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September 8, 2025 – The Summit

It was a beautiful, clear day in the late fall. The air was crisp and cool. On a lonely mountain, there is a man climbing, each step strained. His heavy bag weighs down on him, and his lungs heave with exertion. Regardless, he pushes through. He has to carry on, he has to reach the summit. The view he knows is spectacular; it will make his current struggles worth every breath.

Hours pass with him barely breaking, the cool air biting at his flesh keeps him moving. The steep, unused trail is long and difficult to navigate, covered with overgrown roots and loose rocks. It seems that with every step, small pebbles shift out of place and clatter against each other beneath his feet. With every breath, his lungs wheezed. His heavy load not making the trip easier. He feels the bag shift with a familiar weight; it reminds him of the first time he ever made this trip. Though it was many years ago now, and this may very well be his last, that first trip forever stays fresh in his mind.

It had been spring then, the mountain was alive with fresh grass and chirping birds. He had worn an old, dented helmet, a memory from his late father's army days, strapped loosely, and wobbling on his head as he stumbled over the unexplored roots and loose rocks. That first climb had been filled with panic, the fear of falling, and yet he remembered the exhilaration when he finally reached the summit. There he stood, staring into the lake at the bottom of the mountain valley, the reflection of the sky making the water look like a void in the earth, causing a thrill that was almost holy. The helmet had fallen off then, clattering down the slope, now forgotten. It was this same thrill that now fueled his obsessive trek, bag in tow, still feeling the echo of that first climb in every ache in his shoulders and every labored breath.

At last, he makes the final turn and arrives at the peak. Before him lay a breathtaking view: the surrounding mountains curved inward like a colossal bowl, the same lake still and glassy on this clear day, reflecting the warm glow of the sun as it sets behind the mountain ridge. He smiles.

It is here that he finally stops his seemingly endless climb to take in a deep breath. The frigid air fills his burning lungs as he takes in this solitary view. He breathes out, a cloud of hot breath escapes his lips as he drops his bag to the ground with a thud. He rubs his hands together before kneeling beside the large black bag. Carefully and deliberately, he opens the bag. His knuckles drag along the rough fabric almost reverently, and he breathes in; the musty scent of blood and decay fills his nose, tainting the fresh air. He turns the bag on its side and dumps out the body on the cold, early snow. It looks odd there. This untouched landscape, full of wildlife preparing for winter, sullied by this broken, bloody body. This corpse had no purpose being there; it didn't even know where it was. Whoever it had been was no longer there. Now this ruined shell sullies this place of peace and beauty, staining the ground with its mere presence.

He kicks it, angry. Then again, down toward the lake, he watches it flop and roll unnaturally, hitting rocks and catching on bushes before

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splashing into the shallows, causing a roar of ripples to disturb the stillness of the water's pristine surface. He watches the ripples fade over the bones and decaying tendons of his past victims, silent witnesses to this dark ritual.

He watched until the water stilled, until the sky reclaimed its place on the surface. Everything once again looked normal, as though nothing had even happened. Then, and only then, did he smile, satisfied. Without looking back, he picks up his now-empty bag and begins the descent, leaving the mountain, and everything else, behind.