

*Western Iraq**2016*

Mohammed el-Nagi stood tied to the wooden post in the middle of the dusty town square, mid-day sun casting stark contrasts of brightness and shadow and forcing him to squint. Five bearded men stood in front of him, each dressed in black. Four carried AK-47s, scanning the gathered crowd around the square perimeter. With a set of tongs, their commander held an iron rod in a brazier of smoking coals.

“Mohammed el-Nagi,” the commander announced in a loud voice, “you have been found guilty of viewing pornography, which is strictly forbidden in the Islamic State.”

Mohammed’s arms and legs shook. He had already emptied his bladder, back when the men dragged him out of his cell. “It wasn’t pornography,” he tried to shout, but it came out as more of a squeak.

It had been simple to bypass the I.S. internet filters - lots of his friends did it. The outside world had music, news, movies, and pictures of girls. Lots of girls. He’d been caught during one of the random house inspections looking at pictures of European models in bikinis.

“You will now receive your punishment,” the commander announced.

His mother and two sisters screamed and wailed from the perimeter. “He’s only a boy!” his mother shouted. “He’s only sixteen!”

Two of the gunmen pointed rifles at them. Mohammed’s uncle - his father had died two years ago defending the town from the Islamic State - pulled and pleaded at the women.

The commander pulled the metal rod out of the coals. It glowed with heat.

Mohammed shook his head and fought to free himself, but the ropes wouldn't budge.

"No! Please, no!"

Another man behind Mohammed gripped the sides of his head. The commander nudged the glowing iron toward his right eye. But stopped, holding it inches away.

Heat and fumes danced against Mohammed's face. Sweat poured from his brow. "For Allah's sake, please show mercy!"

The commander pressed his lips together. Then he grinned. And thrust the hot metal into Mohammed's eye.

Searing pain worse than any hell. Mohammed thrashed as his eye burned and boiled away. Screams of torment gave way to fury. "I curse you. I curse you and the Islamic State to a fate a million times worse than this!"

The commander pulled the burning rod out of his right eye and plunged it into his left.

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Mohammed sat in a corner of the family's common room, shut in eternal darkness. Like a prison. His life was over. He was a helpless creature dependent on family charity.

Wafting from the kitchen, the smells of garlic and coriander frying in olive oil made his mouth water. Lentils again - his family couldn't afford meat - but food was his only comfort now. That and thoughts of vengeance. When the *muezzin* called from the minaret loudspeakers, Mohammed joined the others in prayer, but as his mouth recited the verses, his mind formed curses.

*God, strike down the Islamic State and bring its members the most terrible death possible.*

From the dining room, he heard chairs scraping and dishes being set. The radio broadcast a news report from the official Islamic State station, the only thing people were allowed to listen to.

“The forces of the Islamic State are now ready to rid the world of the blasphemous ruins defacing the edge of town,” a pompous-sounding announcer said. “They worshipped a false god named Marduk, and we have prepared explosives inside this god’s temple to erase it from existence. Allahu Akbar!”

“Allahu Akbar!” other men shouted in the background.

Someone switched off the radio. “Come to dinner, Mohammed,” his mother called.

Tapping his cane against the walls and furniture, Mohammed made his way to the table and sat. At first, his mother had had to feed him like a baby, but now he could manage himself. He dug into his food. His mother, uncle, and sisters chatted as if life was normal.

“What is Marduk?” his youngest sister, Anna, asked.

“A god worshipped by our ancestors,” his mother said. “Before the Prophet Muhammad, long before. He was the god of magic and judgment. Through battle, he became the supreme being of Babylon.”

“Is he evil?” Anna asked. “Is that why the Islamic State wants to destroy his temple?”

“The temple is already in ruins. No one has worshipped Marduk for thousands of years. The Islamic State are just being fools. They are evil and stupid men. They killed your father and blinded your brother.”

“Quiet, Fatima,” his uncle hissed. “You must be careful what you say.”

Mohammed repeated his prayer of vengeance. *Bring the Islamic State soldiers a terrible, painful death.*

In the distance, loud bangs and rumblings sounded.

“Are we being bombed?” his sister Nadia asked, sounding worried.

“No, that’s the temple being blown up,” his uncle said.

“It is awful,” his mother said. “That is part of our national heritage. They have no right.”

“Stop your carelessness,” his uncle said. “Stop it now. You are no longer a teacher and it is forbidden to contradict our new leaders.”

More rumblings. Then tat-tat-tats of automatic rifles. Someone screamed, barely audible. The rifle fire intensified. More shouts and screams.

“Everyone in the cellar,” his uncle said. Dishes clattered and feet stomped. Someone - it smelled like his mother’s perfume - pulled him to his feet and led him down the wooden steps into the basement.

The cellar door shut and the gunfire and screams faded. Someone bolted the door. His sister Anna whimpered.

“Hush,” his mother said. “It will be over and then we can go back upstairs.”

They sat on old mattresses without talking, breathing in musty air. His uncle began to pray. “In the name of Allah with Whose Name nothing on earth or in heaven harms...”

Mohammed said nothing. What was there to say? Allah had forsaken him and His enforcers were evil, at least the ones who had taken over the town, killed his father, and put out his eyes. He hoped his family would be okay, though. They had suffered enough.

The gunfire stopped. But the screams grew closer. And something else - a screeching wind, underlain by something guttural that was neither voice nor non-voice.

Something crashed overhead, followed by breaking glass. The cellar door thumped and banged, then flew open despite the lock.

The screeching wind grew louder, underlain by a low-toned dissonant chant, like a purgatory of souls grasping in lost languages. Moist heat curled into the basement, and a foul stench, like something long dead dripping poisonous bile.

His sisters and mother shrieked. Wood creaked beneath heavy feet. His uncle shouted, his voice trembling too much to form words. The air whistled, followed by thuds and screams.

“What’s happening?” Mohammed shouted, the remains of the world constricting and thrashing against his black prison. His heart pounded and rattled with the speed of a machine gun.

Bangs and smashes and screams, everyone screaming. Warm, copper-smelling goo splashed against his face. Blood? *No...*

The screams and struggles stopped. Heavy footsteps squished on the carpeted concrete, accompanied by the smell of blood and bile and urine.

“You awakened me,” a voice that was not a voice resonated. “And then the men of your town freed me.”

Mohammed’s hands and knees shook. He tried to force out a question, but nothing would escape his throat.

“I am Amar Utuk, also called Marduk and fifty other names,” the voice-not-voice spoke. “I am awake now, and the world will be cleansed of those who do not follow me.”

“Did you... My mother, my sisters, my uncle... are they okay?” He knew it was a futile question as soon as it left his lips.

Giant leathery hands pressed against the sides of his skull and squeezed.

Bracketed by pain, memories flashed through his mind - the interrupted dinner, the hot poker searing his eyes away, Internet pages on the computer screen, news of his father’s death, the Islamic State attack, playing football with his friends... The memories flew out of his head, gone forever, sucked into a void with a limitless appetite. And were replaced by something else, something that defied words and conscious thought, something primordial and dark.

“Believe,” the voice-not-voice said. “And become one of my vessels.”

*Author's note: This story was a horror exercise for one of the monthly Annapolis Fiction and Poetry Writers workshops, written before the Islamic State was crushed. It is not meant as serious commentary of any kind.*