, and invited some Yezidi families to meet with them. They announced to the media that the PKK had freed him.

Ammer Omar Amme, Shereen's brother and Omar's son, called the trafficker Khalil the night of January 27th around 6 PM from his job site in Dohuk. He was told to deliver \$1150 to Khalil's father, Asaf. Nasser's grandfather Omar Ame Mesho and Shereen's nephew Yousre drove to Asaf's house in Sharia.

A video was made of the January 28 (about 4 PM) meeting showing the ransom payment to Khalil Asaf's father Asaf, \$11,500. Asaf and Omar Amme, Nasser's grandfather, appear in the video. Omar told Asaf that the purpose of the money was for saving Nasser, and Asaf agreed.

Shereen hadn't mentioned to Salah that she was giving this \$11,500 payment to Khalil, and Salah had no knowledge of Khalil. On that day, as Shereen's Omar returned from giving the \$1150 to Asaf, Khalil's father, Omar received a phone call from Shereen saying their relatives had just seen Nasser on television in front of the Syrian Democratic Council. Omar's heart sank. They had been duped into paying money to this trafficker for nothing. And he had borrowed the money from friends and family.



Nasser Farhan Salah January 29, 2018 in Syria upon release



Nasser Farhan Salah (center) at Syrian Democratic Council January 29, 2017

That same day, Nasser was handed over to a Yezidi named Bazeed from Hassaka, Syria. He said if Nasser didn't find his family, he would be his father. His second day there, A Yezidi man arrived to write Nasser's family names. After more days, some Yezidi man came to say his uncle was waiting for him. Nasser stayed there for about 15 days.

Then they took him to the PKK in Sinjar District and they called his uncle Ammer to pick him up in Sinjar.



Asaf, Father of Fake Yezidi Trafficker Khalil (left), and Omar Amme, Nasser's grandfather (right)

The PKK called Ammer on the eighth of February to tell him Nasser was there and to get him. Ammer went to Sinjar District early morning on the ninth of February to get Nasser from the PKK, finding him in a soldier's tent. Nasser arrived with Ammer in Seje on February 10 at around 11:30 am.

I found the website of the Syrian Democratic Council, before which building Nasser had announced his freedom to the media. They

responded to my email message by saying Nasser had been handed over to Yezidis in the north of Syria to wait for his family to come for him. They knew nothing more, but agreed that if a ransom was being asked, as it was, \$11,500, such would be an unacceptable action of the Yezidis involved. They said they would get me names and phone numbers to follow up on Nasser and baby Annas to try to get them back to their family in Seje.

The next day, on February 11th, Omar tried to register his grandson Nasser in the Genocide office in Dohuk as a victim of ISIS, seeking recovery of the supposed ransom money, but the officer said Nasser had been freed without money, so his name was not registered for reimbursement by the KRG.

Shereen called me to notify me of Nasser's arrival. I was away in Erbil that day, but came back to see the boy the next day at his grandfather's house. He said he was twelve and a half. I had our translator pick up a football for him at the mall to break the ice in the meeting. The boy seemed happy and well adjusted, showed normal behavior in greeting, smiling, sitting next to me as we talked with the help of the translator. He told me pertinent details of his release, and I recorded them on my phone.

We arranged for him to visit us the following day at our compound in Seje. His grandfather called later and said the boy had to return home. He was quite angry, saying he had approved of Nasser going with us to Family Mall to buy clothes, but not of the boy going to our home/compound. The first hour of his visit had been an ice-breaker, downloading video games with the help of our translator who had become his friend. I entered to show him photos of his family in my phone, which he asked me to transfer to his own phone. I was starting to take more details of his movements during captivity just as the grandfather called, so it was a short session. Yet I learned a lot in

a short time, and we let him go. It was raining, but his grandfather refused to allow him to wait for the taxi we had called. He walked home in the rain down the muddy access road to our mountain hide-away.

Our translator called Nasser's mother Shereen to ask her to deal directly with her father to assure that Nasser was free to visit us every day, and be a part of our new woodworking and metalworking program for boys returning from ISIS. She had previously agreed to this, upon his release, but her father was going to need some counseling in that regard. He was still angry that we were keeping Nisreen and her baby onsite, and wanted to boycott our services. We explained this to Nasser before he left. I asked if he loved his sister Ala'a's baby Annas, and he said yes, he did. I told him that his grandfather did not love Annas, or Nisreen's baby Khalid, for the same reason, and this is why he was angry with us, because we were helping Nisreen. He would doubtless have been angrier had he realized I was also working with the Syrian Democratic Council to win the freedom of baby Annas, and his return to Ala'a though it lead to nothing.

The next day we learned that the Yezidi organization YAZDA was there to see Nasser, to see if they could learn from him any information that could help other Yezidi families seeking their lost ones. This added to the anger of the grandfather, because Nasser was not there to meet the organization. The following day, the grandfather took Nasser to Dohuk to meet with the security services, Assauige, to debrief and to be registered as a resident of Seje Village, and a returned ISIS captive.

We called his mother Shereen in Canada to ask her to speak to her father to assure that her son was allowed to visit us in our compound in Seje, so we could understand more of his story and use the

information to try to find his brother and Ala'a's baby Annas. We also wanted to hear more from Ala'a, and the portions of her story about her baby were less likely to be shared in the stare of her grandparents. We were told it was better to speak with them in the grandparents' home, but we continued to work with Shereen to loosen up the access to Ala'a and Nasser.

The next day, February 16, Nasser was taken by his grandfather to their main Yezidi temple near Shekhan, Lalish, to be baptized (sprinkled) back into the Yezidi religion after having been "forcibly converted" to Islam while in captivity.

The following day the grandfather was out, so Nasser's aunt called to invite us to the house to see Nasser and Ala'a. I went with my laptop in hand to check facts regarding his movements in Syria that could be used to find Ala'a's baby and to help Nasser apply to go to Canada. Our male translator went with me. He revealed more details about his participation in the battles in Damascus, Syria as an ISIS fighter. He identified other Yezidi youths in an ISIS propaganda photograph.

That week we received a call from some of our American partners in Seje village who had just received a visit from a Yezidi man looking for Nisreen and her baby. He said he was there to "fix" the problem. They asked him "what problem," and he said the problem of Nisreen and her baby. These partners were personally working with another Yezidi girl who had recently been forced to give up her baby, and who was crying continually over the loss. Not knowing that they were working with this girl, the man bragged that he had helped this other Yezidi girl resolve "her problem."

Almost immediately the partner alerted us, and we put a guard with Nisreen and checked the gate and cameras steadily in case the man found our compound. A strong rainstorm blew in, which eased the

risk somewhat, but we remained vigilant and held a team of young men ready to assist on the compound in case of a problem. We had a family from the UK visiting to do educational programming with Yezidi children from the village, and the wife, Deborah, stayed with Nisreen while this unknown Yezidi man was likely to be still in the village. In the rain, a car ventured up our back road, as if spying on us. This had never happened before in the night, and was very obvious. We let him drive back out without confronting him, as this was technically a public dirt road leading to the undeveloped mountain valley behind our compound.

On February 22nd, Nasser arranged to go with us to shop for clothes in the Dohuk bazaar. My son Noel and a Yezidi boy I was caring for, went along with us, as well as our main translator. He was quick to select football clothes with the Real Madrid insignia, an Adidas track suit, a pair of sturdy sneakers, and a telephone. That was all he wanted. He stayed closer to me than to the boys who were with us, seeming to feel comfortable with me. He seemed to warm to Nasser, a quiet but friendly Yezidi 15 year old.

His grandfather called near the end of our shopping in the Bazaar and wanted him home. So we were unable to take him to dinner or to Family Mall as he wanted, and promised to do that another day. He kissed me on the cheek as I dropped him off at his grandfather's house, and I kissed his cheek in what was a traditional greeting for people who were close to each other.

February 23rd was move-in day for three ladies who had joined our staff from Tulsa, Oklahoma. Lilly also moved into the dorm the same day, though we were still in the process of laying carpet. We would have to move around their beds and possessions to lay the carpet, but that was their choice, just to be together and have degrees of

separation from the rest of the house and the male staff, and to be close to Nisreen and her baby Khalid.

On February 25th I picked him Nasser up again, with my translator, and we made the promised trip to Family Mall.

I visited him again on March 13, to get more details of his release so that I could try to build a case against the human trafficker who had duped them into paying ransom for nothing, and who refused to pay the money back. I asked Nasser what he wanted or needed, and he looked up into space to think, before settling on a new football and two pigeons. We agreed that we would go to the street bazaar on Friday morning at 8 am and choose the pigeons. His grandfather said he was busy with IDs and Passport issues but was always free on Fridays.

Chapter 9: Searching for ISIS Babies

As we became more aware of the caustic attitude of Yezidis toward Yezidi girls who had been raped and produced babies from ISIS fathers we started investigating where the babies and mothers were going.

On February 16, 2018, we visited three orphanages under the care of Ain Sifini Organization for Community Development in Shekhan, Iraq, near the main Yezidi temple, Lalish. All 36 of the children were Yezidis. We were surprised to find that none of the children were from ISIS fathers. We learned that they systematically turned away all such girls with babies at the door, and told them to go back to the Arab Muslims in Mosul. "How can you expect us to help Muslims who committed genocide against us," one female staffer in the orphanage said. We were appalled. The manager, a middle-aged man, said he had turned away more than 30 Yezidi girls with ISIS babies.

We decided to use this in our favor. He said he knew the girls, and could contact them. I offered him \$100 for each girl with a baby that came to our safe house through his intercession. He seemed eager to accept that deal, but he said there was one condition, that we send them out of the country. He said he previously had a German funder that wanted to help the girls with ISIS babies leave the country, and he agreed to that, but then he was informed by the Yezidis in Sinjar that he shouldn't help such girls in any way if they wanted to keep their "ISIS babies." Yet he consented to referring girls with ISIS babies to us.

The same day, I visited two hospitals in Dohuk, Iraq, and talked to their administrators. The first was the Emergency and Orthopedic Hospital, and the second was the Hevi Pediatric Hospital. We arranged to bring surgeons from America to help children with

complicated orthopedic and cleft lip and palette surgeries. At the same time we asked about the ISIS babies.

Both of the hospital directors said the same thing. Few such cases appeared in their hospitals, usually the orphans of ISIS fighters. Some were Asian or other foreign children born in Iraq or Syria. The children were not ill, but no one knew where else to take them, so they were taken to the hospitals. They tried to place them with the orphanage in Dohuk, but they were refused on the basis of the risk of angering Baghdad authorities for taking children of ISIS from places outside of the Kurdistan Region. Both men had cleared rooms for housing the children and hired local women to stay with the children for about 30 days until they were either adopted into the Kurdish system to Kurdish parents, or sent to Baghdad. We know that of the thousands of girls raped, surely hundreds of babies were born, and half of these had been liberated, so we were astounded that the hospitals saw so few of them.

Both men were happy to be able in the future to refer such children to us for care, and stated an intention of doing so. They didn't want the risk of trouble with Baghdad authorities on themselves any more than the orphanages did. But our people were entirely willing to take that risk at MedEast and were ready to face off with anyone who came against the children.

On March 11th I visited a safe house for Yezidi women and children in Qanqi village. I found the same situation there. No Yezidi women or girls with babies from ISIS fathers were allowed to stay there. All were turned away at the door. How many had been turned away we could not ascertain. It became clear that these girls who kept their babies had absolutely no where to go but our Safe Home.

On March 13th Lilly and I attended a major conference on Yezidi girls and their children. In attendance were my friend Farhad, the Governor of Dohuk, Baba Sheik, all the government personnel responsible for dealing with Yezidi girls, and UN and NGO expats working on the issue. They said that Nisreen was the only Yezidi girl who had kept her baby, and her boldness was the inspiration for the meeting.

UNFPA funded the meeting, and we met with their chief officer, Georgette, and with the Canadian woman who had helped set up the Survivors Center over the previous four years. Lilly and I sat at the subject area table identified by a placard as “child protection.” No one else sat at that table. We noticed that no one sat at the “legal” table. There was no discussion of the babies of Yezidi girls and women with ISIS fathers. Statistics were general, the need for a safe home for the women who wanted to keep their babies was not even mentioned as a priority, even a possibility. We left the meeting midway through as the agenda called for more of the same speeches.

We were in the middle of a birthday party for my youngest son Charlie, 16, when Nisreen’s mother and brother showed up with their cousin to visit. Nisreen told us to send them away, and we did so. Later the same day the mother and son returned without the relatives, and this time Nisreen agreed to meet with them. They went to her room, with her assent. It seemed to be a gentler meeting than before. Her mother didn’t try to convince her to abandon her baby any more. She brought a family photo from earlier days that Nisreen would cherish. The two left her in peace and returned to their camp in Qadia, 30 minutes away toward the Syrian border.

The next visit of her mother was rather different. She had brought a relative, her small children, and her husband. We required that the man stay outside the gate, but showed the women and children into

the garden. Nisreen decided to meet them, as she wanted to see the children and her mother had been more conciliatory recently.

I watched from a distance as the situation devolved. Nisreen's mother demanded that she come with them and leave the baby behind. She grabbed Nisreen by the arms and tried to pull her toward the gate. Nisreen grabbed her mother's arms and threw them off of her, shouting her refusal, and walked away. Her mother fell to the ground crying and shouting as her daughter walked away. Lilly was nearby watching, and took Nisreen toward her room. Nisreen started to faint from the emotion, and had to be assisted.

The male relative entered the gate and I entered the scene to remove him, along with the security guard. Once he was gone, I left the guard to handle the women and children, slowly urging them to leave. They requested cash for the travel costs, but for the first time, I refused, saying that they would have to behave better than this on their visits if they wanted any help from us. Her mother complained loudly to no avail, so they all left. Nisreen was emotionally upset the remainder of the day, and Lilly had to stay with her and comfort her.

A couple of weeks later, the mother sent word through relatives that she wanted to talk to Mahabuba on the phone, but Mahabuba refused. She didn't want to repeat the trauma of the recent visit.

Shereen called from Canada asking me to help her father get back the ransom money that the trafficker had kept though he had no part in releasing Nasser. I agreed to go with the father to the government office. There a file was pulled, showing notes that they had warned the grandfather against trusting this particular trafficker, and that he had paid the man over their objections. They had already had problems with this trafficker and refused to work with him, though they did work with other traffickers they trusted. We returned home

with no result. The goal had been to register Nasser as having been ransomed, so the government would repay the ransom money to Shereen's father.

Then Shereen asked me to confront the trafficker directly. I spoke to his partner on the phone and threatened to go to the police with the recording made of his father accepting the money. He countered that they solve things in the tribal way, and this was not my business. I compromised with him saying that if he brought money today, I would not turn him in to the police.

The next morning, the trafficker's colleagues appeared at our gate with Shereen's father. I refused to let them past the garden. We gave them water and sat down to talk. They again said it was not my business, and that they had rescued Nasser. I countered that I had the evidence in hand and was prepared to go to the police. The grandfather was upset by this conflict.

They finally pressed me to accept their offer to prepare a legal agreement to refund the money in the presence of my lawyer, and we began to arrange for departure to the lawyer in separate vehicles. Then they withdrew their offer, and again said they would give the money to one of the men present who was trusted by Shereen's father, pending a second attempt on their part to approach the government to register Nasser as having been ransomed by them. I refused, and declined to talk further with them. I would let the threat of court sit with them for a day, and if they didn't respond, take the matter to my lawyer.

The next day Shereen sent a message asking me to stand down, saying the traffickers earned the money by releasing Nasser. The traffickers had put the squeeze on her father, and he had caved,

forcing Shereen to cave as well. I stopped all work on the issue at that moment.

After that, the grandfather did not allow Nasser to attend our training programs in woodworking. We dropped off boxing gloves with his grandmother, at his request, but didn't see him for two weeks. Then on April 14th, as I was in the back garden, Nasser, Ala'a, and their two cousins descended from the mountain above and walked past me, not realizing who I was. I called to Nasser and he came to embrace me and kiss my cheek with a genuine sparkle in his eyes. The others warmly greeted me. I showed them photos of the large cave on the other wall of the canyon above, and the trail we had made to it, and they seemed interested in hiking up there sometime. I had no translator present and just said goodbye as they continued toward their grandfather's home.

On April 18, Shereen called from Canada saying her efforts to get the money herself had been fruitless, that the trafficker kept lying to her, and she wanted me to step back into the matter again. I was reticent to get involved again, as she had been so fickle about the matter in the past, and now I would approach them in a weakened position. They would think they could call me off the case simply by pressuring the grandfather again.

Chapter 10: Finding Safety

We took in several girls who had escaped sexual slavery with ISIS in late March, and held an opening ceremony April 1st. There was a ribbon cutting, foreign supporters were on hand, and staff assisting with special food for the event. A demonstration of thread-making from sheep's wool was given by a local Yezidi woman, and girls were given a chance to try their hand at the technique for the first time, as an introduction to what would later be their routine work. Then a demonstration of crocheting was given by another of our volunteers. We bought a truck-load of wool from a nearby shepherd for a low price and laid it up for cleaning and processing. We also bought some antique handbags made by Kurds from the carpet bazaar in the Calah in Erbil, to use as samples of products the girls could make. Sewing machines were set up in the factory floor under the girls' dorm so they could begin work after the spring holiday.

The Yezidi girls settled quickly into their new quarters, and into helping out with cooking and cleaning sometimes voluntarily. They played a lot of volleyball, learned English words, played card games, went to the mall with escorts, and went on hikes with escorts in the mountains. An American Psychologist had group and private sessions with them. Soon they had made the compound their home. They visited their relatives in local camps from time to time, being released at will, but Nisreen and her baby were closely guarded onsite and taken out on outings with security present.

We had opened informally at the government's request, and now had to go through a formal process. There was a scheduled visit of a team of 3, two local women and an expat woman who had been assisting the Yezidi girls for several years as they returned from ISIS. They were surprised at the large size and well-appointed details of the home, and also recognized that we were not finished with some of

the tiling, trim work, and other aspects. They asked for exit signs and more fire extinguishers, and told us they would send government specifications for the kitchen, as a public kitchen, which they later did. We continued work on the building in preparation for a second visit, waiting to see the hard copy of their official report to the government, and the next steps they would set.

It was a lovely spring, and the red poppies, “gula nissani,” sprung up on schedule for the Yezidi New Year on the second Wednesday of April. The Yezidi girls made Koliches and gathered red flowers for the occasion, and died boiled eggs bright colors. We bought a sheep and barbecued it, as was the tradition, and shared other ethnic foods. The event was a joy to all. On April 18 many of the Yezidis in Seje travelled to their temple at Lalish to celebrate the Sheik newyear with Baba Sheik. During those two weeks, the Yezidi girls went to be with their relatives for the holiday season before returning to continue their training programs.

Soon a dozen other girls arrived seeking the safety of Gula Nissani, each with her own harrowing tale of capture, rape, and abuse. One had an infant child and was pregnant when ISIS cast them into a dungeon. She gave birth in that dungeon to a healthy baby boy. Another girl had been raped 15 times while pregnant with her husband’s baby. We had rape victims as young as 10 staying with us.

The small children were very guarded around men at first, but slowly began to feel safer and opened up to interaction. They would stay some weeks or months and then go on to other countries. They learned some English, sewing skills, played in the water fountain, went shopping with the female staff, and enjoyed visiting in their rooms. By the time they left they were all filled with hope for the future and a sense of greater power.

Nisreen and Khalid went to Canada. They were carried there by the Office for International Migration and the UNHCR. They travelled with Ala'a and Nasser, who were going to join their mother Shereen in Canada. We insisted that Nisreen have a guard, and that she be taken to a secret location away from the other Yezidis in Canada, which request was granted. After they arrived there were photos sent back, good wishes, and hopeful messages as they settled into their new lives. Others went to Canada later, or Australia, or Germany.

In 2018 the first Conference on the Yezidi Genocide was held in Erbil, and I was one of 5 invited key speakers. There I met Maher, who had been Nasser's friend. He made a cameo appearance on the stage before the televisions and was very courageous. His main message was that no one had helped him, and he was struggling to carry blocks for buildings when he could and couldn't go to school. Yezidi religious and political leaders were present and he enjoyed meeting them. I had dinner with him in a hotel the night before the conference and congratulated him afterward.

A couple of weeks later I followed up with him in Qanqi and found that he still had received no help. I was the only person who had followed up with him. He came to the compound and told me more of his story, and I helped him with his basic needs. He came on swimming day, when I took a group of our worker boys to the water park in Dohuk. He enjoyed it immensely. We invited him to join our soccer team but he didn't feel his skills were adequate. He knew a lot about guns, but not much about soccer/football. We would remain in contact through the months ahead.

We lamented the fact that Shereen's son Habib was still with ISIS. He said that he and other boys like Habib had been free for 3 years to escape if they wanted to, but they were brainwashed by ISIS and

wanted to stay to fight with them. There was no word from Habib over the many months that followed.

As the second group of young women and girls came to the Safe Home we got our second wind and moved forward with more professional interventions, particularly in mental health, involving a mature female American Psychologist with trauma counselling expertise, a Swedish couple, two American women, and two British women with specialized training.

We faced opposition on Facebook chatter at that time. Several people who knew nothing of our work had taken the misrepresentations of Nisreen's bitter mother and amplified them. They claimed that we had forced her to keep her baby, brainwashing her, and made her disappear. Two visits from high government officials were conducted the same day without notice to investigate us. One of our staffers was a young Yezidi college student who knew many of the Facebook chatters, and he promptly shut down the gossip.

The lingering effect, however, was that the Kurdish government retrenched in their processing of our legal organizational paperwork and permissions to enter the camps to recruit girls and women for Gula Nissani Safe Home. I became embroiled in paperwork to continue our work. Yet we continued to recruit by word of mouth and withstood the government opposition and intransigence. For months they held our request to recruit in the camps, then they said they had lost our paperwork, then asked for it again when I went to the top leaders in government, but still did not process our proposal or requests. Our license renewal was pushed into a cumbersome process that would take weeks to negotiate.

We managed to work around this by visiting camps on Fridays when the government officials were on holiday, and showing a letter of entry issued by a separate part of government. Word of mouth continued to be our best recruiting method.

One day we received a call from Shereen in Canada asking us to start again with trying to make the fake trafficker to repay the \$11,500 he had refused to repay over her son Nasser's ransom. By then the traffickers had removed the video of the transaction between Shereen's father and the trafficker's father from the phones of all involved parties, but I had saved it on my phone. I engaged my lawyer and within two days had the trafficker's father in jail. His son quickly paid the money and he was out the next day. Had he not paid the money, the judge was ready to hang his father on terrorism charges, though this threat was never communicated. Shereen's family was able to repay their relatives from whom they had borrowed the money for the "ransom."

At the Genocide conference I met a representative of the German organization GIZ, Andreas, a clever man with a heart for the Yezidi survivors and the situation with their babies. We worked together to create a network to find the girls and their babies quickly when they were released, and to send them to Germany on an expedited visa application, with all expenses paid. We reached out to officials in Baghdad, Mosul, Syria, and Germany and soon had our first mother and baby prepared to immigrate to Germany.

Over time it became clear that the Yezidi community would not yield in any aspect of their rejection of the mothers who keep their babies of ISIS rapes. All the mothers and babies would have to relocate to other countries to have a reasonable chance of a good life. Over time the local attitudes might change, and they might be able to return safely at some point, but for now, their only real choice was to stay in

the Safe Home, or something like it, or leave to another country and live separate from other Yezidis.

As we reached the 4-year anniversary of the ISIS invasion of Kocho, a group of girls returned to visit their village for the day, and to have a ceremony to commemorate the lives lost and those missing. Photos of the fallen adorned the walls of the remnants of the school building as they entered. There was not a dry eye in the group. Eventually they all succumbed to their sorrow and sank to the ground. The world still did not know their grief. They were not sure it ever would.

On October 5, 2018, Nadia Murad, a survivor from Kocho, was named winner of the Nobel Peace Prize. There was a flurry of excitement in the Safe Home that day. A story about Nisreen and her baby Khalid had been published on the front page of the Wall Street Journal on August 13, featuring a photo of the Gula Nissani Safe Home. On the day the Peace Prize was announced, the reporter from the Wall Street Journal who had written that story, Isabel Coles, called to ask me for people she might interview about Nadia Murad. The girls didn't fully understand the importance of the Nobel Peace Prize, but they appreciated that one of their friends from Kocho was being recognized for her work as a survivor and spokesperson for them and others who were suffering. There was hope that more help would come, and that the cycle of genocide against Yezidis throughout history would be stopped.