FATHER of LIONS

One Man's Remarkable Quest to Save the Mosul Zoo

LOUISE CALLAGHAN

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1
Abu Laith

Abu Laith was not the kind of man to let another man insult his lion. Especially not a man who looked like this.

He was wearing a short-sleeved shirt, well pressed, and had the air of a civil servant. He carried a baby in the crook of his left arm. In his right hand he held a reed, plucked from the banks of the River Tigris, which he was using to poke Abu Laith's newly acquired lion cub, who was asleep in his cage.

The man's wife and the rest of his children stood nearby, watching sullenly. Despite his efforts, the poking was having no measurable effect on the lion, who wasn't moving at all. All of this registered in Abu Laith's mind as he ran at full pelt through the zoo towards the man, who had not seen him coming.

It was around 7.30 p.m. in the zoo by the Tigris, and the dusk was settling pink over Mosul's Old City. Families were sitting outside the zoo cafe drinking cold Pepsi and glasses of tea. The bears were reclining in their cages as Abu Laith charged past.

'What are you doing?' shouted the self-appointed zookeeper, who rarely spoke at less than a bellow. 'Get out of the zoo.'

The man, who did not realize the danger he was in, barely glanced up. 'Why aren't they doing anything?' he asked, irate. 'We paid money to see them.'

Abu Laith came to a dead halt in front of the family. 'They're full,' he shouted. 'They've just eaten. When animals are full, they sleep.'

The man, who wasn't listening, kept poking at the lion cub. Next door, the lion's mother and father—known to the zoo's employees as Mother and Father—were also asleep.

'We paid money to see them move,' the man said, prodding the lion cub again.

'How would you like it if I poked your children with a stick?' Abu Laith spat, advancing on the family.

The man, who had finally got the message, backed away, his wide-eyed family backing with him. 'I'm not coming here again,' he said, snippily.

'Good,' called Abu Laith, as the visitors turned and scuttled off. 'And you had better not, because if you do I'll feed you to my lion.'

Grumbling to himself, Abu Laith turned his attentions to the cub. He was sound asleep, and looked not unlike a middle-sized ginger dog. None of the zoo workers, who were milling aimlessly around the park, had reacted to Abu Laith's outburst. They were used to it.

Everyone always said that Abu Laith himself looked like a lion, and it was true. He was five foot six with a rock-hard keg of a belly and an opaque halo of orange hair. His nose looked like it had been hewn from a boulder and sprinkled with freckles. He spoke in a roar.

That was why they called him Abu Laith, which—loosely translated—meant Father of Lions.

* * *

Since he could remember, Abu Laith had loved animals, and devoted himself to them at the near-absolute expense of humans. He had raised dogs, pigeons, rabbits, cats and beetles and held them in his hands when they died. For his third-eldest daughter's

birthday, he had driven a herd of sheep into the family home. He had once given a baby monkey a shower in his garden.

He had one ultimate, lifelong ambition: to live on a farm with large predators roaming free around him. In Mosul, this was considered a suspect ambition. It had, possibly, something to do with the restrictions on animals in the Quran. In the holy book, dogs were listed as *haram*—unclean—along with pigs, donkeys, bandicoots, parrots, glow-worms (and all such bloodless animals), snakes and forest lizards (animals that have blood, but whose blood does not flow).

Most people, even if they weren't religious, thought that dogs were dirty, and somehow unsavoury, in the way that people in Europe felt about rats: plague carriers and unclean beasts that defiled their surroundings. Though some families kept pets, it was considered disreputable to own a *lot* of animals. Among the people of the great city by the Tigris, animal lovers had a shady reputation as hustlers, fighters and panhandlers. Pigeon breeders, a fraternity to which Abu Laith also belonged, were especially dodgy.

Under the Iraqi legal system, pigeon owners were not considered trustworthy enough to testify in court. They had a reputation for always getting into fights and drinking too much whisky. Abu Laith fitted the stereotype all too well. He was a *shaqawa*—a kind of good-hearted neighbourhood thug. The sort of man you might call if you needed an extra pair of fists in a fight, or if someone was harassing your daughter, and needed to be scared off. He would never let anyone else pay for lunch, and always lent money to his relatives, grasping as he thought they were.

Since he was a young man, Abu Laith had made his living as a mechanic, fixing cars in the neighbourhood—at first for a few dinars here and there, but now he owned a big garage with several employees, where he charged hundreds of dollars to fix large American cars of the kind favoured by Mosul's elite. But this was nothing more than a distraction from his real love: large, dangerous animals.

In 2013 he had decided to take an enormous step, which he hoped would change his life for the better. He was going to build his own zoo: a wide, open space with a park for animals to roam, and offices and apartment blocks that looked over it. It didn't matter that the city was plagued with suicide attacks and kidnappings. In Abu

Laith's mind, the development would be a lot like Dubai—slick skyscrapers and open lands on the bank of a mighty waterway, albeit the Tigris rather than the Persian Gulf.

As he gathered together his funds, wrenching money back from tight-fingered relatives and strong-arming investors, he had searched for a plot of land. He discovered that a large swathe of grass on the eastern bank of the Tigris was for sale. There was already a zoo next door. To Abu Laith, the plan seemed fated to succeed, as long as the two businesses could combine into one large zoo. Once he had finished building the new development, he could buy the animals from the existing zoo, adding new ones if he needed to.

One bright morning, he went and spoke to the owner of the zoo, a rich man from Mosul known as Ibrahim, who lived in Erbil, a Kurdish city 50 miles to the east. Like most wealthy people from Mosul, Ibrahim hid his money, knowing it would be a magnet for kidnappers and spongers. When he travelled around Mosul, he went in a simple taxi. He wore poor-quality clothes, rather than fine suits. Abu Laith understood this, and understood how he could be of service.

‘I know you can’t be here to keep an eye on your business,’ he told Ibrahim, when he went to see him. ‘But I know animals, and I know Mosul. If we work together, I’ll make sure your animals are looked after well. Then we’ll expand it together, and we’ll make some money.’

As it was, Abu Laith knew very well, the animals at Ibrahim’s zoo were in a pitiful state. He had been to scout it out a few times, and had been appalled at what he saw. The bears—a Syrian brown bear called Lula and her mate, who wasn’t called anything at all—were tetchy and worried by the fireworks that were set off to entertain visitors nearly every Friday evening near the zoo. The ponies were skinny, and the lions in their metal cages, about the size of a car, were bored and left roasting in the sun.

Abu Laith decided to step in and transform the lacklustre park into a proper zoo. With Ibrahim’s blessing, he began to visit the animals after he finished at the repair shop. Abu Laith, despite never having been a zookeeper before, had spent his life preparing for the role. From hours of watching the National Geographic channel, a years-long obsession of his—it played uninterrupted in his Mosul home—and from owning dozens of pets, he had accrued zoological knowledge that he considered unparalleled. When he was unleashed on Ibrahim’s zoo, it was as if a bomb had fallen from the sky. The zoo employees quickly learned to shuffle off when they saw the portly red-headed man stalking towards them. He would inevitably be getting ready to shout at them for not having cleaned the cages, or for feeding barley to the lions.

‘They need meat,’ he would spit. ‘Fresh meat, only just dead.’

Abu Laith was in his element. Soon, he hoped, he would have raised enough funds to start building his own park on the plot of land he had bought next door to the zoo, which for the moment lay empty. When it was done, these animals would be able to run free, rather than being cooped up in those small, hot cages.

It would begin with the lion. By early 2014, Abu Laith had for six months been the proud owner of a lion cub. He had tawny orange fur, and a notch on his upper lip where he had caught it on some chicken wire that Abu Laith had ill-advisedly used to protect the his cage from stick-wielders and other disturbers of the peace.

The lion cub was his first acquisition for the new zoo—the first animal that would be truly his, and not Ibrahim’s. He had first met the cub in Ahmed’s house, which lay about half an hour east of the Old City. Ahmed worked at the zoo, and he infuriated Abu Laith, who disliked the way he always wore tracksuits and his disdain for the proper feeding habits of animals.

For some time, Abu Laith had expected that Ahmed might be hiding something from him regarding the pregnancy of a lioness who had been brought to the zoo two years before with her mate. Abu Laith suspected that when the lioness gave birth, Ahmed would try to steal her offspring and sell the cubs without the knowledge of the zoo’s owner.

While he might often turn a blind eye to some stealing, Abu Laith was not going to be cheated out of a lion. As a self-styled manager of Ibrahim’s zoo, he had decided early on that he had a claim on the lion cubs, and had arranged to buy as many of them as he could once the lioness gave birth.

Though he had never seen them in the wild, Abu Laith knew a lot about lions courtesy of National Geographic. He knew, for example, that lions sharpened their claws on stones, and that they liked to sleep after dinner.

All Ahmed knew about, he thought, was money. So when one day the pregnant lion started looking a bit skinnier again, with no sign of the cubs, Abu Laith suspected

immediately that something was up. Biding his time, he waited on the street outside his house until Ahmed's eldest son walked past.

'Son,' Abu Laith called nonchalantly. 'Do you know where your father is keeping the lion cubs?'

'They're at home,' said the boy.

It wasn't long before Abu Laith was parking his large American car outside Ahmed's house, a small building with a garage. Inside the garage sat Ahmed, who was peering into a modest brick structure containing two very small lions, each no bigger than a loaf of bread.

Abu Laith was furious. 'Why did you separate them from their mother?' he shouted, as he stormed into the room. 'Now if she sees them, she'll smell human on their fur, and she'll eat them.'

Ahmed, lounging in his tracksuit, didn't seem to care. 'Which one do you want, then?' he asked, clearly exasperated that he'd been rumbled.

Abu Laith crouched down and cast a professional eye over the lions. Moving slowly, so he wouldn't scare them, he opened the door to their enclosure. Immediately, one of the cubs jumped out and on to a white plastic chair that stood in the middle of the garage.

'This one is mine,' he declared, beaming at the young lion, who looked back at him calmly. Within a matter of days, Abu Laith had installed the lion in a cage next door to his parents in Ibrahim's zoo.

After a period of consideration, he decided to name the cub after the lion in a cartoon about African animals that he had watched with his children, complete with mistranslated Arabic subtitles: he would call him Zombie.

Immediately, he set to work training the lion. He taught Zombie to sit quietly outside the cage when it was being cleaned. When he told him to go back into the cage, Zombie would obey. The cub knew not to bother the other animals in the zoo. Across the way from Zombie lived the two brown bears, Lula and her mate. The male bear was admirably strong, Abu Laith thought, and very protective of Lula. When the zookeepers had once tried to move him into a separate cage from his female companion, he had roared and fought so much they had given up.

Lula was a quiet soul who liked honey. When Abu Laith finished up at his mechanic's shop, he would come to the zoo with half a kilo of honey for Lula, who would eat it and lick it from her paws. She liked apples, but only if they hadn't touched the ground. She was a very clean bear.

The training continued apace, and within a few months Abu Laith knew, with the confidence of a man who had only met four lions in his life, that he would be able to tell Zombie apart from a thousand others of his species.

* * *

When night fell, and all the families and the small, annoying children were gone, Abu Laith would take a bottle of whisky to the zoo and sit down with Zombie for a yarn.

'If animals are really dirty,' he would sometimes ask, gazing out over the Tigris as the reeds rustled, 'why did God create them?'

The lion couldn't answer, but Abu Laith thought he knew what he was talking about.

A few months after Zombie came to the zoo, however, Abu Laith's dreams of building his own wildlife park on the Tigris were dashed by a suicide attack that killed one of his business partners in the zoo-building venture just as he was emerging from Abu

Laith's front gate. He had been drinking with the man in his courtyard, and Abu Laith survived, but was accused by the police of having ordered his partner's murder.

Because the man had died in front of his house, Abu Laith felt compelled to pay compensation to his family to the tune of almost all his considerable fortune, amassed through years of saving up every dollar from fixing American cars. After four months in prison, when he was released after the police realized he wasn't a murderer, he came to the zoo to see Zombie, his dreams of re-creating Dubai on the Tigris in tatters.

He could feel the lion had missed him.

2
Hakam

By the time he had turned twenty-five, Hakam Zarari was a seasoned weightlifter, a bird tamer and one of the Iraqi Ministry of Agriculture's most talented chemists. He could bench press over 120 kilos and had written his master's dissertation on the theoretical study of critical packing parameters of hydrotropes, using DFT theory and QSAR calculations. He had a pet bird called Susu who slept on his chest.

His family were all similarly overachieving. Hakam's parents, Said and Arwa, were lawyers and his sister, Hasna, was majoring in literature. She was twenty years old and studying English at Mosul University, an august institution of ochre stone on the eastern side of the city, where she read Shakespeare and Jane Austen. Hakam's dashing younger brother Hassan was away in the US studying for a masters in law at Philadelphia's Penn State University. Their house was one of the mansions that lay on leafy roads not far from the eastern bank of the Tigris. Behind the thick peach-coloured walls that faced on to the street the garden was a verdant paradise: an orange grove banked with delicately tended flower beds, and beyond them a towering house with airy rooms.

Being part of Mosul's upper crust, however, did not insulate the family from the unstable and dangerous reality of their city. Mosul, a stronghold of Iraq's Sunni minority, had for years been under the strict control of the army, sent by the Shia-dominated government in Baghdad.

The soldiers had kept the city on lockdown in response to a wave of attacks from Sunni jihadis, part of a homegrown insurgency that swept the country after the American-led invasion of 2003. The jihadis attacked the American and British armies, as well as the local army they had created after dissolving Saddam Hussein's forces with suicide and roadside bombs and Kalashnikovs. Though Mosul wasn't as notorious as Fallujah—a city to its south known as the 'graveyard of the Americans'—it was plagued by violence. In 2004, al-Qaeda launched a takeover of the city, which was only put down after the intervention of thousands of Kurdish, American and Iraqi troops. For years afterwards, the jihadis retained enormous control over the city's western side.

But for many of Mosul's residents, the soldiers were invaders, rather than saviours—an occupying force. The suicide bombings continued, sometimes more, sometimes less, but leaving an ever-present fear of strangers and crowds. The soldiers seemed to delight in causing endless traffic jams and humiliating people at checkpoints. They set up roadblocks on a whim, conducted relentless stop-and-search operations and smashed the windows of parked cars that stood in their way. Those they arrested sometimes came back crippled from torture, or didn't come back at all.

One of Hakam's relatives was kidnapped from his workplace by a group of corrupt army officers in Mosul's main industrial district. At first, no one knew where he was. After a round of frantic calls it became clear that the kidnappers would give him back if the family paid a ransom. State-sanctioned kidnapping, the family reasoned, was infinitely better than being held on political grounds. They paid the ransom and he was returned, relatively unharmed. Little more was said about it. The man was lucky.

As the government tried to bring Mosul and its jumbled streets and alleyways under control, the architecture of the city itself was altered, turned into a strange network of fortifications. The entrances and exits around the district where the Zarari family lived

were closed off by roadblocks. The only way in and out was through a checkpoint at one end of the district, an area of about three or four blocks.

In theory, the aim was to stop the jihadis from launching multi-pronged suicide attacks. In practice, it inconvenienced the area's residents and provided more work for the soldiers—many of whom were already bored, angry and spoiling for a fight. Their friends had been killed by Sunni fanatics, and many thought the city's residents were little different.

The army checkpoints meant it took Hakam an hour and a half to get to his lab, a mile away. During the military lockdown, basic services were neglected: water was intermittent at best, the electricity flickered constantly and sometimes disappeared for hours, and in the slums around the Old City—which teemed with resentment towards the government—sewage ran in the streets. It was, many Moslawis thought, insultingly clear that the government did not care for the wellbeing of their ancient city.

While Sunnis had held most of the power under Saddam Hussein's supposedly secular government, the ruling class installed by the Americans was decidedly Shia-dominated. Their new leaders were eager to exact revenge on the people they saw as their former oppressors. Despite the army's efforts, al-Qaeda cells regularly targeted the soldiers, and their American backers, with car bombs, suicide attacks and sniper bullets. More often than not, civilians were killed alongside them.

Every day was a risk. Life was normal one second, and the next, everything was dust and blood, eardrums broken, screams and chaos. If Hakam was at school, his parents would sometimes call to tell him not to come home because there had been an attack near the house. Before mobile phones, it would sometimes take hours before a relative returned home after crossing an area where a suicide blast had taken place. The family would wait, glued to the news, hoping that this time they would not be affected.

In 2005, when he was sixteen, Hakam was walking home one day with his friends from a study group. It was summer, and they had been taking private lessons ahead of their baccalaureate exam. They were meandering through the heat towards a checkpoint when someone started firing a gun just ahead of them. There was no shelter, no houses to take them in. They hit the ground as the world around them exploded. A huge thump shuddered the road in front of them. Maybe an armoured car had been blown up, Hakam had thought, as the debris fell around them, and he prayed he wouldn't die.

By now, Hakam knew the anatomy of an attack. Sometimes the militants would only sweep past a checkpoint, spraying it with bullets or detonating a suicide bomb before running away. If you were less lucky, you'd be caught up in an attack with a specific target: an assassination or an assault from different directions aimed at destroying a checkpoint. This was one of the targeted attacks.

For two or three minutes Hakam and his friends lay there, hands over their heads, waiting. The street was filled with smoke, the screams of the injured, the shouts of the soldiers. As it quietened, the boys stood up, terrified. The tables were turning, as they always did after an attack. Soon the soldiers would start blindly shooting at anyone dressed—as the militants were—in civilian clothes. Everyone was a target. The boys high-tailed it down the road.

When Hakam went back through the checkpoint the next day, there was no sign of the attack. There were families walking on the street, and people lining up to pass through, grumpy in the fume-soaked heat. They had all learned to live with it.

Across the city, opinion was divided: some saw the jihadis as gutsy liberators who would rid them of the army, others—like Hakam's family—saw them as troublemaking fundamentalists.

Waiting in the fifty degree heat one day at a checkpoint on his way to the gym, Hakam wondered what would happen if the soldiers left. He wheeled his pushbike over the uneven roadside towards the soldiers standing at the barricade. He would much rather have driven a motorbike, but they had been banned for years after becoming the transportation of choice for suicide bombers. Instead, he cycled along Mosul's traffic-choked streets on a green and blue pushbike, attracting strange looks and inhaling lungfuls of dust.

Without the checkpoints, it would have taken him five minutes to get to the gym. Now, because of the spaghetti-strand route he had to take, it took him a lot longer. Sometimes he would charm the soldiers, who would let him sail past. He'd learned their names, so he could call out and say hi as he approached, buttering them up. But every two weeks the units changed, and a new—roundly suspicious—group of soldiers came on duty. They were nervous, jumpy and sometimes bent on revenge for friends who had been killed by the jihadis. Every Moslawi they saw was a potential terrorist.

This time, Hakam could tell, would be bad. As he rolled his bike towards the checkpoint, he saw unfamiliar soldiers at the barrier. He braced himself for an argument, and smiled pleasantly. Some of the soldiers were sitting on chairs, others standing up to check the cars. One walked up to him and made a cutting motion with his right hand over his left arm, the universal Iraqi sign for papers.

Hakam passed over his identity card. The honking of the cars was so loud it was giving him a headache. The soldier looked at the card for a moment, then stood back. Hakam held out his backpack, packed with well-worn gym gear.

The soldier rooted through the pants and socks. He pulled out a protein shake, unscrewed the top and looked inside at the milky swirl, checking for a bomb. 'What the hell is this?' He asked.

'It's a protein shake,' Hakam said. It was the same every time there were new soldiers. He adopted a tone of studied patience. 'I'm going to the gym. I live round the corner. I come here every day.'

The soldier looked down at the bike. 'Hands on the wall,' he said, pulling the bike away from Hakam. Around them, the cars blared long, insistent signals.

Hakam turned and raised his hands towards the wall. Men had been lost this way, taken from checkpoints and never seen again.

'What's your name?' the soldier asked.

'Hakam Zarari,' he said.

'Where are you going?'

'To the gym,' Hakam said, as calmly as possible. 'I come here every day. I live really close by.'

There was no reply. The soldiers had walked off—some to check the cars going past, some to shake down pedestrians, some to smoke and drink tea. Hakam waited, his hands on the wall. He didn't want to look round. His shoulders ached. He felt embarrassed, which was what they wanted. They were, he thought, ignoring him on purpose. Anger and shame coiled inside him as the sweat soaked through his t-shirt.

Soon, he began to wonder whether they'd just forgotten about him. The cars were still honking, and the air pressed even hotter. He chanced a look behind him. The soldiers

were standing around the line of cars, looking through their windows and occasionally opening the boot and checking underneath the chassis with a mirror. No one was looking at him.

He turned back to face the wall. The soldiers were impossible to talk to. He would have to wait.

As the minutes passed, he sank into a heat-struck fog. This was worse than the usual treatment: being screamed at and called a son of a bitch by the soldiers.

'Hakam?'

Someone shouted his name from across the road. Keeping his hands on the wall, he turned around. His cousin Mustafa was standing opposite the stream of cars snaking in both directions, looking extremely confused.

Mustafa was a student about a year younger than him, pale-faced and cheerful. They'd planned to go to the gym together that afternoon. He seemed to ignore the group of armed men imprisoning his cousin. Cutting through the swathe of traffic, he ran up to Hakam.

'What is going on?' he asked, as much to his cousin as to the soldiers.

The men looked up and sauntered over. Mustafa handed over his ID card, and the young men stood together, staring at the soldiers.

'So you know this guy?' one of the soldiers asked, sounding extremely bored.

'Yes,' Mustafa pleaded. 'He's my cousin. He lives just down the road.'

The soldier mulled things over for a moment. 'Fine,' he said. 'You can go.'

A few minutes later, Hakam was back on his bike, shaking like a tuning fork as Mustafa followed him away from the checkpoint. He'd been there for almost half an hour.

'Screw this,' he thought, cycling towards the gym.

3
Abu Laith

The thing about lions, Abu Laith considered one afternoon as he went to visit Zombie at the zoo, was that it didn't take long at all for them to grow up. In his years of watching the National Geographic channel at home in his living room, he had observed the speed with which lions went from small, helpless creatures to large ones that could kill a human with a swipe of their paw. The key, he knew, was their mother's milk, which made them grow at an astonishing rate.

But since Ahmed had separated Zombie from his mother the cub couldn't live in a cage with her, and he couldn't feed on her milk. Abu Laith knew that if Mother had smelled a human touch on Zombie, she might kill him. Because of Ahmed's ignorance, he had been left to raise the lion with his own hands. But he didn't know what to feed him, other than cow's milk.

The result was that, despite being six months old, the lion cub—who lived in a small cage next door to his parents on a patch of cement about 20 feet by 30 feet—was still the size of a large puppy. Zombie wasn't growing, and Abu Laith didn't know how to fix it. This vexed the would-be zookeeper immensely. No matter how much he fed the lion cub, it didn't put on weight. Abu Laith bought Zombie's milk in big bottles from a shop near the illegal sheep market by the city walls, and fed it to him from a bottle with an extra-long teat—the kind, he knew, used to feed lambs that had been rejected by their mothers. Zombie usually gulped it down, spilling frothing white foam around him, and over Abu Laith's trousers. Yet despite this, he remained resolutely small, and rather timid, for his age.

Today he looked the same as ever. As Abu Laith walked through the zoo, sweating in the burning sun, he saw Zombie sitting in his cage, small and red as a fox. Abu Laith had just finished a full day at the mechanic's shop, and was covered in oil, keen for mischief. It was May 2014, a few weeks since he'd been released from prison. The weeks inside had been boring, as well as an insult to his reputation. But now he was free, his name clear, and freedom suited Abu Laith well.

As he trundled around the city in his ostentatiously large truck—big enough for all his many children—he didn't think too much about the suicide bombs and the kidnappings that plagued Mosul, and that had taken a fair handful of his friends and relatives. Abu Laith wasn't prone to introspection, and he saw nothing to be gained from worrying all the time, as his wife, Lumia, did. Though he hated the trappings of organized religion with a deep passion, and thought mullahs were no more than bearded hypocrites, he knew his life was in God's hands. He would die when his death was written, and not before.

Zombie's life, however, was in Abu Laith's hands. Something would have to be done if the lion was going to grow up strong. Abu Laith had big plans for Zombie. By the time he was older, he hoped, he would have built him an enclosure so big he could hunt—running down sheep and goats in a safari-style environment that Abu Laith did not think would be hard to arrange in Mosul.

'You're too young to eat meat,' Abu Laith told the lion, surveying him critically. 'And you don't like honey.'

Attempts to get Zombie to eat a more varied diet had gone badly, with the lion turning his nose up at everything Abu Laith had offered him. Apples and bread were sniffed at and ignored, as were thin strips of goat flayed lovingly from a fresh carcass brought from the slaughterhouse near the zoo on the east side of the city.

After a long period of contemplation—and many meditative hours in front of the National Geographic channel—Abu Laith had decided that if cow's milk was not enough, then Zombie needed donkey's milk. He had heard somewhere that the queen of Tadmur, the ancient city in Syria guarded by statues of two winged bulls, had washed her face with it. She was famously powerful, and it seemed reasonable to think that it might make Zombie strong.

He had asked the farmers at the market, and the raggedy boys who rode donkeys through the streets of the Old City. But after days of searching, and enquiries posted in every dairy inside the city walls, he gave up, unable to find a regular supplier. There just weren't enough milk-producing donkeys when he needed them.

That was weeks ago, and he hadn't had a better idea since. Zombie was still living on two very large bottles of cow's milk a day, and his belly was covered in shrunken ochre fur, ribs faintly protruding. Now, he was hungry again. Downcast, Abu Laith opened the door of the cage and walked in to give the lion its supper.

'Sit,' he said, and Zombie sat. The lion was always very obedient, Abu Laith recalled later, except on the occasions when he didn't feel like listening. Zombie's training regime, which Abu Laith had concocted over hours in the mechanic's shop while tightening rivets or changing oil, was taking hold, even if the food wasn't making him fat. Inspired by a video he had seen about tame lions, Abu Laith had semi-successfully taught Zombie to sit outside the cage when he cleaned it, and to come to him when called. The fact that the cub didn't always obey these commands was simply proof to Abu Laith that he was an independent-minded lion, rather than one who did not follow orders.

It was late afternoon by now, and Abu Laith was cleaning out the cage when he saw the buffalo herders cross the bridge over the river, and had an idea. Discarding his broom, he shut the cage door and raced through the zoo and along the Tigris towards them. They were a group of three or four men, some dressed in long thobe gowns, holding long, thin sticks to guide the lumbering animals on up the road, where the slow-moving traffic jam honked itself forward in a fug of exhaust fumes.

'Do you sell milk?' Abu Laith shouted at the men.

'We do,' replied one of the herders. 'You're welcome to it.'

Amid the cars, with the mud-banked Tigris stretching out below them, the herders poured out a stream of foaming liquid—shining like oil—into repurposed Pepsi bottles. Pleased at his own ingenuity, Abu Laith stacked them in his arms and started back towards the zoo, as the buffalos plodded away down the road.

Zombie hadn't moved far. He was still sat in the cage, looking at Abu Laith. The zookeeper poured a large slug of buffalo milk into Zombie's bottle. Holding the lion still, Abu Laith hallooed as he gulped the milk down. He later explained his thought process: if this milk could make small buffalo calves turn into the huge beasts that lumbered down the highway, it should have a similar effect on Zombie.

The experiment was an unqualified success. With at least 2 litres of buffalo milk a day, Zombie began to pile on weight at a remarkable speed. As the summer grew hotter, his stomach rounded, his neck filled out and he seemed, to Abu Laith, content with his

lot. Next door, his parents alternately paced around the cage or slept. To the intense frustration of the visitors to the zoo, they almost never roared.

Across from them, Lula the bear and her mate lazed in the sun, or licked honey from their paws. The Shetland pony trotted around its enclosure or, occasionally, went berserk when Abu Laith tried to put a halter on it. Ahmed skulked around at the entrance, taking money for tickets and spending not much time at all on the animals. From Ibrahim, the animals' owner—who lived in Erbil—they heard very little.

All the while, in his self-appointed role as zookeeper, Abu Laith kept a firm hand on the comings and goings at the zoo by the Tigris—seeing that the pony was given hay, and that the monkeys had branches to swing on. Soon, Abu Laith thought contentedly, as the summer heat rose, everything would calm down, and he could really get working on his own zoo.

4
Hakam

At 12:30 p.m. on 5 June 2014, a ringing bell made Hakam look up from his computer. His supervisor was shouting for everyone in the lab to go home early, and around him people were picking up their bags and sloping off towards the door. He glanced out the window, and saw the streets thronged with people and a massive traffic jam.

Hakam made his way outside with his colleagues, crowding each other on the stairs. He didn't think too much of it. Government employees were usually sent home when there was a security threat, as there often was. They filed out into the car park, each clutching their briefcase. His phone rang. It was his father.

'Did they tell you what's happening?' he asked.

Said Zarari was a lawyer, one of Mosul's best. He worked at the courthouse about five minutes away from Hakam's office, a large white building filled with dusty files. He sounded extremely terse, which was not unusual.

'No idea,' said Hakam, as his colleagues piled into their cars and joined the slow traffic jam. 'What shall we do?'

'I'm leaving work now,' said his father. 'I'm trying to see which road has the least traffic. Come over to where I am.'

As his colleagues left, Hakam looked out at the teeming streets, which were filling up with office workers who had been sent home. No one seemed to be panicking, though the traffic jams and the army's attempt to direct them were goading drivers beyond endurance. Shopkeepers were waiting at their doors for their last customers to leave, before pulling down the shutters with a clattering bang. Mannequins dressed in sequinned tops were covered up, and the shops padlocked.

There were a lot of soldiers around, shouting incoherently at drivers to stop or go—often both at the same time—and shooting in the air. As he waited, Hakam recalled later, he had wondered if they were preparing an operation against the jihadis. For the last few days, Sunni fundamentalists had been battling the armed forces in the city's poor, conservative districts on the western bank of the river, bolstered by militants who had taken control of much of Anbar province to the south earlier that year.

It said on the news that the jihadis were overwhelming the soldiers in the west of Mosul, though the army was insisting it had the situation under control. Few Iraqi soldiers, who mostly came from the Shia areas to the south, wanted to die defending a Sunni city. They had lost friends to suicide bombers, and saw the locals as dangerous fanatics.

Little quarter was given to the citizens of Mosul, who were harassed at checkpoints by the army and killed by the random bombs of the self-proclaimed holy warriors—stuck between the lines of a war where both sides were claiming to be their protectors.

The two sides of Mosul were separated by the churning River Tigris, about 100 yards wide as it cut through the city centre. The east was, in general, slightly better off, and better staffed with army units. In the rickety streets of the west side, there was some local support for the jihadis. But most people just wanted to be left in peace. Hakam loved the Old City on the west side—the bustle of traders and the smell of roasting coffee from gold-painted stalls that dotted the streets—and he was proud that centuries of Moslawi

history were layered in the stone alleyways along the western bank; invaders from Hulagu Khan to the Ottomans and the British had fought and died there.

At times, over the years, the jihadis had turned the Old City into a viper's nest, hiding in alleyways and rooftops to launch surprise attacks on the army. At night, some neighbourhoods in the west were held by jihadis. It was all the more dangerous because of how embedded the jihadis were in local society. Three brothers, living in the same house, could be respectively a soldier, a policeman and a militant. All it would take was for the jihadi to ask his brothers not to go to work the next day, and a road would be left wide open for him when the other two warned their colleagues to stay away. With the geography of the Old City on their side, a few hundred guerrilla fighters could easily resist and immobilize a vastly more numerous and better-equipped enemy.

The east was different: it had broader streets and the buildings were squat and relatively modern. Though there were many there who sympathized with the jihadis, it was generally richer and less insular than the west—more people who worked for the Baghdad government lived there, and fewer lived in poverty and humiliation.

Connecting the two sides were five bridges. One, known as the Old Bridge, was an iron masterpiece built by the British during their occupation of the city during the First World War. On any given day, the bridges were gridlocked with traffic going back and forth from the markets on either side, or ferrying Moslawis to school and work. There was, Hakam thought, no chance the jihadis would be able to cross the bridges to the east.

His father called him. 'You'll have to walk over to me,' he said. 'The traffic is too bad.'

Winding through the cars, which were all but parked in the road, drivers leaning on their horns, Hakam made his way to his father. Said was dressed, as ever, in a pristine suit and an astrakhan hat that gave him an air of deep sobriety. 'Come on,' he said. 'The traffic is terrible.'

It was worse than they had expected. As they crawled along the road eastwards, Hakam saw soldiers gathering everywhere at checkpoints—a scrawl of blast barriers, sandbags and Shia flags emblazoned with the face of Imam Hussein—or rushing in armoured cars towards the west.

'I don't like this,' said Said, and Hakam agreed.

It took them four hours to get back to the house, which was only a few miles from the courthouse, through traffic that seemed to get more desperate at every turn. No one wanted to be stuck on the street, sitting ducks for the jihadis.

They parked the car outside the house. A metal door led through the 10-foot high outer walls. Inside was the courtyard, which at this time of year was planted with red and yellow flowering shrubs, shaded under the orange trees that grew heavy fruit in the winter. It was like many houses in Mosul: from the outside, a dusty wall, but inside, a lush garden and high-ceilinged family house full of life.

Arwa and Hasna, Hakam's mother and younger sister, were already in the living room, listening to the news in silence. Next to them was the family's collection of books, an entire wall of leather-bound volumes and paperbacks stacked tight on dark wooden shelves.

'You're home,' said Arwa, deeply relieved. Like her husband, she was a lawyer, though she hadn't practised since she married.

Hasna was hunched on the sofa in her usual trousers and long shirt, glued to the TV. The anchor was reporting that an operation was going on in western Mosul to neutralize terrorists.

'They'll stop them,' Said said. But Hakam could see that his father, who terrified criminals in court, was sober and doubtful.

Hasna, who had been at university getting ready for her English literature exams, asked 'What are we going to do if they come?'

'We'll stay,' said her father. 'We've got everything we need here. They wouldn't care about people like us. They only want to hurt the army.'

In the tense atmosphere, no one argued.

The family sat down and waited. None of them were sure who these jihadis were. The people the army were fighting in the west could be al-Qaeda remnants, or the groups who had taken Fallujah and Ramadi, backed by the jihadis who had taken Raqqa and parts of Aleppo, defeating the more secular Syrian rebels in the terrible civil war that had been going on since 2011.

All evening, the TV ran updates on the fighting in Mosul, interspersed with sports news and the weather in New York and Washington. The Arabic channels knew no more than their foreign counterparts. The family's phones rang relentlessly with news and questions from relatives who lived outside the city, or those who were waiting nearby, frantic to know what was going on.

Hassan, Hakam and Hasna's brother, stayed dialled in on video call from the US, his terrified face pale on the screen that stood propped up on the coffee table. Hassan had left to the US just a few weeks before. Now he sat in his dorm room, tuned into every channel he could. But for all that the family talked, they still heard only rumours and the occasional distant explosion.

At about 2 a.m. they were still sequestered in the living room—splayed across the sofas, half-dozing in front of the TV. The honking outside, which had been going on all evening, was growing louder.

'Can you hear them?' Hakam asked, walking towards the door.

'Don't go outside,' said his mother, sharply. 'We don't know what's happening.'

Hakam considered this. 'I'm going to find out,' he said, and ran up the stairs. On the landing near Hasna's room, there was a window that looked out on the street. Crouching, he stared through it, trying not to create a silhouette. He could just see the big intersection that lay behind the house, with its watchtower on the far side always manned by at least two soldiers.

Usually, the road was empty at this time of night. But now it was rammed as if it was rush hour: cars beeping and drivers crawling forward, tail to tail, the line of vehicles almost stationary. With a rush, Hakam realized what was happening. This was the road east. They were escaping the city—probably heading for the safer Kurdish cities, if they had the connections to get through the checkpoints.

To the right and left of their house, Hakam could see his neighbours packing their possessions into their cars, the lights on and faint shouts audible over the traffic.

But Hakam's father had been clear. They were not leaving.

By the next evening, the family had all but stopped talking. They had gone through every possible scenario so many times that each option seemed about as unlikely. None of them had gone outside. The TV hadn't reported anything new, but the bangs in the distance had grown louder.

Hakam went back to his vantage point at the window. The traffic jam had broken up, though there were still plenty of cars on the road. Among them there were—Hakam saw—a surprising number of the army's beige armoured vehicles driving out of the city. None were heading in, though he could still hear shots cracking in the distance. He looked at the watchtower on the intersection. For the first time, ever, it was empty.

Hakam sat back on the floor. His brain felt numb, he later said. The soldiers were abandoning Mosul—running away from the jihadis. But it didn't make any sense. The streets of Mosul were usually choked with soldiers. They had huge bases with 15-foot blast walls. They had tanks, machine guns, helicopters.

But though the army had enormous garrisons, built and armed by the Americans, and thousands of men, they were weak and demotivated. The jihadis might only be a gaggle of extremists, but they were full of religious bloodlust, and hundreds of them in their dusty pickups came in from the desert, with their Kalashnikovs and rocket-propelled grenades. They had taken Anbar to the south like this, and Raqqa in Syria—rising together to displace Iraqi government or Syrian rebel forces in a way that no one had ever really thought possible.

Whichever way Hakam twisted it, the situation looked the same. Not much more than a thousand resistance fighters armed with rifles, suicide cars, machine guns mounted on pick-up trucks and not much else had launched an assault that splintered a thousands-strong fighting force trained by the US army at the cost of billions of dollars. Across Mosul, the Iraqi police and army had abandoned their posts.

He walked downstairs, to where his family were still sitting. 'The army have retreated,' he said in disbelief. 'I saw their armoured cars leaving. They've abandoned the watchtower.'

The jihadis had won, and they had barely needed to fight.

By the morning of 10 June, less than a week after the militants had begun the fight for Mosul, it was quiet. Hakam walked outside. The streets were empty, and everything looked the same. But the Islamic State had taken power in Mosul, Iraq's second city and home to over half a million people.