

CHAPTER SIX

O'ER THE RAMPARTS WE WATCHED

“You’re starting to get a little wide around the waste, Coot,” Ethel said as Cooter looked in the mirror at the proof of what his wife was telling him. He had always been naturally skinny, but that’s when he ran around the farm of his parents’ home eating only when they allowed him. Now that he ran things at his own small farm, he chose when to work and how long to take a break; and more importantly, what and how often to eat. There was no greater pleasure on Earth than to sit at a dinner table and chow down what God and hard work had provided.

But now it was beginning to show. Just in his early 20s and he was already starting to sport the belly of a 40-year-old. “What can you do about it?” he asked.

It had been a rhetorical question, but Ethel answered, “Mayhap eat less.”

“Never!”

“Or eat more carefully. Less fried food.”

“Fer shame, woman!” Cooter exclaimed. Ethel laughed. He tickled her belly, which was also growing the same grease-blamed looseness as his. “Out, devil! Only Satan would suggest such a thing!”

Ethel screamed and giggled, the most wonderful sound in the world to Cooter. It was for her more even than for his own belly that he cooked so much and so often. Though neither appreciated what it was doing to their bodies, they both enjoyed his skills as a chef too much to give it up.

She suggested they both move around more. Ethel had heard rumor that physical exertion was good for keeping the weight down; and even though they both worked the farm, it was only a few acres. One could walk the whole distance around it and barely have broken a sweat.

Cooter joked back that he needed little tikes to chase that could outrun him. “That’d get that ol’ fat burnin’ blood movin’!” he said.

It was a careless phrase, and he realized that the moment after he said it when he saw the effect spelled out on Ethel’s face. She could provide him no children; the doctor had made that clear. After trying for more than a year, it had been confirmed that she was barren.

Some of Cooter’s friends at church had suggested he leave her. Lack of providing children was an acceptable reason for separation. God would not judge him harshly for it. Even his father and sister had suggested it. That last, Cooter could not understand; how any woman could make such a suggestion. But she already had four, and could not understand the feelings of hopelessness his wife felt.

Even Ethel told him she would not blame him if he left. She knew how much children meant to him; how much of a child at heart he was. “You will rob the world of a wonderful father by stayin’ with me,” she had admitted sadly.

But no such thought would be entertained. Cooter simply told Ethel that he would just have to take all the love he had planned for his children and give it to her.

And from that day forward, she would want for nothing. Cooter’s obsession with cooking seemed to be for his own insatiable appetite, and he took the blame for it; but it was really to see her smile as she pulled that fork from her smiling lips. Each one of those moments was more precious than the most tasty of meals.

And such is how he made up for the present floundering of words. He brushed it off by saying it was a horrible idea, and little people did nothing but tear up the furniture. “But more importantly, there’s a leg o’ lamb I got from the butcher yesterday what’s calling to be chopped up an’ fried, an’ I don’t want to let it down. Come, Ethel! It’s time to cook!”

* * *

The breakfast today was sloosh. The men had the mixture of corn meal, lard, and a bit of egg and water at the end of their ramrods roasting over the campfire. Cooter sat back with nothing cooking before him. He told the other men that he had eaten twice as much as them while making the food, though the truth was he had had only a couple small bites. They were quickly growing low on supplies and he didn't want to run out completely.

Cooter had earlier relied on the stored fat he had gained over the years to protect him from starvation, but that was all gone now, and he looked for excuses to busy his hands to hide the shake.

Today he was restlessly rolling the ball he had attained around in his hand. One of the men asked about it. "This is what you call a bass ball."

"A what?"

"A bass ball. They named it after a fish."

"It ain't named after a fish, you four flusher," Skeet laughed, not looking up from the newspaper Cooter had given him. "It's a base ball. It's like stick ball or town ball."

"Oh."

"Where'd you get it?" Vincent asked.

"Off a dead Yankee."

"One of 'em from yesterday?" a soldier around the campfire asked.

"I didn't think Yankees could play ball," Skeet said, still not looking up from the newspaper.

"I don't even want to think about a Yankee base ball team," Vincent said before biting into his sloosh.

Cooter tossed the ball up in the air and caught it a few times, getting the feel of its weight and spin. He noticed Thomas strolling by behind him. "What do you think, Lieutenant?" Cooter asked. "You think Yankees can hit a ball?"

"I wouldn't bet against 'em," Thomas said.

"I bet they could no sooner hit the wing off a fly than hit a bona fide stick ball," Cooter said.

As he did, Thomas stopped and stared at the ball as though he recognized it. He swiped it out of the air the next time it flew in front of his face.

"Hey! That's my bat ball!" Cooter exclaimed.

"Where did you get this?" Thomas asked urgently.

"Got it off a dead Yankee!" Cooter said with pride. "Killed him myself."

Thomas pulled Cooter up with one hand and shoved him against a tent pole. "Where?" he asked furiously.

"I just stole it from the picket. He gave it to me, all right?" Cooter said.

The others, alarmed at first at Thomas's outburst, now smiled at Cooter having to admit to one of his tall tales.

"What were you doing talking to the enemy?" Thomas asked, a little less personally heated, but the commander in him coming to the forefront.

"Nothin'. Just news'n such."

"Did you tell him anything about us?"

"No."

"Anything about our numbers?"

"No way."

"Our disposition?"

"Course not!"

Thomas glared at him a moment, showing he was serious, then put Cooter down. He handed the ball back to him and said, "I don't want you taking anything more from them, you understand?"

"Don't ya think the newspaper'll come in handy from time to time?" Cooter asked.

"Nothin' in there but lies," Thomas concluded.

They both felt a tension coming from near the fire and looked over at the same time. Skeet was hunched over tensely, his eyes blazing at the newspaper silent and still.

Vincent stepped up behind him and looked at it over his shoulder. "Oh, blazes," Vincent said.

“What is it?” Thomas asked.

“Atlanta. It’s been burned to the ground,” Skeet said in shock. “Goddamn Yankees destroyed the whole city.”

Everyone was silent. No one knew what to say. Skeet was from Atlanta and his pregnant wife, or possibly wife and child, would still be there, if they were still alive.

“Like ya said, Thomas. All a bunch o’ lies an’ propaganda is all that is,” Cooter said.

Skeet was grasping so tightly to the newspaper now they could all see the muscles stretching in his hands. Vincent ripped it away and tossed the paper in the campfire. Skeet did not struggle with him. Tears of rage were forming in his clenched eyes. Wrinkles of hate formed across his reddening face as he stared into the flames.

Thomas knew he had only a few moments before he’d have an incident with one of his men. He looked at the ball Cooter was holding, and said, “Cooter, you got a straight, firm stick among your supplies?”

“I’m sure I can scavenge something up,” Cooter said. “Why?”

“We need to blow off some steam,” Thomas said.

“You sure that’s a good idea?” Cooter asked.

“Get a stick bat before he gets a gun!” Thomas ordered.

* * *

“Ah, shoite. I swear ya carry an extra deck in yer sleeves, MacCracken,” Shamus grumbled, throwing down his hand of cards in frustration.

Across from him at their small table, Artemis scooped up the money. “I do, but I smuggle it up your ass so it’s easier to get to.”

“I’m dealin’ this toime,” Shamus said, inserting the used cards back into the deck, then shuffling. They were at their favorite spot, near the fortifications overlooking the field, though they were scooted back slightly to avoid tempting an enemy sharpshooter. As such, they could not see very well into the field today, but they were next to the tree where Benson made his lookout nest, so he could tell them if anything was happening across the way.

Both of them, Shamus especially, threw out the occasional comment about a terrible smell wafting from the tree in an attempt to goad Benson. It was hard to do; Benson typically let everything go. But when incited to annoyance, the entire sector of the tree shook as they heard him protest with annoyance. There was no smell they could detect, but it gave them no end of amusement to see the tree shaken so hard the leaves shed from it.

“If the enemy ever wants to know where you are, all they’ve got to do is hurl a zinger at you, Benson!” Artemis said.

“You two have spent far too much time together,” Benson said.

“Due to a fine taste in ale, and a love for the old country,” Artemis responded.

“If you love it so much there, why didn’t you stay?” Benson asked.

“No more potatoes,” Artemis explained.

“Huh?”

“Famine woiped a lot of us out, Shamus explained. “We left searchin’ for food and work.”

“And women with a little meat on ‘em,” Artemis added.

“Aye, that, too,” Shamus said.

“Why is your accent so much thicker than MacCracken’s?” Benson asked Shamus.

“Cause he’s a no good traitor to his homeland,” Shamus said.

“I believe in fitting in to wherever I go,” Artemis explained.

“Oy, like I said. A sell out,” Shamus said.

“Deal the bloody cards,” Artemis said.

They all heard a sharp “crack!” in the distance.

“What was thot?” Shamus asked.

“Maybe you cracked one o’ your old muscles,” Artemis suggested.

“Ach, ya shite,” Shamus exclaimed. “Might be serlious.”

“I don’t see anything,” Benson said. His eyes were sharp enough that the other two took it as an all clear and went back to their game. Then Benson asked, “Did you two know each other back in the old country?”

“No. We met, uh...” Artemis began.

“Beginnin’ o’ the war,” Shamus interjected.

“That’s right, or just before.”

“Fort Sumter. We saw the war start, lad.”

“You weren’t at Sumter,” Benson said.

“Aye, we were!” Shamus insisted.

“We were in Doubleday’s command,” Artemis said.

A distant crack again. This time they could tell that it was coming from the direction of the rebels. Rather than peeking over the edge, Artemis and Shamus looked up at Benson, who strained to look, but saw nothing.

“We saw the first shots fired,” said Shamus.

“Where?” Benson asked.

“Fort Sumter!” said Shamus.

“Oh, yeah,” said Benson.

“Not a single casualty,” said Artemis.

“Bah. We got one o’ their horses.”

“Is that true?”

“’Tis.”

“Guess we hit one of their horses, Benson. We won the battle!” Artemis exclaimed.

Another crack. This time Benson looked through the site on his gun. He studied the line of trees, looking for any sign of movement, even in the brush. Nothing.

“Target practice?” Artemis suggested.

“Yeah,” Benson said. “Probably target practice. Why’d you surrender?”

Artemis shot him a confused glance.

“If you didn’t take any casualties at the fort? Why’d you surrender?” Benson asked.

“Surlounded,” said Shamus, dealing the cards.

“No more ammo,” said Artemis, throwing in his first bet.

“But no one got killed?” Benson asked.

“Well, there was Hough,” Shamus said.

“Oh!” Artemis exclaimed, rolling his eyes. “The bloody misfire.”

“Misfire?” asked Benson.

Shamus explained, “After the battle was over, the brass, broilliant as always, insoisted they ‘ave a 100 gun salute to honor themselves.”

“The one condition of our surrender,” Artemis interjected.

“That’s roit. Anderson surlendered us on the condition we be alloowed to give ourselves a pot on the back with a 100 gun salute. The rebels approved of it, and good on them, too. What they weren’t able to do, we did to ourselves.”

Artemis added, “A spark went off in the ammo for one o’ the cannons. Blew up the whole casemate and wounded the crew. Killing Hough and maybe another.”

He quizzically looked at Shamus, who shrugged and said, “He was from the old countly, too.”

“We played rounders a couple times with him,” said Artemis as another whack sounded in the distance. This time, Artemis ignored it. “Nice lad. He tried to help me teach it to Captain Doubleday...” Artemis paused, noticing a queer expression on Benson’s face, looking out in the distance. He was sitting up, staring at the sky, his eyes following something flying.

Artemis stood quickly, knocking the table and scattering the cards. He saw a ball arcing through the air, then tumbling down to the earth. Shamus stood, also, but did not see the ball until it was on the ground.

“What the hell?” Shamus exclaimed.

“It looks like a ball,” Benson said.

Artemis yanked out his field glasses and peered at the ball resting in the grass. It looked familiar. The rough lines and stitching reminded him of the one they used; Lieutenant Mason’s ball. But how did it get out there? Then he lowered the field glasses and muttered, “Pud.”

The other two looked at him confused and asked what he had said.

“I think it’s ours,” Artemis told them.

Thomas, Cooter, Vincent, Skeet, and a couple others hurried to the tree line and saw the ball resting near the middle of the field.

“Skeet, you hit too wildly,” Vincent said.

“Ain’t his fault,” Thomas said. “This is just an accident.”

“Well, we gotta go get it,” Cooter said.

“They’d shoot us in our tracks,” Skeet responded.

“Who’d be so low down to shoot a man what’s retrievin’ his ball?” Cooter asked.

“A Yankee,” Skeet responded.

The muttering rose in emotion, and soon escalated into a heated debate over the fate of the base ball.

Thomas, seeing his attempts at cooling the angers unraveling, removed his knife. Cooter and a few others stopped arguing, looking at Thomas.

Thomas marched briskly over to a nearby tent and cut a small section from it, then tied it to a tree branch and carried it out into the field, past the wide eyes of his comrades.

Vincent quickly looked across at the enemy heads across the way peeking over the earthworks. More were appearing, curious at what was happening in the field. He then spotted a sharpshooter up in a tree, the most likely one to take Thomas out. He grabbed his rifle and aimed back at the man, ready to fire if the sniper so much as aimed his gun.

Artemis and Shamus watched the fool-hearted man stroll into the field in a sort of awed silence. Why a stolen ball would be worth risking his life, especially their lieutenant’s life, was beyond him. Was this a trick to get them to fire the first shot? He couldn’t imagine why that would matter.

He saw the men gathering at the front and knew this could be a distraction from some other front. “Everyone to your posts!” he ordered. “There’s nothing to see!” Artemis removed his jacket, then hurried off his shirt.

“Nothin’ to see indeed, lads,” Shamus said, baffled by his friend’s action.

“Don’t start,” Artemis said as he grabbed a stick from the earthworks and attached his shirt. He then climbed over the fortifications and headed out toward Thomas.

Thomas had gotten to the ball and picked it up by the time he saw the large, chubby man stumbling down over the tall log piles of the defensive works, the flabs of his body jiggling as he went. He was exactly what Thomas had expected of the overfed Yankees. He also saw a few men at the lines pulling out their rifles. This could get dangerous, so he turned back toward his own lines and called out to the stranger over his shoulder, “Just came out to retrieve our ball.”

“Hold on a second, lad,” the man said in a thin Irish accent.

Johnny began to notice the crowd growing near the front of the camp. There were no shouts or sounds of conflict, so he knew they hadn’t attacked again. He had no notion of what it might be.

Johnny hurried to the crowd and looked out into the field. The first thing he noticed was his supply sergeant without a shirt, and he wondered if he had somehow lost his mind. The second thing he

noticed was his brother talking to him. They both held white flags and Johnny became furious, thinking peace negotiations might be happening without him.

In a single leap, Johnny vaulted over the earthworks and let the momentum carry him down the hill. As he did, the private meeting broke up, and Thomas was heading back to his lines. Artemis met Johnny coming the other way.

“Sergeant, explain yourself!” Johnny ordered.

Artemis sighed at having been caught, though he had already resigned himself to having to explain what was happening to his lieutenant. He hesitated a moment by putting on his shirt. As he did, Johnny looked around at Thomas walking away, and even began to go around his own officer to talk to his brother. Artemis put his hand on Johnny and said, “I just bought us a day away from conflict. They somehow got their hands on our rounders ball so I challenged them to a game. If we win, we get the ball back.”

“Playin’ ball?” Johnny asked.

“That’s right.”

“Just to get a ball back?”

“And it keeps them from attacking for one more day. If we’re lucky they’ll be ordered away in the meantime. Or you can negotiate something with their commander. Seemed like you wanted to say more yesterday when he left.”

Johnny’s face, now turning from Thomas to Artemis, flushed red; and upon realizing it, he turned away, back to their lines, and walked up the hill. “Who we gonna have on our team?”

Thomas returned to his lines with the same news, and was met with less enthusiasm. “Why don’t we just keep the ball?” Vincent asked. “We don’t need to play for it.”

“Yeah, but this buys us one more day that they don’t probe the line and find out we got nothin’. One more day for Jacobson to catch up with us and reinforce our lines.”

“We don’t need no reinforcements, Lieutenant,” Skeet said. “I’m ready to pummel them into the ground.”

“Your horse artillery’s no match for their 12 pounders, Skeet,” Thomas said. “If we get enough numbers here, we can convince them to surrender without another fight.”

Skeet didn’t say another word, but Thomas could read in his eyes that this was not the result he wanted to see. Thomas would have to keep an eye on him. He would have to watch over every detail to keep this game from becoming a blood bath, and ruining their thinly veiled cover.

* * *

Thomas managed to round up enough players to go into the field, but he would be going without his second lieutenant. Vincent refused to be a part of this endeavor. “Meetin’ the enemy with any desire less than to kill it is against every law o’ nature and man,” he said. Thomas accepted that it was really for the best. Vincent could maintain order in the camp, and could take over command should the endeavor in the field go badly.

What Thomas did not know was that Vincent had no intention of remaining in the camp. He waited until the team was assembled and marching out to the field, then he assembled his own team for a very different purpose.

He first got the Avery brothers, twins who wore matching goatees and long, stringy blonde, almost white hair. They had so little remorse or even emotion that many assumed they had been criminals before the war. Simply suggesting the possibility of killing someone got them on their feet. This mission, however, would require stealth, so any killing they wanted to do needed to be done with their Bowie knives, which they had at the ready.

The trio then gathered a team of about a dozen men, and set out on a long arch around the side of the enemy base. Vincent had recognized an opportunity that Thomas clearly had not. Crowds were gathering in both camps to watch the game. The Federal base would be all but empty in every section

except the one facing the field. This would make it easy enough to sneak in by the side, kill whatever guard may be there, and take some of their supplies. If the opportunity presented itself, they may even manage an attack on the enemy from within their own base.

Out on the field, meanwhile, the opposing teams met in the center, and were trying to lay down some ground rules. Arguments over how the game was played commenced almost immediately. Each contingent wanted the version of the game that came from their homes. The Irishmen wanted rounders, the New Englanders wanted base ball, the men from the country wanted stick ball, those from many of the cities wanted town ball, one or two suggested cricket, and still others had alternate rules of their own.

Realizing this would get them nowhere, Thomas started over, beginning with establishing the shape of the bases. Again, everyone chimed in with the shape of their own home's game, but they were able to narrow it down to what they could likely put together. Many of the stick ball players chose the number and shape of the bases based on how many trees there were and their placement. There were no trees in the field. The Federals could supply grain sacks for bases, but they would be limited to how many they were willing to bring out.

Some of the men, Skeet especially, were simply argumentative, shooting down every suggestion that was made by the Yankees. "How about four bases" was met with "how about five?" "How about six bases" was met with "how about two?" "How about a triangle shape" was met with "I ain't playin' on no field I can't even spell!"

To keep things moving, Thomas allowed his opponents to make a lot of choices, much to the ire of his own men. When it seemed town ball was the game most widely known, Thomas agreed to it, saying, "All right, four bases plus one for home."

"That's right, one for home, lieutenant," Johnny said, smiling knowingly at Thomas, who only scowled back.

Everyone else paused briefly at the strange comment, but Artemis moved them on from the subject to the next issue, how the game would end. Again, everyone had an opinion, and some who had no opinions gave them just to argue.

Some threw in not so subtle jabs unrelated to the game, but dealing with the war at large. Phrases were thrown out like, "It'll end when you lose the war," and "If your throwing is like your aim we'll be here all week." Others were more personal, such as when someone said a rule would be allowed over his dead body, and an opponent said he could help that, and reached for his pistol.

That particular altercation reminded Thomas, Johnny, and Artemis that they needed to set a rule on not allowing guns onto the field, a rule that raised protests on both sides.

"There are more than enough soldiers with plenty o' firepower on both sides to shoot us all to pieces if anyone causes a problem," Johnny said. It was a bit morbid, and left everyone somewhat shaken as they looked around them and realized they had a large, armed audience.

At last they rested on each team being "in" two times, each batter per team having one chance at bat during his team's "in"ing, and they would use Thomas's six missed strikes and you're dead rule. The word dead was chuckled at by some considering the circumstances, but it was only the general slang for a player who had been tagged and would be "out" for the time being.

As they went back to get some sacks for bases, Pud, who had arrived late to the field, asked one of the soldiers what they were playing for. They surely wouldn't have a game without a wager, especially with the enemy.

"We're playing to get our ball back," the soldier said. "Someone lost it to the rebs."

Pud swallowed hard, and when he returned with a stack of sacks, he met Artemis's judgmental stare and understood it. In a small attempt to make up for it, Pud had brought back one bag that had somehow been dyed black to serve as home base. Artemis didn't get the gesture, but he liked the fact that home was unique from the other bases, and he placed it between first and fourth bases.

The other bases were placed out in a square, approximately sixty feet from one another. A stone was placed in the exact center where the "feeder" would be standing. Rope was laid out on either side of

the square marking each team's "fort," their holding area where batters would wait for their turn. Pud then grabbed two stones and passed one to the rebel side.

"What's this for?" Skeet asked.

"It's your cornerstone," Pud said. "You put it in your base."

"Now these rules are getting too complex," Skeet said, about to pass it back.

"It's so when the opponent's team has all batted, you can attack the fort and take it while they're still runnin' the bases," Pud explained.

Skeet froze just before the stone left his hand, a smile fading across his face. "I like that rule," he said, and he tossed it behind their rope; far beyond it.

"I assume we're using the take-over rule," Pud said. Most of the players on both sides stopped and looked at Pud with annoyance.

"He plays in a league back in New York," Artemis explained. "What's take-over?"

"That's when you bat it into one of the forts. The strike doesn't count and it's a do-over."

Players were still looking at Pud blankly, save but a few who had played town ball more extensively. "Guess none of us are as sophisticated as you New Yorkers," Cooter said.

"No more rules," Thomas insisted. "Let's play ball."

"But," Pud interjected.

"Play ball!" Artemis agreed.

By now the groups of spectators on both sides had grown to true crowds. On the Union side, they sat on the logs and abutments of the earthworks, and on the Confederate side they gathered at the tree line, some climbing onto branches to get a better look.

Samson was among the last to arrive. At first uninterested in what grabbed everyone's attention, he could no longer ignore it when the camp was all but empty, save for the other laborers, who rarely showed much interest in the affairs of the rest of the camp.

Samson stood at the far end of the spectators, furthest away from the game. Closer to the center, people could only get a look at what was happening by shoving their way to good positioning; and while others could do it with minimal ribbing, as a black man, he would be shoved back or worse.

Samson felt a sort of odd disgust at what he saw; enemies meeting on the field of battle in a friendly game only three days after killing one another there. Something wasn't right about it.

While lost in his thoughts, he heard a soft, yet sharp voice call to him. It sounded distant, yet it was right next to him. The voice called again, and he snapped out of his daze to look over at the speaker.

It was a blonde woman wearing a vivandier uniform of blue with red lace. She had made room on the log on which she was sitting and pulled her skirt aside so he could sit.

"No thank y'ma'am," Samson said. "Prolly won't be here..."

Marie ignored what Samson was saying and patted the log. He protested again, and she said, "Don't make me ahder you, soldier. Sit yah butt down."

Samson considered a moment, then sat next to her, bypassing the fact that she had called him a soldier when he was only a laborer. "Thank ya kindly."

"Nothing to thank. I woulda made you... Even though I'm a nurse and have no rank, I'm sure I could still somehow pull rank on you."

Samson looked across at the Confederate spectators gathering on the other side. He noticed how many of them were armed, and that a couple of their cannons were in place with their crews sitting on every side of them. Turning toward the Union lines, he saw the same with the Federal soldiers.

"Isn't this something?" the woman asked.

"It's somethin'," Samson said.

"Yah not sure," she said.

Samson hesitated before answering, "I don't know nothin' 'bout it, misses."

"Marie. The name's Marianne, but that's too long for some so I go by Marie. Marie Lewis. You?" She held out her hand to shake.

Samson stared at her hand as if it was a foreign object, something taboo and to be touched at one's own risk. He slowly reached his own hand forward close to hers without touching it. "Samson," he said.

Marie grasped it hard and shook it. He was surprised at the firmness. "Pleased to meet yah, Samson. You got a last name?"

"No."

"Oh. So what do they call you in the ranks?"

"They don't. I jus' dig trenches and set logs. I set this'n."

"Oh! You did a great job. Comfortable."

Samson looked down at it and smiled slightly, then turned shyly away from her. She studied the large man, noticing his every quirk. He was firmly built and strong, and would be intimidating if not for his fear. She had seen few ex-slaves in her life, had never met one, and was immediately struck by what it had done to what would otherwise be a vigorous and confident man.

In the clearing, the players of both sides had now gathered across from one another in straight lines, each on their own side of the field. They held their rifles, but instead of pointing them at one another, they bore them at their sides.

On each edge, their lieutenants gave the orders first to stand at attention, then to present arms. They held their rifles in front of them, the barrels pointing skyward. Their stares were straight, focused on one another. The stance was one of respect, but their eyes bore into one another confrontationally.

Both lieutenants ordered their men to lower their guns to the ground, and they did so in unison, the men watching their opponents carefully to make sure they let their guns go at the same time. There was a tense moment while they were all kneeling, watching one another, when it seemed like they would not let go; but slowly they all did, and they stood again at attention.

As they rose into position, Johnny headed out toward Thomas. Thomas hesitantly did the same, meeting him halfway to keep from coming any closer. When he was about twenty feet from his brother, Johnny pulled out a coin. "We'll flip to see who strikes first."

Thomas said nothing, continuing to stride toward him. The determined look in his eye unnerved Johnny, and he stepped back as he saw Thomas grab something out of his pocket and pull it out. It was a Confederate coin. "We use this," he said.

"Fair enough," Johnny said, putting his US coin back in his pocket. "Heads."

Thomas threw the coin in the air and let it drop to the ground. It hit the grass and landed unevenly. "Tails!" Thomas declared.

"That is no tails!" Johnny protested. "It's on its side..."

"Mostly with tails on top..."

"That's a heads..."

"Are you blind?"

"If that's supposed to be heads, you rebs need to make better coins..."

They continued to argue like... well, brothers. Both sides grew uncomfortable, though Skeet and a few others smiled at the potential brawl that was already forming. Artemis broke his attention stance and was ready to run in and break it up when Thomas said, "All right, all right, all right! Here." He picked up the coin and showed a side with a woman holding a spear. "Heads," he said. Then he flipped it over to the image of a shield. "Tails."

"All right," Johnny said.

Thomas then flipped the coin and caught it in his hand. He slapped it onto his wrist and removed his hand. It was the shield. Thomas's team would strike first.

The game began well enough with the Confederate batters getting a couple men on the bases. There was some confusion when the second batter started to run around the bases counter-clockwise rather than clockwise, which was the way they were supposed to run, and he almost ran into his teammate coming the other way. He had luckily hit it far enough and the Union players were uncoordinated enough that he was able to run directly across the way, passing over the feeder's rock, to first base before the ball got to him.

Trouble started a few plays in when Cooter went up to bat. Talking almost constantly, he had something to say about almost everyone in the infield, especially Artemis, who he felt was feeding him poor throws. When Johnny, playing the behind and catching all the throws that the batter missed, suggested he tone it down a little in the interest of the game, Cooter shot back, "What's wrong, lieutenant? Your momma don't want you influenced by us roughin's?"

"That a shot at my age?"

"Nah! I'm sure you been wearin' britches 'stead o' diapers now for a whole two years!"

Just then the pitch came in and he managed to wallop it into the outfield. He hurled himself away from Johnny before he could retaliate. He was fast enough that he had managed to get between second and third before the ball came infield. When the third baseman got the ball, Cooter ran back to second. The third baseman threw it at Cooter and he ducked under it. The ball was caught by the second baseman, and Cooter ran back toward third. The ball came at him again and he dodged, returning to second.

The crowd on both sides were on their feet, roaring for their teams. Few noticed the two men who made it home and scored; all eyes were on Cooter and the two men desperately trying to peg him with the ball; but his wily, agile frame managed to weasel around every throw. He just could not make it past them.

The back and forth went on for so long, in fact, that the cheering of the crowds died down and caused Artemis to shout, "Just... Someone catch him!"

As if given permission, the third baseman allowed the ball to fly by him and he punched Cooter in the face. Cooter fell flat on his back and the Yankees who had been insulted by the wiry little man cheered. The Confederates got to their feet and shouted in protest.

"Hey! None of that!" Artemis called out before the tensions escalated to another level.

"That wasn't right!" Skeet shouted.

"Take the base for free, lad," Artemis said to Cooter as he helped him up.

"Thank ya kindly, Big Britches," Cooter said, hurrying past Artemis and cutting across to fourth base rather than third. The second baseman began to protest and Artemis raised a hand to him, signaling to shut up. He then signaled to get the ball back, and it was passed back to him.

The game continued through a couple more players. Everyone was surprised at Jed, who, despite his small size, managed to hit one far into the outfield, sending Cooter home. Confederate players and viewers alike were both cheering and sneering at their rivals. The Federal lines were silent.

When Duncan went up to hit, he swung a mighty blow on his first try and sent the ball far into the outfield. Pud chased after it, all the way to the tree line, and caught it out of the air just as it came down. He cheered with delight, then felt himself yanked back by the Confederate viewers who claimed him as a prisoner.

The Union line of spectators now rose and the players started toward the outfield. Thomas ran to his men and ordered them to let the guy go.

"Only if the catch don't count!" one of them insisted.

"It counts!" Thomas said. "Let him go!"

The men let him go, whispering that they'd get him later, and Pud ran it infield himself.

Reaching Artemis, he said quietly, "Well, so far, so good. They've hit every throw you've fed them."

"He should have let 'em keep you," Artemis said.

"That isn't funny," Pud responded.

Artemis shoved his thumb toward the outfield, and Pud told him to hold on. He had come in to try to give him a tip on throwing so it wouldn't have such a clean hit.

While he did, Thomas approached the striking area, close to Johnny.

"Welcome home," Johnny said.

"Hush up," Thomas hissed.

"Don't want your men to know, huh?"

"I haven't heard you announcing anything to your boys."

Johnny was silenced by the comment. He switched subjects. "Did you get drafted or somethin'?"

"No, I joined the right cause."

"Right c... Thomas, the only right cause is our home, an' you left it."

"Striker up!" Artemis called. Thomas prepared his stance. Johnny, too, crouched down, ready for the throw.

"Did you leave home to join this cause?" Johnny asked quietly.

Not taking his eye off the pitcher, Thomas answered, "Wasn't a war then."

"Then why the tarnation did you leave?" Johnny asked. The question came just as the ball was thrown and Thomas was unprepared for it. He swung and missed. Johnny held the ball, waiting for an answer from Thomas, who gave none. After an awkward pause with everyone waiting, Artemis cleared his throat, and Johnny threw the ball back to him.

Thomas and Johnny got back into position and Thomas said quietly to him, "Your team's pretty lousy."

"You're avoiding the issue."

"There is no issue."

The ball came in and Thomas swung. The ball nicked the top of the bat and Johnny stood, catching it. "That's a muff! You're a dead striker!" Johnny declared.

"What are you talkin' about? I didn't hit it!" Thomas protested.

"Yes you did! It nicked the bat!"

"That don't count!"

Their argument again got heated, and players from both sides were ready to join in, but Artemis interrupted before it could go that far. "Look, hey! Hey!! Why don't we say it'll be a rule from now on, but this time it doesn't count?"

Thomas and Johnny, torn from their bickering, realized how many eyes were on them. Feeling exposed, they both agreed quickly and went back into position, Johnny throwing the ball back to Artemis.

Johnny then said quietly to Thomas, "Maybe we should talk away from the other men."

"Maybe I should crack your skull with my bat so you don't question me in front of my men," Thomas hissed.

Johnny wanted to respond, but the ball came in and Thomas swung hard. The ball again nicked the top, but this time it flew straight into the air. Johnny got under it, his eyes fixed on the ball. Thomas tossed the bat at Johnny's feet and hurried away. Johnny easily dodged the bat and signaled for everyone to stay back.

The ball came squarely down into Johnny's hands and landed in it with a snap and a puff of dust. The Yankee crowd cheered for their first success. Johnny was all smiles, holding the ball up for his teammates to see, but his smile shrank when he saw his brother, discouraged, slumping back toward his own men.

As everyone sat back down, Samson again looked over at the opposite end of the clearing to see what the enemy was doing. Everyone else was so focused on the game that they noticed little else. What he saw disturbed him; and it disturbed him more that he seemed to be the only one noticing it. Along the tree line just beyond where yesterday's bodies were buried, he could see several men in gray moving from the rebel lines. They were not moving toward the Union spectators, but they were moving away from their own. Most importantly, they were all armed.

"Miss Marie, do you see that?" Samson asked, pointing toward the group of men parting from the crowd. Just as he pointed, they disappeared beyond the trees, and Marie missed them.

She shook her head and said, "Samson, you don't need to cahl me Miss Marie."

Samson didn't respond. He kept his eyes on the graveyard and watched for another sign.

"What did you see?" Marie asked.

"Rebel soldiers. Didn't look right." Samson looked at their own lines of spectators sitting on the breastworks. No one else was reacting.

"What were they doing?" Marie asked, a slight shiver in her voice.

“Can’t reckon,” Samson said. “Prolly nothin’. If there was somethin’ to be seen, someone else’d seen it.”

He turned his attention back to the game. Marie, too, tried to go back to watching, but found herself looking back at the graveyard, searching for any sign of what Samson had seen. She then looked at the crowd, as Samson had done. Nearly everyone was there. That meant that if the rebels were indeed up to something, they would strike while the fort was most vulnerable.

She assessed the overall situation of the field. There were a lot of Confederates on the other side watching, so, she surmised, the contingent going around the flank wasn’t likely very large. If they were, and those numbers were added to the numbers now across the field, they wouldn’t need a diversion like this.

With this information, she determined to do something. “Come on, Samson,” she said, and they hurried away from the game.

By the time the Confederate team had gone through their ten players, they had scored six points. The Federal team answered with as much skill as they had shown in the outfield. Halfway through their roster, they finally had two people on base, Benson and Shamus.

Benson, on third, had leeway from his guard as Cooter was giving room for the stench emanating from him. Shamus, meanwhile, noticed that his guard, a kid the rebels called Jed, was busy eating cornmeal he had pulled out of the bag. In fact, all the basemen had ripped open their bags and were munching on the contents, slowly draining the bases.

Rather than protesting, Shamus took advantage of the opportunity and started scooting the base toward third by dragging it with his foot. Jed, wrapped up in watching Thomas pitch to Artemis, didn’t notice until he went for more corn meal. When he did, Shamus stopped, and Jed simply thought he had forgotten where it was.

He eyed Shamus, who was looking away innocently. In truth, Jed wasn’t thinking about the movement, but rather he wanted to make sure Shamus didn’t see as he reached down quickly and scooped up a little more corn meal. When he stood up again, he looked away innocently, and Shamus dragged the bag a little further with his feet.

“Hey, Thomas, let this guy hit it so I can get smelly off ma base, would ya?” Cooter begged, still occasionally holding at his face from the pain.

“I don’t think anything could help make this guy hit it,” Thomas said, followed by a belly laugh from the Confederate team and fans.

Artemis grasped firmer to the bat and gritted his teeth. He swung hard at the next throw and missed.

Johnny stood up from their fort and shouted, “That ain’t fair! The pitch was way over in the next county!”

Thomas was about to argue back, but Artemis said to Johnny, “It’s all right, lad. Let it go.”

Johnny shot an evil eye at Thomas, then reluctantly sat down.

The next throw came in more on target, and a little more gently. Artemis swung and nicked the ball. It ricocheted back and the behind stood and caught it.

“Now, that hit wasn’t...”

“It counts!” Thomas said pre-emptively. “You said, it’d be a rule from now on.”

Artemis shrugged his shoulders. Johnny jumped to his feet and shouted, “He let yours go! Least you could do is be a man about it!”

Thomas tuned his back on Johnny. His men looked to him to retaliate with words, but Thomas said nothing. He just prepared for the next pitcher. “Just a coward is what y’are!” Johnny said, then sat down before Artemis could go to him and calm him again.

Pud was up next. “*Please* get this feller off my base!” Cooter shouted to Thomas. Benson was smiling with his mouth full of bright white teeth, and he leaned over toward Cooter to torture him.

Jed, still guarding Shamus on base, noticed that the base was further away again. He looked around at the other bases to see their distances, and as he looked back at Shamus, he noticed him scooting a little further before stopping. "Hey! Stop stealing the base!" Jed shouted.

"What's going on over there?" Thomas asked.

"This fella's stealing the base!" Jed tattled. Shamus showed no reaction, as though he had no idea what was being said.

Then he saw Artemis walking toward him shouting, "O'Brien! What the hell are you doing?"

"Oy, he's stealin' the cornmeal outa the bag!" Shamus reasoned.

Now Johnny saw that all the basemen were eating the cornmeal. Cooter tried to hide it behind his back, but his full mouth gave him away. Johnny began marching out toward Thomas shouting, "Lieutenant, what is the meaning of this!"

Thomas answered without facing his brother, "They're the basemen. They're entitled to..."

"They ain't entitled to nothing!" Johnny insisted. "This is a game with a bet, and you need to get control o' your men."

Thomas nodded reluctantly. "No eating the bases! Finish what you got and don't take no more!"

Satisfied, Johnny turned and marched back to his fort. Artemis joined him, shouting back to Shamus, "And no stealing bases!"

Jed smiled triumphantly at Shamus, his lips and teeth covered in cornmeal.

Thomas returned to feeding the ball, and Pud hit it hard, far into the outfield. Duncan, far departed from the others, got under the ball. Pud had not realized Duncan was a player when he struck the ball, mistaking him for a spectator. He began running in any case, and so did the other two.

The ball flew down at Duncan, who waited for it, then, at the last moment, stepped back, let the ball hit the ground, then caught it after the first bounce. "You're out!" Thomas shouted.

Benson and Shamus started back toward their own bases, Shamus going even before he heard Thomas shout.

"What do you mean, I'm out!" Pud protested.

"He caught it in one bounce!"

"Yu supposed to catch it out o' the air!" Pud said.

Benson now stood ready to run, depending on the ruling.

"That ain't no town ball rule," Thomas said.

"Ain't no rule I ever heard," Skeet said.

"Maybe not in the sticks," Pud said. "That rule got changed a long time ago."

"Sorry, lad," Shamus said. "I have to go with them on this one. It's been a town ball rule ever since I learnt it."

"Well it got changed because any real man should be able to catch it out o' the sky."

"Where's that rule come from?" Thomas asked him.

"New York," Pud said, as though it was obvious, and what was declared there was declared everywhere.

"Well, you ain't in New York no more," Thomas said as the ball came in to him.

Pud looked around for support, but there was none. This was a rule most people had gone by, and though his friends back home believed everyone should use their rules, they were not here now to defend him. And so he slumped back to his team's fort grumbling about giving in to the backwoods hicks.

Johnny went up to bat and faced off against his brother. The two stared each other down, trying to read one another; but the years and the miles had put separation eternal between them, and they no longer knew the tells in one another's eyes. Thomas merely had to guess and Johnny just had to swing, and the result was a miss that went so wild the behind had to run and fetch it. As he did so, the brothers stared each other down again, trying to recognize something in one another, but neither knew the other well enough anymore to gather any information.

Two more throws resulted in no swings, the second of which was simple enough to hit, and drew protests from the rebel players. An argument between sides decided that the second had indeed been a

failed strike, but neither of the lieutenants spoke. They stared one another down, like two wild animals trying to intimidate each other, or preparing for the attack.

A third throw, and Johnny began to swing, but stopped, and it was considered another failed strike. Three left to go.

Thomas stopped trying to read his brother. He smiled a cocky grin and wound up, then threw it in quickly. Johnny connected hard, the ball flying so close to Thomas he had to duck. It flew down the middle into the Confederate team's blind spot. When it hit the ground, it bounced wildly inside of rough ground that had been upturned during the battle, then bounced again another direction. The men running to it didn't know which direction to go, and when they finally got there, the tall grass where it had settled made it difficult to find.

Johnny ran frantically around the bases. He was going for it all the way, shouting for the others to rush on like he was sounding a charge. He took a moment to glance over at Thomas, who looked away when they met eyes. Johnny grinned for the first time in the game.

Skeet found the ball and threw it in, skipping it expertly across the ground to one of his fellow artillerymen. He, in turn, skipped it perfectly across the ground toward home base. The behind caught it just before Johnny got there. Johnny appeared out, but Artemis pointed to the foot of the man playing the behind position, which was an inch off the base. Johnny was safe, and the Union team had scored three points!

Samson and Marie made it to the cluster of cabins where most of the supplies were kept. The largest one in the middle with its tall flagpole standing at attention next to it held the ammunition and ordinance, what Marie suspected would be the target of the invasion, if it should come.

And the most likely spot of attack would be from a point of the breastworks that were relatively close to the cabins. Because of its proximity, the abutments here were stronger than most areas, but they were useless when unmanned, which was almost entirely the case right now. Two low ranking guards had been left to watch over the entire sector, and only a handful more who could not get permission to go to watch the game were anywhere close to the cabins. All the officers who could give themselves permission to go were either in the game or gone to watch it, so everyone who remained was slacking off.

Marie easily ducked into one of the cabins without even being questioned. She came out with a pair of rifles, one of which she handed to Samson, who stared at it intently. She then set about organizing whatever men were nearby, and would listen to her, including the laborers with whom Samson generally worked, and who had ignored the game today.

Vincent led his small band of men through the brush. He had seen the bundle of cabins during the attack, and he knew what they were. He had been on enough raids to recognize the primary storage areas when he spotted them.

The game would probably stretch on for a while, at least enough time for them to take a circuitous route around the side. He had not ventured too far into the woods for fear they might get lost, always keeping the break in the trees close enough to see where they were. This had almost gotten them into trouble near the makeshift graveyard as the trees had thinned more than he had expected, but it seemed they had successfully sneaked by without catching either side's attention.

Vincent left the men behind a couple times to creep up to the edge of the woods and look out to see if they had arrived yet. He found it on the third try. The cabins were about twenty yards beyond the breastworks, which were about forty yards from the edge of the woods. Small tree stumps revealed that the woods had once grown up to the fortifications themselves, but had been cut down to watch for intruders in this direction. This had clearly been done a long time ago, as the manmade clearing had fallen into disrepair, and tall grass and bushes had grown into place.

They saw no one at the wall, and could see no guards beyond it. Nevertheless, Vincent ordered the men to stay low and try to use the cover as much as possible as they approached the edge of the depot. It would only take one man to sound the alarm.

Considering this potential problem, Vincent had three men take turns watching for guards who might be a problem. Should anyone spot them, the men were to shoot them immediately, and Vincent would at that moment have to decide whether to get out, or exploit their advantage and attack. He hoped that it would not come to that, and they would get close enough to use their knives to silence any guards.

He whispered to his men before they hurried forward that food was first most important, then ammunition. And he reminded them that this could turn into an attack should they be able to take advantage of it, which it looked like they might.

Swiftly, the men in gray slithered through the grass and past the undergrowth. The snipers took their positions in the bushes and the others hurried up to the breastworks. There they stopped and took cover. Vincent took stock of his men's positions. The Avery brothers were on either side of him at the shallow earthen wall ready with their Bowie knives while the rest of the men were scattered among the tree stumps and bushes. Vincent turned and peeked up over the wall.

At first glance, the coast looked clear. Through the windows of the cabins he could see weaponry and ammunition stacked neatly in their racks. This would be better than he had imagined. Having no one guarding their rear, and their armories wide open, they could take over and cause havoc so severe that Lieutenant Mason would have no choice but to exploit the attack and run over the Yankees, game or no game.

Then he spotted the problem. He saw a musket sticking out of a window that was cracked just enough to make room. Beyond it he could see a hand holding the musket; a black hand, the hand of a nigger. He had heard of the north arming men who should be slaves. A ridiculous idea, and he could show them just why if he could dispatch the boy before he began whining to his caretakers. The biggest difficulty would be getting to him before the nigger's gun went off.

Then he was nudged. One of the Avery boys had spotted another musket poking out of another window, this one held by a white man. He spotted another, then another held by a girly hand, probably the hand of a boy. And then he spotted a small cannon in a pig pen, its barrel stuck between two fence posts, its body camouflaged by mud. He could see the hats of its crew sticking just over the base of the fence. They, too, were no doubt camouflaged and ready to jump up and fire grapeshot right into them.

Vincent looked back at the black hand. He spotted the nigger's eye at the end of the rifle. It was staring right back at him, the impudent bastard. It was probably laughing at him, too. This attack would be fruitless at best, and Vincent knew their only chance was to sneak back into the woods and hope they wouldn't be shot up getting there. He would find some way to get at these cowardly Federals who hid behind shelter rather than standing like men in a line and fighting honorably on the field of battle.

All this he complained in his mind as he and his men slithered through the grass to the tree line, and into the safety of the forest.

Back at the game, the Union in-ing ended when Skeet knocked the last player unconscious by throwing the ball in at him with a well-placed blow.

It was a pyric victory for him as it brought in a replacement player for the Federals that was far better, Watson, who joined the outfield. He organized the men and they kept the Confederate team from scoring more than three points. One of those points was scored by Jed, who struck in a runner and ran all the way to third, and eventually made it home during someone else's striking.

The Federals went up to bat with a six point spread. Shamus got on base followed by another batter. Watson then managed to round two bases, placing him on second, and runners on third and fourth.

The pressure was on Artemis, who stepped up to strike. Thomas carefully wound up and tossed it in. Artemis clipped the ball, and it flew high above them, arching down into the Federal players' fort. He had stood dumbly watching the ball, waiting for it to be caught, but when the Confederate behind and Jed tried running over to get under it, the Federal players got in their way. The ball fell somewhere among the mass of bodies, and the play was on.

Shamus came running home shouting at Artemis, "What are you standing there for, you bloody fool! Run!"

Artemis shook himself from his daze and ran for first base while Shamus tagged home behind him.

The two basemen shoved their way through the Federal bodies and looked through the grass for their ball.

The next Union player came in and scored. Artemis was going for second.

The rebels were pushing the Federal players roughly now, searching for the ball. They saw Pud standing in the center, away from his comrades. He wore a look on his face that was far too “disinterested” to be real. The behind pushed him back, and there was the ball. It had been just below Pud’s foot.

Jed scooped it up and shoved his way back out to the field. There was no one at home base, so he helplessly watched Watson run in for another point.

But Artemis was still rounding the bases. Inspired by his success, he had not seen that the enemy had gotten the ball, and he was trying to turn this into a full rounder.

Jed held the ball behind his back as he went up toward the field. The Federal players called to Artemis, trying to warn him, and he smiled and waved back at them, thinking they were cheering him on. As he rounded fourth he smiled at the Confederate baseman who had come out to meet him. Even the opponent was congratulating him, he thought.

But Jed smiled greedily and pulled out the ball. A horrified look crawled across Artemis’s face, and Jed chucked the ball hard into his chest. Artemis fell back as the ball bounced back toward Jed. Artemis was out of the game, but he had brought in three players.

They now needed three more points to tie and they had three more players remaining. Each had to get on base, and they all needed to score by the last play.

Johnny would be the first of them. Everyone watched intensely, crossing their fingers, knocking on wood, or any other sign of good luck they practiced. Thomas paced back and forth at the feeder’s stone, considering his options. Johnny confidently took his spot and readied himself.

Thomas leaned over. His eyes narrowed not on Johnny, but on the spot where he’d be throwing. The behind studied his eyes trying to predict where he’d be throwing. Thomas seemed to make up his mind as he began winding. He threw. Johnny swung, and hit!

Just as planned, the ball again flew straight at Thomas. This time, instead of ducking, Thomas spun in place. Johnny dashed at first with all his might. With enough speed, he’d certainly make it to second, and possibly third. He’d make it in with one of the next swings, or if the rebels made a mistake, he’d make it in now.

But when he got to the first base he heard a familiar whistle, one he had heard many times in the fields at home years ago. It was Thomas. He looked over to see his brother holding the ball, a teasing grin plastered on his face. He had caught it as the ball winged by him.

The Confederates cheered, both on the field and off. Their spectators rose to their feet and many gave the rebel yell. They charged out into the field and some Yankees got to their guns afraid there was an attack. But they were just crowding around their commander, the hero of the game.

The Federal players picked up their things and slouched back toward their lines. The spectators disappeared quietly behind the breastworks.

Johnny remained behind, watching his brother’s triumph. After getting over the initial shock of defeat, Johnny wanted to go over and congratulate him, but then stopped, realizing he could not. He wanted to speak with him to ask him more, but as Thomas’s men picked him up and carried him on their shoulders back to their lines, Johnny realized this was impossible. Not only was he their sworn enemy, he was an officer; and they would just as soon shoot Johnny as let him speak to his flesh and blood.

And speaking of which, if they knew that, would it compromise their commands? Johnny had heard of relatives from opposing sides finding one another on the battlefield before, but he didn’t know how the men would react to both being the commanders. And so he stepped back and watched them carry his brother away as he triumphantly held the ball aloft.

Artemis was watching also, but he had a different thought in mind. For the first time he noticed just how ragged and gaunt the Confederates were, and he wondered how long it had been since they had had a full meal.