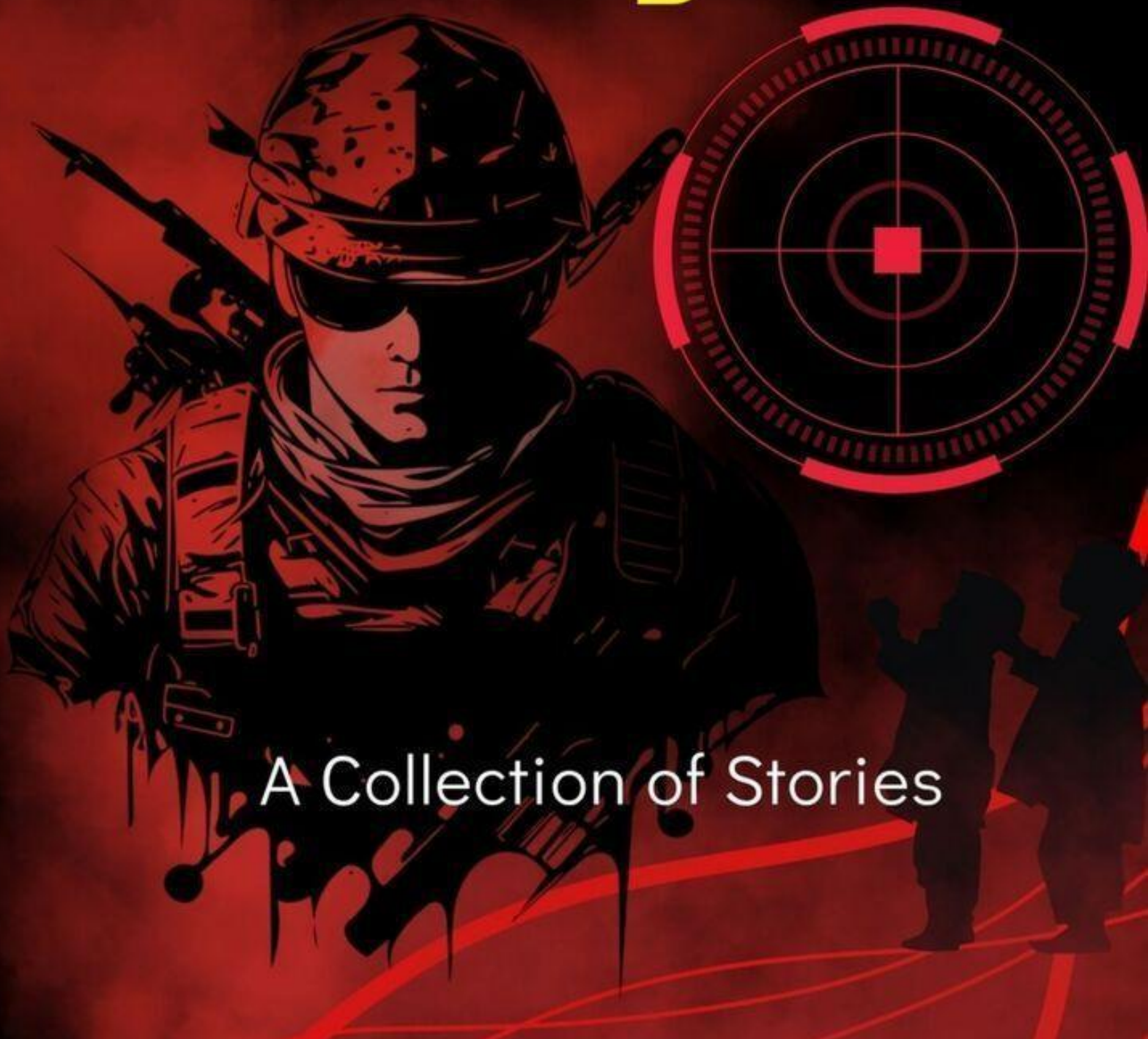




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M a m a j a n o v I k r o m j o n

Abstract Target



A Collection of Stories

Ikromjon Mamajanov

Abstract Target

«Издательские решения»

Mamajanov I.

Abstract Target / I. Mamajanov — «Издательские решения»,

In a lone desert house, a mother and her children fight daily for survival — unaware they're being watched. For 24 days, Marine sniper Taylor waits in ambush, torn between duty and the suffering he witnesses. When his target finally arrives, he must choose: report it and doom the family, or stay silent and fail his mission.

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Part I: “ABSTRACT TARGET” — Synopsis

In a remote corner of East Asia, the war has raged on for five years without end. Though the United States withdrew the bulk of its forces after the major offensives concluded, a small outpost still remains hidden in the mountains, a last foothold to keep from losing its grip on the region entirely.

From that outpost, Marine Corps reconnaissance sniper Taylor is sent to watch a single, isolated house standing alone in the desert. The reason is simple: intelligence suggests that the leader of a local insurgent group known as “Sun” will eventually arrive at that very house. Taylor’s orders are straightforward — stay hidden on the ridge, observe, and report back to base the moment the leader appears.

But as the days pass, the mission begins to mean something else to him entirely. What he sees through his scope is no longer just a future target. Down there, in the scorching sand and dust, a family is struggling to survive: Laylo, a mother who lost her husband to the war, and her two children — eight-year-old Atal, who is trying with all his might to become the man of the house, and his little sister, Lalmo. From time to time, an old family friend, Anzirat, comes to visit them as well.

For twenty-four days, Taylor watches every part of this family’s life unfold — the hunger, the thirst, the waiting, the small joys, and the devastating losses — seeing it all with his own eyes, unseen by them in return. Slowly, the isolation transforms him from a mere observer into something far more.

At last, on the twenty-fourth day, the expected visitor — the leader of the “Sun” movement — arrives at the house. And Taylor is faced with a choice unlike any he has ever known: follow his orders and call in the strike, or stay silent. Neither path comes without a price.

Abstract Target is the story of how a war fought from a distance reaches down and touches the lives of ordinary people — children most of all. It is also the story of one soldier caught between duty and conscience, and of where a single decision can ultimately lead him.

Part I: Abstract target

In this sun-drenched, desolate expanse of Far East Asia, framed by jagged mountains smelling of salt and dry dust, time moved like sluggish, muddy water.

Five years had elapsed since military operations commenced in this remote corner of the globe. Following the failure of the last major engagement, the United States had withdrawn the bulk of its forces from the region. Yet, to preserve a semblance of strategic oversight and mitigate the bloodshed between local armed militias and forces defending their homeland, a small, isolated outpost remained concealed deep within the mountains.

Scout Sniper Taylor of the United States Marine Corps lay motionlessly on a weathered concrete slab — roughly three by four meters — protruding from the sheer face of a cliff halfway up the mountain. This exposed ledge served as both his quarters and his observation post. Flanked by two neighboring peaks that stood slightly lower than his own, the expansive plain below and the narrow entrance to the gorge unfolded before him like the palm of a hand.

Suddenly, his eye caught a motion near the distant foothills to the right — a faint, almost imperceptible flick of movement. Slowly, Taylor shifted from his prone position, easing forward toward the outer brink of the slab, right at the edge of the precipice. Dropping onto one knee, he brought his rifle up and adjusted the glass of his optic scope to resolve the shadow.

Through the magnifying lenses, he spotted dry bushes swaying gently at the base of the mountain. The moment a target materialized, his index finger settled softly against the trigger, ready to neutralize the threat. Holding his breath, he scrutinized the tamarisks. Finally, a wild mountain goat bounded out from between the bushes and vanished into the rocks.

Exhaling softly, Taylor stood and retreated to his primary position against the rock wall where the slab met the mountain.

It was then that his gaze drifted to a corrugated steel drainage pipe nestled right beside the slab. Wide enough for a man to crawl into, the conduit plunged inward, slanting steeply down into the belly of the mountain for several hundred meters. The dark mouth of the pipe lay silent, looking like a secret passage into the earth, exhaling a damp, cool breath from the subterranean gloom.

Taylor stepped toward the edge once more, setting one foot firm and kneeling down to scan the valley through his binoculars. But the calm was short-lived.

Without warning, the terrifying roar of automatic gunfire thundered from the mountain slope to his right. Bullets cracked through the thin air, whistling past his ear before smashing violently into the rock wall behind him. Shards of stone exploded outward. Within a fraction of a second, Taylor hit the deck, staying low as he army-crawled backward from the edge.

Instantly, a hail of gunfire erupted from the opposite peaks on both flanks. Multiple armed insurgents had locked onto his position. Taylor's saving grace was that both enemy firing positions sat considerably lower than his concrete perch; most of the incoming rounds slammed harmlessly into the thick lower lip of the slab.

Pressing himself flush against the cold concrete, Taylor reached for his tactical radio and hailed the base. He delivered a concise sitrep and requested immediate reinforcement. The response over the comms was bleak: the nearest QRF was at least an hour out. Furthermore, to prevent the relief squad from riding into an ambush, Taylor was ordered to fix the enemy positions and transmit their coordinates.

Determined to ascertain their exact locations, he crept toward the edge and carefully raised his head. The rocks rang out again with deafening concussions. A bullet struck his helmet full-on. The force of the impact snapped his head back violently, but miraculously, the Kevlar held, sparing him from a fatal injury.

Taylor realized instantly that returning fire with his bolt-action sniper rifle from this angle was impossible; exposing his head again meant certain death. Conversely, the insurgents could not scale the sheer cliff face to close in on him due to the brutal terrain.

The small arms fire subsided momentarily, but a far greater threat loomed. At the foot of the mountain on his left — approximately five hundred meters out and lower down — two combatants emerged. They were setting up a mortar tube, aiming it straight at Taylor's ledge. Seconds later, the tube thumped ominously. The incoming shell whistled through the air and detonated against the cliff wall just short of the concrete slab. The shockwave shook the mountain, filling the air with dense dust and debris.

Taylor knew all too well that the first shot was merely a ranging round. The next shell would hit his platform with pinpoint precision, obliterating everything on it. For the first time in his career, an overwhelming sense of helplessness crept into his chest. The pounding of his heart echoed louder in his ears than the gunfire outside. Cold sweat stung his eyes, trickling down his face as though it would never stop.

Yet Taylor had not been selected for scout-sniper duty by accident. His defining trait, the quality that set him apart from every marine in his unit, was his ability to make split-second, life-saving decisions under intense mortal peril.

In an instant, he low-crawled toward the rear of the slab — straight toward the dark, hundred-meter drainage pipe sinking into the mountain. Seconds were everything now. Taking a calculated risk, he lifted his head just enough to glimpse the mortar team below. One of the insurgents was already aligning a second shell over the muzzle.

Time seemed to freeze for Taylor. Those critical seconds between life and death stretched into hours. He watched the insurgent drop the shell into the tube...

Taylor didn't hesitate. He threw himself headfirst into the pitch-black, bottomless metallic drainage pipe.

The damp, suffocating darkness swallowed him whole. Taylor plummeted downward into the chute. Above him, a deafening explosion rattled the metal walls of the pipe as the mortar shell struck the concrete slab he had just abandoned — the entire mountain shuddered. Fighting to slow his breakneck descent, Taylor pressed his arms, elbows, and entire body against the rusted iron walls. Even as his uniform tore and the jagged metal scraped his skin, he fought with everything he had for survival.

The vertical shaft ended abruptly, dropping him onto the bottom elbow. Though the impact shook his frame, it caused no major injury. Drawing ragged breaths, he caught his bearings. As his eyes adjusted to the gloom, he realized the pipe now ran horizontally for several hundred meters. At the far end, a faint speck of daylight flickered.

Wasting no time, Taylor crawled eagerly toward the light. Every movement inside the iron tube echoed hollowly, but the detonations and distant gunfire outside muffled his noise.

He halted roughly three meters before the pipe's exit. Stepping straight out would be suicidal. Pushing his rifle forward, Taylor used his optic scope to reconnoiter the daylight opening and the terrain beyond.

The lens brought into focus a sunlit slope covered in crushed stone and parched earth. Shifting his scope slightly, Taylor froze: standing on a small clearing just two hundred meters from the pipe's mouth were the same two insurgents. They were still gathered around the mortar tube, chuckling in satisfaction as they prepped another round, convinced they had turned the sniper's upper perch to dust. It never crossed their minds that their quarry had slipped down from above and was now lurking right beneath their feet.

Taylor's vision locked through the crosshairs. His finger squeezed the trigger with smooth, unyielding discipline. The bullet found its mark — one insurgent crumpled instantly into the dirt without so much as a twitch.

Hearing the crack of the rifle, the second insurgent lunged behind a nearby boulder in a panic. He immediately took up a defensive posture facing upward — toward Taylor's old concrete perch on the cliff. Completely oblivious to where the shot had actually originated, he believed the giant boulder offered him complete cover from the high ground.

As the insurgent prepared to return fire toward the cliffside, he had no idea Taylor was positioned almost directly on his right flank. Taylor seized the opportunity, targeting the insurgent's exposed side. Before the man could figure out the source of the lethal fire, Taylor's second bullet put a definitive end to his resistance.

A heavy silence settled over the mountain, replacing the fierce battle that had shaken the peaks moments before. Taylor remained inside the pipe's mouth, resting in the damp gloom of the conduit that had saved his life, allowing his breathing to steady as he listened to the wind howling through the rocks.

He didn't rush to step out into the open. Instead, he lay motionless in the shadow of the metallic barrel, keeping his rifle trained on the two corpses and the abandoned mortar.

His combat experience warned him that now was the time for patience, not celebration. The remaining insurgents behind the ridge would soon notice the loss of communication or grow suspicious of the sudden silence, coming down to inspect their fallen comrades. Of that, Taylor was certain.

Slowing his breathing to a calm rhythm, Taylor inhaled the damp iron air and waited patiently for his next targets to walk into the trap. Twenty minutes passed. He glanced briefly at his wrist watch — every second counted on the battlefield. Soon enough, his patience was rewarded. A silhouette armed with an assault rifle crept cautiously from the shadow of the rocks, approaching the clearing where the bodies lay.

Though his finger rested on the trigger, Taylor held his fire. He waited. He knew the force that had pinned him down earlier consisted of more than just two men. Though he hadn't visually counted them during the ambush, his instincts and ear for combat had already computed the tactical math.

Staring into the dark opening, he mentally reconstructed the cadence of the firefight — the acoustics, the impact frequency of incoming rounds, the distinct signatures of automatic weapons firing from different angles... Yes, there were at least five of them. Two were dead by the mortar; that meant at least three more were still operating nearby.

Taylor's calculations proved exact. Moments later, two more armed men stepped out from the rocks behind the first. They gathered over their fallen comrades, looking around in bewilderment, still expecting danger from the mountain high above. All three targets were now laid out plain in Taylor's scope.

The lead insurgent knelt, carefully examining the entrance wound on his comrade's forehead. A mix of rage and disbelief crossed his face as he moved to inspect the second body. Driven to analyze the threat, he lined up the bullet trajectories, pointing his index finger through the air to trace the angle of fire.

Slowly, his pointing finger rotated... until it aimed directly at the dark mouth of the drainage pipe where Taylor lay concealed.

A terrifying realization flashed in the insurgent's eyes, but it was already too late.

He barely caught the flash of muzzle fire emerging from the subterranean gloom before the deafening crack of the rifle cut through the air. The impact threw him backward instantly. The remaining two insurgents froze in terror, unable to comprehend what was happening. Their final, panicked gazes remained locked onto the abyss of the pipe as the darkness claimed them.

Chapter II

Nestled deep within the mountain range, this isolated U.S. outpost was designed primarily for intelligence gathering and analytical operations. It housed no large offensive strike forces; its military presence consisted solely of a small specialized unit tasked with perimeter defense. Inside the secure command rooms, watchstanders worked around the clock, illuminated by dozens of glowing monitors. Analysts spoke in hushed tones as they processed digital satellite telemetry, thermal imaging, and topographical maps. Behind every flickering dot and set of coordinates lurked a potential threat.

Inside the spacious office of the Chief of Staff, silence reigned. General Smith sat back in his leather chair before summoning his chief of tactical operations.

A moment later, a knock echoed at the door, and Captain Drop entered. His posture was military crisp, carrying a thick leather binder tucked under his arm containing top-secret files and operational details.

“Report, Captain,” General Smith said calmly, fixing his gaze on the officer.

“Sir,” Captain Drop began, unbinding the file on the desk, “activity among local insurgent groups and freedom movements in our sector has spiked dramatically. Currently, the greatest threat to both our base and regional stability is the armed militia known as ‘The Sun’. Unfortunately, tracking down their leader — known simply as ‘The Leader’ — has proven impossible so far. However, intelligence has identified five primary strategic locations he is likely to visit or occupy.”

“Have reconnaissance teams been deployed to those points?” the General asked, stepping up to an electronic wall map.

“Yes, sir. To four of them,” Captain Drop replied, pointing out four red markers on the digital display. “We are facing a severe manpower shortage for the fifth location. Every skilled sniper and seasoned scout in our roster is currently assigned to outer perimeter security. The situation is volatile, sir; we cannot pull a single operator from the defensive line.”

General Smith’s brows furrowed, his expression darkening. “Then what is your proposal, Captain?”

“I recommend assigning the new arrival to the fifth point, General. He meets all operational requirements.”

Captain Drop pulled a specific personnel file from the binder and handed it across the desk. General Smith opened it, his eyes settling on the photograph and the name typed beneath it: Sergeant Taylor Grey. Scout Sniper, United States Marine Corps...

“This man isn’t right for the job, Captain,” General Smith said flatly, without looking up from the file.

Surprised by the immediate rejection, Captain Drop stood straight. “Permission to speak freely, General? May I ask why?”

“Look at what’s listed under his personal interests,” General Smith said, tapping his finger against the bottom of the page. “He reads Leo Tolstoy’s ‘The Kingdom of God Is Within You’. That’s not just fiction, Captain. That is an ardent manifesto calling for total pacifism and the laying down of arms! His mind isn’t filled with battle tactics — it’s filled with humanism. He’ll hesitate at the first sign of contact; he’ll ponder sin before pulling the trigger. I don’t need a philosopher out there. I need an operator who executes orders without question.”

Captain Drop stood his ground. He flipped to the next page and slid it toward the General.

“Look at the next page, sir... That’s Taylor’s latest after-action report from yesterday. He was pinned down alone in a mountain ambush. Under extreme pressure, he utilized a drainage pipe to flank the enemy single-handedly, neutralizing five insurgents on his own. His philosophy didn’t stop his finger from squeezing the trigger. The man can be trusted.”

General Smith stared at the fresh report, the body count, and the tactical summary. An uncomfortable silence filled the room. Finally, he closed the binder and tossed it onto the desk.

“For your sake, I hope you’re right, Captain Drop,” General Smith said with a heavy sigh. “Very well. Place him at the fifth point. The responsibility rests entirely on your shoulders.”

With that, the General turned and strode briskly out of the room, signaling the discussion was over. Left alone, Captain Drop let out a long breath and tucked Taylor’s dossier back under his arm.

Captain Drop stood inside the darkened observation room behind the one-way mirror, his eyes fixed on the interrogation room across from him. Seated at a metallic table directly under a bright overhead light was Taylor. Though his face bore the physical toll of yesterday’s engagement — exhaustion and minor cuts — his demeanor was eerily calm.

On the other side of the table sat Dr. Miller, the base’s chief military psychologist, turning through Taylor’s file. Before sending Taylor back out on a high-stakes covert assignment after a bloody engagement that left five men dead, evaluating his mental stability was non-negotiable.

Dr. Miller looked over his rimless glasses, peering intently at the Marine. “How are you feeling, Taylor?” he began in a measured tone. “Any restlessness, nightmares, or recurring flashes of that drainage conduit since yesterday?”

Taylor kept his eyes fixed on a single spot, answering almost motionlessly, “No, sir. Everything is fine. Sleeping well, health is fine.”

The psychologist spun his pen between his fingers, skimming through the tactical notes. “According to the report, you calculated that there were five hostiles based purely on muzzle blasts and acoustics without seeing them first. And you eliminated all five from inside a single pipe. What was going through your mind at that moment, as you took those shots?”

Taylor paused briefly. Behind the glass, Captain Drop instinctively leaned closer to the mirror...

“Nothing was going through my head, Doctor,” Taylor replied calmly. “Inside that pipe, I was simply calculating balance. Five rounds, five targets. If I had hesitated, you’d be asking these questions to someone else.”

Dr. Miller nodded, seemingly satisfied with the answer, though his diagnostic routine was far from over. He flipped the page.

“Very well. Tell me then... what did you feel when that insurgent’s finger pointed straight at the mouth of the pipe where you were hiding? He had figured out the threat. You saw that terror in his eyes through your scope, didn’t you?”

Taylor’s gaze sharpened slightly. “I didn’t see his eyes, sir. I saw the crosshairs. He made his choice. I made mine. He was late. I wasn’t.”

Dr. Miller set his pen down, straightened his back, and looked directly into Taylor’s eyes. “What was your true objective when you threw yourself into that drainage pipe, Taylor?”

“To stay alive and improve my tactical position, sir,” Taylor answered curtly. Then, unexpectedly, he turned the question back on the doctor: “How did you interpret it?”

“To be honest, Taylor... jumping into an unmapped pipe under fire isn’t something most people would think of. And even if it crossed someone’s mind, very few would have the sheer audacity to execute it...”

Taylor offered the psychologist a subtle, knowing smile. Hidden behind his gentle grin was a faint touch of irony, as if he were looking at a man who could never truly comprehend the reality of survival.

Dr. Miller caught the subtle shift instantly. “Taylor, I think you understand exactly what I mean. But you evaded the question anyway.”

Chapter 3:

“That pipe may seem terrifying to you, sir,” Taylor said, his calm, mysterious smile remaining intact. “But to me, it was not.”

“That pipe was extremely dangerous for anyone — for any human being — at that moment!” the psychologist said, his voice rising slightly as he struggled to maintain his composure. “You could have perished inside that hole.”

“Mr. Miller, I have no intention of belittling you,” Taylor’s voice sounded unnaturally serene. “But from a professional standpoint, you were trained and educated solely to speak with people, to analyze them. We, on the other hand, are trained to fight. Fear is a foreign concept to us.”

The psychologist took the sniper’s words as a personal insult. Though a flash of anger flared in his veins, he suppressed it, striving to keep his mask of composure intact.

“Soldier!” the doctor said. “If you ask any rational, ordinary person about this situation, they would deem jumping into that dark pipe as nothing short of suicide.”

Taylor narrowed his eyes and fixed his gaze on the doctor. “Mr. Miller, my respect for you is boundless. But rational people in that situation would also tell you that out of sheer desperation, putting a bullet through their own head with their own weapon would have been much easier and far less painful. Yet I did not surrender.”

Doctor Miller fell silent. The psychologist was utterly checkmated. Standing behind the two-way mirror of the interrogation room, Captain Drop smiled aristocratically upon hearing Taylor’s words. All his lingering doubts had vanished completely.

At that moment, Captain Drop turned toward the general seated in the chair behind him with a triumphant expression, as if asking, “Well, how about that?”

“Sir! Did he pass the test?” the captain asked triumphantly.

The general rose heavily from his seat. “Yes... with a score of 105%. As I said before, that extra 5% of intelligence is precisely what we need. Prepare him for the operation.” With those words, the general walked toward the door and left the room.

Combat Operations Planning Room

A large stencil with bold yellow lettering on a red background was affixed to the door: “Restricted Access: Authorized Category-A Personnel Only.” The heavy doors of the classified operations room locked shut, severing all connection to the outside world. Only Captain Drop and Taylor remained inside. The bluish light from the massive interactive monitor on the central wall illuminated their faces.

Using the touch screen, the captain cycled through detailed satellite maps, thermal imagery, and three-dimensional terrain models. Taylor remained intensely focused, etching every detail into his memory.

Captain Drop zoomed in on a desolate, remote ruin nestled between mountain ranges on the monitor and pointed his baton at it. “Taylor. Your objective is to intercept the insurgent leader at Point Five. According to our intelligence, his arrival at this location is highly probable.”

The captain pulled up a low-resolution, slightly blurry photo in the corner of the screen, though the target’s face was clearly visible. The ambiguity in the insurgent leader’s eyes and the sharp contours of his face bore testament to his extremely dangerous nature.

“Study his photograph thoroughly,” Captain Drop warned, his tone darkening with gravity. “Memorize every feature. A minor mistake out there will prove costly and lead to unnecessary bloodshed in the region. Your objective is not to eliminate him, Taylor. The moment he arrives at this point, you must immediately calculate the coordinates and relay them to base. The assault team will handle the rest.”

Taylor nodded, his gaze fixed on the monitor. In the following seconds, he mentally deconstructed every facial feature of the target.

Point Five was a forgotten corner at the edge of the world. Upon arriving at the designated destination, Taylor established his position on an elevated ridge located exactly eight hundred meters from the courtyard.

From his vantage point, everything below stretched into an endless, desolate plain and vast golden desert. The stifling heat made the air shiver in waves, and occasional dust devils rose across the vast sands, temporarily clouding the view. In the middle of the desert stood a solitary dwelling, as if abandoned entirely to the wilderness: a modest cob house surrounded by a crude fence of haphazardly driven wooden stakes and rusted wire, containing no more than three rooms.

Through his sniper scope, Taylor began observing this lone homestead in the desert with meticulous care. Though the breath of the scorched sand brushed against his face, his eyes remained locked onto the reticle.

Taylor observed the deserted house for a long time. No living creature appeared nearby; only heat and silence reigned.

Finally, the door creaked open, and a little girl around five years old ran out holding a bowl. She approached the old well in the middle of the yard. Wrapping her small, fragile hands tightly around the heavy wooden handle of the windlass, she strained with all her strength to turn it, hauling up the water-filled bucket from the depths of the well.

Through his optic, Taylor observed her every move with absolute clarity. Just as she reached the final turn, her frail arms gave out from exhaustion. The heavy handle spun backward violently, and the water bucket crashed back down to the bottom of the well with a loud metallic rattle of its chain. The force of the sudden recoil knocked the little girl off her feet, leaving her sitting on the dusty ground.

Remaining on the ground, tears welled in her eyes as she called out for her mother. “Mom! Mom!” she cried softly.

“What happened, Lalmo?” her mother’s anxious voice came from inside the house.

“I couldn’t get water from the well! The bucket is too heavy!” the girl said, rising to her feet and peering mournfully down the dark shaft.

“Atal! A-tal!” the mother called, this time addressing her son.

Atal’s sleepy voice responded from within: “Yeah?”

“Look after your sister! Help her draw water from the well,” the mother commanded from inside.

“Okay,” Atal grumbled reluctantly.

Taylor heard their conversation with crystal clarity through a covert microphone previously concealed near the rim of the well, while tracking them through his scope. The children’s innocent voices echoed in his earpiece.

Moments later, an eight-year-old boy named Atal emerged from the doorway, his dark skin framed by messy, curly hair. Still half-asleep, he approached his sister and scolded her like an adult: “What are you doing, Lalmo?”

Atal cranked the handle of the well and hauled the heavy bucket to the surface. He poured water into her bowl and handed it to his sister.

The water gulped down Lalmo’s throat, splashing into her empty stomach with an audible slosh. Atal watched her in astonishment.

War had ruined everything, dragging famine behind it for ordinary people. The sloshing of water in Lalmo’s stomach was a quiet echo of those brutal wars.

Eight hundred meters away, lying on the scorching sand, Taylor heard this sound through his earpiece. For a military sniper accustomed to world-shaking explosions, the cold echo in these children’s bellies sounded more terrifying and heavier than the roar of any artillery shell.

Thus, Taylor’s duty day passed under this invisible acquaintance with the two small heroes before him. Throughout the day, no suspicious movement was detected.

Day 2

The sun had not yet risen above the horizon; dawn was mere moments away.

Taylor, having kept watch all night without blinking, had briefly drifted into sleep. Suddenly, a rustling noise and the creak of an old wooden door in his earpiece snapped him back to full alertness. Vigilant, he gripped his sniper rifle's stock and carefully scanned the courtyard.

In the gloom of the outer yard, a woman's silhouette appeared — she was carrying a tea kettle. Stepping softly, she approached the well and poured water into it. Then, dissolving back into the darkness, she re-entered the house.

A moment later, a faint light flickered behind the thin curtain of the window. The woman's clear shadow was cast against the fabric. For a few seconds, she stood motionless, her posture straight. Then she raised both palms to chest level, folding them together.

Behind his scope, Taylor understood everything. The woman was praying. In the desert silence, at the very epicenter of war, it was a profoundly peaceful and sacred sight.

Having finished her prayer, the woman came outside. She grabbed an old, frayed broom standing against the wall, sprinkled a little water from a bucket over the dusty ground, and began sweeping softly.

After cleaning the yard, she moved to the side of the house, where a couple of posts supporting a piece of slate formed a modest lean-to shed. She gathered a bundle of small twigs from the shed and walked over to a brick hearth. Stacking the wood inside, she placed an old copper kettle on top and kindled the fire.

Before long, the water in the copper kettle began to boil violently. Its lid rattled, and thick steam rising into the darkness became visible.

The woman went inside and returned with a small porcelain teapot. Wrapping a rag around the kettle's soot-blackened handle, she poured the boiling water into the teapot with a warm gush to brew the tea. Closing the lid, she placed it near the warm ashes at the edge of the hearth to let it steep.

Taylor heard every detail through his microphone, even the sound of boiling water pouring into the teapot. The horizon was gradually brightening.

Taylor opened his own field ration. Tearing the sturdy foil pouch at the designated notch, he poured a little water inside and mixed the meal. Once prepared, he began eating quietly, occasionally taking a sip of water through the rubber hose at his collar.

Down below, the woman by the hearth was starting her impoverished day with hot tea, while on the ridge, the sniper ate his dry ration, his eyes glued to the scope, continuing his watch.

Soon, as the woman sat on the raised wooden bench awaiting her children with brewed tea, her daughter approached, rubbing her eyes. "Mom, what are we going to eat today?" For a mother, this was the hardest question in the world. For days, she had been unable to give her children a proper meal. Their daily sustenance consisted mostly of bitter tea and whatever hard bread remained. By this morning, even that stale bread was gone.

Every other day, she milked their single thin goat for the children, but it was far from enough. Finding feed for even one goat in the middle of a vast desert was nearly impossible. Moreover, the poor woman feared depriving the little kid; she knew that if she milked all the goat's milk, the young kid would starve, so she could not bring herself to give all the milk to her own children.

Not knowing how to answer, the mother looked down at the ground. "Well, Lalmo, today is the day we milk our goat!" she said, offering comforting encouragement.

"Awesome!" the little girl exclaimed, her eyes sparkling with joy.

Lalmo immediately ran over to the little kid. Stroking its tiny head, she spoke to it in a surprisingly serious tone: "Don't worry! We'll save some milk for you too. You get to drink first, then us."

The woman walked over to the wire-mesh pen. The goat bleated in greeting, and the little kid snuggled against its mother. The woman threw a armful of dry, thorny bushes — which she and Atal had gathered from afar the previous day — behind the wire mesh into the pen. The hungry animal immediately began gnawing at the thorns.

Atal, still groggy, sat down on a brick near the hearth and silently watched his mother's movements.

"Atal," his mother said as she lifted the copper kettle off the hearth, "we need to go gather thorns again today. We're running out of feed."

"Let's go to the same place as last time."

"You're right, Atal. Where we went last time, there was plenty of brush. Do you remember the way?"

"Yeah, I remember, Mom!"

"In that case, I've brewed tea. Drink it, and then go harvest some feed by yourself!"

"Okay," Atal said softly, staring at the ground with heavy eyelids.

The boy's exhausted body did not want to make the long journey so early in the morning, but thinking of their situation and the hunger of their goat — their only hope — he could not disobey his mother.

"Just go to that exact spot. Don't wander off anywhere else and make me worry," his mother added, unable to hide her anxiety.

The sun climbed high into the sky, scorching the earth even more relentlessly than the day before. The desert air quickly turned dry and oppressive.

On the ridge, Taylor still lay motionless. Though a small bush above provided a sliver of shade, he was soaked in his own sweat beneath his uniform, feeling as though he were boiling in broth. Every breath scorched his lungs with intense heat.

Hours after leaving, Atal's figure finally appeared in the distance. Carrying a bundle of gathered brush tied in cloth over his shoulder, he stumbled forward with unsteady steps toward the house.

The mother, watching the path from the window, rushed outside the moment she spotted her son. She immediately relieved him of the heavy bundle, and together they carried it into the yard.

Exhausted, Atal lacked even the energy to go inside to rest. Dropping his load, he sat down on the brick by the hearth despite the blazing sun, catching his breath.

His mother picked up an aluminum bowl near the tandoor oven, rinsed it with water from the kettle, and walked toward the pen to milk the goat.

When she arrived, the little kid was nursing from its mother. The woman tried to shoo it away with a stick, but the kid easily ducked aside to the other side of the goat and continued nursing. Seeing this, she drove the kid entirely out of the pen behind the fence. As soon as it was out, she blocked the entrance with the hem of her dress to keep the mother goat from slipping out after it.

Left outside, the little kid bleated endlessly for its mother, pacing frantically back and forth around the pen. Sitting helplessly on the ground, Atal silently watched his mother's struggle and the kid's desperate movements.

The woman began milking the goat. The sound of milk striking the bottom of the aluminum bowl with a rhythmic sloshing drew the exhausted boy like a magnet. He listened with his entire soul — to him, there was no sweeter or more beautiful music in the world at that moment. Every drop sounded like a message of salvation to his dry throat and hollow, aching stomach.

The mother milked about a bowl's worth of milk. She set the bowl atop the well, covered it with a thin cloth, and went inside.

Atal stared intently at the gleaming aluminum bowl. To his eyes, it shimmered like a heavenly blessing, drawing him with irresistible force. Before he realized it, he was standing at the well, holding the bowl in his hands. His heart pounding with fear, he lifted the cloth. Inside was pure, frothy white milk... to him, it looked like a lifelong abundance.

Atal could not resist his hunger. He raised the bowl and began gulping down the milk frantically. He drank with such greed that white drops ran down his cheeks, washing through the dust on his face and dripping onto the dirt.

Just then, the house door creaked open. Atal lowered the bowl slightly. Spotting his mother standing on the threshold, a jolt of shock hit his brain. Realizing what he had done, his trembling hands placed the bowl back onto the well.

“Hey! Boy! What are you doing?!” his mother rushed toward him in panic.

She picked up the bowl and looked inside. Only a few small gulps remained at the bottom. Lalmo’s share of the milk was gone. The woman’s face darkened, her eyes flashing with fury as she grabbed a stick resting against the well.

“What have you done, you foolish child?!” she yelled, swinging the stick at Atal’s back and legs.

Stunned by fear and pain, Atal began running across the yard, weeping loudly.

“I’m sorry, Mom!” he sobbed, his voice choking with tears. Dodging his mother’s strikes, he managed to scramble over the half-ruined wooden fence surrounding the yard.

“Why did you do that?! That milk belonged to your sister too!” the mother cried. Her voice trembled as angry tears gave way to bitterness.

Atal stopped a short distance away. Wiping his tears with dirty hands, his face became a smudge of mud and tears. “But I was the one who brought the brush for the goat! I suffered so much in the desert... Are you really beating me this badly over a single bowl of milk?!” he wailed, his chest heaving.

“Oh really?! You’re boastful now because you fed the goat and gathered brush once?! You only went once!” The woman, lacking the strength to chase him further, sank weakly onto the brick by the hearth. She threw the stick toward Atal as tears streamed down her cheeks. “Ever since your father went off to war, I comforted myself thinking we had a man in the house, a pillar to rely on... But I was wrong. I raised a selfish boy who cares only about his own belly! Thank goodness I don’t have to depend on you!”

His mother’s words — especially the word “selfish” and the mention of his father — stung Atal deeper than any blow from the stick. Standing behind the wooden fence, he felt overwhelming remorse. “Don’t say that, Mom... Forgive me,” he whimpered, filled with regret.

“Don’t you dare step foot back in this house!” the woman snapped, standing up and slamming the door behind her as she went inside.

On the ridge, observing this scene, Taylor pulled out a small notebook from his pocket. He jotted down a brief note: “*Head of household — fighting with insurgent forces.*” To him, it was merely another piece of intelligence, a cold fact. Finishing the note, he stowed the pad away and resumed monitoring the yard through his scope.

Leaning against the wooden fence, Atal sat on the ground, weeping in silence. Several hours passed in this quiet manner. The boy occasionally walked around the perimeter, but shame and his mother’s words kept him from climbing back over the fence or entering the house.

As afternoon set in, Taylor set his weapon down, pulled out his radio, and contacted base. He relayed the intel that the head of the household was actively fighting alongside the insurgents. Ending the transmission, he reached for his sniper rifle again when his elbow accidentally brushed against his field ration box. The plastic container filled with dry rations tumbled down the steep slope of the ridge.

“Damn it!” Taylor cursed himself. But leaving his position to retrieve a single box of rations was too dangerous. Remembering he had additional reserves in his pack, he didn’t worry further.

He returned to his optic and carefully scanned the yard. Atal, who had been wandering aimlessly near the fence earlier, was nowhere to be seen. Taylor panned his scope back and forth searching for the boy, but found nothing. “*He probably moved to the other side of the house,*” he thought to himself.

He continued his watch, alternating between scanning the compound through the lens and lying silently with his thoughts in the baking heat. Time in the desert seemed frozen, moving at a agonizing crawl.

Through Taylor's earpiece, the quiet voices of Lalmo and her mother echoed from inside the house:

"Mom, I'm really hungry. Did you milk the goat?" Lalmo asked.

"Yes, my sweet girl. But there was very little."

"Why? Did the kid drink it all?" Lalmo asked innocently.

"Yes... the kid drank it."

"Well, that's okay then. At least it got to eat its fill today. That means it was meant for him," Lalmo said happily.

"I'll bring you the milk now," her mother replied.

Through his scope, Taylor saw the woman step outside. She walked over to the well and stared somberly at the couple of swallows of milk remaining at the bottom of the shiny bowl. She picked up the copper kettle used for boiling water, added water to the milk to stretch it out, poured the diluted milk into a bowl, and returned inside.

Moments later, their muffled conversation drifted through the receiver again:

"Here, sweetheart, drink this."

"What about big brother? Let brother drink first, he's older."

"Your brother already drank, honey," the mother reassured her.

"Mom, why is the milk so watery?" Lalmo asked, puzzled.

"That's just how it came out today, my sweet..."

More minutes, perhaps hours, slipped by. Yet Taylor still could not spot Atal in his scope. Suddenly, his eye caught a moving shadow directly below his position, halfway up the slope.

Without moving his rifle, Taylor shifted his body and peered down. To his absolute astonishment, Atal was searching for a path up the ridge. After a brief struggle, the young boy found a small trail and scrambled halfway up the steep slope.

Terrifying thoughts raced through Taylor's mind. *"Do I really have to kill this kid? No, no..."* Taylor whispered to himself, trying to soothe his mind as if the boy couldn't hear him anyway. He took a deep breath, fighting to control his surge of panic. Military duty was clashing fiercely with human emotion. Drawing his pistol from his tactical side pocket, he quietly threaded the suppressor onto the barrel. He stared at the cold steel weapon for a moment, then looked back down the slope.

The Mirage of Duty

Atal scrambled upward, clinging to every rock and bush. His presence threatened to compromise Taylor's concealed position. It seemed Taylor had no other choice — to preserve operational security, the boy had to be eliminated without a trace. He leveled his rifle, taking aim and preparing to squeeze the trigger, when the sound of tumbling stones echoed from below.

Taylor glanced down cautiously. Atal hadn't lost consciousness, but his footing had given way, causing him to slide down the steep slope. Fortunately, the decline wasn't too steep, and he escaped serious injury. Taylor lowered his weapon.

Below, sitting in the dirt, Atal shook his head in dazed confusion. The fall had scraped his elbow and knee, drawing blood. Grimacing with pain, he wiped the blood from his elbow with his sleeve. As he braced his hands against the ground to push himself up, his fingers brushed against something hard and unfamiliar. Wedged between the rocks was the MRE package Taylor had dropped earlier.

The boy stared at the box in wonder, examining the markings and the paper packaging printed with illustrations of delicious meals and fresh vegetables. He opened the box. Tearing open the foil pouch inside proved difficult, but straining with all his strength, he managed to rip it open. Out came ready-to-eat dry rations, just like the pictures.

Atal's eyes lit up with sheer joy at the discovery. Stomach twisting with hunger, he instantly moved to pop a piece into his mouth. But as his hand reached his lips, he froze. The image of his tearful mother at home and little Lalmo sipping diluted milk flashed in his mind.

He didn't eat a single bite. Clutching the box tightly against his chest, he turned on his heel and sprinted back toward his house with all the strength he had left. Up on the hill, Taylor re-holstered his sidearm and silently watched the boy disappear into the distance.

Atal burst through the courtyard gate, his footfalls heavy, but pulled up short right in front of the door. Catching his breath, he peeked cautiously through the crack in the door. Seeing no one at first, he called out softly:

"Mother..."

No one answered. He waited a moment, then raised his voice slightly:

"Mother!"

In truth, his mother was inside, lying beside her daughter and pretending to sleep. Though she heard her son's voice, her heart was still heavy with resentment, and she refused to answer.

Then came little Lalmo's quiet whisper from within:

"Brother, Mother fell asleep."

Still not daring to step inside, Atal peeked through the gap again and beckoned to his sister:

"Lalmo, come here! I found food," he whispered.

"No way! Really?" Lalmo's eyes sparkled with delight. She immediately began nudging her mother. "Mother, wake up! Brother is back — he found food!"

Seeing Lalmo leading their mother out, Atal dropped the ration box by the doorstep as a precaution and took a few steps back. Stepping onto the threshold, the woman picked up the strange box. She turned the opened food pouch over in her hands, examining it from all angles.

"Where did you get this?" she asked, her brow furrowed with suspicion.

"I found it up near the hills. It was just lying on the ground..." Atal stammered, intimidated by his mother's stern look and ready to bolt at any second.

As the woman inspected the foreign writing and shiny packaging, she instantly realized it belonged to the foreign soldiers patrolling the area. Sensing that this object brought nothing but trouble, she tossed the box to the ground.

"Take this back where you found it immediately!" she commanded.

"Why, Mother?" Fear and disappointment resurfaced in Atal's eyes.

“Why? Because it belongs to someone else! Put it back where you found it — if the owner comes looking for it, it will bring disaster upon our heads!” With that, she took her daughter by the hand, turned sharply, went back inside, and shut the door behind them.

Atal picked the ration box back up. He longed to take just a small bite, to share some with his sister. But his mother’s words bound his resolve. At the same time, reluctant to make the long trek back up the sun-drenched hill in the blistering heat, he decided on a different course.

He slipped into the woodshed at the edge of the courtyard. Locating a deep nook in the dark corner of the wall, he shoved the box deep inside and concealed it beneath a pile of old rags.

A harsh day, heavy with hunger and heartache, drew to a close as the scorching sun finally ceased its relentless burn over the helpless family and Taylor on the ridge.

Dawn was approaching.

In the murky morning light, Taylor gripped his weapon once more. Through his scope, he attentively observed the woman’s morning routine just as he had the day before. This time, she lit no fire in the hearth and brewed no tea — evidently, their meager supplies were entirely exhausted. Picking up a large, worn cloth and a small handmade mattock near the tandoor oven, she set off alone into the vast, arid expanse of the desert.

Walking slowly across the sandy terrain, the woman leaned down, carefully inspecting every thorn and dried shrub. Whenever she spotted a root that seemed edible or useful, she knelt down, dug into the soil with her mattock, and gently wrapped it in the cloth. For safety, she stayed within a reasonable distance from the house, but spent hours wandering the surrounding expanse in search of roots or plants to feed her children.

Meanwhile, activity stirred in the courtyard. Atal rubbed his eyes, woke up, and stepped outside. Still burdened by yesterday’s confrontation, his stomach ached with hunger. The boy wandered around the homestead, searching for his mother.

Standing behind the wooden fence, Atal gazed into the boundless desert. The dry air shimmered, and in the far distance, his mother’s tiny silhouette was barely visible. He recognized her movements: she moved tirelessly from place to place, kneeling to dig up whatever she could find and wrapping it in her cloth.

Atal could not run out to help her. His mother had strictly forbidden him and Lalmo from ever venturing into that specific part of the desert.

He could never understand why. Whenever they gathered firewood or forage for the goats, they always went somewhere entirely different — further away, where plant life was scarce — even though this section of the desert had an abundance of dry bushes and edible roots.

Resting his chin on the fence, Atal silently watched his mother’s grueling labor from afar.

Up on the ridge, Taylor lay watching both the solitary woman in the middle of the desert and Atal leaning against the courtyard fence. The desert wind blew grains of sand against Taylor’s face, but he continued recording every movement in his logbook.

Once the gathered roots filled the cloth, the woman brought the four corners together and tied them in a firm knot. Gathering all her strength, she grasped the bundle tightly and swung it over her shoulder with all her weight. The heavy sack settled against her lower back with a thud. Stumbling a step forward under the weight, she straightened up and began the long walk home.

As his mother approached the courtyard, Atal forgot yesterday’s grievances and ran to meet her. Grasping one corner of the bundle, he helped her carry it. It was remarkably heavy.

Upon reaching the courtyard, Atal eagerly untied the knot. Reaching inside, he pulled out an off-white, strangely shaped root and squinted at it.

“Mother, what are we going to do with this?” he asked, screwing up his face.

“We’re going to enjoy a meal, my son.” The woman wiped the bitter sweat from her forehead with her sleeve.

“Eat this?!” Atal was bewildered. The root pulled from the barren desert soil looked bizarre and completely unpalatable to his eyes.

“Yes, eat it. You can boil it, or just wash it and eat it raw if you like. It tastes just like a carrot,” she said, trying to whet her son’s appetite. In truth, the poor woman had no other choice and nothing else to give her children.

Holding the root with visible disgust, Atal uttered a dismissive “Pff...” and tossed it back into the bundle.

The woman placed the roots in a bowl and washed them thoroughly with well water. She then peeled away the outer skin piece by piece. Exposing the crisp, juicy white flesh, she rinsed the roots lightly once more before slicing them into round discs.

She called the children. Sitting together on the small, weathered wooden platform outside, the family gathered around this strange meal.

“Mother, what is this?” Lalmo asked, her eyes wide with curiosity.

“It’s a root that tastes like a carrot, sweetheart. You can eat it without worry. It’s very delicious!” the woman replied, forcing a reassuring smile.

Lalmo picked up a crisp disc of root and popped it into her mouth without hesitation. Sitting opposite her, Atal watched with an open mouth, a mix of astonishment and mild disgust as his sister chewed.

“Mmm... It really is good! I guess I was just really hungry...” Lalmo said happily. But the slip of her tongue about being hungry made her bite her lip instantly. Looking at her mother, she lowered her eyes in embarrassment. Young as she was, Lalmo possessed a deep sensitivity and understood the family’s dire circumstances; she dreaded causing her mother pain.

Watching the scene through his scope, Taylor felt an involuntary pang of hunger. He pulled another MRE box from his pack. Tearing open the pouch, he began crunching on the dry rations as they were, without even taking time to rehydrate them with water. Every now and then, he took a sip of water through the thin hose running from the hydration bladder on his back to his collar.

As the woman and Lalmo ate the roots with satisfying crunches, the mother noticed Atal hadn’t taken a single bite.

“Aren’t you going to eat, Atal?” his mother asked gently.

“It looks like goat food...”

“If you don’t eat, you’ll fall ill. Here, take a bite,” she said, bringing a piece close to his mouth.

Reluctantly, Atal pouted and took a small bite. He chewed... Suddenly, his eyes lit up. Unappealing as it looked, the root was surprisingly sweet and flavorful. His famished stomach welcomed the nourishment eagerly. Reaching into the bowl himself, Atal took a larger piece and began chewing contentedly.

A sense of relief and quiet tranquility washed over the mother’s face. Seeing her children fed was her greatest reward.

For days, Taylor had been stationed on this dry, scorching ridge, doing little more than observing a simple family. There was no sign of the insurgent fighters, weapons caches, or suspicious activities he had been sent to find. He had gathered virtually no actionable intelligence. A strange emptiness began to take root inside him: he felt like an accidental bystander, a spectator who had arrived in the wrong place entirely.

The aimless surveillance and oppressive desert heat drained him physically and mentally. He rested his sniper rifle gently on the dusty ground.

Leaning his heavy helmet against the dry earth, he lay face down and closed his eyes. He sought a moment of rest, attempting to shut out the relentless military orders in his head and the heavy thoughts of the impoverished family below. Around him, nothing could be heard except the low whistle of the desert wind and the rhythm of his own breathing.

Suddenly, the radio crackled sharply with static. A cold voice from the speaker shattered the silence:

“Point 5, do you copy?” the base operator radioed.

Taylor forced his dust-crusting eyelids open, bleary-eyed and disoriented. Groping across the sand with one hand while keeping his eyes half-shut, he found the receiver:

“Point 5 copies,” he answered hastily, keeping his voice low.

“Satellite imagery indicates an unidentified contact approaching Point 5 from the northwest. Large footprint — possible infantry squad. Verify and report immediately,” the operator instructed in a stern, rigid tone.

“Copy that.”

Setting the radio down, he snatched his sniper rifle. Adjusting his helmet, he swung the scope toward the specified direction and scanned the horizon. Thermal haze shimmered over the desert floor, distorting the image. Although the satellite had detected movement from above, it couldn’t provide a clear visual. Taylor slipped his finger near the trigger, concentrating all his focus on the blurry figure moving through his optic.

Through the lens, he saw a young shepherd boy mounted on a snow-white camel, driving a herd of nearly forty sheep. He picked up the receiver:

“Base, this is Point 5. Target identified. One shepherd boy driving a flock of roughly forty sheep toward the homestead at Point 5.”

“Solid copy, Point 5. If the boy exchanges any intelligence with the family, report immediately,” the operator replied.

“Understood.”

Taylor switched off the radio. Then, with genuine fascination, he began watching the shepherd boy’s movements — and especially his pristine white camel — through his rifle scope.

The boy drove the flock slowly past the homestead. A couple of sheep broke away from the herd and strayed to the side. The boy blew a short whistle to his massive, formidable dog. The hound understood instantly, sprinting alongside the stray sheep and barking to drive them back into the fold.

Hearing the noise outside, Atal dashed out of the house. From behind the wooden fence, he watched the shepherd boy, his sheep, and especially the magnificent dog in utter awe. Atal looked at the shepherd boy with deep envy: the boy could go anywhere he pleased, as if he alone held the freedom to roam the entire world.

Just then, Atal felt something soft brush against his ankles. Looking down, he startled at the sight of a strange golden shadow and took a step back. A moment later, he realized it was a small puppy that had fallen behind the herd.

Standing behind the fence, Atal longed to play with the adorable pup. He blew short whistles, calling it closer. The puppy frisked about playfully, as if signaling to Atal, “Come out and play!”

Atal sat on the ground and reached through the gap in the fence to stroke the puppy. As he scratched behind its ears, the puppy froze in delight, instinctively leaning into his palm.

Moments later, the mother dog’s sharp bark echoed from the distant herd. The puppy scampered off in a hurry. Atal remained behind the fence, his hand still outstretched, watching the gentle creature disappear into the distance.

To Taylor, these events seemed insignificant. A shepherd boy, some sheep, a puppy, a white camel... None of it had any bearing on the mission, so he saw no reason to report it to base. He simply lay back, gazing at the sky. Near midday, the dry bushes on the ridge offered a sliver of shade from the harsh sun. Taylor watched the bush leaves fluttering in the gentle breeze. The rhythmic swaying had a soothing, almost lulling effect.

When even this dull distraction grew tiring, he picked up his rifle again and spent hours silently monitoring the courtyard and its surroundings. Feeling his throat parched, he raised the thin hydration

tube to his lips and took a deep pull. But nothing came from the bladder inside his vest except air and a hollow gurgle — his water was out.

Unbuttoning his outer vest, he pulled out the empty reservoir. Taking a larger reserve canteen from his pack, he unscrewed the cap and began pouring water into the bladder with a soft splash.

At that exact moment, a figure suddenly materialized from behind the massive boulder behind him!

Taylor's heart leaped into his throat. Almost dropping the canteen, he lunged frantically for the rifle resting on the ground.

"Don't move!" a familiar voice commanded from behind.

Before his hand could reach the rifle, Taylor froze and turned his gaze toward the figure pointing a pistol at him. To his utter shock, the person holding the gun... was Atal! Yes, the young boy!

He glared at Taylor, repeating with childhood bravado and fierce determination:

"Don't move!"

Taylor stood paralyzed for a second, unsure how to react. Moving quickly to disarm the boy was out of the question — the distance was three to four meters. As a precaution, he mentally prepared to draw the sidearm holstered on his hip. But from his military experience, Taylor knew one thing all too well: never trust a child with a gun! A single wrong or sudden move, and the panicked boy might pull the trigger.

"My father taught me how to shoot!" Atal threatened, his hands trembling slightly, though the barrel remained trained squarely on Taylor.

Realizing the gravity of the situation, Taylor nodded slowly. To calm the boy and signal total surrender, he raised both hands slowly to shoulder height, then lowered them deliberately while watching the boy's every movement.

"Why are you watching us?" Atal demanded.

"How long have you known?"

"A week. Am I right?" Atal muttered.

"That's right. You're sharp," Taylor said, inwardly admiring the boy's vigilance.

"You didn't answer my question! Why did you come to our land?!" Atal demanded, his brow furrowed, refusing to break eye contact for even a second.

"To protect children like you... and your mothers. To help you," Taylor answered, though a heavy pang of guilt gnawed at his conscience.

"To protect us? From who?"

Taylor hesitated for a moment before answering:

"To protect you from the insurgent militants."

"They aren't insurgents! They are Freedom Fighters!" Atal raised his voice fiercely.

Taylor was taken aback by the sudden surge of deep pride on the boy's young face. Trying to correct him, Taylor said:

"That's what they taught you to believe. They aren't on the right path. They took up arms, shot civilians, set off bombs, and destroyed whole towns."

"Those people you talk about are a rogue group! My father fights against them too!"

"Your father is a fighter?"

"Yes... But my father considered you Americans to be enemies too! Because you invaded our country!" Atal gripped the pistol tighter with both hands.

Taylor's mind raced. The weapon in the boy's hands could go off at any second.

"Hey, take it easy! Like I said, we have no ill intentions. We came here simply to bring peace to your land. We want to help," Taylor urged, moving his hands slowly.

"We didn't ask for your help! Besides, your people killed everyone too! My father told me. You killed many of my father's comrades!"

“Your name is Atal, right? How can I explain this to you... When we entered this country to establish peace, they might have opened fire on us first. Our men only shot back to defend themselves,” Taylor tried to reason.

“You shouldn’t have come in the first place!” Atal spat, every word laced with venom. Filled with hatred, he switched off the pistol’s safety catch.

The sharp metallic click echoed unnaturally loud in Taylor’s ears. A cold sweat broke out across his body. The situation had turned lethal...

Then Taylor’s eyes caught sight of Atal’s left leg — from his thigh down to his ankle, it was soaked in thick blood.

“What happened to your leg?!” he gasped in horror.

“This happened because of you!”

Taylor’s eyes widened in terror. In that split second, a flash of fire erupted from the barrel of Atal’s pistol, and a deafening roar thundered across the desert... These were the final seconds witnessed by Taylor’s eyes and ears.

Taylor bolted upright with a bloodcurdling scream.

Around him was a blanket of deep twilight blue. It had all been a terrible nightmare... Sleep had overtaken him while he was lying on his back, watching the leaves flicker in the breeze. Sweat poured down Taylor’s face and forehead; his chest heaved rapidly as he gasped for air. No matter how deeply he inhaled, his lungs felt starved of oxygen.

He hurriedly put on his earpiece, grabbed his rifle, and peer through the scope down at the house.

Everything was bathed in absolute silence. In one room of the house, the flickering light of a kerosene lamp gleamed behind a curtain. Moments later, the woman’s silhouette appeared against the curtain — she blew into the lamp, extinguishing the flame. No other movement followed.

Enveloped in darkness and the howling of the dry desert wind, Taylor was left utterly and completely alone once more. This nightmare was merely the first echo of the remorse that had already taken root deep within his soul.

The Shadow of the Past

At the bottom of his rucksack, Taylor pulled out his very last MRE ration. His food and water reserves would barely stretch to cover two days. A few days ago, he had radioed the base to report the shortage, but the operator informed him that resupplying the area on the ground was virtually impossible — the supply roads had fallen entirely under insurgent control. The only ray of hope was an aerial drop via drone, but even that remained uncertain. Beyond the pressing issue of logistics, abandoning his post to return to base presented a fatal risk in itself.

Down in the courtyard below, the family’s situation was far dire than Taylor’s. Starvation was slowly eroding their strength day by day. This morning, the woman could not even manage her usual household chores, performing her prayers with what little strength she had left. As the hours slipped by, the desert sun began to scorch the arid earth with increasing intensity.

His lips cracked and parched from thirst, Atal turned to his mother in the courtyard.

“Mother, what are we going to do now?”

The woman understood all too well what her son was asking.

“I don’t know, my son... God will provide our sustenance,” she replied softly.

“What if we go back to the city?” Atal asked, taking a seat beside his mother on the wooden platform.

“To the city?... It lies in ruins now. There might be food there, but there is no peace, no quiet sleep, Atal,” the woman said, taking a tiny sip of water from the bowl in her hands.

“Still, the important thing is that there’s food! People will help us, and our relatives are there too...”

“Atal! There is a war raging there right now. War means people... each other...” She broke off, choosing not to finish the sentence. She refused to let such cruelty and brutality become familiar concepts to her young son.

After a brief silence, Atal set off to find forage for the goat. Hours later, he returned carrying a much smaller bundle of wild green herbs over his shoulder. He set the bundle down in a shaded spot near the pen. Just then, a faint, rhythmic whimpering caught his attention.

Atal searched every corner of the courtyard. Squinting beneath the elevated wooden platform, he discovered the shepherd boy’s tiny puppy from a few days prior! Atal’s eyes sparkled with joy. Reaching out his hand, he whistled softly to coax the pup forward. But the frightened puppy pressed itself further against the mud wall under the platform. Atal could have crawled under to pull it out by force, but he refused to use aggression.

“I need to give him something,” he muttered to himself.

Suddenly, a brilliant idea struck him! Atal immediately darted into the woodshed, reaching into the hidden nook where he had stashed the military MRE ration. Uncapping the container, he pulled out the paper food pouch and tore it open in a single hasty motion. In his rush, several dry food pellets spilled onto the dirt. Fearing his mother might discover he hadn’t returned the package as instructed, he quickly gathered the fallen grains into his palm. He tucked the ration box back into the nook, concealing it beneath the old rags once more.

Clutching the dry food pellets in his hand, he hurried back to the platform where the puppy cowered. Bending down, he tossed a couple of pellets toward the pup. At first, the puppy ignored the food. Driven by hunger, it eventually crept closer and sniffed the pellets, its eyes never leaving Atal. Smelling the rich food, the puppy lapped up the pellets, crunching on the dry rations contentedly.

Seemingly enjoying the treat, the puppy perked its ears and stared at Atal with hopeful eyes, as if asking, “*Are you going to drop any more?*” Understanding the gesture, Atal tossed two more pellets — this time a little closer to himself. The puppy hesitated, then stepped forward and ate those as well. Atal’s hand could not reach the pup yet, but the distance between them was steadily closing.

Once again, those perked ears and pleading eyes fixed on the boy... Atal tossed two more pellets much closer to his knees. Remaining crouched under the platform, the puppy stretched its neck to gauge the distance. It realized that reaching the food meant stepping closer to the boy.

Up on the ridge, Taylor watched through his binoculars in silence as Atal fed his own stashed military rations to the little pup, gently building trust between them.

Reluctantly, the puppy stepped closer, narrowing the gap even further. Though it couldn’t reach all the pellets at once, it stretched its neck, savoring the scent of the food. It tilted its head up at Atal, letting out a soft whimper as if asking, “*Are you tricking me?*” Hunger, however, won over fear. Taking a leap of faith, the puppy stepped out, crunching down the remaining pellets. Although Atal had the chance to grab the puppy, he refrained, careful not to startle it. Wagging its tail slightly, the pup began to relax. Atal poured the rest of the pellets directly beneath his feet. The puppy trotted over, crunching happily on the food. Their reacquaintance was going smoothly.

Observing through his optic as his final reserve of military rations was devoured by a puppy beneath the platform, Taylor pursed his lips in quiet amusement.

Just then, Atal’s mother emerged from the house.

“What are you doing?” she asked, looking down at her son.

Atal pointed to the puppy at his feet; luckily, it had already polished off every last pellet.

The woman let out a soft sigh. “So you’ve finally made a friend...” Walking over to the well, she lowered the bucket, turned the wooden winch, and began hauling up fresh water.

In those very seconds, Taylor spotted a dark SUV kicking up a massive cloud of dust as it sped toward the homestead from across the desert expanse. He immediately raised his radio.

“Base, Base! This is Point 5, I have an update!”

“Base receives you. Point 5, report status,” the operator responded.

“An unidentified SUV is approaching Point 5 at high speed. Possible insurgent vehicle.”

“Identify vehicle occupants. Stand by on this frequency and provide continuous updates.”

The heavy SUV pulled up right outside the courtyard wall, grinding to a halt in a swirl of dust. Four armed insurgents clad in tactical gear dismounted hastily from the vehicle.

At the sight of the armed men, the mother instinctively shielded her son behind her back. One of the insurgents approached with aggressive posture, questioning her sharply.

“Where is your husband?!”

“I don’t know... He left with you!” the woman stammered in fear, covering her face with her veil.

One insurgent brushed past her and barged into the house, while another began inspecting the perimeter of the courtyard.

“You’re lying! There’s been no word from your husband for a week. He deserted his post,” the interrogating insurgent barked.

Meanwhile, the insurgent who had entered the house dragged little Lalmo outside by her arm. Seeing this, the woman rushed forward, snatched her daughter from the man’s grip, and pulled her behind her alongside Atal.

Taylor reported the situation over the radio.

“Is the commander among them?” the operator inquired.

Taylor quickly scanned each insurgent through his sniper scope.

“Negative. He is not present.”

“Hold fire. Maintain surveillance from your position. They may simply be clearing the sector,” the operator instructed cold-bloodedly.

Taylor continued monitoring the confrontation below.

“I told you, I don’t know! He hasn’t been here for a month!” the woman wept, tears streaming down her face.

“You’d better start speaking the truth, or your children will suffer the consequences,” the insurgent threatened. His partner reached behind the mother, grabbed Atal by the arm, and forced him onto his knees. Terrified, the boy trembled, his wide eyes darting anxiously between the armed men.

“No!” the woman shrieked, throwing her arms around both her children as she crouched beside them.

“Your husband went into battle against the Americans. Did he betray us and join their ranks?” the insurgent demanded.

“He would never do that! He is not a dishonorable man! He was only fighting for his family...” The woman buried her face in her veil, weeping bitterly on the ground.

“That is not how we see it.”

“You are persecuting your comrade’s family! Have you no fear of God?!”

The insurgent handed his rifle to his comrade, drew a sidearm from his waist, and aimed it directly at Atal’s forehead.

“You have three seconds. Tell me where your husband is, or one by one... One...”

“Shoot me instead! What fault is it of the child?! Please...” the woman sobbed, as the man continued his count.

When the count reached “three,” the mother threw her body over her son, shielding him from the barrel of the gun. She squeezed her eyes shut, bracing for the gunshot and the cold embrace of death.

Up on the ridge, Taylor’s finger rested firmly on the trigger, his scope reticle locked squarely on the head of the insurgent aiming at the mother and child. His heart hammered violently against his ribs...

At that precise moment, the radio on the insurgent's belt squawked loudly with static. Stopping the count, he stepped aside to answer the call. Moments later, he turned back, hanging his head in quiet resignation. He walked slowly back toward the family.

He gestured to his men with a wave of his hand, signaling them to stand down. The insurgents lowered their weapons.

Looking down at the mother, the insurgent spoke in a flat, somber voice:

“Your husband gave up his soul honorably on Mount Imbir.”

The woman's eyes widened in horror, fixed on the man's lips. Her mind struggled to process the devastating news.

The insurgents climbed back into their vehicle and sped away, leaving behind a trail of dust.

Left behind in the dirt, the woman pulled her two children tight against her chest. Heartbroken and weeping bitterly for herself and her now fatherless children, she surrendered to the overwhelming weight of grief...

The day turned to mourning. The silence in the house was no longer mere stillness; it had transformed into a profound requiem.

Day 16. Night

The famine gripping the household reached a critical threshold. There was virtually nothing left to eat — only water and the dried stalks and roots gathered near the well.

Weakened by hunger, the woman emerged from the house. Her slow, deliberate steps brought her to the edge of the well. Leaning over, she peered into its dark depths. The full moon reflected upon the dark water, its silver light rippling across the nocturnal waves. Closing her eyes, she opened her hands in prayer.

“O God... I never doubt Your providence. If You have granted me the breath to pray, then hope remains. Ease our family’s burden, and grant abundance to our daily bread...” she whispered softly.

Wiping her hands over her face in blessing, she quietly slipped back inside. Shortly after, the dim glow of the kerosene lamp went out.

Up on the ridge, watching her desperate prayer through his night-vision optic, Taylor realized with a heavy heart that there was no way out for them. In the middle of this vast desert, the family was slowly fading away.

Day 17. Midday

Taylor's own supplies were nearly exhausted. For several days, he too had been surviving on severely reduced rations and small sips of water. Both the harsh military conditions and his own choices had brought him to this point. Below, in the courtyard, Atal secretly retrieved another handful of dry food pellets from the MRE hidden in the woodshed nook. Playing a game with the puppy without revealing his source, he tossed the pellets across the yard, watching the pup crunch on them happily.

Suddenly, the radio at Taylor's collar crackled back to life.

"Point 5, Point 5! A large contact is approaching the homestead. Possible enemy infantry unit. Image quality is degraded. Confirm contact!" the operator ordered.

"Copy."

Taylor adjusted his sniper optic toward the designated vector, bringing the image into sharp focus.

"Base, contact identified. It is a shepherd boy driving his flock of sheep," he reported.

"Report any suspicious activity," the operator replied before cutting the link.

Riding atop a pristine white camel, the young shepherd drove his herd near the homestead. His massive shepherd dog barked loudly, keeping the scattering flock in neat order.

Drawn by the dog's formidable barks, Atal and his mother stepped outside. Sitting near the wooden fence, the tiny puppy began running back and forth in excitement, delighted to spot its mother in the distance. Bound by the fence, however, it couldn't cross. The mother dog trotted up to the fence, pressing her nose through the gaps to lick and scent her pup.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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