

# Azeroth

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*Azeroth* – Demon of Syrian origin. Alleged to be a Grand Duke of Hell. A demon of the first hierarchy, he seduces by means of laziness and vanity. Known to be prince of accusers and inquisitors.

Surprisingly, he thinks the bullet feels like a sting. The sting of an insect. Maybe a bee or a wasp. It is only after he looks down and notices the blood that he begins to feel real pain.

The sound echoes in his ears, sounding like a toy gun even, something a child would use. He can't see anything. He can only hear. Feet shuffling, voices muffled, doors shutting, a scream on occasion, the loud and righteous voice of the interrogator. His interrogator.

*"What were you doing here? What do you know of Al Queda?"* the main screams at him once again. The man says *Ki-duh*, with a thick Texas accent.

Blood is dripping from his shoulder. A hand comes, compresses the wound to stop the bleeding.

"I told you, I don't know anything. I'm just a tourist." This doesn't placate the voice. He hears the voice slam something down on what he imagines to be a table. He hears the sound of metal and his mind begins to imagine even worse horrors than he had already experienced – if that were possible. He rubs the bandaged nub of where his right index finger used to be. It aches though it no longer exists.

He hears the sound of the gun being loaded again; the bullets going into the magazine, the click of the steel as the magazine is loaded into the chamber.

He tries to relax his body, what he can of it not constrained by rope. He knows whatever happens next will hurt worse if he doesn't relax. He tries to relax, demands that his body do so but his will falters. The tension remains.

Boots walking. Closer to him. Heavy on what he imagines to be concrete. Fingers opening something, plastic.

"You're a fucking American. Akron. Ohio. Why are you in Iraq?"

"I wanted to see for myself."

"See what?"

"I wanted to see the results." He tries to reason. *Why am I here? It wasn't to volunteer. It was a whim. A pure and foolish whim.* He knows that he won't be believed.

"You wanted to see the results? What results?" the man screams. "You want to see dead Americans? You want to become an Islam?" He cringes at the way it is said, '*Become an Islam*'.

"No. None of that." He is exhausted. His mouth is dry. He has had nothing to drink for what seems like a day, perhaps two or even three.

"Then what? You better come up with something. We found you in the house of a known terrorist, sleeping on the floor." The man's voice states facts. His is not a voice of doubt. It is a voice of authority, of truth. He cannot be swayed, only placated.

"I didn't know he was a terrorist. I was alone. An attack came. It was the only cover I could find."

He imagines the headlines, "American Professor of Literature Found Aiding Terrorist in Iraq". His colleagues, some of them, would believe this even. Those who knew well would not. Regardless, he knew his reputation was ruined, his career over, even his life too perhaps.

A door slams. He is alone again.

There is a surprise in the next few hours. A blessing from "above". Suddenly, a soft hand, a kind hand even, reaches down and touches his face, removes his blindfold. He smells a female, her femininity, the musk of fertility. The light blinds his eyes, he holds his hands up to let them slowly adjust.

"Professor Azeroth?" the woman says.

He looks up. She is thin, gaunt. The fatigues drape her like a blanket. Her eyes are warm though. He senses regret. "I am sorry about what has happened. Only today were we finally told by the State Department that somebody from your university was looking for you."

*Only now, he thinks. Only now, after I have lost most of my finger. Only now, that my mind has been damaged and will no longer be as resilient as it was before.*

“Thank you,” he says.

“You need to sign these forms. They explain that you will be required to keep what happened here to yourself. It was a mistake. We will compensate you.”

*How much does one get for a lost finger? \$5,000 maybe? \$15,000? What if it had been another body part? Could I have retired had they taken my leg?*

She shoves the forms in front of him. He reads them, scans them. No use in knowing what it says. He will have to sign regardless..

He signs his name. Thomas Azeroth. He wonders about his family name again. The name of a Muslim devil. His lineage of generations is European. Irony, ironic. Mars, the color red, like blood, like the iron in blood. Hard to miss red. Nothing subtle about it.

He gathers his things, a bag. It is empty. Evidence. He walks out, nods to the guards. They ignore him and stare off toward the Sphinx or the sun, their eyes just as remote and distant.

The *habb* is blowing strongly; sand stings his face. Smoke, black and oily rises along the horizon. Bullets fire on occasion. He has no idea where he is at.

He walks toward a Humvee, gets in and then rides.

He lets his mind wander.

*So it comes to this. After all and everything, it comes to this. The aeon, ending. The terminus of civilization.*

He would leave Iraq in two weeks. There were things he still must do and see before he could leave. Afterward he would catch a flight to Nigeria and then the Hindu – Kush region of Afghanistan. There was much to see, to learn....to remember.