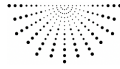


SIENA SAINT JAMES
IS NOT A SPY

The VOCABULARY EDITION



By

ERICA ABBETT

VOCABBETT

BIG WORDS MADE SIMPLE.

Siena Saint James Is Not a Spy
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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

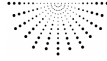
While I adore Siena Saint James and her story, it cannot be denied that she has a fondness for big words and esoteric historical references.

For the sake of the reader, she's put explanations and definitions at the bottom of each page. There is also a glossary at the back of the book.

*For example, I used the word *esoteric*. If you don't know what a word means, just look down. Odds are, the definition is right there!

Esoteric - Not widely-understood; known only to certain people

CHAPTER ONE



WHEN I WAS TWELVE YEARS OLD, I decided I wanted to be a spy. Jennifer Garner was getting her teeth pulled out by a sadistic interrogator in Taiwan, and I thought, *this is the life for me*.

Alias continued to be my favorite show until its lackluster final season, when I began seriously preparing myself for a life of espionage.

I took karate classes, though I found the studio's fluorescent lighting unbearable. I studied abroad across Latin America, Europe, and the Middle East. I started sitting with my back to the wall. You know, all the things the pros do.

It wasn't until I was about to graduate that I finally accepted a harsh reality: I was never going to make it as a spy.

My lack of inches wasn't the problem, though being a five-foot-tall, 100-pound blonde female probably isn't an advantage when fighting off bad guys.

No, it was something far more sinister...a diabolical curse that rendered me hopelessly disoriented each time I went

Sadistic - When someone likes hurting people

Lackluster - Not great

Espionage - Spying

Sinister - Harmful; criminal

Diabolical - Devilish

somewhere new.

In plain English: I have a terrible sense of direction.

I considered the countless times Jennifer Garner sprinted out a building, a bomb inside mere moments from exploding. Never—not once in all my watches and re-watches—did she pause to say, “Wait, if I turned right to get in here...that means I turn left to get out, right?”

My sense of direction was so bad, I got lost in parking lots. And that was without counterespionage agents pursuing me.

Honestly, the prospect of fighting off bad guys didn’t scare me. Nor did the frequent identity changes associated with the job. I fancied I could even disarm a nuclear weapon if called upon to do so. But the embarrassment of getting lost on a mission...

With my dream over before it began, I moved to New York after graduating and began working at a high-end auction house called Belliston’s. Surprisingly, my spy prep translated quite well to the world of art and antiquities. Both fields, after all, are heavily rooted in history, languages, and travel.

I liked working at Belliston’s...but I never lost that initial interest in espionage.

That’s probably why I was so disappointed to hear myself sobbing and screaming, “I swear on my life, I’m not a spy!” at a tender 24 years of age.

NO, DEAR READER, I didn’t stop there for dramatic effect. Well, maybe I did, but there are a few things you should know before we proceed with the narrative.

The first is that I haven’t had a day’s vacation since I started working at Belliston’s three years ago. Sure, I’ve had vacation days, but I used them to visit family. I’m talking about a *vaca-*

tion.

The second is that, though I'm surrounded by immense wealth at work, my salary is only slightly higher than that of your average Walmart greeter.

The third is that I'm a firm believer in intuition. Maybe not everyone's, but mine is always right. More or less.

All these factors came together shortly after my 24th birthday, when I stumbled upon a heavily-discounted, week-long Krav Maga camp in Israel. I was at the tiny table in our kitchen, if a counter the size of a cutting board and a sink full of dirty dishes constitute a kitchen. Such accommodations were fairly standard in Manhattan, but I considered myself lucky. From seven stories up, I could gaze upon the East River and Roosevelt Island through gorgeous, vintage-paned windows. But that blustery March morning, the only thing visible was a misty gray.

Facing the window, I sat with one knee up and stared at the phrase "A Trip That Will Change Your Life" splashed across my laptop screen.

I must've been radiating waves of excitement because my roommate Christine stopped to see what I was looking at. Clad in silk pajamas and last night's mascara, she looked like Hang-over Barbie. Her physical characteristics included long legs, big boobs, and waves of platinum blonde hair. Makeup, last night's or otherwise, was superfluous to her obvious beauty.

I've known Christine for years—we work together at Belliston's—but something changed in her demeanor after we moved in together last summer. I couldn't put my finger on it, but it was like...she was trying to keep me in my place? Like, "You may be pretty enough to be seen and occasionally pho-

Immense - Huge

Radiating - Giving off in waves

Clad - Dressed

Superfluous - Unnecessary

Demeanor - Behavior

tographed with me, but never forget that I am your social superior...”

For instance, I rarely mind how much taller everyone is than I. But Christine lords her extra ten inches over me, looking down her perfectly-straight nose with narrowed eyes and an exaggerated tilt of the neck.

She comes from some oil billionaire family in Texas, and the contrast with my comfortably working-class origins is only amplified by close proximity. I once made the mistake of asking her what I should wear for a date.

Standing before my closet, whipping hangers to the side with a look of faint disgust, she eventually settled on a black shift dress. “Who’s this by?”

“Umm...Target?” I responded.

She couldn’t have looked more horrified if I slapped her in the face. “I can’t believe you just said that out loud.”

Christine’s had a tough couple of years, so I try to ignore (or laugh at) such comments. Coming from a world where she had horses, summers in Saint-Tropez, and a housekeeper diving in front of her with an umbrella if it started raining, Christine never expected to work for *money*.

Then her dad went to jail for insider trading and the family fortune evaporated in a dizzying series of fines and asset seizures. Overnight, she became vulnerable to the horrors of reality, like the monthly rate of an Equinox membership.

In some ways, I admired her. She refused to lower her standards, so she worked her ass off as an influencer when we weren’t already working our asses off at Belliston’s. That’s why she was so status-conscious, I think. All that remained of her former life was her appearance. She could afford the clothes, but was still figuring out how to regain the lifestyle.

Proximity - The state of being near

Insider Trading - Using confidential info to make \$\$ illegally

Asset Seizures - When the government takes your \$\$

Equinox - An expensive gym

Barefoot and smelling vaguely of vodka, Christine leaned down to read my screen. Masses of platinum, extensions-laden hair weighed heavily on my shoulder. “What the hell is Krav Maga?” she asked.

I resisted the urge to slap the laptop closed. “Israeli martial arts,” I said. “I’m thinking of going to Israel for an intensive week of it.”

Her face lit up in amusement. “Oh my God, Siena. Imagine little old you fighting someone! That is *hilarious*.” Then she booped me on the nose like I was a dog, or she was Alexis from *Schitt’s Creek*. The show struck a chord with her for obvious reasons.

I emitted a half-smile, my default response to her mildly condescending comments, and returned my attention to the screen. Christine had already moved on to her next task by the time I looked up.

Holding a cup of coffee, she was filming an Instagram story on her way back to bed. “Hello, loves! Now, this *is* sponsored, but I would never recommend a product I don’t use myself...”

And she started going on about some hair-growth vitamins that were unopened on our counter.

DRIPPING SWEAT, I ran for my life down Tel Aviv’s glorious coastline. At five in the morning, I was trapped in a chronological no-man’s-land. Shops were closed, late-night revelers had staggered to sleep, and sun-seekers hadn’t yet awoken. The only witness to my plight was the starving sun. After a night in captivity, the fiery orb consumed the sky and sea, leaving barren fields of pink and orange in its wake.

The mob was still behind me, though I didn’t dare turn

Emitted - Made

Mildly condescending - Kind of rude

Chronological - Relating to time

around. When one is being pursued by men armed with guns, knives, and sticks, the auditory sense is sufficient, and I could hear them shouting.

The sand was doing funny things to my legs; it was only a matter of time before I stumbled. The sun warmed my back, wondering if I'd make a tasty aperitif. I searched desperately for a location—any location—where I might have the slightest advantage in a fight.

Despite the formidable weaponry behind me, the sand eager to trip me, and the sun threatening to consume me...I knew the biggest threat was actually the Mediterranean Sea to my left. Its gently lapping waves looked peaceful, but I'd be pitifully easy to drown. In a nautical confrontation, the tallest person nearly always wins, and few adults in the world are shorter than I. None of the guys behind me fit the bill. They all topped me by approximately 12 inches.

I thanked God I spent so much time on the beach while studying abroad. I'd traversed this path hundreds of times that beautiful semester, and even my directionally-challenged brain couldn't befuddle something as straight as a shoreline. If I kept going, eventually I'd hit Ramat Aviv and Tel Aviv University.

There wasn't a chance I'd make it to campus, though. It was two miles away, at least. But if I could make it another quarter mile or so, I'd reach a wide boardwalk. There, the sand transitioned to smooth, wooden slats that rose high above a rocky part of the coastline, and a thick metal railing protected pedestrians from falling.

In *Burn Notice*, Michael Weston talks about how he likes fighting in bathrooms. "Lots of hard surfaces," he says in his

Pursued - Chased

Aperitif - Pre-dinner drink

Formidable - Impressively large or powerful

Nautical - Relating to water

Traversed - Travel across

Befuddle - Confuse

characteristically deadpan delivery, slamming an attacker's face into a sink.

I decided a railing wasn't a terrible alternative. If nothing else, it protected me from the sea and forced the bad guys to stay in front of me.

The men were closing in, but their weapons made it difficult to sprint at full speed. I've never gone running with a golf club, but I imagine it's rather unwieldy. A burst of adrenaline got me to the boardwalk, and I could've cheered when my feet reached the stable wooden slats. The railing wasn't far now! Staggering as I slowed, I positioned my back to the metal. Then, in preparation for the coming onslaught, I put my hands on my knees and gasped for air. Sweat trickled down my temples.

The aggressors formed a semicircle before me, and I straightened to meet them. There were four, bulging biceps and admirable pectorals heaving beneath their Krav Maga tank tops. Most looked like they could carry me under one arm.

I should've been terrified. The simulation was meant to feel as real as possible, minus the rubber weapons, but I couldn't help but smile at the absurdity of it all. This *felt* like real spy training. And quite frankly, there wasn't a chance that "The Farm" where CIA agents train was half as beautiful as Tel Aviv.

One of the artificial assailants was an instructor. Hailing from Australia, he introduced himself as Matt at our meet-and-greet the night before. My inner art historian went into overdrive after landing in Israel, and I couldn't help but think he looked nothing like Jesus' tax collector friend. Approximately 6'4", his oversized arms were covered in tattoos, one of which revolved around a large, fanged spider. His nose had the crook

Deadpan - Lacking emotion; expressionless

Unwieldy - Difficult to carry

Onslaught - A fierce attack

Simulation - A fake version of something

of an appendage repeatedly broken. If he filed his teeth down to fangs like the Vikings, they wouldn't have looked out of place.

The men adjusted their grips, awaiting further instructions, and I forced myself to rationally recall yesterday's introductions. Matt had normal, 21st-century teeth and a crinkly-eyed smile. Plus, he had an Australian accent. No one sounds mean with an Australian accent! *Maybe he was bullied as a child, so now he uses tattoos to deter confrontation. And he teaches people how to defend themselves for a living! He can't be all bad...*

But who was I kidding? Even in my thoughts, my voice was whimpering.

"Not a bad runner," Matt growled, eyeing me like the fly in his spider tattoo, "but let's see how you fight. Lorenzo, you're up."

One of the other trainees, Lorenzo was brandishing a golf club with obvious discomfort. His expensively-cut hair was a mop of shiny, light brown curls; his face was smooth and clean-shaven. He held the club at a distance, like he'd prefer passing it to a caddy.

I smiled and gave him a reassuring nod, but stayed light on my toes. The weapons may have been rubber, but the fighting was real, and being hit by a fake golf club would still hurt like hell.

Lorenzo adjusted the club experimentally. First he did a light swing, holding it like a baseball bat, but I danced out of reach. Then he modified his approach, using the club and opposite arm to create a large "V." Each time I tried to side-step out of it, he did the same, and we danced back and forth like two people trying to get out of each other's way, only the opposite.

Now certain of his success, Lorenzo raised the club, reveal-

Appendage - Something added to something larger (like a nose to a face)

Brandishing - Holding (something) as a threat or with excitement

ing an impressively tanned torso. The armholes of the men's tank tops were cut so low, the sides were practically open to their hips, but I refused to be distracted. Before he made contact, I dove over his shoulder, wrapped one arm around his neck and used the other to trap the arm holding the club. Then I started fake-kneeing him in the groin repeatedly—basically where every Krav Maga move ends.

Lorenzo faltered, and I grabbed the club with both hands.

"Hi-ya!" I fake backhand-struck him with the weapon, then twirled it at the rest of the attackers like Captain Hook with a sword. "*En garde!*"

Matt was unamused. With a single hand, he yanked the club back. I tried to hang on, stumbling forward as he wrenched it free by the bulbous end (or whatever you call it—clearly golf is not my forte).

"Nice disarm," Matt growled, "but keep your weapon close or you'll be back where you started. Don't get cocky."

He tossed the club back to Lorenzo, and for the next drill, they all converged at once. I held my hands up like "Oh my gosh, please don't hurt me!" But I was actually just positioning them closer to the weapons so I could grab one.

A baseball bat came next. The disarm was basically the same as what I'd done with Lorenzo, though this assailant was far less considerate on the personal hygiene front. I do not stereotype...I merely state the fact that he was French. I've known plenty of exquisitely-groomed Frenchies, but Pierre was not one of them. His skin and hair were greasy; his beard days old. I could smell him from several feet away, and dreaded the moment when his sweat would smear all over me for the disarm.

Knowing he was French, I guessed he would wield the baseball bat overhand. Baseball bats are one of those interest-

Faltered - Lost momentum; made a misstep

En garde! - A French expression typically said before fencing (sword fighting)

Bulbous - Round; bulging

ing weapons...Americans often swing them two-handed, like they're playing baseball, while people from less baseball-centric cultures sometimes use them like a club.

Pierre went for the overhand, club-style attack, and the smell was just as nauseating as I feared. On the bright side, I retreated in control of a formidable weapon. On the downside, my entire torso reeked of another man's body odor.

I kept the weapon close this time, forcing the attackers to reconsider their strategy. Pierre was unarmed, Lorenzo's golf club was useless as long as I could keep him at a distance with the baseball bat, and the same was true of Matt's knife.

Unfortunately the fourth attacker was armed with an orange, rubber pistol. "Drop the bat! *Slowly.*"

A model of masculinity (though at this camp, that was more the rule than the exception), Amir was perfectly proportioned, with wide shoulders, a slender waist, and olive skin. The sweat he acquired on the three-mile sprint looked decorative, like the oil they put on people before photo shoots.

"Not on your life."

"Drop it, or I shoot!" Amir's lips quirked at the silly play-acting.

"Do it, then," I smiled in response. "But jail time for murder is so much worse than a failed abduction, isn't it? You could still get away."

Matt clapped, signaling the end of the exercise. "You're quite the scrappy little thing, aren't you, Siena?"

With my lack of inches, I was always a "little" this or a "tiny" that. I didn't mind the diminutives. They weren't an insult, except when wielded by Christine.

Matt went on, "Just remember that in real life, you do everything you can to avoid a fight. You didn't even try offering us your wallet, your phone, whatever. Sometimes a con-

Diminutives - Something that implies smallness

Wielded - Used (with a weapon/insult)

frontation is unavoidable, but you de-escalate at the beginning, not the end. Even if Amir doesn't shoot, how much longer could you keep this up?"

I wanted to say, "I could do this all day." Instead, I modestly replied, "Got it. Thank you."

Matt turned to the rest of the group. "Nice work, guys. It's so important to practice with different partners, particularly for the ladies. No offense, but Siena is far more likely to be attacked by someone like us than another young woman. That's why we mix it up. Sparring with someone your size is great in practice, but who would attack you in real life? These are the scenarios we're trying to replicate."

AFTER THAT FIRST thrilling exercise, our training fell into a pattern. Mornings involved an element of travel, though the details remained a mystery until we arrived. For instance, the itinerary might say "Caesarea," but it wasn't until our feet reached the hot sand of the ancient Roman city that we learned we'd be jogging on *top* of the ancient aqueducts before fighting beneath their splendid arches. Literally encircled by thousands of years of history, the timeless Mediterranean to my back, I'd never been happier.

Dinner was family-style at Bevel, where all 15 of us gathered around a massive table on the private rooftop. The place could've doubled as an advertisement for Pinterest. Bulb lights crisscrossed overhead, plants adorned nearly every available surface, and lounge seating between us and the sea boasted intricately-patterned, freshly-fluffed pillows. Ostensibly reborn as polished members of society, we descended upon the pita and hummus like locusts.

Modestly - Without vanity or arrogance

Aqueducts - Something that transports water; looks like a beautiful bridge with arches beneath it

Ostensibly - On the surface

“In a real fight, there are no rules,” Yonah, the trip leader, said during his toast the first night. With dark hair, a neatly-trimmed stubble beard, and a well-tailored suit, he looked like a celebrity pretending to be an action star, though of course he was the real thing. With the sun setting into the glorious sea behind him, he reminded me of a minor deity, and we the supplicants he graced with his presence.

The comparison wasn’t entirely inappropriate. If not one of the lesser gods, Yonah Hariri was certainly Krav Maga royalty. He only worked with civilians like us a few weeks a year. The rest of his time was spent jetting from country to country, providing specialized training to Navy SEALs and other elite commandos.

“Out there, no referee is going to protect you,” Yonah gestured to the world with a glass of whiskey. “No one’s going to stop a man, or a group of them, from dragging you into a forest by your hair, doing what they want, and burying you there.”

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. Yonah looked directly at me, then shifted his gaze to the other girls one by one.

“If you remember nothing else, remember this. There is no such thing as a fair fight. If you’re attacked, you do whatever it takes to get away. Kick him in the groin. Hit him with a hammer. Tear his fucking eyes out if you have to.”

Nervous laughs fluttered around the table, and Yonah continued. “I’m serious. Would you rather be dead? Would you rather have your parents stay up night after night, imagining what happened to you? I can’t tell you how many videos I’ve seen where a girl just walks into a van because some jackass grabs her by the arm. No! Never go from Point A to Point B with an attacker. If it’s your time, it’s your time. But it’s happening right there, where they’ll find you, and you make sure that fucker doesn’t walk away unscathed. Make it clear he was

Deity - A god/goddess, typically of a polytheistic religion

Supplicants - People who make pleas to a higher power or authority

in a fight. Leave evidence. Leave DNA. Make sure he doesn't attack anyone else."

Matt raised his glass to Yonah. "Cheers to that."

Which set off a round of "*L'chaim!*" and "*Salud!*" as we clinked, sealing our fate as those who fight back.

I TOOK YONAH'S little talks to heart, uncomfortable as they were, and resolved not to waste a moment of training. That's probably why my favorite part of camp was the hands-on grappling that took place each afternoon.

Our small groups stayed the same, so I was still with Lorenzo, Pierre, and Amir while Matt and Yonah rotated from group to group.

It was shocking how quickly our relationships evolved, though I suppose punches batter interpersonal barriers more quickly than polite conversation. By the third day, Amir and I were each other's closest friends at camp, getting drinks together after dinner and choosing each other for sparring partners when we had the choice.

Unlike Matt, who looked nothing like a tax collector, Amir resembled his etymological namesake. The word derives from "emir," and he could easily pass for an ancient prince or military commander.

Until he opened his mouth. A graduate student at Columbia, he was a lover, not a fighter. You were far more likely to see him at a peace rally than a brawl.

Who knew that Amir's love of peace would change my life forever, landing us both in deadly straits?

L'Chaim! - Hebrew for "cheers!" (literally "to life!")

Salud! - Spanish for "cheers! (literally "health!")

Etymological - Relating to the origin of the word

Derives - Comes (from)

Brawl - A messy fight

Straits - A situation with great trouble or difficulty

ON DAY FOUR, we were bussed to Yarkon National Park for fake strangulation drills. The green lung of the region, it boasted a picturesque lake, gentle streams with dusty walking trails, fields of carefully tended grass, and acres of scrubby, uncultivated land surrounding it all.

What I loved most, though, was that like Greece or Rome, it's impossible to throw a stone in Israel without encountering an object of historical significance. At Yarkon National Park, we got an entire fortress.

In ancient times, two groups coexisted in modern-day Israel and Palestine: the Israelites and the Philistines. Sometimes they'd have peace treaties; sometimes they'd have epic battles (think David and Goliath). The Philistines mainly controlled the land in Gaza and other modern Palestinian territory; likewise, the Israelites controlled much of what the Israelis control today.

Then the Romans conquered everything around 63 B.C.E., creating the client state of Judea. By the time of Jesus, Herod was king (and yes, he's the guy who's said to have ordered the execution of all boys under two years old). Mad with power and ruling in the name of all-powerful Rome, Herod built the city of Antipatris on the very ground I was standing on, naming the city after his father.

Understandably, most of Herod's contemporaries weren't overly fond of him or the Romans. Over the next century, they revolted and battled countless times in what came to be known as the Jewish-Roman wars. And if there's one thing history

Uncultivated - Wild

Contemporaries - People who live at the same time as someone else

makes clear, the Romans did *not* like when their enemies rose back up. Remember Carthage? Of course you don't. The Romans basically burned it to the ground after the Third Punic War. Some say they even sowed the fields with salt to make sure no food could ever grow there again.

By the 2nd century C.E., the Romans had about as much love in their hearts for the Jews as they did for the Carthaginians. By now, the Romans had sacked Jerusalem, destroyed the Jews' temple, paraded their sacred objects through Rome, sold countless men, women, and children into slavery, imposed a "Jewish tax" on anyone who was left...and these ridiculous monotheists kept resisting! The Romans were like, *seriously?*

So they sent in their toughest general to kill anyone who could still hold a sword, and the politicians got to work pulling a Carthage on the Jews: i.e. making them disappear.

The Romans renamed the entire area "Palaestina," in honor of the Jews' sometimes-enemy, the Philistines. *Oh yeah, we read your David and Goliath story, the Romans said. This land belongs to Goliath now, bitch!*

Some Jews remained in Judea, now known as Palaestina, but the Romans banned them from Jerusalem. Many fled to other parts of the empire, or to other empires entirely. They were still treated as second-class citizens, but at least the Romans weren't constantly coming in and killing them. This, of course, constituted just one of many Jewish diasporas throughout history.

Sorry to get carried away...but I work at an art house, remember? I spend half the day researching antiques, and I honestly find this stuff fascinating. I may have been born to be a

Carthage - Ancient civilization in modern-day Tunisia (for more on this, read up on Queen Dido and Aeneas)

Imposed - Forced

Monotheists - People who worship one God

Constituted - Was

Diaspora - The dispersion of people from their homeland

spy, but I make a fine historian.

Lost in these musings, my eyes drifted to the crumbling remains of an Ottoman fortress high on a distant hill. I wouldn't have noticed if the president of the United States walked across the field, Secret Service in tow. Matt's next sentence, however, captured my attention entirely.

"Don't be afraid to really choke your partner once you've practiced a few times. You need to know what it feels like to be strangled so you don't panic in the moment."

Amir and I eyed each other, brows raised in silent surprise.

"Lorenzo, come on down," Matt waved over my preppy friend.

Lorenzo looked about as excited as you'd expect for a man who's just been informed he'll be casually strangled, but he joined Matt on the ground.

"You'll be the bad guy," our esteemed instructor added to Lorenzo's obvious relief. "Alright, get in the mount and put your hands on my neck."

Escaping a chokehold is Krav Maga 101; it was one of the first defenses I learned at the studio back home. But we didn't *really* squeeze each other's necks! Just like we didn't actually punch each other in the face.

"Alright, try to strangle me."

Lorenzo cocked his head to the side. "How much should I... ah...strangle you?"

"Go for it, mate. Everything you got."

"Actually?"

"Yes. Go."

Lorenzo's knuckles bulged as his grip tightened, but in a

Musings - Thoughts

Ottoman - Relating to the Ottoman Empire, which collapsed after WW1 and was based in modern-day Turkey

Esteemed - Respected; admired

The mount - When one person is lying down and you sit on or kneel above them, one leg to each side of their body

flash, Matt flipped Lorenzo onto his back and started handing out fake punches.

Amir twirled a finger at the duo. "How did you...?"

Matt bounced to his feet, offering Lorenzo a hand, before explaining the move and demonstrating once more.

"This is always a death sentence in the movies, right?" Matt said. "Someone gets strangled. They die. That should *never* happen."

When Matt was done breaking down the defense, Amir asked, "Alright, Siena, you ready?"

"Mmmhmm." Amir and I went through the motions a few times, never putting lethal pressure on each other's necks. Then Amir asked if I was ready to take it up a notch.

"Has to happen eventually."

I laid on the grass and Amir got into position, kneeling with one leg on either side of my waist. Hands on my neck, he started to squeeze. Recent drills, coupled with a strong sense of self-preservation, made my next move automatic. My hands flew to free my neck, bursting between his like I was doing the breaststroke. I bucked my hips at the same time, sending Amir sprawling over my shoulder. I wasn't able to flip him over like Matt did, but I had no problem escaping, which is the ultimate goal.

"Not bad!" Amir rubbed the arm he landed on. "Again?"

We practiced over and over. When I was finally able to flip him, ending the move with me on top, he declared, "Alright, this time I'm not going to let you win."

"Excuse me? You've been *letting* me win? Do not!"

"You're ready to pretend this is a real fight? If we do, I'm going for it," Amir warned. "You have to beat me."

"That's the whole point! How am I going to learn otherwise?"

By this point I had so much adrenaline pumping through

my veins, I was confident I could escape any attacker short of Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson. I laid down, took my last calm breath, and Amir started squeezing. A choked cough escaped my throat as he squeezed harder than ever before, but it lasted a mere moment. I freed my neck immediately, but this time the “buck and roll” was trickier. Amir was putting up a fight, trying to stay on top. But he was sprawled, off-balance, and I’d already trapped one arm.

I groaned like a cow giving birth, putting everything I had into flipping him over. At last, he was flipped! “Bam, bam, bam!” I fake punched.

“Nailed it!” he said, out of breath and supine on the grass. “Of course, this isn’t the end of the fight. I could still take you. But at least you can get out of this move.”

“Whatever,” I rolled my eyes and offered him a hand up.

We switched partners, giving Amir a chance to practice with the other guys. Not to brag, but the others were even easier to topple than Amir. Poor Lorenzo flew halfway across the field when I did the buck and roll. For a second, I worried I’d broken his neck. Lean and trim, he was laughably light compared to Amir’s bulk.

The only one who gave me a bit of a struggle was Pierre, the malodorous Frenchman, but that was simply because continued proximity always made me a trifle lightheaded. On days I partnered with him, I could literally smell him on myself the rest of the day. But thankfully we were switching partners a few times today, so the stench would dissipate among the group, and Lorenzo’s expensive cologne would help cancel it out.

After pinning Pierre, I stood up with alacrity, though I still helped him to his feet in the universal gesture of camaraderie. I

Malodorous - Smelly

Trifle - Little

Alacrity - Speed

Camaraderie - Friendship

looked around, having worked with everyone, and awaited further instructions.

"You got this, Siena?" Matt asked, sensing my air of conquest.

"I think so."

"Let's see."

I laid down and Matt straddled my waist, providing a terrifyingly close view of even more tattoos. Deadly animals were evidently a passion of his. In addition to the repulsive spider on his arm, a tattooed cobra encircled his neck. The snake looked like it was about to squeeze his head off, squirming and slithering in response to the Australian's movements.

"You practiced for real with Amir and the other guys right?" Matt confirmed, Australian accent bringing me back to reality. "You're ready for this?"

"I did. Go for it."

With calloused hands, Matt squeezed my neck in a vice-like grip. I freed my neck and bucked, but he wasn't going anywhere. I could breathe, but that was the extent of my success. I kept trying to throw him off with my hips, but the man could've been a professional bull rider. I don't even remember all the moves I pulled. From my smothered position down below, I even tried tickling his rock-hard torso. *Maybe it's a clever move he won't expect...He'll jump right off.* Apparently tickling isn't an official Krav Maga defense for a reason. It didn't work, but it did leave me extraordinarily embarrassed.

After an eternity of fighting and wiggling and squirming beneath 200 pounds of pure muscle, I somehow managed to roll onto my stomach.

"Never do that!" Matt wrapped an arm around my throat. He was sitting on my back now. One little pull, and my neck arched backward like a bow.

Smothered - Covered, usually to the point of being unable to breathe

Hoarse - Raspy or rough, like with a sore throat

Expletive - Swear word

I let out a hoarse expletive and tapped the ground, signaling my concession.

"You'll get there, Siena," Matt helped me up and I stumbled to my water.

The heat of the Middle Eastern sun, dust from the field, and hours of being choked did not leave me feeling my best. I could already feel bruises forming on my neck, and my hair probably only looked marginally better than Medusa's.

Not even winded, Matt proceeded to serve as the attacker for the others. He delivered a valuable lesson in overconfidence, pinning each man in turn.

When he'd finished, and the others were starting to dissipate among the water and bags, I croaked, "Do you mind if we go again?"

Matt raised his eyebrows in obvious approval. "Let's go."

I laid down and Matt put his hands around my neck. Once again I fought for my life. By the end of our match, he'd folded me up like a sandwich, nose to knees, and was sitting on my shins.

"Come on, Siena!" Amir called. A small group had gathered by then, including Yonah, watching with arms crossed and the hint of a smile. "You can take him!" someone shouted.

I knew I could never lift him, but maybe I could roll him? But each time I tried to rock, Matt calmly adjusted his feet like I was a somewhat uncooperative chair.

"I give up," I gasped.

Matt helped me to my feet and gave me a hearty clap on the back.

"Normally if I were the victim, I'd have started running sooner," he said. "Don't just sit on your opponent, obviously, but I wanted to prove a point..."

Concession - Surrender

Marginally - Slightly

Medusa - A woman with snakes for hair, according to ancient Greek myth

Dissipate - Scatter

Matt began lecturing the group on all the things I'd done wrong. I wanted to listen, but I was a trifle light-headed. I staggered back to my water, took a giant swig, and collapsed in the shade of an ancient olive tree.

Amir followed me over, standing with his back to the sun. "No offense, Siena, but he's the instructor. Even *we* can't take him. What makes you think you can?"

"Reckless overconfidence, mostly."

Amir let out a bark of laughter.

"Plus, I'm not trying to take him. I'm just trying to *escape* him."

I stood up, wondering if this is what it felt like to be 80, and locked eyes with Matt. Telepathically, I vowed to free myself from his deadly clutches before the week was up. He grinned broadly, clearly understanding the message.

"Challenge accepted," his eyes responded.

I BOLTED AWAKE the following morning to a terrifying thought. Of all the horrors I'd experienced, this sent a chill down my spine like none other. *What if I toot on someone while kicking them?*

It wasn't an arbitrary fear. One of the ubiquitous, unnamed diseases that pounce the moment unsuspecting travelers cross an ocean had clearly identified me as her prey. Coupled with four days of little sleep, waves of nausea began last night. Thinking it might be dehydration, I chugged a liter of water, the plastic bottle crinkling in my hands beneath the nonexistent overhead light of my hotel room (why don't they put lights on ceilings in so many other countries?). Clutching my stomach, I slept fitfully until the early hours. When the sun

Telepathically - Sending a message through thoughts

Arbitrary - Random

Ubiquitous - (Something that is) everywhere

sent her sentries to spy on me, peeking around the edges of blue velvet drapes, I surrendered to a mere hour of slumber.

My phone trilled at 8:00. I grasped for it, hand fumbling around an unfamiliar nightstand. The time was a veritable respite compared to the pre-dawn conditioning of the first few days. It was almost like Yonah, the camp's big boss, knew we needed a bit of a break.

Summoning my energy, I fell to my feet and examined the bags under my eyes like an augur searching for clues. *Am I too sick to go?* I knew if I were back home, I'd err to the side of caution, but I didn't want to miss a single day of training.

If the unthinkable happens, I'll have no choice but to flee the country and change my identity. Do they let people into Witness Protection for indigestion-related embarrassment?

But looking into the mirror, I was pleasantly surprised. Days of sun, seawater, and exercise had given me a lovely tan and Khaleesi blonde highlights. Not to mention, I had some exquisite new lines on my arms and abs. I suppose that's why people over-tanned for so many years. I'd never looked healthier, despite the long-term skin cancer ramifications and germs colonizing my stomach.

Grabbing some Pepto Bismol and my bag, I headed for the door.

LORENZO AND I faced the sea as Pierre and Amir grappled in the sand before us. Like lovers, they began by kneeling before each other, touching the tops of their foreheads and clasping one hand behind the other person's neck, the other around each other's waist. The challenge was to maintain this intimately awkward position while throwing your opponent to

Sentry - A type of soldier

Augur - An ancient Roman religious official who made decisions about the future based on nature's signs (like where birds decided to fly or what a pig's guts looked like)

Err - Make a mistake

the ground.

It wasn't classic Krav Maga, which is all about practical, defensive measures. Yonah explained that this was merely an exercise in balance and coordination. As the drill began, he and Matt walked up and down the beach, pausing to observe each of the groups.

Pierre had been muttering under his breath from moment one, a stream of invective in French, English, and Hebrew. This wasn't entirely unusual, for him or anyone else. Sometimes it's impossible to muster all your strength without invoking an expletive or two.

But Pierre's comments were constant, and directed specifically at Amir. What began as typical trash talk was becoming unacceptable by the one-minute mark, especially since Amir wasn't responding to any of it. I could feel my fingernails digging into my palms.

"Son of a whore, you're the worst fighter I've ever met!" Pierre spat.

"Yeah?" Amir finally broke. "You have the worst breath I've ever smelled. Maybe we can learn something from each other!"

Pierre positively roared before releasing his grip. Then he stood and shouted, "Amir shouldn't even be here! He is Muslim."

"So?" I intervened, taking a few steps closer to Amir.

"We are roommates," Pierre continued, voice vibrating with righteous indignation. "He thought I was asleep! But as the sun rose, I caught him. He was bowing and chanting at Mecca!" ⁵

Like a 17th century cleric, Pierre was frothing at the mouth

Invective - Abusive or highly critical language

Muster - Gather (especially troops)

Indignation - Anger

Mecca - A city in Saudi Arabia, it's the birthplace of the prophet Muhammad and Islam's holiest city. Muslims often pray facing Mecca.

by the end of his odious diatribe, skinny finger pointing at Amir like he was revealing a witch in the village. I felt sick, but it had nothing to do with my stomach bug.

“Jesus,” I said, perhaps not appropriately given the religious nature of the exchange. I offered Amir a hand up and said, “Are you fucking kidding me, Pierre?”

“It’s OK, Siena,” Amir said. “You get people like this everywhere.”

“Well, you shouldn’t! I mean, I’ve read about guys like this on the news, but he’s right *here*. This is not OK!”

Everyone started talking at once.

“This is Israel, the *Jewish* homeland,” Pierre hocked a loogie, snot wobbling on the sand. “He’s probably a spy for Iran! He will be the death of us all!”

“Maybe I should get Matt...” Lorenzo hastened in his direction.

Amir stayed calm and tried to draw me away, too. “Siena, you’re a white American. Just because you’ve never experienced racism—”

But something told me not to take my eyes off the fanatical Frenchman. I resisted Amir’s efforts to draw me away, instead positioning myself between the two. Shrugging, Amir placed heavy hands on my shoulders.

I wished I made a better human shield, but since Amir’s entire head rose above my own, I couldn’t absorb the malevolent monologue in its entirety. Nevertheless, I started slowly stepping backward. As my back made contact with Amir’s perfectly-chiseled chest, his movements began mirroring my own.

Pierre advanced on us, pushing us away from the water. From the corner of my eye I saw Lorenzo and Matt jogging in our direction, coming up on our left. Ever the instructor, Matt

Odious - Hateful

Diatribe - A forceful verbal attack

Malevolent - Showing a wish to harm others

Monologue - A speech by one person

called out, "What's the problem here?"

That's when I knew my suspicions about Pierre were correct. He wasn't just a horrific racist; he was a fucking lunatic. Only a madman would continue with such vitriol in the face of Matt's tattooed knuckles and charming Australian accent.

"Don't pretend you haven't heard me," Pierre shouted back. "Why aren't you doing anything? He's a fifth columnist! If you won't protect us..."

Pierre withdrew a black switchblade from the pocket of his cargo shorts, flipping it open with a spin of the wrist. Lovingly polished with a black handle, the knife glinted in the sun. My mouth went dry. I forgot Amir was behind me and nearly knocked us both over in an instinctive scramble to distance myself from the weapon.

As I found my footing, Pierre's knife found my stomach. Opposite hand holding my shoulder, he calmly rested the tip approximately three inches above my belly button, poking the skin without breaking it.

"Collaborators," Pierre looked directly into my eyes, pushing the knife ever so gently closer to a vital organ, "are no different than the enemy they serve."

My vision tunneled, but I found that I was still able to think with perfect clarity. Our first lesson in knife fighting floated back to me. "The thing to know about knives," Matt said, "is that if someone has one, you're going to get cut."

Amir was still behind me. I suppose turning and running would've been the act of a coward, but he was actually more inconvenient where he was. I couldn't do the only Krav Maga defense I remembered, or the knife would go straight into his midsection.

Vitriol - Cruel and bitter criticism

Fifth Columnist - Traitor

Instinctive - Automatic; something done without thinking

Collaborators - Traitors; people on your side who work with the enemy

Before I could try a different defense or (more likely) get stabbed, Matt held up a hand and started reasoning with Pierre. In the tone one might use on a skittish horse, he repeated calming phrases. “Put the knife away, mate. You’re a good guy deep down. You can still walk away from this—”

That’s when Yonah materialized on my right. It belatedly occurred to me that Yonah and Matt had been working in tandem, the latter distracting Pierre so Yonah could swoop in.

In a move that was part-magic, part Krav Maga, Yonah deftly took control of Pierre’s knife-wielding arm and twisted it behind his back.

“Traitor!” Pierre tried to kick Yonah’s knee and wrench the blade back. “I’ll show you. I’ll show all of you! You’ll regret...”

Yonah snapped Pierre’s arm. I’m not sure which was worse—the sound of the bone cracking or the howl that escaped Pierre afterward. Snot, tears and sweat dampened his greasy face. He staggered to the side, clutching a pathetically twisted limb.

Matt and one of the older trainees, a level-headed Austrian, grabbed Pierre. Together, they escorted him away, taking him to the hospital or the police or who knows what.

Yonah turned his attention to Amir and me. By this point I was—*almost*—as afraid of him as Pierre.

He addressed Amir first. “On behalf of my country and my people, I am truly sorry. You should never have experienced that. I hope this doesn’t ruin your trip, or your perception of Israel.”

“I...Umm...No, it’s fine...Uh...” Amir stayed behind me. I didn’t blame him.

“And you, Siena. You handled yourself well.” Coming from

Skittish - Nervous

Belatedly - Later than it should have

In tandem - Together

Deftly - Quickly and skillfully

Perception - View, opinion

Yonah Hariri, the sentence was tantamount to a knighthood. Still trembling, I felt myself stand a little straighter.

“Needless to say, Pierre won’t be with us any longer,” Yonah scratched his beard. “Now everyone, back to your drills! Next, I’ll teach you how to strangle someone with their own shirt.”

Tantamount (to) - The equivalent of