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Silent Night

The silver radio sat atop the wooden table in heart of the barracks, the chow hall. Red tinsel was passed out by a young and cheery soldier, adorning him and his fellow men, as they made merry. Laughter and the billowing smoke from their cigarettes filled the air. They held on loosely onto their hands of poker but tightly to their drinks; gambling away cartons of cigarettes, pogeey-bait, and anything else of 'value'. All as the modest speakers proudly played the merry sounds of Christmas, as loudly as they were able. Young Leeroy Robles, though just eighteen, knew his way around a card table and while he had a great hand, hearing the music change, he stopped in his tracks.

"Shh! Hush now fellas, you hear that?" Turning the men's attention to the song coming through the static, attempting to adjust the dials. "It's Silent Night! My absolute favorite Christmas song." Robles stood up, onto his chair, removed his hat from his shaved head, and began to sing. The laughter, and chatter amongst the Soldier's died down, all eyes became fixated on the young man. Soon everyone in the room, was gripped by the sound. Just for that small moment, they forgot where they were.

"Just what in the hell do you think you're doing Robles?" Lieutenant James Sanchez stood in the door way. Peace was quickly replaced by tension as the men scrambled to their feet and fell in line, at 'Attention'. Leeroy, bumping into his chair, stumbling over cards, rushed to the front of the pack, facing his commanding officer.

With a salute, Robles spoke up. "Good even-ing sir!" The greeting was said with a his usual bright grin. The warmth of the young private caused a light nervous chuckle to spread amongst them.

Returning to 'at-ease' Robles hastily added, "We were just having a small celebration Lieutenant Sanchez. You know, with it being Christmas Eve and all- It was all my idea, honest! Please don't be sore at the men."

Eyeing the red tinsel that was draped over Robles' shoulders disapprovingly, Sanchez turned away from the men. Why oh why, had he been stuck with *him* as a battle buddy? Leeroy, Leeroy the clown, the young and dopey Christmas-clown with his head stuck in the clouds.

Sanchez breathed in deeply through his nose. "As you were." he growled, over his left shoulder, and exited the Chow-Hall swiftly, back toward their sleeping quarters. Leeroy, ignoring his soldier's call to return to their celebration, ran after Sanchez.

Though Sanchez had just turned twenty-six, only a handful of seasons older than Leeroy, the war had clearly aged him well past his years, as war tends to do. **The horrors they'd faced of mangled men, fallen fellow soldiers, and the fear that this war would go on forever were displayed apparently on Sanchez: in his dull eyes, in his darkened sprit; and most prominently, it showed at night, while he dreamed.** The smell of fear and blood, his ears ringing from the explosions, the sight of life leaving men's eyes all seemed to be burned into his mind now. The war, it seemed, had warped them all, robbing them of their youth. All, except Leeroy Robles, who since arriving in July had kept his kindness and humor.

"Lieutenant Sanchez, uh, sir..." Robles called as he cautiously approached his officer, hands together twiddling "why don't you come celebrate with us? There's plenty of-" Leeroy was quickly cut off.

“What?” Sanchez retorted, turning toward Leeroy, frustration growing, “So I can look like a fool too? Up there, singing ‘Jingle Bells like a damn caroling bird or something?” Sanchez pointed his finger to Robles’ chest, challengingly. “I don’t think you realize where we are Robles. Look around **you**, we are at *war*. The whole damn world is at war!” Sanchez lowered his voice, and his hand and seemed to grip something that laid underneath his uniform. No larger than the size of a dog-tag, but with a rounder shape. Straining, he finished, “We’re in hell... there is no reason to be celebrating, you hear?”

Removing the tinsel from his shoulders, tossing it aside, Robles looked down. Not in shame, but in thought.

“...Sanchez,” He said finally, “That wasn’t Jingle Bells.” His hands still twiddled idly as he stood.

“What?”

“It wasn’t Jingle Bells- that I was singing just now? It was Silent Night. That’s my favorite song at Christmas **Time**. Which is, as you know, ‘the best time of the year’. Sir, do you want to know why it’s my favorite?”

Sanchez blinked defiantly, incredulous to the ludicrously that was Robles.

“Jingle Christmas- silent Christmas, silent bells- who cares? They’re all the same, and you seem to be missing my point Robles.”

Sanchez’s words had been seemingly unheard as Leeroy continued, “Well, it’s my favorite for two reasons, really. For one thing, it’s about it’s Christmas Lieutenant- a time for Miracles and-“

“It’ll be a miracle for us to live another day, Robles. We are in a *war*.”

“The song,” Leeroy persisted, “well it’s about peace. Tonight, *on this night*, all that time ago... far away from the mess we’re in... there was peace.”

“There is no peace, not during a time of war- *Soldier*, don’t you get that?”

“And two, it’s my Mama’s favorite... or at least... it was.”

Sanchez looked into Robles’s eyes, and for a moment did not see the dope he’d made Robles out to be, or even a soldier, but a boy. A boy who’d lost someone he loved. Up until now, he’d pictured him only as an annoyingly optimistic soldier, never though, as a human being. With a deep sigh, Sanchez sat upon his impeccably made bunk.

“See, she passed just after I was shipped out, something got her sick I suppose. Pop just couldn’t handle life without her, it seemed, and in just two months, well he passed too.” Robles said softly through budding tears, that were quickly wiped away. Sanchez continued listening, earnestly now, while gripping a locket that laid cloaked underneath his layers adjacent to his dog-tags.

“But you know, they were good Church-going-folk. And boy oh boy did they adore Christmas. It was always an event in our home!” Leeroy chuckled, lost in a reel of childhood memories, playing in the theater of his mind’s eye. “Now, I may not have anyone to go home to, the world *may be* at war- but Christmas is Christmas Lieutenant. **I** for one, plan to celebrate however I’m able, with whatever version of ‘family’ I’ve got. Peacefully so too! Even if for now, I’m only singing about peace.”

Sanchez rose to his feet and put a hand gently on Leeroy’s right shoulder. “I am sorry to hear about your family, Robles...”

Wiping away any remaining signs of tears, Leeroy smiled and with a small nod replied, “It’s alright... I’ll... I’ll see them again, I’m sure of it.”

Sanchez withdrew his hand and sank, slowly back into his bunk. He just couldn’t figure it out, since the day of the draft, all he’d known was death. He’d seen death, caused death, breathed in it’s stench- but for some reason, the idea of death affecting Robles outside the war; the idea of the boy’s parents passing on without him, softened his hardened heart, **if only a moment.**

“This is Mary”, Sanchez said, removing the locket from his neck and handing it to Robles who opened it, revealing a young lady’s portrait.

“She’s beautiful.” Robles added, while sitting beside Sanchez.

“...Yeah... she’s my girl back home.” A smile, an *actual smile* crept over his face, “The second I get back, I’m **purposing** to her. We’ve already been on the subject before and she’s got everything figured out.” Sanchez chuckled, for what was the first-time Robles had ever heard, and shook his head. “Funny enough, she wants a Christmas wedding! Maybe we could hire you to sing or something, you damn songbird.”

Robles beamed with delight, “I’d be honored.” The men smiled and shared a nod, when a violent noise and a shake caused dirt from above, to seep into the barracks.

In the midst of tremendous tortures of the fox-hole trenches, the unit scrambled to reload their weapons. The only light visible was from gun fire or grenades. One could hear nothing at all, but the deafening explosions and commands screamed to the men who only dared stick their heads

up, to shoot for their lives. Out on the blood-stained mud filled field soldiers battled, grappled, and fell.

“The Nazi’s are advancing! Fall back, fall back! Everyone, into the fox holes!” Sanchez yelled to his remaining unit, as loudly as his lungs allowed. Men, both injured and unscathed rushed away from the line of fire with all their strength. Though his unit retreated, the muck, blood and snow caused the ground to grow terribly slippery; many men fell just meters away, never to reach safety. Robles, not far behind Sanchez, saw a small object fly through the air and land just by the Lieutenant’s feet.

“Sanchez look out!” Robles dove to for his officer with all his might, shoving Sanchez into the safety of a fox hole.

BOOM.

Only the crackling of fire, and final yells of agony resounded in the air. Sanchez rushed back to his battle buddy, young Robles laid drenched in his own blood, his bottom half mostly gone. Cradling him in his arms, Sanchez wept, rocking the boy back and forth.

“Robles... why’d you go and do that?” Sanchez saw the life seeping away from his once bright eyes. “Medic!” He yelled, “We need a medic over here!” the weeping grew to sobbing, as Robles gurgled against the blood that filled his lungs.

Coughing, he whispered, “...James?”

“Leeroy! Leeroy stay with me, damn it Leeroy you stay with me! MEDIC!”

Lieutenant James K. Sanchez looked down at the young man, dying and mutilated in his arms, and knew no medic would be able to help. All his training urged him back into the

trenches, urged him to retreat, but instead, he began to sing. “Silent night, holy night, all his calm.... all is bright...”

Life was leaving Leeroy slowly, and with a cough of blood and a pained smile, the boy turned his eyes upward. **Where they’d stay, as his body went still.**

James, though fighting back sobs, continued to sing all while the sound of boots sloshing in the mud directly in front of him caught his attention. James looked up, though he was now staring down the barrel of a German **Soldier’s** weapon, he did not stop singing. He was, he noted, now enclosed by the once advancing German **Soldier’s**. James thought to himself that if he was to be taken as a prisoner of war, or even follow Leeroy shortly after, his last act would be this.

The German, eyed the scene closely, when recognition for the tune, flooded his eyes. Cautiously, the man lowered his weapon to the ground, and began to sing along in German.

His fellow men looked onward, and soon followed suit. Though they sang in different languages, they harmonized perfectly. One by one, the beautiful sound called each American soldier remaining, out of hiding. The band surrounded Sanchez, and the boy’s body, that he rocked back and forth.

The rest of the night, silence fell like snow, upon the battlefield. The halt of fire began at that moment, and lasted throughout all of Christmas Day.