



## Cold Suns Set

*a tale of loss and redemption*

The truck trudged through frozen mud at a leisurely pace, clambering over heavy stones in the makeshift road. On the left and right, fresh snow had turned the country landscape into a virginal wilderness that sparkled in the setting sun. The Colonel, a passenger, stared straight ahead.

A burden shared was eased, he thought to himself. But when one man is fated to bear the awful weight of war, how does he stand? How do his knees not buckle from the strain? He grimaced, fighting the urge to move on and sympathize with the walking and unwounded, forcing his focus on the individual marked for pain.

He looked over the soldier's information again. A draftee, it was written. Embraced the duty given, excelled when called upon. What is said to a man who does right and receives painful suffering as his living reward? Good job? It was nice knowing you?

He chuckled, darkly, and the driver glanced over for a moment. No, he thought, that wouldn't do at all. No weary sarcasm. No slap on the ass and quick promotion before expiring. No military ceremony or pomp and circumstance. But nothing? Really?

The Colonel looked at the frozen fields and saw a suffocated world, ready to live but forced to wait. He marveled at its patience.

The truck lurched, and a letter slipped out of the folder. It had the President's letterhead, and his signature. He placed it neatly on top of the pile. Maybe that's what was needed. Recognition, at the highest level, of the sacrifice given before it was paid. Wouldn't a soldier want that? Wouldn't anybody?

The truck rolled to a stop in front of the medical tents, shuddered as the engine ceased. It was quiet in the cabin, and warm. His hand played over cold air coming through a bullet hole in the door. His eyes watched heaven touching earth.

Inside the bivouac, he surveyed the empty hospital beds with approval. The operating room was dark and empty. The nurse, a slim man with a mustache, walked up quickly and saluted.

"At ease, Lieutenant."

"Can I help you, sir?"

"Here to see the patient." The nurse shifted his weight, as if to turn, then paused.

"He's heavily medicated at the moment. Sir."

The Colonel did not respond as eyes swept the interior, finally alighting on the foot of an occupied bed, set behind screens. He walked over with measured steps, the folder in cupped hands behind his back. The nurse fell in stride beside him.

"Any change in the prognosis," said the Colonel flatly.

"No sir."

"Will I be able to speak to him before he goes?"

"I can reduce the drip, sir. But he'll only be moderately coherent on awakening."

"Let's get that done, then."

The Colonel grabbed a stool and sat next to the sleeping soldier. As the nurse dialed down the medication, he looked over the file one more time. He still didn't know what to say. He'd talked about death to husbands, wives, fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, grandparents, cousins, grown kids, in-laws, divorcees, foster siblings, foster parents, even a grandchild in Mississippi who was the only living relative. He'd seen many soldiers and friends slip from this plane in battle, sometimes smiling, sometimes screaming. But somehow, he'd never spoken to a man that was both safe and guaranteed to die.

He wanted to feel sick about it. But his emotions wouldn't bother to get worked up.

The nurse came back with two cups of water.

"He'll be thirsty when he wakes up. The other is for you, if you want it."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," the Colonel said, feigning a warm smile. Every fiber of his being and mote in his soul seemed to be frozen or sleeping. What was the key? When would his springtime come?

The nurse returned to his station, and the Colonel was left with the broken man, consciousness snugly wrapped in a chemical blanket. The soldier's face was clear and young, a facade of vitality. But under the sheets, it was said, he looked like a used pinata.

The Colonel's shoulders sagged, his gaze as old as stone.

Time passed. Sometimes it was quick, sometimes it was slow, its velocity shifting as thoughts filled or emptied his head. He stared at the blank tent wall, listening to the ambient noise of a military encampment. He let memories of elsewhere bob to the surface for precious moments before pushing them back down into the deep, icy waters of his soul, where they were safe from the calamitous fires of warfare. Occasionally, a smile crept on his face, but only when his eyes were staring farthest away.

A laggard finger brushed stiff sheets. The Colonel snapped back to now, and watched the soldier with hours to live. His eyes were half-open, taking in lights and shapes and blurry sounds, but not much else, not yet. This the Colonel knew from experience.

He pulled the letter from the President out of the pile, and glanced over it again. It was a form letter, with a bit of context injected where the language was fluid. But at least the signature was real. His fingers lightly brushed over the florid signature, feeling its indentation on the page, daring the blue ink to smudge, as if testing its commitment to the cause. It did not seem to notice, and the lines stayed clean.

The nurse walked over and stood across from the Colonel, looking at vital signs and taking the pulse of the patient.

"You're coming out of a deep sleep," he said. "Can you hear me? Nod if you can hear me." The soldier's head dipped forward almost imperceptibly as his eyes tracked the voice. "Good! You have a visitor who's going to sit with you for a bit. Let him know if you need some water. Do you need some water?"

Another nod. The nurse looked to the Colonel, who brought the paper cup to the man's cracked lips. The first sip was tentative, but each increased in volume until the cup was empty and he groaned for more.

"How much can he have?" asked the Colonel.

"All he wants," replied the nurse. "He doesn't strictly need it, because he's on a drip, but I'll get a pitcher."

While the nurse was gone, the Colonel took his own cup, unused, and let the man drink. His eyes were more open now, and looked over the room as he worked his jaw and tongue loose.

"Buhh... ?" The first word struggled to find purchase in that sleepy mouth.

"My name is..."

"Bad?"

"Hmm?"

"Is it... bad?"

The Colonel looked at him levelly. Options flicked through his mind like an analog clock: flick, flick, flick, flick.

"Yeah," he decided to say. "It's bad."

His hand moved to cover the soldier's hand, warm and limp, covered in medical tape, and encrusted with the IV apparatus.

The man looked straight ahead for a while, and blinked. A tear traced his cheek and hit the pillow.

"We won?" His voice, having woken, was choked in his throat.

"Yes, the mission was a success. An amazing victory that got us very far. Unfortunately, one man was wounded."

The soldier looked to the Colonel, and something like a sly smile formed on his lips. Then there was a jocular grunt, followed by a grimace of pain that quickly eased.

"Figures."

"You fight bravely and well, I hear. You killed several of the enemy, and saved your squad." The Colonel pursed his lips as he spoke this, as if tasting something sour. He felt like an automaton giving last rites.

"Mmm," mused the soldier, as he carefully peeked underneath the sheets covering his body. "Jesus," came the name in a breath. The sheets were lowered, and the eyes struck heavenward, with another tear offered from each and blinked away. "They were brave right back at me." The Colonel nodded with a shrug, grunting an affirmative almost as an afterthought. "Why am I awake but half-asleep? Everything is..." he waved his free hand slowly, "... muddy." The hand dropped onto the sheets. "When do I really wake up?"

The Colonel leaned back and got the attention of the nurse.

"Yes?" said the nurse, speaking to the soldier.

"I can't... feel normal. I feel like... like I have sand in my veins."

"That's a side effect of the pain meds. You would be in intense pain otherwise."

"From the knife or the bullet?"

The nurse blinked and glanced at the Colonel. "Ah... your injuries were bullet wounds."

"No. Am I hurting 'cuz of ... surgery, or ... the damage." He shifted in the bed. The Colonel handed him the bed controls.

"Both are contributing to that right now. I'm sorry." The Colonel eyed the nurse as he squirmed under the burning stare of the patient. Fumbling fingers found the right button, and slowly, the soldier was pushed into a sitting position, the bed motor creaking and humming. When

that was done, all was still.

"Am I gonna die?" The voice was listless, almost disinterested, perhaps not really asking.

"Things don't look good," replied the nurse. The soldier rolled his head over to look at the Colonel, who nodded. The soldier's gaze dropped to the stack of papers on the Colonel's lap.

"What's that?"

"Among other things, a letter to you, from the President."

Seconds ticked by. "Who's it addressed to?"

"To you, or your next of kin."

The soldier swallowed, and stared at the stack for a while. Then he sat straight and looked at the flimsy walls. His voice was dreamy and distant.

"I want to go outside. And off the meds."

The nurse looked at the Colonel before responding. "That wouldn't be a good idea."

The Colonel stared back.

The sun was low on the horizon. A white landscape had been painted orange. High clouds took on a purple hue. Behind them, the night had taken hold, extinguishing color in its grip. It was also very, very cold.

The patient had blankets piled on top of him. More were stuffed underneath his bed to keep wind chill at bay. A knit cap and a fuzzy hat were on his head. The only thing exposed was his face, and it was serene.

"He said it would be super bad. I feel great!" The Colonel, standing at ease by the soldier, said nothing. "Can I see that important letter?"

The document was held in front of his face as he read it. The smile on the soldier's face slowly dimmed.

"Must've been a real slick job for the prez to take notice."

"The president had to authorize this operation. Trust me, he noticed."

"Tell me, did we save any orphans or anything? Help some widows? Help the poor? Overthrow oppression?"

No answer was forthcoming.

"We defended the interests of, what, some... international corporation, saying we were fighting terror. Whatever that means." The soldier shifted to look at the Colonel. "Didn't we." His commanding officer peered back at him. The soldier tried to speak, but the words stopped in his throat. He choked a sob, tried again, failed, then let tears break into the cold air.

"Is it hurting more?" asked the Colonel.

The soldier nodded. "Can I speak freely? Sir?" he whispered hoarsely.

"Yes, of course," came the reply. The Colonel knelt in the snow to be closer.

"Is it right what we do?"

"I don't question orders, I follow them," was the automatic reply. It fell like a hammer on his heart.

"Is that right," said the soldier. "Me too." He stared at the sun with swollen eyes, brimming with tears.

The Colonel hoped for interruption. Anything to give him time to think. A backfiring engine, a helicopter spinning up, construction equipment, the talk of men. But there was nothing.

Just a face that had lost its vigor, fronting a soul that had been uprooted.

Time ticked by. The ringing in his ears, the ever-present hallmark of a battle-scarred veteran, rose sharply in volume, then slowly subsided.

He stood up, slowly, and rested his hand on the metal rail. It was freezing cold, but instead of releasing his touch, he gripped it, hard, imbuing it with his body's heat.

Something ethereal moved inside of him. Long ago and deep inside, he had slammed shut a gate and trapped a despair which threatened to bring him down. But the locks had rusted away with time, and the pressure of words needing to be spoken suddenly blew out of their cage and surged from his body.

"I lost my daughter when I was in Italy. Wasn't even fighting, just R&R during my last time out, you know? My final deployment, and then I was going home. She was just a kid. And I promised... I lost the... I never had the chance to hold her hand while it was warm, to hear her laugh, I just thought one more tour and I'll have her forever, and she'll have me, and the army just needed me so badly they gave me extra pay, it all just..." He felt sick, like he had just thrown up in a hotel toilet, empty and alone, his face like a child's after a broken promise. He waved his hand like he was sowing ashes, unable to continue.

The soldier pulled his free hand out from under the tightly wrapped blankets, and rested it on the Colonel's.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, as loud as he could.

The Colonel put his other hand over the soldier's, and spent a minute choking down the impulse to blubber and sob. The uncaring world lost more of its color.

"When she died, I had no one else but relatives. And the army became my family. And I've seen so many men die, so many brilliant flames extinguished, that I began to wonder if it could ever keep together. That I could keep it together. We do, because we cleave together when thrown into a struggle. We're a mass of bodies, but more than husks of meat: vessels of a spirit, of a soul. Words, deeds, and actions of one nourish the others. That is the great victory of mankind. All great men leave a banner flying high, a defiant strip of color against a gray and uncolored sky.

"Your banner's flying high, son. Your banner's flying high."

Their hands and eyes locked. Pain flooded their bodies. Endorphins surged, triggering a slurry, icy joy. Soon, sweet color was laid to rest, by hungry hands of night.

He did not see the morning.