

They'd bedded down for the night and risen early to complete the trek to Midland, riding down the trail and up a hill looking into the next valley. From their vantage point on the crest of the hill they saw twenty Indians on horseback riding around a pair of wagons nestled up against a bluff. The Indians were yipping and yelling, firing guns and arrows at the besieged soldiers who were doing their best to return fire. They watched as four Indians on horseback rode forward and heaved lances at the soldiers, spearing two of them. There were five soldiers lying prone, arrows in some, spears in others. The Indians continued to whoop, howl and attack.

"Those soldiers need our help," said Sergeant Major John Bell. "Sound the charge Corporal Murphy!"

"Yes, sir," Corporal Murphy said as he lifted his bugle to his lips and began to blow.

"Charge!" Sgt. Maj. Bell commanded with his sword drawn as the bugler blew his horn. The colored cavalry regiment galloped down the hill at full speed shaking the earth, opening fire with pistols and repeaters. Five Indians were knocked off their horses by the USCT Cavalrymen's gunfire, instantly garnering the attention of the rest of the braves. They could feel the sound of the rumbling hooves of fifty horses, rattling their hearts, their riders shooting at them. As the Indians turned to flee, three of the besieged soldiers leapt up from their cover and shot five of the escaping warriors. This left ten Indians galloping away from the colored cavalrymen.

The 10<sup>th</sup> Cavalry arrived just in time to rescue the surviving soldiers.

"Sergeant Donum! Take fifteen men and pursue those warriors!"

"Yes, sir!" Sgt. Donum selected the men he wanted with him and galloped off after the fleeing Indians. Daniel and Obadiah were among the pursuing soldiers. The Sgt. Maj. dismounted and knelt before the white soldiers they had just rescued.

"You got here just in time. I thought we were done for. Thanks."

"What unit are you in, sir?" he said noticing the Captain's bars.

"The Sixth Cavalry, Sergeant."

The Sgt. Maj. appeared puzzled, looking around. "Where are your horses?"

"When the Indians surprised us, we only had enough time to employ the wagons as a barrier. We unhitched the packhorses from the wagons and shooed all the horses off into the valley. They'll be back."

"Our horses are loyal," the other officer said.

"Only if the Indians don't get em first. What're your names, officers?"

"I'm Captain Jack Tremaine."

"I'm Lieutenant Justin Tremaine." The Sgt. Maj. saluted them and they returned the salute.

"I thought I recognized a couple of the horses from your regiment. Are Obadiah and Daniel Holder among your men?"

"How the hell'd you know about them? This is a new regiment and we're yet to make our mark."

"My brother Justin and I are well acquainted with them. We grew up on the same plantation, were taught horsemanship by the same man. We each broke our own wild horse. Obadiah's riding a filly named Golden. Daniel's on a stallion called King."

The Sgt. Maj. offered his hand to them, helping them up. "How many'd you lose, Captain?"

Jack looked back at the fallen and back at the Sgt. Maj. "Fifteen," he said and suddenly knelt on the ground, bowing his head, praying for the lost. Sgt. Maj. Bell was moved by Jack's display of emotion and piety and knelt next to him, offering his hand. Jack took it as Justin took the Sgt. Major's hand.

"Heavenly Father. We don't know the reason for your ways or why you allow good men to be plucked from this life into the hereafter, but we bow our heads with heavy hearts. Many good men were taken from us today. I pray that you receive them in your arms and through your infinite wisdom permit them to enter the kingdom of heaven.

"Let me whisper their names into your ear: Mark, Phillip, Stephen, Zachariah, Quinton, David, William, Andrew, Brian, Donald, Fred, Ernest, Ulysses, Carl and Gregory. All were far too young to be taken from us. Some leave widows behind, sons and daughters who will never know their father. Some leave this life and the promise life offers, unfulfilled. Bless each of us and cause us to treasure their memories. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen."

"Amen," the Sgt. Maj. echoed, standing up, scanning the horizon. "I don't see your horses anywhere."

Jack and Justin rose and put their fingers to their lips and let out an ear-piercing whistle. They heard the galloping of hooves as White Mane and Stryker came from behind the bluff and up to them. Jack and Justin walked to their horses, grasping their reins, stroking their manes.

"I ain't never seen anything like it," the Sgt. Maj. exclaimed as ten more horses followed White Mane and Stryker back to where their masters had been besieged. "You say you broke those horses?"

"Yes, we did," said Jack while caressing and kissing White Mane's muzzle. "You obviously don't know Daniel and Obadiah too well. Their horses are as loyal to them as ours are to us."

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Sgt. Donum and his men were in hot pursuit of the fleeing Cheyenne warriors who'd just killed a number of United States Cavalrymen. The Indians had a head start. The dust of their flight was visible ahead like a rising fog.

"Ride hard, boys!" Donum said, withdrawing his sword from its sheath as they rode into the cloud of dust. Suddenly they realized that they couldn't see. Shots rang out. Two men fell and two more were knocked off their horses by arrows. Yelping and shrieking rang out from beyond the cloud of dust. An Indian rode through the soldiers and tried to spear Obadiah who easily deflected the thrust with his drawn sword. Another Indian emerged from the fog, riding toward Daniel who fired a shot from his revolver into the Indian's neck, knocking him off his horse. As the dust settled, they could see the Indians riding away from them.

"Let's get them, men!" Sgt. Donum commanded his soldiers as they coaxed their horses to gallop after the warriors. Daniel and Obadiah's mounts accelerated past the rest of their regiment, inching toward the eight escaping Indians. They were now within gunshot range, preparing to overtake them. One of the Indians looked over his shoulder at his pursuers and alerted the others. Two flipped around on their horses' backs and fired arrows at Daniel and Obadiah, who'd nudged Golden and

King away from the path of the arrows. They fired their revolvers at the archers, knocking them off their horses and continued to close on the remaining six Cheyenne warriors. White Mane and King carried Daniel and Obadiah into the midst of the remaining warriors who turned and slashed at them with spears, which were blocked by swords.

"Surrender!" commanded Obadiah as he rode toward the warrior closest to him. The warrior thrust his spear at Obadiah who deflected his attacks with his sword. Meanwhile Daniel had thrust his sword through two of the fleeing warriors near him, leaving only four more. The warriors suddenly changed direction and tried to circle Daniel and Obadiah and charged, whooping and hollering. Daniel and Obadiah shot one each with their revolvers just before the last two warriors leapt from their horses, knives extended and slammed into them, knocking them off their horses.

They rolled around in the dirt, each trying desperately to gain the upper hand over the other: the Cheyenne warriors with knives they'd obviously stolen from men they'd murdered, Daniel and Obadiah with weapons they'd been issued by the United States Military. Daniel was the first to draw blood as he used his sword to slash through the side of his opponent, who knelt on the ground, holding his side. He spoke harshly to Daniel, who understood nothing. The warrior rose to his feet with his knife extended toward Daniel and ran at him, shrieking and howling. Daniel had no choice but to run him through. The warrior slid off his sword, quivering in pain and died. Obadiah and his opponent engaged in a desperate battle. The Cheyenne warrior attempted to stab him with his knife, but Obadiah wrenched his arm, nearly breaking it, stealing the knife from him and throwing it into the brush. The warrior leapt at him, wrapping his hands around his neck, attempting to choke the life out of him when Obadiah remembered a few of Caleb Brodie's tricks. He stomped down hard on the foot of the Cheyenne warrior, kned him in the balls and pounded him in the solar plexus, knocking the wind out of him. The warrior fell to the ground, defeated. Obadiah stood over him, holding his fists at the ready, waiting for him to resume fighting.

The warrior lifted his hand in surrender. "No more, Buffalo man. All braves dead. I'm alone. Want to kill me? Kill me now?" Obadiah relaxed his stance.

"What's your name? How did you learn English?"

The vanquished warrior lay in the dust, getting his breath back. He looked up at Obadiah. "My warrior name is Otaktay. Mean kills many. Now kill none. I learn English in church school in Midland when boy. Holy man teach in school. I orphan."

"Why are you here, fighting the United States?"

"Cheyenne medicine man tell me white man lies. Must fight white man for Cheyenne Nation. Make white man leave. I leave white man school and fight with tribe. Keep Cheyenne Nation free. Not slave."

"Look at me. I was a slave. I'm now free."

"How can black man serve white man?"

"I don't serve the white man. I serve free men everywhere."

"Could you serve me?"

"What do you need?"

"I have woman, sister and two babies near Abilene. They need me take them to New Mexico. I make peace with white man."

"What are we going to do with you, Otaktay?"

"Call me Songan. It mean strong. Midland church call me that name. I understand when you say it."

"You just tried to kill me and helped kill a lot of our men," Obadiah said as Sgt. Donum and the rest of the troops arrived, some of them riding after the fallen warriors' horses, collecting them.

"Good job, private. Any of them get away?"

"No, sir. He's the only survivor."

"Well, tie his wrists and put him on one of their ponies. We'll see what the Sergeant Major wants to do with him." Obadiah secured Songan and helped him mount a horse. The contingent of USCT Cavalrymen rode back with their captive to rejoin the Sgt. Maj. and the rest of the split regiment.

When they arrived they saw that fifteen graves had been dug and bodies in them awaiting burial. One of the surviving white soldiers was staring at Songan as they rode into camp.

"You should have killed them all!" he declared angrily. "God damn Injuns! Ain't worth nothing," he said, drawing a pistol, preparing to shoot the prisoner.

"Put the gun down, Private Curtis," Jack said. "He's a prisoner of war. We don't execute prisoners."

"He just helped kill a lot of our fellow soldiers. Would of kilt us all if he could have," he said, keeping the barrel of the gun pointed at Songan. Jack pulled his revolver and cocked it, pointing it at the Private. Justin drew his as well.

"Put the gun away, Private. That's an order!" he barked. Reluctantly, Private Curtis let the barrel of the revolver point at the ground, uncocked it and returned it to his holster.

"Oughta be a law against these savages."

Obadiah and Daniel dismounted and walked over to Jack and Justin.

"Can't seem to get away from you two," Obadiah said as he and Daniel approached Jack and Justin.

"Your Sergeant Major confirmed my suspicions when I saw Golden and King. Thanks for the rescue."

"Glad to oblige."

"What are you and Justin doing here," Daniel asked.

"Things got too dangerous for us at Great Wood. The Grower's Association put a bounty on our heads after we killed three of their Regulators."

"I was nearly killed in a gunfight with them," Justin said.

"Is Uncle Brodie still there?" Daniel asked.

"He's looking after the place for us. Hopefully it'll be safe for us to return one day. For now we're in the Sixth Cavalry out of Austin."

"Those bars on your shoulders make you both officers. How'd a couple of Rebs like you become officers in the Sixth Cavalry?" Obadiah asked.

"A Union Cavalryman we faced in battle during the war asked us to sign up when the war was over. We faced him in the first battle at Bull Run and then spared him at the Wilderness when we could have killed him."

"Jack said he was a man of honor," said Justin. "I guess it's a good thing he did, otherwise we'd just be ex-Confederate soldiers roaming the prairies looking for a grubstake. How'd you boys end up in the Tenth Cavalry?"

"After the war was settled we got word that Colonel Miller Cudahay was looking for good men. We signed up with him in Maryland. When Congress voted to reconstitute the Colored Regiments we were transferred here."

"Small world," Jack said. "We operate out of Austin under Colonel Cudahay."

Daniel and Obadiah were surprised to hear the news. "Colonel Cudahay's a good and fair man. He told us he remembered and respected the two of you," Obadiah said. Jack fell silent.

"Anything on your mind, Jack?" Obadiah asked. Jack looked pensive and uncertain.

"We had some harsh words the last time we saw each other. I was wondering if you were harboring any misgivings?"

Now it was time for Obadiah to squirm, taking his time to answer. "Uncle Brodie kind of told us how we should act. You said some hurtful things. I was pretty angry with you."

Jack thought for a couple of beats, gathering his thoughts. "I was angry with you too. I wanted to hurt you for what you said."

"You still angry?"

"I hadn't thought about it for a while. I guess I'm not. It's funny how people you care about can hurt you deeper than those you don't."

"What do you want to do with the Indian we captured?" Jack looked at Songan.

"You capture him?"

"I did. Says he's through making war on the white man. Wants to take his wife, kids and sister to New Mexico. They're outside Abilene."

"He was just making some serious war on the white man. I'm inclined to see him put into a cell for his crimes against us."

"The Cheyenne are at war with us. Maybe he wants out."

"The war's still on. You want to guard him until we get to Midland?"

"Babysit a Cheyenne warrior who'd probably be happy to stick a knife in my ribs?"

"You brought it up."

"How'd you get to be an officer anyway? Daniel and I are privates."

"Most of the officers went to West Point. I would have thought your battlefield experience would have qualified you to be officers."

"The Union doesn't allow coloreds to rise above the rank of Sergeant Major. You didn't go to West Point and you fought for the Confederacy. Why'd they make you an officer?"

"That was part of the arrangement we had with Cudahay. Can we drop this discussion? Whether we agree or disagree won't change things in the slightest other than to make each other angry."

"Alright. We'll look after the Indian."

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The troops finished burying the soldiers who died in the attack by the Cheyenne warriors. Jack led the men in prayer for the fallen. Then they gathered the bodies of the slain Cheyenne warriors and buried them in a mass grave.

"Though we were enemies in life and fought each other to the death, Lord, we ask for your mercy on the souls of these men. When the time of final judgment comes, when the graves are opened throughout the world and the sea gives up its dead, be merciful to these savages who didn't have the opportunity to hear your Gospel and follow your ways. If you see fit, accept them into your kingdom. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen."

"Amen," was echoed by most of the soldiers.

"Well I ain't prayin for their souls," Pvt. Curtis said, spitting on the mass grave. "I pray they all be taken to Hell for what they done. I'm glad they're dead. Better them than me." A grumble of agreement erupted from the men.

"Thank you for your perspective, Private Curtis. God will be their final judge, not you or me," said Jack.

"We seen what these savages do to our men. They don't show them no respect. They mutilate their corpses and cut off their privates to hang on their kioux sticks to show they're better men than we are."

"This is what makes us better than them, Private. We show respect for their dead while they desecrate the remains of their enemies. Take it to heart, Private and any other man who shares your opinion. The enemy is to be respected and honored. I will not tolerate any man who takes trophies of the enemy dead. Dismissed!"

Justin walked over to Jack as they were returning to the spot where they'd made their stand. "Nice speech, brother."

"Had to say something. No matter what we think of them, they're still God's children." Obadiah and Daniel joined them.

"Well, well, well, Mister Jack."

"Who the hell you calling Mister? Address me as Captain."

"Yessa, Captain Jack."

"Give it a rest, Private."

"I just wanted to tell you that I appreciated your words back there."

"Thanks, Obie. I wish all the other soldiers were as enlightened as you."

Songan joined them. "Me wish to thank you for your words." Jack looked askance at him.

"I thought you were guarding him?" he asked Obadiah.

"Sorry." He looked back at Songan. "Not planning an ambush are you?"

"No, Buffalo man. I told you, I no longer fight white man while you fight at their side."

"What did you say to this guy?" Justin asked.

"I have no idea," Obadiah said, a little exasperated. "I'm warming up to him, though."

"Just make sure you know where he is at all times," Jack said.

"Will do."

As it was near sundown when they returned to the site of the battle, Jack decided to camp there for the night. The cook started a cooking fire and got out the provisions for dinner.

He boiled a huge pot of water and cooked beans and rice with bacon and ham. He dished up servings for each man as they came down the line with their mess kit. Obadiah had an extra plate for Songan.

"Looking for double portions, Private?" the cook asked.

"It's for the prisoner, sir."

"Well I ain't got a soft spot in my heart for any of them Injuns. I'd a sooner filet them than take food away from the plate of a soldier of the United States of America."

"I'm just asking for a little mercy for the vanquished, sir."

The cook paused as the men in line began grumbling about the wait. "Give the Injun a portion if for no other reason than the rest of us get to eat dinner!" came the cry from the line. The cook smiled and dipped his serving spoon into the evening's meal and slapped it down on Obadiah's extra plate.

"You got what you want, nigger. Now let me feed the rest of these men."

Obadiah winced at the rebuke. He'd been called a nigger his whole life and found that he didn't care for it. Still, he accepted that this would be the way he would be spoken to and remembered that there were times the word meant nothing to him and times where it stung. He reflected on individual men he'd had contact with and realized that the countenance of each man reflected their soul and spirit. There were men who'd referred to him as a nigger, whom he felt affection for and others whose spleens he'd like to cut out.

He joined Daniel and Songan, handing him the plate and a fork. Songan regarded him with gratitude and bowed his head. "You humble me, Buffalo man. I see now that Cheyenne are wrong. Forgive me for killing white men."

"It's just food, Songan. Eat up. You're going to need strength for the ride tomorrow. Would you like some water?"

"Yes. I thirst." Obadiah handed his canteen to his Indian captive who took it and drank deeply. Songan stopped and handed the canteen back to Obadiah. "Thank you, Buffalo man."

"Why do you keep calling me Buffalo man?"

"Your hair like Buffalo, thick, curly. You fight like Buffalo, too. Buffalo hard to kill. They taste good, though." Daniel and Obadiah chuckled. "You laugh at Songan?"

"No, Songan," Obadiah said. "You just made us feel happy on a day that was far from."

"Thank you for sparing Songan and bringing him food. Cheyenne not be so kind. I will be your servant," he said, bowing his head.

"Forget it, Songan," Obadiah said. "We're probably never going to see you again after we get back to Midland."

"That make Songan's heart sad if true."

"Finish your dinner and bunk down for the night. I've got a blanket you can spread on the ground and another one to wrap around yourself."

"You are kind, Buffalo man."

Obadiah and Daniel spread out a blanket for Songan and gave him one to keep him warm. His eyes moistened in the moonlight as he wrapped the blanket around himself. "I think Cheyenne medicine man not tell truth about white man. White man has black man on his side. Holy man at church in Midland might have told truth."

"Get a good night's sleep, Songan," Obadiah said. "It's a long way to Midland."

Songan lay back and closed his eyes. "What do you want to do about him?"

Daniel asked.

"Well he's still an enemy combatant. I say we trade off watching him. Wouldn't want to be killed in our sleep."

"I'll take first watch. I'll wake you up in two hours to take over."

Daniel took first watch and aroused Obadiah when the appointed hour had arrived. Obadiah took over, watching Songan when he realized that he had fallen asleep. His eyes opened and gazed on Songan's bed. It was empty! He looked to his left and saw Songan with a huge rock lifted over his head while he heard the rattle of a sidewinder to his right. Songan smashed the rock onto the head of the rattler, crushing it. Obadiah had drawn his revolver and pointed it at Songan, cocking it.

"Sorry, Buffalo man. Snake come for you. Songan stop snake."

Obadiah looked at the dead snake and then back at Songan. "Thank you."

"I friend of Buffalo man now?"

"Yes. Friend."

Songan lay down and fell asleep. Obadiah roused Daniel. "What is it? Can I sleep some more?"

"I don't think we need to worry about our Cheyenne friend. He just killed a rattlesnake that was preparing to strike me. Let's bed down for the rest of the night."