

The Mirage

Five years since my boots last sank into Afghan dust. I was always the guy with the loud laugh and a light heart, that is, until someone tried to split my skull like a melon. Now, my heart pumps through veins clogged with sand and diesel fumes, like every day is a countdown I forgot to start.

They say I killed 200 people. A lie. The number is higher, but I stopped counting after I could no longer tell if it was blood or just paint staining my hands. The rifle had needs—bullets eager to dance, and the trigger? Always too light for comfort.

Morning came, and my feet led me to the diner next door. It was the same as every day, ordering a breakfast I'd never taste, watching the world move outside the window like an old film reel missing half its scenes. Then, the door slammed open, and they came in. Masks. Guns. Their eyes hollow, like men who'd traded their souls for vengeance and had forgotten what the bargain was for.

I smiled, hands up like a puppet on strings. "Guess you don't like eggs."

They bound me tight. The ropes bit into my skin, but it was nothing compared to the sharpness of the silence that followed. I was just another prize to these scavengers, just another piece of meat to carve.

Hours blurred. Days? Maybe. My body ached, but the pain felt like a long-lost friend, tapping my shoulder to remind me I was still breathing. One of them approached, his eyes gleaming like a wolf eyeing its prey. He jabbed a finger into my chest.

"Your empire's gone, and you're all that's left. Worthless."

I chuckled, half because it was funny, half because I'd forgotten how to be scared. "If that's all you've got, mate, you're gonna need better insults."

He didn't laugh. None of them did. But it didn't matter. Nothing did.

I let my mind wander—back to the sound of Alberta's wind howling past my porch, beer in hand, back to my first kill, the rush of it, the shock. That man's eyes, wide open and full of questions I never answered. Or maybe it was my reflection I saw in his final moments.

They dragged me to a car. The desert was endless, unforgiving, and indifferent to the drama of men. My captors? They didn't care where we were heading. Neither did I. I closed my eyes, and when I opened them, the sun was already burning holes into the horizon. The world seemed to stretch forever, and I had the sudden, absurd thought that I was walking through the afterlife.

For a while, I forgot I was even a prisoner. The desert didn't care about chains, didn't care about borders or wars. It was just there, waiting.

I lost track of time. Hunger gnawed at me, thirst clawed at my throat, but they were distant, like background noise. The real punishment? It was the silence. It crept inside me, tearing through the echoes of my past like a vulture picking apart the remains of a carcass.

I stopped walking when the sun dipped below the dunes, casting everything in a deep orange that felt like the final breath of the earth itself. I stared at my hands, dirt-encrusted, the hands of a soldier who once thought he could control fate with a trigger pull. Now, they were just hands, empty, waiting for a battle that never came.

The desert offered no answers. There was no grand finale. No redemption. Just me, the sand, and the slow, inevitable fading of whatever was left of who I used to be.