

The Kurdish Connection

*Prologue
Halabja, Iraq
March 1988*

Two weeks after the attack on Halabja, Dersim Razyana, an eighteen-year-old engineering student, returned from Beirut to the remains of his hometown—to bury his parents and two brothers.

His childhood friends, seventeen-year-old Ismet Timur and sixteen-year-old Hawre Vandad, were also victims of Saddam Hussein's regime. Ismet suffered horrendous burns over his face, upper body, and arms. His lungs seared by chemicals, Hawre became weak and developed a persistent cough.

Despite their injuries they numbered among the few survivors.

Halabja, a peaceful city of 70,000 inhabitants in Iraqi Kurdistan was surrounded by mountain ranges on three sides, the Sirwan River to the west, and less than ten miles from western Iran.

Forty-eight hours earlier, bombardments shattered the city's peace. Continuous pounding by Iraqi artillery reduced many homes to rubble and destroyed the infrastructure.

The earth shook with each barrage. The screams of the injured penetrated the putrid stench of the dead and acrid, billowing smoke. Many suffocated in the toxic air. Cries of grief over the mangled bodies of loved ones rose everywhere.

Rocket and napalm attacks resumed on the third day, March 16, 1988. Fires raged out of control and residential areas collapsed. People hid in basements or crawled under teetering concrete slabs.

The softening of Halabja had ended.

That evening, sounds burst over the city—jet engines and strange whistling noises like metal falling to the ground. "Gas!" someone yelled. Others picked up on the warning and shouted at passersby. People panicked, trampling one another in vain to find safety.

An aroma, not unlike sweet apples, mixed with the pungent odor of rotten eggs spread across the city. Birds fell from the sky. Insects curled up and died. Cats, dogs, livestock, and then humans sank to the earth.

Waves of Iraqi aircraft flew over the doomed, dropping sarin, mustard gas, and other chemical agents.

Those fortunate enough to be outside the immediate blast area fled. If they owned a vehicle, they drove. If not, they ran. The nearby mountains provided temporary escape as refugees fled into Iran. Those who couldn't became statistics.

More than five thousand died that day, and during the following weeks and months, thousands more joined them due to secondary infections and lack of sustainable medical care.

After burying his family, Dersim sought out his friends. He searched everywhere but couldn't locate them.

"Check at the hospital." A masked worker paused his search through the rubble to speak with Dersim. "The authorities transported many injured people to Zakho."

Dersim made the trip to Zakho's hospital, arriving two days later. He spoke to several nurses, all too busy to waste time on a healthy person. A male aide recognized Dersim's frantic face as belonging to someone searching for relatives.

"Try room four. Many from Halabja are there."

The stench reached Dersim before he entered. A room designed to hold ten patients held twice that number. He went from bed to bed, stopping at each one.

In the far corner, he spotted them, crammed into the same bed. They appeared to be asleep.

"Psst. Ismet. Hawre, it's me, Dersim."

Filthy bandages covered the injuries to Ismet's face and upper body. Hawre, whose face appeared almost normal, except for burns around his mouth, opened an eye. "Dersim." He pushed aside an oxygen mask and stretched a shaking hand out to his friend.

"Dersim. I ... knew you'd find ... us."

"How's Ismet? He seems bad."

"Yes." Hawre coughed several times before using the oxygen once more. "They keep him ... sedated. So he ... will heal."

"No more talking, my friend." Dersim grasped his arm and replaced the mask over Hawre's face. "Rest."

Hawre drifted off.

"Sleep, my friends. I'll be here for you."

As his friends dozed, Dersim's thoughts wandered.

What's our future? How'll we persevere?

Chapter I

Halabja, Iraq

Thursday, December 30, 2010

"You must swear by Allah never to say a word of what I'm going to tell you. If you promise, come to me. Now. At my house. Swear by Allah, or disaster might occur. This is the most important secret."

Dersim Razyana stretched his left hand toward the dun-colored rocks for balance as he inched around the exposed artillery shell. Once past, the breeze forced him to pull his tattered coat tighter around his body. Although bright and sunny, the morning wind carried a hint of rain from the nearby mountains.

He trudged through the soft sand caught in crevasses and climbed over a small ridge, an area without trees or any animals, yet only an hour's walk from his home. Dersim squeezed through the rusted barbed wire enclosing an abandoned military compound. Rows of derelict buildings stood like silent guards waiting for their leaders.

A once-impressive parade ground now housed the rusted hulks of forgotten vehicles. Miniature sand dunes stretched from the trucks, like fingers, with random shriveled weeds where some forgotten plants once achieved a foothold. Only the occasional call of a passing crow interrupted the silence.

"Come on, you two," Dersim said. He spoke in Sorani, a Kurdish dialect. "Don't take all day. There's scrap to salvage and sell."

Ismet Timur and Hawre Vandad, his friends for more than thirty years, stared at the shell. Streaked with rust, the shell was about seven inches in diameter, and at least two feet long. The men sidled by and joined Dersim.

Dressed in frayed clothes and wearing American-style baseball hats, they continued to move farther away. Of average height, the three men were wiry and strong despite their weathered appearance.

"Don't worry about the shell," Dersim raked his hands through his wavy black hair while he waited.

"Should we—" Hawre broke into a coughing fit. A gust of wind blew sand into his face. He took a piece of cloth from a pocket and wiped the grime away. "Should we try to remove it?"

"No. Through Allah's blessings, we've always returned home without injuries. I don't think any of us are reckless or desperate enough to tempt fate."

"Dersim's right. We don't need to risk our lives."

"Pray to Allah for more good fortune today to end the year," Hawre sank to his knees to offer a prayer before a convulsion ravaged his body.

They often traveled up to one hundred kilometers from Halabja searching for anything to salvage. The Iran-Iraq war had ended twenty-two years before but the once-fertile land yielded a meager living for the three scrap dealers. Together they spent many long days picking through the rubble of war-torn villages and the countryside, examining the insides of abandoned and derelict buildings.

Today, though, they continued to scavenge on a hillside east of Halabja, not far from the Iranian border. Dersim and Hawre loaded Dersim's dilapidated Turkish BMC truck with salvage they had identified during the previous three days. The truck sagged on broken springs. Cracks spider-webbed the windshield and the paintwork was so faded it became difficult to recognize any of the original colors. Dersim maintained the engine and other moving parts in superb working order, at least, when he obtained the necessary components.

Fifty yards away, Ismet screamed and waved his hands. Long-legged and built for running, he left the loading to the others. Dersim spotted Ismet, cringed, and ducked behind the truck.

"Hey!" Ismet whistled. "Dersim! You coward. Come here."

Dersim raised his head and scowled. "By the grace of Allah, don't yell! I thought someone was attacking us."

"Check this out. Wait 'til you see. I can't believe our luck." Ismet locked his hands behind his head and danced his version of the Kurdish Chapi. He pushed his left foot forward twice, stepped back twice on his right, while throwing his right hand upward, moving in a circle.

Dersim hurried to his friend, who stood with a broad smile on his dust-covered face near a collapsed wall by the hillside. The wall hid the entrance to a large cavern, and Ismet had dug around the opening, making a space big enough to squeeze through.

"What did you find?" Dersim bent down, pushing giant cobwebs aside for a better view. Through dark shadows, he made out a well-worn, dust-covered floor beneath stacks of crates.

"Ismet, go to the truck and make some torches. Use the oily rags in the back and grab a few pieces of wood."

Once Ismet returned, Dersim lit a torch, and they crawled inside.

"What did I say? I sensed we'd find treasure." Ismet whooped with delight.

Unlike many other areas they uncovered, concrete paved the massive grotto area. Dersim and Ismet walked between rows of crates stacked ceiling high, marveling at the potential value. Once they reached the end of the cave, Ismet spotted steps carved into the rock and lit another torch.

They descended a long flight of steps to a deep cellar. A hoard of military supplies stretched beyond the light of the torches. Their gaze fell on boxes of uniforms, boots, emergency food rations, tents, and medical supplies.

Ismet hoisted a small box of boots over his head, a grin still on his face. "We're rich, we're rich. Allah has blessed us."

"Let's check this out before you count your money." Dersim waved a hand in Ismet's face to bring him back to earth. "We've found other stockpiles suitable only for scrap."

"This must be one of Saddam's hidden bunkers. I can't believe our luck."

Hawre leaned against a pile of rubble to ease his stiff limbs, shuffled a foot in the sand, and kicked a few stones while he guarded the main entrance. A gust of wind blew grit into his face, which he cleaned with a dirty piece of cloth.

"Allah has blessed us!" He overheard Ismet's muffled shout and entered the cave to join the others.

"Ismet, you and I'll sort through the items. Hawre, please go back outside and warn us if anyone comes near." I hope he's a better watchman than he's a scavenger. I wonder if his illness is getting worse.

Departing, Hawre launched into another coughing fit. He wiped his mouth with his rag. Before putting the cloth back in his pocket, he saw bloodstains, more than last time.

Four hours later, Dersim and Ismet completed their inventory of the cave. Dersim stretched his weary back. "How many uniforms?"

"I stopped counting when I reached one hundred."

Dersim gasped. "What?"

"Brand new. They're all from the Iraqi Army. At least two hundred pairs of boots, too."

"I found hundreds of boxed meals and many cases of bottled water." Dersim pointed down the corridor. "Must be at least fifty to seventy boxes of medical supplies."

"These items are worth a fortune! And we still must count the weapons."

Together they stacked the weapons. Ismet estimated at least fifty Kalashnikov AK-47 assault rifles and seventy-five Glock pistols. Dersim tallied the boxes of ammunition, one for each weapon, and over one hundred 7.62mm magazines.

Along one wall, hidden by a discarded tarp, they found another stack of wooden crates. Dersim pried open the first one with a small crowbar.

Crack!

The dry wood shattered as he forced the lid open, sending splinters and dust into the air. A damp odor wafted from the container. Moving aside an oily cloth, the contents appeared.

Grenades! What a find.

The squeak of nails forced out of their holes and labored breathing filled the air. An odor of mildew mixed with the tang of lubricants and aged pine made breathing difficult. When he finished, he counted ten crates filled with grenades, while another ten contained plastic explosives.

Ismet kept repeating, "We're rich," as he worked.

Dersim mumbled. "You realize we must keep this quiet? Control yourself and be careful where you wave your torch. You might set something on fire and blow us up."

Gravel trickled into the cave entrance and echoed throughout the chamber. The two men froze.

His heart racing, Dersim whispered, "What was that?"

Wide-eyed, Ismet shook his head.

The next sound, Hawre coughing, flooded Dersim with frustrated relief. "Hawre," he said. "Go back to your post. I told you before, pay attention. We don't want anyone to sneak up on us. You'll be able to view everything later."

Hawre shuffled back outside to the wall and sat down. He pulled his wooden prayer beads from a pocket and recited the ritual prayers of the Tasbeih to praise and glorify Allah.

While Dersim opened the crates, Ismet found a large steel container secured by an old padlock. He forced the lock with a chisel and hammer from the truck and found six more boxes, each larger than those holding the grenades and explosives. A hand-painted Iraqi flag covered the side. Across the top, a single word written in Arabic script: DANGER. He called Dersim over.

Curious to find out what they contained, they opened the boxes, one at a time, using slow, controlled movements.

"Ismet, be careful with those tools."

Ismet reached down to pick up the pry bar and wrapped the end in a rag. "Sorry, Dersim."

Each box contained nine canisters, wrapped in protective padding. Dersim pulled one out. "Ever come across one of these before?"

Ismet shook his head and pulled another one from the protective covering.

Dersim peered at the faded writing on the canister he held. The mixture of letters and numbers meant nothing to him. He waved the canister at Ismet. "Do you understand what this is?"

Ismet pointed at the label. "Skull and crossbones mean one thing—danger."

Dersim nodded. "We must be careful. Come. Let's move the stuff to the front of the cave."

They made more than a dozen trips to move the treasure to the cave's entrance. During one trip, Dersim found Hawre asleep against the wall. "Hawre, wake up! We need you to pay attention."

He gave instructions to Ismet when he returned. "When you go outside, scout the area in case Hawre missed anyone trying to sneak up on us. I caught him sleeping."

Ismet came back a few minutes later. "I found Hawre bent over making a terrible hacking sound. Is he getting worse?"

"Perhaps. I told him to go back to the doctor, but he refused. No idea how much longer he'll be able to work with us."

Dersim made a decision once they placed the weapons and munitions by the opening.

"The truck isn't large enough to take everything in one trip. Let's take the weapons first because we'll receive more money for them. We'll leave everything else inside until we return. Hawre, you must remain to keep your eyes on things."

Exhausted from the exertion of hauling their hoard to the surface, Dersim and Ismet gulped water and took a short rest. Anxious to leave, they finished loading with a renewed sense of urgency before anyone spotted them.

Stashing their find on the truck, they concealed everything under a load of scrap metal. The two men covered the load with large beige tarps and tied them down with coarse ropes. Dersim walked around the vehicle, double-checking the ropes and glancing around, searching for trouble.

No one. Must be my nerves.

Hawre stayed behind to guard the remaining treasure. They waved to him as they departed on the dusty forty-minute journey to Dersim's walled compound on the western outskirts of Halabja. Other than a couple of donkey-drawn carts and some wild dogs, they controlled the road.

As they approached Dersim's property, an elderly man trudged along the edge of the road, struggling under a load of chopped branches tied together with a piece of rope. He set the load down and waved.

Dersim waved back and slowed to a stop. "Allo, Ahmed. How are you today?"

"Tired, Dersim, but still breathing. It appears you've done well." He pointed at the covered load on the back of the truck. "What did you find?"

"The usual. Old tires, sheet metal, wooden crates. Even some copper."

"Good for you." The man bent down, grabbed his load, and pulled the rope over his shoulder. "Later. Tell Xalan I said hello."

"I'll do. May Allah watch over you."

Dersim nosed the vehicle ahead. Ismet jumped out of the cab and opened the gates, and Dersim pulled into his back yard. They unloaded the truck and covered the weapons with the tarps, weighting the edges down with chunks of concrete.

The men hurried back to the vehicle and returned to the compound. Collecting Hawre and the munitions, they drove back to Dersim's residence arriving as dusk fell. Two people stood by the pedestrian gate. As they drew closer, Dersim recognized them—nosy neighbors.

"Allo, Dersim. Where's Xalan? I came over an hour ago. No one answered. May I come inside and wait for her?"

"Allo, Rana. She took the children this afternoon to visit her parents. They'll be back tomorrow."

"Ah. Okay. Thank you." They headed toward their compound, glancing back at Dersim and the others as they did so.

When he pulled into the compound, he parked next to the house. "Let's move everything inside."

Dersim reset his simple but effective alarm system while the others hauled the stash into the house. Set four feet from the wall, Dersim maintained a rope-linked series of cans, half-filled with stones and broken glass. When disturbed, the contents rattled. During the still of the night, the disturbance couldn't be missed inside.

Dersim lifted a trap door hidden by a carpet under the sofa in the front room. "Hand the crates down."

The men worked together in silence. Noise not unlike the horn on a train shattered the night. The men froze.

The horn sounded again. A deep rumble shook the house.

"The guy lives down the street. He drives a big truck for a Zakho company," Dersim smiled, understanding the fear shown on Ismet and Hawre's faces. "Every time he's back he shows off."

By midnight, they secured the munitions in Dersim's bolthole, built to protect his family in an emergency. He set one of the unknown canisters aside. His cousin might understand the writing.

The next morning, Dersim wrapped the canister in a blanket and went outside. He placed the package in the back of his truck and hid the bundle beneath scrap metal. There would likely be police or military checkpoints along the way.

He hopped into the truck and headed toward Erbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan, where his cousin Egid lived. Now a pharmacist, Egid spent several years in the Iraqi military and might tell him about the canisters.

If the security people take the baksheesh, perhaps they won't inspect the cargo. Dersim hoped he brought enough money for bribes at checkpoints along the route.

As Dersim downshifted to climb the next steep part of the road, the engine groaned. His eyes scanned for potholes, and he swerved back and forth to miss the larger ones. The vehicle shuddered every time he misjudged. He uttered a brief prayer. "Tires don't puncture, brakes, don't fail."

Reaching the apex of the steep climb, he inched the vehicle along, past an occasional boulder hanging over the road. He began the treacherous downhill stretch toward Erbil.

The brakes squealed as Dersim tapped them to keep the vehicle under control. A large grinding noise came from the back—the scrap iron slid back and forth while he rocked the vehicle to avoid the largest potholes. At last, the road leveled out again, and he boosted his speed.

Dersim knew he was approaching Erbil by the familiar gray smog of wind-blown dust and ash from soft coal fires lingering over the city. He wrinkled his nose at the pungent stench and tasted the coal dust permeating the air.

He approached one of the permanent security checkpoints outside the city. A burly mustachioed guard dressed in a khaki uniform waved a red flag, signaling Dersim to stop. “Where are you going? What’s in the back?”

“I’m taking this scrap metal to the market.”

“There’s a fee for using this road.”

Without a word Dersim handed over an envelope he prepared in advance. The guard grabbed the envelope, took a quick peek, and waved him along.

Dersim drove to the Erbil bus station and parked. He called his cousin when a pay phone became available.

“Egid, it’s Dersim. How are you, Cousin? I hope all is well.”

“Hello, what a surprise! Where are you?”

“I’m in Erbil with a load of scrap to sell. Do you mind if I stop by when I’m done?”

“Of course, happy to see you again. Come after I close for the evening. We can talk and not be interrupted.”

“Good. Until tonight.” Dersim returned to his truck and drove to the junkyard to sell his salvaged metal.

When he arrived, Egid ushered him inside the store and closed the door. They went into the back room where Dersim unwrapped his prize.

Egid examined Dersim’s bundle. “Bxo—shit! Where’d you find this canister? It’s dangerous stuff!”

“I suppose. I spotted the skull and crossbones and was careful. What’s inside? Fertilizer or poison? We found several of these and plan to sell them.”

“I can’t be sure, but—see these letters and numbers? They’re chemical formulas. Based on what I can make out.” Egid picked up the canister and studied the writing. “*Saghab*—son of a dog! I think this contains a chemical agent used in Saddam’s gas attack on Halabja.”

Dersim’s heart pounded, and his eyes grew wide as he stepped back from the table. He remembered returning to the village after the attack, finding his family—parents and two brothers—dead. His best friend, Ismet, scarred for life, his upper torso, arms and face disfigured. The stench of decaying bodies had overwhelmed him and the screams of the injured and those in mourning haunted him. He shook his head, trying to erase the memories while tears slipped down his face falling to the floor.

“Uh ... okay, thanks.” Dersim paused, rubbing his chin. He let out a long sigh. “What do you think we should do? Perhaps we should take them back to the compound and bury them deep in the ground.”

“Dispose of them. Don’t mess with these canisters. Nothing good will come to you. *Dayk heez*—son of a bitch.” Egid ground his teeth together and shook his head as he continued to inspect the canister.

Dersim witnessed the doubt in Egid’s eyes. “You’re right. They’re too dangerous.”

Dersim spent the evening with Egid. After a quiet meal, they retired early. Dersim tossed and turned throughout the evening. Visions of his parents and brothers swirled through his mind, tormenting him. At last, he fell into a restless sleep.

The next morning, Dersim headed back to Halabja. Before departing, he wrapped the canister in heavy padding and secured the container in a sack of grain purchased with the money raised from selling the scrap.

Waving to Egid, he drove away, all thoughts on the previous two days and their unbelievable discovery. *Do I put the canisters back in the ground as I promised Egid? We might make good money for the metal, and not tell anyone what’s inside.*

"Damn! What do I do?" Dersim slammed his hand on the steering wheel. "Think." A lot of money to be made if we're smart. Do we keep the weapons and ammunition, and sell the other stuff? "Allah, guide me!"

Dersim paid little attention during the return trip, rocking the truck back and forth as he dodged around the worse stretches of the road. His concentration centered on their find and the dilemma they now faced.

"That's it!" Something I've always wanted to do. We can still raise money to feed our families. Perhaps ... we'll also help our people. Create our own destiny.

Dersim went straight to the post office when he arrived in Halabja. He used the outside pay phone to call his cousin, Babir, in Zakho, to check if he'd a sufficient supply of goods for him to transport to Turkey to sell.

"Happy New Year, Babir!"

"The same to you, my brother."

"You won't believe what we've found."

"Tell me. What did you find?"

"You must swear by Allah never to say a word of what I'm going to tell you. If you promise, come to me. Now. At my house."

"Why the mystery? Tell me!"

"If you can't swear to Allah, disaster might occur."

"All right, Dersim, all right. I swear by Allah to keep what you say to myself. I'll come as soon as I can."

"This is the most important secret. Ever."

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