

## **Knife's Edge**

The sun split the horizon like a gunshot. Crimson beams stretched through the air lazily, with liquid consistency. Around me, my compatriots awoke, stretching, rubbing the sleep from their eyes. I hadn't slept.

In the distance, I heard the rest of the camp rising, noisily hocking loogies and airing out their bowels. My skin prickled with gooseflesh from the icy February air as I set to work on a piece of salted pork. It was all my stomach could handle.

"Good mornin', Abraham," a voice from behind me intoned. "Quiet as ever, I see."

I turned and recognized a familiar, bearded face. "Amari," I offered a faint smile. "Good day."

Amari tilted his head. "The birds are silent today," he observed. He clapped me on the back. "They are saving their songs for our victory."

I grunted in response. There was so much noise that you'd think we had already won the battle. How very different from the Confederate camp, I mused.

Swallowing the last of the meager fare I called breakfast, I set my mind on weapon maintenance. I cleaned the barrel, wiped down the stock, and checked the lock. The musket working routinely, I turned my attention to the bayonet. Gingerly, I detached it from the barrel. I polished it until the metal shone and began to sharpen the blade. In each rasp of the whetstone, I heard my master's voice.

The memory hit me so suddenly I didn't even have time to comprehend it. One moment I was there with the other troops, the next, I had shifted back in time. Not a dream or a vision. It washed over me with such perfect clarity that I felt I was actually there.

I was on the farmland of the plantation, the sun beating down on my neck, as I stared incredulously at my master. He was beginning to grow impatient.

"Did you hear me?" He snapped. I nodded mutely. "Then get going!"

"But Master Bailey," I croaked. "I don't wanna go to war."

His eyes hardened, cold steel boring into me. "Well, you ain't got much choice, boy, unless you want a hundred lashes."

I swallowed in an attempt to lubricate my rapidly drying throat. I once again nodded affirmation to my master. His glare softened. "Good," he rummaged around in the satchel he was carrying. "Good. I have something for you."

He pulled out a slender knife, silver and almost blinding in the harsh sunlight. I took it, examining the razor edge, the way it tapered to a sharp tip. Master Bailey backed away, perhaps recognizing the imprudence of handing a weapon to someone he had just threatened. "It's a bayonet. Goes on the tip of your gun. Kill some Union bastards for me, would you?" He retreated hastily, shooing me away as I gripped the bayonet firmly.

Not that I ever used it. The Confederate Army hadn't allowed us guns or other arms. They likely would have confiscated my bayonet if they'd found it. Instead, we worked as laborers or body servants, doing the dirty work just like we did on the plantations.

That all changed when I slipped through no-man's-land into Union territory one night, where I received a spot in the camp and a musket the next day.

I was jolted out of my trance by a nudge on the shoulder. "You alright, soldier?" A fellow I didn't recognize was staring concernedly at me. My whetstone lay forgotten on the ground. I blinked and offered a smile. "Fine."

He nodded and walked off, joining the other troops in what seemed like a sudden hustle and bustle. I squinted. The sun now sat directly above us, its light harsh and piercing. Amari walked past, carrying a bundle of ammunition packages. "The battle plan was outlined. Brigadier General Grant will lead us infantrymen to the rear while Flag Officer Foote will lead the rest in gunboats on the river." He called.

I got to my feet, brushing off the grass on my pants and delicately attached the bayonet to the front of my musket.

People were jostling for the front spot in the battalion, each making loud proclamations of the heroic deeds they would perform. I was content in my position, three or four ranks back.

At the bugle call, we began to advance through the road. Though the road was smooth, I felt my breath come faster and faster. My throat constricted, and goosebumps raised across my skin even under the sun's harsh heat. My knuckles turned white from my grip on my gun. Cold sweat trickled down my brow as we neared ever closer. I stared desperately forward, straining to hear past the roaring of the blood in my ears.

The first shot came so suddenly that it seemed to materialize from midair. The man beside me let out a quiet sound — no more than the exhalation of breath — and fell to his knees, his hands all too small to contain the stain rapidly spreading across his uniform. With his final death rattle, he called for his mother.

The front lines froze, their bravado stalled. We all stared at the body, uncomprehending, until a second shot whipped over our heads. That's when the panic started. Stampeded, bolting for cover in the forests. Friends, brothers, sons were crushed underneath the raging mass of men, all as bullets continued to cut us down. War was nothing like the stories. All around me was death and devastation. The air was filled with the copper tang of blood and the heartrending groans of the dying. Before I had time to lift my gun, I was the only one left standing on the front lines in the midst of a field of corpses. Fear sloshed over me, each wave colder than the last, yet my legs would not comply. It was as if my feet had pierced through the ground and penetrated to the other side of the earth.

The rifle fire stopped, and the Confederate forces began to pile out of the fort. Leading the charge was a brutally familiar face. I pointed my gun at the oncoming horde, but my hands shook so greatly that the bullets whizzed harmlessly past them. In my haste to reload, the ammunition fell to the ground, scattered in a pile so tantalizingly close yet so impossibly far.

My body folded from a sear of pain so great my breath stopped, my palms unspooling in ribbons of red. My vision fading, the last thing I saw was Master Bailey, a hellish sneer on his face.

I awoke with a gasp. The blood-red sun was just making its climb past the horizon. I lifted my shirt frantically. No trace of the bullet hole. Had it all just been a dream? I breathed a shaky sigh of relief and sat up. I reached for my ration pack, pulled out some hardtack and some salt pork and ate with relish.

The sun continued to climb, and as I enjoyed my breakfast, the air was filled with the sound of soldiers relieving themselves.

"Good mornow, Abraham," a voice behind me intoned. "You're certainly up early."

I turned and offered Amari a grin. "Good day."

He gave me a nod in return and sighed contentedly. "The birds are silent today." My hand froze halfway to my mouth. I barely felt Amari's hand on my shoulder. "They are saving their songs for our victory." He laughed.

I remained unmoving. The morning chill permeated my very bones. I stood up abruptly, spilling my rations in the dirt, muttering and pulling at my hair. Why had Amari said precisely what he had in my dream? What the hell was going on?

I was jolted out of my trance by a nudge on the shoulder. Amari again. "They're calling us over." I followed behind him, shaking my head. It was all just some dumb coincidence.

I stood on my tiptoes, craning my neck to see over the throng of people that had all gathered. A messenger from the higher-ups crouched in the dirt next to a crudely drawn map. "Now, Brigadier General Grant will lead you infantrymen to the rear of the fort. Flag Officer Foote will lead the rest in gunboats on the river. Everyone understand?"

The crowd all murmured assent and left to prepare their weapons, except me. I remained firmly rooted to the ground, eyes wide and unblinking, breath coming in irregular gasps. Amari pulled my arm. "Come now, Abraham. Let us be off now."

I lunged at Amari, gripping him tightly by the shoulders. "This has all happened before, right?"

Amari laughed nervously and attempted to extricate himself, but my grip was like a vise. "What are you talking about?"

"This!" I cried, wildly flailing my arms. "All of this! This battle, this plan, this entire day. It's all happened before! We failed the other day. Is that what happened? This is our second attempt?"

He looked me in the eyes, his face etched with concern. "Abraham, are you all right? I am beginning to grow worried about you."

A scream of frustration congested in my throat. I seized a passerby by the hand. "Tell him! Tell him that this has all happened before. We attacked the fort before, and it failed. Remember? Tell me you remember!" He shoved me away, muttering about mental cases. I sank to my knees, half-sobbing, angry and oh-so-confused. Amari wordlessly handed me my gun and bayonet, then left me to attend to his own tasks.

An hour later, I stood exactly where I had stood before, listening to the unjustified boasts coming from the front of the line.

As before, we began our march in high spirits.

As before, the man next to me was shot through the stomach.

As before, he died calling for his mother.

As before, the men around me began to panic. They scattered, like mice, like cockroaches, fleeing for cover, not caring who they trampled underfoot. "Hold the line!" I shouted. "Stand your ground!" It was no use, my words lost in the pandemonium.

As before, the Confederate soldiers soon followed, ready to strike the final blow. My hands did not shake this time as I fired one bullet after another. All the while, the distance between my master and me drew closer. I closed one eye and aimed down the barrel.

The crack of the musket was lost in the groaning of those around me, but I saw my enslaver stagger and drop to one knee. I lowered my gun, triumphant in victory.

Musket shot buried itself in my stomach, a boil of agony bursting across my entire body. I looked up incredulously. My master lowered his smoking rifle. I rolled my eyes and uttered a single, harsh expletive before collapsing face first into the dirt.

I gasped, clutching at my stomach. The vermilion sun ignited the sky in open defiance of my complaints. I buried my face in my hands, chest heaving with silent sobs. I didn't want to die again to some ill-conceived, ill-fated plan...

That was it. The secret to my problem. If I could stop the attack from going ahead, the man next to me would not be shot. The soldiers would not run, leaving me to stand alone against insurmountable odds. I would be able to see the next day. I leapt to my feet and began to run, picking up speed. My feet hardly touched the ground. My breath burned in and out, sawing in my ears. I crashed into another, sending us both sprawling, but I picked myself up and kept running, ignoring the curses he hurled. My legs burned from the exertion. Sweat streamed freely down my face. I sprinted the last few steps, launching myself into the command tent, and barging past the two men standing guard.

"General Grant!" I cried, the words grating my throat. "The plan is not to go ahead!"

Three men stood huddled around a map. At my words, they looked up and parted. In the center, staring directly at me, was Brigadier General Grant.

He stood ramrod straight, beard immaculately trimmed despite his disheveled appearance. He must have been all night. There was a small scar across his left eye.

I repeated myself. "The plan is not to go ahead. It won't work, sir." I remembered my manners and saluted. "Private Abraham Pratchett, sir."

Grant continued to stare at me. "And how the devil would you know if the plan works?"

I knew any explanation of my situation would be dismissed as the ramblings of a crazy man. "I just do, sir."

Grant scoffed and lowered his head, going back to studying the map. I could feel my grasp on the situation slipping. "You plan to lead the infantrymen to the rear of the fort. Flag Officer Foote will lead the rest in gunboats on the river." The words came carefully and smelled of rote. "It won't work, sir."

Grant looked up again. One of the men standing beside him coughed. "Perhaps we should hear him out, General."

Grant waved him off. "Any idiot could have deduced our plan. It doesn't mean anything. The attack will go ahead."

"Please, sir," I begged. "The first shot will come, and the men won't be ready. They'll all run. And I'll be left alone on the battlefield, and the Confederates will come storming out, and I'll be shot." As soon as the words had left my mouth, I realized I had lost what little credence I had gained.

Grant snorted. "Get the fuck out of my sight, Private."

I turned and walked out, my head bowed. The rest of the morning passed in a haze until we reached that fateful road. I wiped my sweaty palms on my uniform. If General Grant wasn't going to do anything, I would.

The first shot whipped through the air. I was ready for it. I grabbed the man next to me by the collar and yanked him to the side, the bullet whizzing harmlessly past him. But then the second shot came, and the third. As well as I knew what would happen, I couldn't save everybody. The fourth bullet found its mark, and everything proceeded exactly the same way. Men crying for their mothers, people trampled under the rampaging mass of retreating soldiers. I, left standing alone on the battlefield, watching Master Bailey charge towards me. But I knew where his bullets would go. Within a minute, we were face to face, and I was unscathed. I lifted my musket. I wouldn't miss at point-blank range.

Master Bailey's hand gripped the barrel, holding it off-line. His other hand unlatched the bayonet and thrust it between my unprotected ribs, driving it up to the hilt. He leered at me, lips wet with slaver. "Beg for your life, boy." All the while I looked at him as the wrongfully accused look helplessly and puzzled at the executioner.

I was dead before I hit the ground.

I awoke with a gasp. My throat felt raw and broken like I had drunk sand and salt. My hands balled into fists, and silent tears rolled down my cheeks. Molten rage flowed through my blood, hot and dense, and I slammed my fist into the dirt. I had done everything right. Every step, every action. Except for my last moments. But I couldn't do it. I couldn't look my master in the eye again, couldn't watch that malicious smile split his face.

With a herculean effort, I sat up. There was only one course of action left for me now. I reached into my ration pack and began to chew glumly on a piece of hardtack.

"Good morrow, Abraham," Amari said. "Quiet as ever, I see."

I forced a smile onto my face. "Morning, Amari."

"The birds are silent today," He said. I exhaled shakily, on the verge of tears. "They are saving their songs for our victory." He continued.

I stayed silent. How could I respond?

I performed the rest of my tasks aimlessly, without purpose, waiting for the arrival of that fateful hour. It felt as though there was nothing left in my person but ashes fluttering inside brittle bones.

When the hour finally came, I took my position not in the fourth rank as I had before but in the very last. As we began our march, I managed to lag a few paces behind, not enough to be noticeable, but enough to make a difference.

The shot rang clear in the crisp air, and I bolted, sprinting for cover in the trees before the others could even comprehend what had happened. I watched from my refuge in the forest as they went through the practiced motions.

As the sun dived into the horizon and the moon cast its pallid glow, I approached as close as I dared to the camp. I would miss living in the camp, but there was no way I could go back now.

As I watched, movement in my peripheral vision caught my eye. I squinted, just barely making out two silhouettes creeping into the camp. A woman and a young boy. Her son, probably. One soldier, a white man, approached them, engaging them in vigorous discussion. I couldn't make out what they were saying, but the meaning was clear - we have no space for you in this camp.

As they conversed, another silhouette appeared. Cold dread surged through me, and I fought to tamp my rising panic. Why was Master Bailey here? He sauntered up to the three. Upon seeing him, the woman and her son cringed away, cowering behind the white soldier. Master Bailey gesticulated wildly, frequently pointing at the woman.

My desire to scream was almost unbearable. Why was the soldier humoring him? He should have been killed the moment he walked into camp, yet here he was, his complaints actually being considered.

After a long, impassioned discourse, the soldier shrugged and stepped aside, pushing the woman and her son towards Master Bailey. I stared in shock, the noise of the nighttime fading to a dull hum. My

mind was filled with cataclysm and apocalypse. As the woman and her son stumbled back towards Confederate territory, I could just make out Master Bailey uncoiling his whip.

I had seen enough. I detached my bayonet and in one swift motion, drew it across my neck.

My eyes open. I sit up, taking a deep breath, savoring the cold, crisp air. Dawn, rosy-fingered, blossoming in the deep blue of the sky. I set myself upon my ration pack, ravenously devouring its whole lot. The rest of the camp slowly wakes up around me.

"Good morrow, Abraham," Amari says.

I turn and grab him in a hug. "Good morning, Amari. I've missed you."

He seems flabbergasted, letting out a small chuckle. "What have I done to warrant such behavior?" I didn't answer, only hugged him tighter.

"The birds are quiet today," Amari remarks.

I let go and smile wolfishly at him. "Saving their songs for our victory."

He gives another confused chuckle. "You took the words right out of my mouth, my friend."

I set about my tasks with superhuman vigor. My nerves and muscles throb with an excited hunger. Only when I come to the bayonet, do I hesitate before finally deciding to keep it sheathed on my belt.

When that momentous hour comes, I am ready. I shoulder my way to the front of the lines. The other men break out in protests, but a look at my eyes, frenzied madness dancing behind them, silences everyone.

When we reach the road, I break into a jog, slowly putting distance between myself and the rest of the battalion. They whisper amongst themselves in confusion.

The Confederates' first shot came, no longer aimed at the throng of men but the solitary juggernaut careening towards them. More follow, many flying harmlessly over my head. Others find their mark. It didn't matter. I continue to run. My gaze is fixed on one man.

My former enslaver runs to meet me, his musket trained securely on my torso. He fires once, twice. I let it come. There is no pain. Only a feeling of salvation.

I raise my gun in retaliation, and he moves to intercept. There! At that moment, he overextends. I drop the gun, grab my bayonet and slash upwards. The blade splits the very air, bright as the sun itself, to catch the hollow in my former enslaver's throat.

I look him in the eyes as he chokes on his own blood. "Beg, boy. Beg for your life."

I see a faint flash of recognition in his eyes before the light fades from them altogether.

The next bullet comes, worming its way past muscle, past sinew, past the interlacing fingers of my ribs, finding my heart.

I smile as my face strikes the earth.

*In the darkness of night, a shadow watches as two strangers, a woman and a boy, steal into the Union camp. In the victory festivities, they are welcomed with open arms.*

*The shadow closes its eyes, finally at peace.*