

Home and the hole: a foxhole short story by Ki McKenzie.

The birds were quiet on the farm. It was cold out in the early hours of the morn, and Malys had already woken up. An old woman well into her late forties, she wore a cloth around her hair and had already slipped into a warm coat and dress, slipping on her boots. The rest of her family, Sahdra and their old dog Colesly were snoozing in their humble abodes. A rusted kettle sat atop a small little flame on the kitchen stove, and it was already starting to squeal from the boiling water inside, timid vapours of steam escaping its lip. Malys walked over to it, plodding over the creaky floorboards of their small farmhouse and lifted it off with a mitten onto a platter, and poured the hot water into a little cup. She reached into the cabinets at waist, sliding them out. There was only a handful of meager teabags left, and with that she sighed. She looked up at the wall as she dabbed the bag into her cup, absent mindedly pouring just a bit too much sugar into it as she thought of her son on the frontlines. Upon the wall, nestled right above the mantle of the fireplace was a picture of her whole family. Her husband Paulson, her young teenage daughter Sahdra and her son Thurnsley with the dog. A picturesque family of hapless farmers, who had owned their land for generations... or at least, the land they originally farmed out in Callahan pass. The war had drove their entire family out into this bleak expanse far into Warden territory, far from the war front relocated by the Warden authorities to farm for the war effort, as much of the original territory of the old empire had been consumed by decades of fighting and invasion from the Colonial Legion.

At first, her husband had gone off to fight. That was five years ago, when Thurnsley was just a 12 year old boy and Sahdra a mere child of 9. Malys and Paulson had given birth to 4 children, but only two of them survived- the first being a stillborn and the second dying from sickness in its first year. Hardship wasn't new to their family, but this war was testing everyone. Paulson died within the first 4 months,

the old farmer having rather bad knees and not being able to outrun the younger Colonial soldiers who had stabbed him to death with bayonets, Paulson's unit being composed of rather under supplied conscripts of various ages, the Warden's having been surprised by the sudden Colonial onslaught. She did not know these details, and was simply told he had died.

Merely 3 months after that date their family was relocated, and they carved out a bitter existence in the far steppes. The surroundings was that of a cold, bleak and dismal backwater where every single harvest was the result of grudgingly battling the soil for each and every yield, a war in and of itself. Food was strictly rationed and even Malys and her family ate fairly lean, Malys at the start of the war being somewhat portly and well fed, now having withered to a thin and overworked state. Everyone had to cut back to a singular meal a day, and a rather sparse one at that. Some families had already starved and succumbed to the winters, and there was little aid to be provided by the government. For all the pride in the world, of the heritage and culture the Warden empire may have once possessed, it all mattered naught when plates lay barren and stomachs empty.

It had only been a 2 months ago this very morning that her son Thurnsley had been drafted into the army. The war was getting desperate. The Wardens had recently lost the Deadlands entirely to the Colonial onslaught, they had fallen back to Callahan's passage. A windy, unforgiving region of rocky crags is where her son was to supposedly fight, to hold the line against the ever encroaching forces of the Colonial Legion in its battered, snowy landscape. She rarely slept well at night anymore, her bedside being cold with the lack of her husband. Drinking her tea and warming herself up and eating a scone, she had conducted her morning ritual. It was time to feed the animals and clear away the snow.

Thurnsley sat on a simple metal seat that was riveted into the side of the truck. Bouncing and bobbling up and down after each bump, the tarp skinned convoy truck had 6 other souls in the back. Young men like himself. Barely 17, Thurnsley was a clean shaven youngster of a thin, lanky build with some muscle. A farmboy with a bit of strength but with little body fat due to the harshness of growing up in a prolonged war economy, he and his fellows were the products of a generation born and bred in a quagmire of war. This was the day his rather rushed and ill funded instructors had tried to prepare him for. His stationing on the frontlines.

One of the other soldiers was trying to light a cigarette, striking a match against the rough patch of the box. He snapped the first one when a bump hit, and he cursed to himself. Striking another, Thurnsley cupped his hands over it to give it a bit of protection from the drafty winds ripping through the vehicle. Lighting it, it glowed a vibrant orange, and the fellow inhaled.

“Thanks.”

Thurnsley merely nodded. None of them really wanted to talk too much, everyone seemed to be fairly anxious about the upcoming ordeal. They've all heard stories of the butchery that had taken place in Deadlands. The atrocities committed... weapons salvaged from past conflicts to bring horror to modern ones. The report of his pa getting murdered years ago on the coast when the Colonials first landed. He didn't fully understand the politics of the war... apparently the Wardens held exclusive trade rights over the canal, and the Colonials wanted a piece of it, a means to make profit themselves. War had saturated most of the world one way or another... decades of conflict had erupted all around, and warfare was

nothing new to the Wardens. But the scale and magnitude of this recent conflict had brought the Warden empire to its knees, stressing its bulwark to the eyeballs.

The truck pulled into a small encampment driving past fields of barbed wire, where some corpses were still frozen trapped in the thick, gnarled bunches of razor wire and tufts of snow, half buried at this point. The wind howled and snow flurries blew everywhere as Thurnsley and his comrades stepped out of the robust truck, plopping down into the snow. Walking over to the patrol that intercepted them, they were led deeper into the encampment as the truck had already begun loading the scarred, mutilated and wounded soldiers that needed to be transported out of this hell hole. Distant pummeling artillery thundered in the distance, the explosions popping up now and again within ear shot, punctuated with the occasional gunshot.

Mere skirmishes.

Introductions to the new post had been brief. A few passing glances and a few exchanges of verbal instruction had landed the majority of the new arrivals to inspection by the local outpost's commandant in a run down old warehouse, refurbished into a forward headquarters. In the Warden army, such positions were often afforded more by nobility and wealthy education rather than soldiers rising up through the ranks, dredging mud along their way. No, the officers of the Wardens were often of the landed elite... but it would be a misconception to assume they were removed from the action. If anything, if its believed to be true, Thurnsley had heard the officers were among the most susceptible to casualties of any ranking other than that of conscripts, due to the expectations placed upon them. The commandant before them, staring them down seemed to be no exception... the product of years of

ruthless noble circles, academia and physical training. The continuing heritage of the military aristocracy in full form.

The CO's voice was hoarse and low pitched. His face was clean shaven with his head adorned with a visored cap, the cap itself being round in shape with a few Warden golden leafs adorning its sides. The man was built like a bulldog, short, squat with a potbelly and large, broad shoulders and ham like fists.

“Recruits, I am Commandant Elsely Sturnsworth, and I will oversee your accomodation into the front lines. For those of you who know how to read, there will be a manuscript debriefing provided for you to read. In general, welcome to Callahan's pass. Fighting here has been fierce and unrelenting as the main hordes of the Colonial Legion dare set foot further in our territory. But this is where we intend to stop them in their tracks, in the hero's pass itself.” With an extending rod, he begun pointing at a map pegged on a wheeled in billboard.

“The enemy has occupied all the stretch from Crumbling Post to Overlook Hill, and are pushing towards us in Solas Gateway. The frontlines are here, and constant skirmishes are the norm as you can well hear.” He pointed to each with the rod, and then turned to Thurnsley and his fellow recruits.

“We will hold them just east of Solas Gateway. It's a natural chokehold, and we will have the usage of artillery to our advantage. But in order to do that we have to secure it! I hope you all have been practicing your bayonet drills, because this will likely get rightfully personal.” There was almost a sense of a bloodthirsty grin to Sturnsworth as he said that... and it made Thurnsley rather uncomfortable.

“Rifles will be issued out, and each of you will only be afforded 3 stripper clips due to lack of adequate supply. Use them wisely and make every bullet count, we must hold this position at all costs. Do I make myself understood?” He walked along the rows of the assembled troopers, who all varied in age and experience. Their resounding reply was, “Sir commandant sir!”

“You also will be issued gas masks. The enemy has been using their new weapon, codenamed 'Green Ash.' It is a chemical gas that enters the lungs and constricts breathing, burns the eyes and irritates the skin, with over exposure causing death by suffocation. In other words, a horrible way to die. This should have been covered in basic training, but to re-affirm what has been taught, I will demonstrate how to properly fit your gas mask. Now please, pay attention, this is vital.”

The line of soldiers all stiffened up, and looked sharply at the commanding officer. He began to explain how the straps all worked, and how to properly fit the gas mask and ensure the air canisters and filters were properly in place. One of the recruits, a bearded man from the Heartlands, was met with a mean glare by the officer.

“As for you, I want this barbaric display of ill discipline shaved within the next 10 minutes. You will not be able to fit your gas mask over your worthless hide Heartlander, which won't be much of a loss in reality but none the less, I have been ordered to minimize casualties where I can.”

The man simply looked forward, “S-sir commandant sir, I'll uh, shave right away.”

The commandant scowled at him, and then eyed each and every one of the soldiers for any other

discrepancies, pacing past each of them. Thurnsley breathed in tightly as the commandant passed by him and his fellows.

“What bunch of hills did the recruitment office raid in order to obtain you young lads? No matter, you shall go to the front regardless. Stick to your elders boys, and mind your betters. Do so and you will survive and grow some hair on your chest.”

The commandant then grabbed a hold of each his fellow's shoulders, and shook them violently... seemingly to test their strength. When he reached Thurnsley, Thurnsley's tight breathing and determined posture gave little to the attempts of the officer, and the commandant smiled at him.

“It seems you've passed and earned the position of fieldgun assistant. Last one was killed unfortunately, and I need a good strong lad to push it... you'll do just fine. Just fine...” The punctuated re-assurance of the Commandant did quite the opposite of easing Thurnsley's growing, gnawing feeling of fear. While he knew the fieldgun was armoured and exhibited generous firepower with large caliber machine gun rounds, it was also a high priority target.

Sturnsworth clapped his hands and rubbed them together, cracking his knuckles as he did. He then whipped his pointing rod towards the door of the warehouse and shouted to the assembly of soldiers, “You all will be lead by your designated NCO's now. Dismissed! For the glory of Callahan soldiers!” Thurnsley proceeded out of the warehouse doors, into the white, frozen hell awaiting him...

