

Prologue

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Nurhan stumbled over a crop of small, scrubby brush. The weight in his pack threw him off balance, but he managed to regain his footing. His eyes quickly scanned the ground for more hazards, but the moonless night sky made finding them impossible. Cold wind screamed around his ears and chapped his face. He winced as his heart raced inside of his chest, beating faster than it had in ages.

Slowing his pace, he ducked behind a row of tall, wind-sculpted rocks. Carefully, he pulled off his large hiking pack and with both hands he gently laid it down on the dusty ground next to the natural wall.

The mass of his load was twenty-three kilograms. An easier burden to bear than it would have been on Earth, but after two hours of running, a heavy load nonetheless.

Nurhan fumbled shaky hands under the collar of his thick jacket. He pulled out a water hose and shoved it underneath his breather mask and into his mouth. The man drank greedily in short, harried spurts between breaths.

Pulling up his sleeve, Nurhan checked the display on the com strapped to his inner wrist. Wind sent specks of sand onto the screen of the device and the lenses of his goggles, he continuously wiped them clean. It wouldn't be long now - maybe five minutes at most - until the last member of the fire team was on top of him.

The first two had attacked him in tandem. Special operations fire teams like theirs were trained for exactly this kind of trace and kill scenario. Nurhan knew all too well what they were trained and prepared to do. Killing them had been more than difficult; it had set him against men

that he had once fought alongside with. He had always been one of their best, among the most loyal and competent.

The most loyal thief, Nurhan thought bitterly. The most competent murderer...

Exhaustion pulled his consciousness from reality, taking him to a dreamy, faraway place. Nurhan gave his head a vigorous shake and slapped himself on the cheek. He had no time for laziness when a threat remained so close behind him. For all his running the soldier following Nurhan hadn't relented in his chase.

Nurhan drained the last of his water. He secured the hose beneath his jacket collar and his eyes began to flutter shut. He needed to push himself to go farther, but his body wanted only to shut down and rest. The time for rest, however, had passed. Nurhan pushed back his shoulders and arched his spine to get a quick stretch before the upcoming fight.

A jab of pressure and stinging pain erupted on the deltoid of his right arm. Nurhan let out a stunned cry that quickly faded into the thin, windy air. His eyes shot to his injury. A small knife jutted from the source of his pain, blood leaking out from near the handle. Nurhan spun his body around, breaking his attacker's grip on the knife. But he was too slow to avoid the man's boot connecting with his chest.

Hitting the ground, Nurhan felt the knife drive deeper into his arm. His attacker charged, bringing a solid kick downward, heel first toward the injured man. Nurhan rolled quickly, feeling the blade push even deeper into muscle before he deftly regained his footing. Red dust kicked up into the wind, the soldier twisted around to face Nurhan once more.

They stalked each other in a circle like trained predators, looking for any opening, any sign of weakness to attack. His shoulder throbbed and burned, but Nurhan knew that as soon as

he pulled the knife from its meaty sheath the ensuing blood flow would need to be stopped immediately. He didn't have time for first aid.

From behind the soldier's goggles, Nurhan saw the man's eyes twitch in the direction of the large hiking pack. It remained untouched at the foot of the rock wall, shielded from the wind and sand.

Nurhan found his opening. He leapt into the air, neatly spinning around once, his right leg extended into a flying kick. Instinctively, the man's hands grabbed at Nurhan's foot before it could make contact. With Nurhan's entire body still airborne, the soldier twisted the captured boot, flipping Nurhan over and forcing him back to the ground. Nurhan's chest smacked the rocky soil with a thud, his head impacting hard enough to blur his vision for a split-second.

Momentarily pinned by his own exhaustion and injuries, Nurhan didn't know if he experienced the freeze because he couldn't physically move, or because he simply didn't have the will.

The boots in Nurhan's field of vision rotated as the soldier pivoted on the balls of his feet. One leg lifted into the air, presumably to come down on Nurhan's exposed skull. Nurhan's eyes went once more to the pack, to the reason he went on the run. Fighting those he once called friends.

Sparks ignited in the pit of his stomach, burning him from the inside. Nurhan clapped the hand of his uninjured arm against the red soil. Pushing with all his strength he flipped himself over, out of the way of the incoming boot.

The stomp landed less than three centimeters from his ear, sending dust flying into his face. Nurhan grit his teeth as he reached around his chest and wrapped his fingers around the handle of the small knife.

His attacker grunted and raised his boot again for another stomp. Nurhan cried out in pain as he wrenched the knife from his arm, tearing the wound wide open. In one smooth motion he drove the blade into the heel of the soldier's boot, severing the Achilles tendon cleanly in two.

Off balance and yelping in pain-stricken surprise, the soldier fell downward. Nurhan tore the knife from the boot and stabbed upwards at the falling body, into the base of the assailant's skull. A dull groan sounded from the man as the blade found its new home. Nurhan let the convulsing body roll off of his extended arm naturally, coming to rest on the rusty ground beside him. The soldier's blood leaked over the dust and rocks, blending into its surroundings.

Nurhan slowly got back to his feet. Clutching at his freshly opened wound he jogged to his pack. He jerked open the front pocket, pulled out a first aid kit and went to work. The last member of the fire team may be down, but there would be more, he had no doubt. They would never stop, not as long as he had what was theirs.

What they claimed to be theirs.

Nurhan took in an unsteady breath. He would have let his superiors have what he had stolen for them. He would have, if the possibility of making him destroy the content of the pack had never been brought up. An inexcusable action, even for them. He may have been honor bound to obey, but what was honor among thieves?

Finishing his hasty gluing and bandaging, Nurhan replaced the kit. Before donning his burden once more, he had to make sure that his precious cargo remained undamaged. A small opening had already been made in the zipper of the bag's largest pocket. He carefully pulled it open the rest of the way.

From behind his goggles, Nurhan's eyes softened as he went about checking his cargo. His hand paused, resting on the most precious article of his stolen payload. As exhausted as he

felt physically from a day of running, his emotional reserves had been left just as barren from a lifetime of fighting.

His experience had taught him time and again that nothing in this life was sacred, but he couldn't let himself believe that was true anymore. He wouldn't. Even if he had to give his life to prove it.