

The Bend

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Ai'dah

I was in Tangier to rescue the kidnapped child. She'd been posted missing far too long, and no one—not the media outlets, the brand names, the faces on the dollar bills, Command C—had a holy hope in hell of finding her. Only I, with the full blessing of the internet behind me, had the wherewithal to ask around online. Who hadn't sought the advice of thegenie.com? Who hadn't exchanged emoticons and a few lines of text with lildimples99? Who hadn't dug the latest post at oasismadeamistake.blogspot.net? Everyone, apparently.

It was round about the end of July, hot as a hipster's brow in Los Feliz, American-made but foreign-born, and every corner I curved, every open doorway I approached, seemed to draw back its shade like a parent withholding love. For a moment, I stopped walking, shifted my backpack in fear of it sticking permanently to my shirt, changed hands holding my fake-leather laptop case, raised my sunglasses and wiped the sweat from the ridge, adjusted my khaki fisherman-style cap, and marched on. The sky above stood a stalwart blue, bordered on either side by the high walls of the medina in which I was now pleasantly lost. I passed a large closed entryway, the semi-circular double doors painted a cartoonish blue. At the foot of the doors sprawled an emaciated gatita, one of several I'd seen in the hours I'd been wandering. I slowed to linger, but the cat did not move nor did it open its eyes, so I moved on.

Ahead, a long path stretched straight and appeared to end at a wall and what I assumed would be another corner to turn. No one walked before or behind me. Indeed, since entering the medina I had seen very few people, and it had been peculiarly quiet.

The cry of a man, shrill and hopeful, ripped my perceptions. I looked up. At the end of the long corridor, just above the wall, the top of a thin and proud spire poked, its black megaphones blaring the call to prayer.

I had seen a movie once in which men were at the edge of an ocean on their knees, their lips touching ground. The theater had been cold and crowded. I had eaten half a box of chocolate-covered raisins and laughed when one of these men suggested peace.

I realized there was another sound now, closer to the ground and my ears.

"Assa'lām ā'laykum, greetings," said the man blocking my way. He was short—shorter than me (but then a lot of people are), and he had thinning dark hair and sharp teeth that he did not hesitate to bare when he smiled. I smiled back, albeit thinly.

"It's time to pray," he said, "but I cannot when you are here. What is more important? You are more important."

I knew I wasn't going to get around him without a conversation—and perhaps something else.

"What are you trying to find, my friend?"

I wasn't about to tell him what—whom—I was really after, so I said, "Dar el Makhzem."

"Ah, you know the Arabic name for it. That's good. Do you speak Arabic?"

"Atakalam Al Arabeia Kaleelan," I said.

"Atakalam Al Arabeia Kaleelan," the man repeated. "That's good! Amir ismee." He extended his hand, which I took. "Má huwa ismuk?"

"Dennis ismee," I lied.

"Dennis." Then he busted out with a string of sentences, all in Arabic. I must certainly have looked aghast, for Amir laughed and said, "We will converse in English. I speak English. You speak English..."

Somewhat sadly, I nodded.

"So you are trying to find the Kasbah. Come with me, my friend. I'll show you."

Immediately I started to protest, but Amir cut me off. "Dennis. Really. It's just a little walk, nothing more. This way, please. You are my guest now."

As I walked just behind him I practiced my exercises. I started with the tip of the forefinger on my right hand. I bent that finger so that it curved at the top of the knuckle, nothing more. Then, satisfied with the stance, I curled the rest of the forefinger inward so that it rested neatly, natively, in the palm of my hand. I did this a few more times, each time with a significant increase in speed. I then went on to my left hand and repeated the same moves, just in case.

"Do you know of the invasion of Spain by the Moors in 711, Dennis?"

"I do."

"Many people do. But many people also do not know that Spanish prisoners were brought back here, to Tangier. Did you know that?"

"I did not."

"Good! Then before we go to Kasbah I will show you the prison."

Our shoes skipped and scratched across the stone. The call to prayer had since ceased, and again the medina was quiet, hot and still. I placed a hand to the sun-stroked stone on my right, then withdrew quickly with a stifled hiss between my teeth.

"Those who converted from the Christian faith to Islam, the muwallads, were saved. The rest..."

Who says Tangier isn't the true Morocco? I thought. They really do mean well. Don't they?

Amir had come to stop in the shade of another massive doorway. This building appeared very old, its wooden doors busted and falling to either side. Inside only darkness. The last people to have lived there had not lived there in a very long time.

"They will tell you different things," Amir said. "But I tell the truth. This is the entrance to one of the old prisons."

"Really? Should we, uh, go in?"

"No! No. It is, what is the word..."

"Condemned?"

"Yes! I remember that word now from my studies. Good! This way."

And again we were off, he just ahead and keeping up his pattering.

"Not all the prisoners were happy being prisoners—ha! So they dug."

"They dug?"

"Yes, they dug, under the city. You look hard you may find entrances to secret underground passageways. They are in certain places in the medina. Secret places. Now come to Kasbah. Kasbah is..."

His voice was beginning to interfere with my voice, the voice I would need to refine in my head if I was to succeed with my mission. At that moment I was thinking, Toilets without seats. I was thinking I really should read some Moroccan writers. The Pauls. A Mohammed. I was thinking 238 euros for five days—can I make it? And really I couldn't be thinking about any of those things. I had only to think of her.

"It is a fact," Amir said, "that in the 20th century the secret tunnels were made better by movie stars and foreign officials, who wanted undisturbed access to the sea."

We entered a kind of courtyard, blessedly shaded, with all the doors to all the houses shut save one pair belonging to a basement-level abode. I looked past the stairs into this maw as Amir rambled on. At last I said, "I gotta go." And I began to head toward the stairs.

Amir held my arm firmly. "Where are you going, my friend? The Kasbah is still ahead."

I explained that I understood, sincerely, but that I was here to meet someone, alone.

"Why alone? If it's your friend than he—or is it she?—can join us on the tour."

I insisted that I go and claimed it was business—which, in a way, it was. I made it known that I would not be stopped, but then so did my guide.

He stepped in my way. "Sir. Then if the tour's over you must make the payment." And he held out his hand.

I shook my head and told him I hadn't really agreed to any tour. It had not been announced up front (he'd only said something close to "I'll show you where the Kasbah is"), no price had been agreed upon, and what had at first seemed like a gesture of goodwill had morphed into a capitalist endeavor to rival the clev-crest of Orange County.

I was lucky in that Amir hadn't asked for a specific amount. I had something of an out, but I also had a bit of fight left in me.

"Why?" I said. "Why do I have to pay for this? I told you I thought you were just helping me out."

"It is my livelihood, sir. The same way you are here for business, I am here for business."

"Yes, but don't you have another means of making money? Some kind of trade or something..."

Amir beamed mightily and said, "Allow me to show you my shop. It has what you need I'm sure. Belts, wallets..."

"Oh no, no belts, no wallets..."

"Then, sir."

The hand was out again.

Feeling like a bastard, anticipating the result, I reluctantly reached into my pocket and brought out a few dirham bills. I placed this pathetic amount in Amir's hand, and he looked at me as if I'd just plopped feces in it.

Without bothering to count it he spat, "It's nothing, sir. *Nothing.*"

"Well, I'm sorry, but that's all I have." This was close to the truth—at least as far as on-the-ground cash went. Apparently I hadn't taken out nearly as much as I should have at that bank in the Petit Socco. Amir's hand remained outstretched, as if he either expected me to give more or take back my meager offer, shamed.

But I wasn't buying. I actually, forcefully, pushed past him, my eyes set on the open doorway of that basement-level dwelling. I heard him call out after me. "Only a few minutes. A few minutes! My shop is right above!" And then, as I descended the staircase two steps at a time: "Arie Fique! Do you know 'Arie Fique'?"

Inside the house—for it was surely a house—I saw all the clichés I could ever hope to conjure up. Rugs and carpets of dazzling patterns and eye-splitting colors hung from walls or draped over ottomans, Arabic pop music thumped from a speaker somewhere in another room, the lighting was dim, the air hazy, candle flame wavered in the breeze blown in from a lone window off to the left, and the air itself was thick with hookah smoke.

I crept cautiously from one vacant room to the next, my hands raised and clasped as if in prayer. I had slung my laptop over my stronger shoulder, and the computer's weight combined

with that of my daypack no longer seemed to bother me, for I was focused now, I was close.

The pop music grew louder to the point of squealing. I rounded yet another corner, expecting to see the ultimate, a belly dancer, but instead I was met with a small room, a miniscule window letting in a little light, a chair in one corner, an empty metal bowl in another, and a body dressed all in black curled up on a cot. I approached the still form, careful to remain positioned sideways so that I could keep the doorway in sight. But even that stance had to drop eventually. I crouched down in front of the cot and nudged the form with both hands. It was a body, and judging from the softness, the malleability, it was the body of a woman. I waited, no longer caring who or what came up behind me, clobbered me, kicked me repeatedly, took the money that was rightfully theirs. I no longer cared because I knew. It was her. It was Ai'dah.

Eventually she turned to face me. She wore the traditional burqa, only her eyes showing through the mask-like headdress. Tears had welled up in those eyes, but amazingly they had not yet fallen.

"I know this is messed up," I said, and I brought out her hands, which had been cuffed together, solid steel. "I should've been here sooner. So many of us should have been here sooner. If only we had gotten in the loop!"

I helped her up to a sitting position and stroked her head. "But now," I announced, "you don't have to fear anything anymore. You're coming to America with me."

I pinched the top of her headdress, intending to yank it back and off, but Ai'dah shook away so violently that I held up my hands and said, "Fine. I understand. It's your culture. Now it's time for you to experience mine." And with that I grabbed her around the waist, hoisted her up, and tossed her over my shoulder, sack-of-potatoes-style. She made not a single sound. She was heavier than I anticipated—the internet had put her in at no more than eighty tops, and I wondered if perhaps her captors hadn't been feeding her more than captors are supposed to.

With a deep breath and a cry of rage, I barreled out of the room, linebacker-style, using my free shoulder as a kind of battering ram. And I was in luck for, just as I crossed the threshold, a man dressed in a Boston Red Sox t-shirt, jeans, and a wrapped-up facemask, appeared in my way. Before he could fully raise his pistol, I smacked into him, felt the crush of his sternum, and just had enough time and slack in momentum to see him drop. I picked up speed—until I was a blur carrying a beauty, and no bullets could touch me. I heard the zings, felt the shattered glass and stone chips against my face, but it all was of no consequence as Ai'dah and I—Ai'dah still slung over my shoulder—raced through the front entryway and up the steps

leading to freedom. Now the plaza—indeed, I suspected, the entire medina—was teeming with the angry and the anti-American. Another masked captor came at me with a fierce-looking knife, but I deftly side-stepped and brought him down with a single chop to the back of the neck. Then it was time for the real weapon.

“I’m sorry,” I shouted back to Ai’dah. “I know this is uncomfortable and not very flattering, but I need this arm free.”

Indeed I did. Men—masked and unmasked alike—were on all sides of me, and I had only one hope of breaking through. Like a gunslinger in a well-meaning movie I drew my hand out, arm up, and fired just the way I’d been practicing.

“Bang!” I said. “Bang! Bang!” I continued to curl my finger over and over, spinning in place, swirling my living load. Each time I aimed and fired I hit: our attackers either crumpled into nothing or flew back as if blown by a hyper-powered storm-simulator on a Hollywood back-lot. I watched the points rack up on the screen. Then I ran.

With Ai’dah safely sandbagged and my backpack and laptop case secured, I took off along Rue Ben Raisouli—or was it Rue Dar el Baroud? (I had no time to check the internet.) Regardless of the route, we were in extreme danger: on either side of the street I spotted what could only be called terrorists in the upstairs windows of the buildings I raced by. Each window warrior held some sort of weapon—be it an AK-47, an older-model sniper rifle sans scope, a bazooka, a grenade, a potato peeler, or the tried-and-true Molotov cocktail. I sensed the bullets close, the grenade pin about to be yanked, the trigger of the missile launcher about to be pulled, but before any of them could actually follow through with the intended action, I had aimed at my own killer and hit each and every target in sight. Every so often in between “Bang!”s, I belted out snippets of “Oh say can you sue...” while alternating with asking Ai’dah how she was doing. Of course I received no response from back there, not even a punch in the spine to tell me to slow down, stop all that bouncing already.

And then I was in the Petit Socco, which had more people than I had seen in a public gathering place in quite some time. Men wearing sports caps, fisherman-style caps similar to mine, makeshift masks and police uniforms, yelled obscenities and ran toward me, their weapons drawn, aimed but not firing. I brought several more of them down, but there were just too many. Old women and crippled children had taken to hurling slabs of stone and bits of undesirable food at Ai’dah and me.

“No one ever listens to the traffic cop,” I said as a Tangier traffic cop took it right between the eyes, whistle in his mouth still sounding. “Bang,” I said. “Bang, bang, bang!” I was running

low on ammo, and our attackers—her captors—had brought out the heavy weaponry. I heard the rumble of a tank. Rather than wait and see if the locals were willing to destroy one of the most popular tourist areas in the city, I kicked and punched and pistol-whipped my way to a side alley. Here more attackers surged before me, but at least I had a way out. I remembered Amir's tour.

"Here!" I said, triumphant, and kicked through the bottom of a wall that had been showing signs of disintegration. A sizable hole was ready for our entrance. I threw Ai'dah in first and then, without another look, launched my own body in after her. "Go go go!" I shouted after her. She moved fast, so fast I had trouble keeping up. For a while I feared she might even lose me, and then my trip would have been for nothing.

We crawled for some time in complete but cool darkness. At times I felt that perhaps Ai'dah was no longer just ahead of me but rather a giant rat whose tail twitched just before my nose. I felt slime and grit and other things on my hands, but I dared not stop to cover them nor adjust my backpack or precious laptop.

Finally I crawled into an open space with a small slab of light beaming down. I heard footsteps and voices above. A man said, "That'll teach me not to order hot soup in the middle of a Moroccan summer."

Ai'dah sat against the wall opposite from where I stood. She appeared to be either dead or resting, but I'm pretty sure it was the latter. My guess was confirmed when she opened her eyes and looked at me with great approbation.

"What," I said. "What did you want me to do? It was either us or them. Wouldn't you rather it be us?"

She said nothing, neither nodded or shook, and I set about finding a way out of the hole we were in.

"Amir was right," I admitted. "The secret passageway the Spaniards dug in the 700s, refined by movie stars and foreign dignitaries in the 1900s, *does* lead to the sea!" I could hear waves lapping when I pressed my ear against the wall. "There must be a way..." I began to tap the wall, probing for any possible weakness. "Ai'dah," I said. "Help me tap. Please."

Reluctantly, she did so. Together we tapped until, at last, Ai'dah broke through. Her entire arm went into the wall, and I jumped and clicked my heels together. "You're amazing," I said as I hugged her. "Let's go!" I crawled out first into the late afternoon sunshine to see the turbojet tourist megaboat just starting to pull away from the dock.

"Wait!" I cried, waving my arms. I grabbed Ai'dah, bent down, took her into my arms, and then ran the rest of the way with her along the narrow ledge of the dock. Above was the edge of the boarding area and below the ocean itself, waiting eagerly

for us to fall. I balanced along until we came to the ship, now a little over six feet from land's edge and receding fast.

But the door to the hold was still open. With the last of the Red Bull in me I jumped—Ai'dah in my arms, laptop across my shoulder, backpack on my back—across the threshold and into the ship's hold. The door cranked shut.

In the passenger seating area, Ai'dah would not look at me, even though we were seated together and I had rescued her from that awful house, that awful room, those awful men. Her hands were still cuffed, but I took care of that after some strenuous effort involving a couple of toothpicks and a maxed-out credit card. The cuffs dropped to the floor, and I quickly shoved them under the seat with my foot.

Still Ai'dah said nothing—not a word of thanks on my behalf. She was free now—did she not see that? Perhaps it was too soon after escaping—the shock of her horrid experience was probably still with her strong.

Eventually I took my leave of her and walked up on to the sundeck. If I smoked, I would have lit up a cigarette then. How old was she really? Now that she was free, would she take off that unbearable burqa? What would be my reward, back home in the States, my fame, back home in the States, now that I alone had found and rescued her with nothing but my wits, my weapon, and the internet? The high-speed megaboat skipped across the waves like a stone I'd tried tossing when I was a kid. The creek had been shallow that day, and I'd kept going back into the water to retrieve the stone, fetch it back to the shore, and repeat the process.

The ship made landfall at sundown. Not far from the Spain-side marine terminal, the beach stretched like a basking snake. All along the shore, topless bathers of all genders cavorted with the waves and each other. Windsurfers glided in from the relatively mild ocean to call it a day. Only the wakeboarders seemed determined to stick it out into the night.

On equal footing at last, Ai'dah and I walked side-by-side from the marine terminal to the old walled city section. "You'll like Tarifa," I said. "It's a lot like San Diego in the late eighties. You know, beer bottles on the beach, Steve Winwood and Gloria Estefan on the tape deck..."

Ai'dah continued walking face-forward. She had not really looked at me since we'd boarded the tourist megaboat.

"I bet you take that off while you're here," I said in reference to the burqa. "It'll do you some good to get out of that thing. A young girl like you should be on the beach with friends."

Ai'dah looked at me then, and in her eyes I swear I saw blood. Then, just as swiftly as she had glanced over, she was back to staring straight ahead. We passed the entrance to the

ancient walled city section and headed up to the nearest hostel on our left. It must really have been our lucky day: they had two beds available in the same room.

We took the stairs. Along the way I saw a sign that read, "NO THROWN THE PAPER IN W.C. thanks you." I saw a sign that read, "The glasses, plates, cups, knives, post, etc... They cannot be led to the rooms."

The rooms were cramped with at least six beds—a mix of bunk and single—in each. At least ours had a functioning door. When we entered, a surfer dude, no doubt from Australia, judging by his sunburn, lay clothed and sleeping on top of a single against the right wall. To the left, another guy, this one taller, thinner, more angular, was just finishing shoving his backpack under his bed—the bottom bunk. The bunk above him looked to be vacant, as did the lower bunk on the set opposite him.

"Hi," the tall guy—taller than me even—said, his arm outstretched. "I'm Maarten."

"Hi," I said and gave him my name.

"Is that really a name?"

"Yes," I answered in all seriousness. With his sharp facial features, Maarten looked a lot like a devil, but I wasn't about to tell him that.

"Who's she?"

"This... is Ai'dah. I just rescued her from captivity in Tangier."

"She was captured? What for?"

"Honestly, I forgot," I said. "She was held for so long I think everyone did. Anyway, the important thing is she's safe and coming with me to America. We have a flight leaving Malaga on Tuesday, so."

Maarten nodded but concentrated on my ward. "Uh... maybe she can tell us why she was captured."

"Ai'dah's not really into talking right now. I aim to change that when we get to the States."

I expressed my hunger then, a hunger Ai'dah apparently did not share. She pulled herself up onto the bunk above Maarten and refused to look at either of us. I settled on to the lower bunk of the set opposite. "Don't worry," Maarten told me. "The girl above you is from Switzerland. She's clean." He added that he was game to eat, so the two of us agreed to head to the nearest decent restaurant. We left Ai'dah alone on her small single bunk bed, staring out the dirty window to her left.

"Is that your computer?" Maarten said when we had put some distance between us and the hostel.

"It is."

"It must be expensive to have to carry it with you."

"Oh, I carry it with me everywhere. I have to. It's my job."

We spotted a restaurant just across the street that looked promising and so postponed our conversation until we were seated and had ordered food and drinks.

“Your job is to carry around a computer?”

“In part, yes. Without it I wouldn’t be able to take orders.”

I left it at that, unaware that my newfound associate was hanging. Finally he said, tentatively, “Who gives you orders?”

“The internet.”

“Okay. Who on the internet.”

“There is no who. There’s only the internet.”

The drinks came. We sipped our brewskies in silence. I watched Maarten stare out at a large yet modest church across the way. He seemed hesitant to turn and face me. “Do you really think she’s going to go back with you?” he said.

“She has to. Where else is there?”

“Another Arabic country maybe.”

“Saracens,” I scoffed, as if that word solved everything.

When we got back to the dorm room, Ai’dah had disrobed. She was seated in her previous position, on the top bunk bed, only now she wore a tasteful and quite fetching sundress, patterned pink, a bracelet, and earrings that highlighted the color of her intense eyes. I was drawn to her long lashes and wavy dark hair that fell past her shoulders. Not only that but her age: she was not a child after all but rather a young adult, or an adult, perhaps in her early twenties, maybe mid-twenties at most. The internet had been, well, wrong—about her age, anyway.

My mouth must’ve been slightly agape, for Maarten nudged me with his pointy elbow.

“This is what you wanted?” he said. His voice was low, though not low enough.

Surrounding Ai’dah on her bed was a bevy of shopping bags bearing the brand names of fashionable shops I’d never heard of. Many of the bags appeared full and undisturbed. I wasn’t aware that these stores existed in Tarifa.

“I’m happy for you,” I told her. “Let’s celebrate. Do you want to celebrate?” I addressed this question to Maarten, who said sure.

Later that night the three of us met up with the Swiss girl, Pamela, who slept above me. Pamela, to my surprise, seemed interested in me. She certainly made fun of the fact that I’d brought along my laptop. “Are you going to dance with that too?” she teased.

“I can’t very well leave it at the table,” I said.

“What a shame. I never thought I’d have a computer as a chaperone.” And she touched my beer-holding hand.

“You speak excellent English,” I said.

“I’m Swiss,” she said.

Maarten came over. “Hey,” he said to me, again with the low voice. “Would you mind if I, you know, tried something with Ai’dah? I mean, you’re not dating her, right?”

“I’ll have to kill you in your sleep,” I said, only half-joking. Maarten laughed, didn’t detect any seriousness. I added, “But go for it.”

Maarten left our table and went out onto the meager packed dance floor pumping to the Euro-trash techno hit of the month. He sidled up to Ai’dah, her eyes closed, her arms up, her fingers snapping, head turning either way with each alternating beat, and opened his mouth.

“I hope he speaks some Arabic,” I said without turning my attention from the blood.

“He’s very good at Arabic,” Pamela revealed. “He’s spent the past two months in Morocco, and several more in other countries in the Middle East. Iran, Jordan, Lebanon...”

“All those? He lied to you.”

“He wouldn’t lie. He’s from Rotterdam.”

Feeling an emotion I would have to google later, I got up from our table and stumbled toward the crowd. I clutched what might have been my seventh or eighth or ninth beer, even though the bottle was empty and I had some sense not to order another. In my left hand I clutched my laptop case and used this as an aid in forcing my way through the pack. College-aged kids, rock-faced Eastern Europeans, super-sun-exposed Australians, vomitous Brits—all curled their lips and noses as I and my laptop passed by. Eventually, we reached Maarten and Ai’dah. Unfortunately now I can’t remember much of what was said beyond “Don’t even try it” and “She’s mine” and “Let’s take this outside” and other gibberish only an American asshole who’d been drinking nonstop since early evening would spout off. I know I dropped my bottle on Maarten’s foot. I think I called him tulip boy. I’m almost positive I pushed him in the chest hard with my laptop case, which must’ve hurt on impact. What I do clearly remember is Ai’dah running away from us, Maarten indeed taking me outside, and the two of us crunching and scrambling around on the curb just outside the bar.

We were lucky we didn’t end up in prison. Instead we ended up back in our hostel beds, he in the lower bunk opposite mine. I awoke with sun filtering through my slowly opening lids. Maarten was dead to Tarifa—not dead, I was thankful to see—on his side, arms wrapped around his chest as if it were seven degrees in the room instead of seventy.

With much pain and exertion, I stood up. The first thing I saw was the upper level bed on my side—Pamela’s. It had been cleared, the sheets pulled up, smoothed out, and neatly tucked in. All her belongings—all evidence of her existence—were gone.

Holding my head to my hand, I turned to Ai'dah's bed. She was on it, dressed now in frilly pink pajama shorts and a matching spaghetti strap top. She was again staring out the window, her eyes absent of emotion. If I had thought she had made too many purchases the previous evening, that thought was now eclipsed with the sight of her most recent haul. So many more shopping bags—more than I thought any human possible of carrying, let alone taking out of stores legally—were stacked on her small single bed. Stacked behind her, creating a wall that rose to touch the ceiling, more bags and boxes were on either side of her, a veritable fortress of faith, and as I took a step toward her bed she hastily reached out and grabbed these bags and boxes from the left and right and pulled them toward her. She covered herself in them, created a barrier that stood between us, defiant, a mass so tall and imposing I could see only her eyes through the plastic and paper shimmer. I held out my hand, hurt.

"Ai'dah," I said. "Let's go. Come on."

Very slowly, she blinked.

Believing she would see reason in my words, I continued. "We have to go. We have to get to Malaga. Our flight's early tomorrow morning. We can't miss it."

Nothing. Nothing from everything I had come here for, everything I had done, the training, the targeted searches, the participation in discussion forums, the repeated entrance—and sometimes denial—into chat rooms, IM boards, live video conferences. All that—and for what?

"Ai'dah. Those tickets are nonrefundable."

I went for a walk with my laptop, which, amazingly, had made it intact to rest against my bed that morning. I thought about all the things I could say to Ai'dah that would convince her to take that flight with me. I thought of the little Arabic I knew. But mostly I thought of what I still had to learn.

In a stripped-down plaza off the main waterfront, I found a comfortable-looking bench and took a seat. Then I fired up my laptop. I got online and began to search. I went from googling "Arabic lessons" to "lessons in Arabic" to "Arabic language schools" to "pickup lines in Arabic" to "how to talk to Arabic women" to "shopping addiction" to "binge drinking" to "Rotterdam" to "are Dutch guys good in bed?" to the meaning of her name and the history of her people. But no matter how many searches—in quotes or not—I made, I was still searching, I would always be searching.

Back at the hostel, I found Maarten sitting on the edge of his bed, his face buried in his hands. Above him Ai'dah's mattress still held all those unopened shopping bags—perhaps now even more—like a mountain of treasure a dragon sits on, only there was no dragon. Ai'dah had fled. I looked. I stuck my hand in the

pile and knocked bags and boxes off, making a racket, pissed, but she was nowhere around. She had taken her burqa and nothing else.

Maarten got shakily to his feet. “She wanted me to give you this,” he said through gritted teeth—gritted from pain and not from anger, I was relieved to realize. In my hand he placed a business card, blank on both sides, pure white.

“Did she say anything?”

Maarten laughed and shook his head. He asked if I wanted to get something to eat. I told him I couldn’t. I had a bus to catch.

“I understand.” He smiled and offered his hand. “Good luck with your job.”

“Good luck with your women,” I said, shaking.

I hurried for the bus station, my laptop swinging, backpack lighter now. I had left my gun back at the hostel for some poor fearful American to find. He would need it, whatever the reason. As for me, I didn’t need it. I was going the way of the world, and I could not be stopped.