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Our Fort: Florida Territory, 1836

*(an excerpt from the forthcoming novel **Drovers**)*

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When the sun went low in the west the boy left out the east. The shadow of the pickets stretched all the way down the bluff and into the trees. He would crawl out through a raccoon hole and scabble through the high grass down the slope. This was better than sneaking out through the gate like he had once done. The gate was always shut now and was carefully watched, everything was carefully watched, and it was a challenge to slink past the patches of scorched earth where the sentinels lit their fires. He had never been seen.

From his hidden place out in the trees he could hear the bugler sound for evening watch and hear the voices shouting to each other to take up positions and see the sentinels light the

massive brush piles they had stacked up during the day. Then Ab would watch the fires leap up at the four corners of the fort with enough sparks to deaden the pink sunset and see the men move in front of the flames with their bayonets glinting, hasty motions preparing for night. There was fear in their hoarse voices, fear of the forest where Ab now walked. As if they were afraid of him. The boy would observe them making their preparations, all very far and very small, and stalk the trees like a god.

For a while the sounds he heard were pleasant, even comforting. The whippoorwills, the bullfrogs. The horses whinnying in their corral. Drunks of the fort sealing their last quaff of the day with a fistfight. The bugler playing Evening Colors. June Geyer arguing loudly with someone who was not arguing back, hog or human or angel. Ab would sit under a tree and take it all in, as if it happened by his permission. But then the wolves would

start howling. When the wolves started howling Ab would go back inside.

Late one afternoon Ab left the fort, went tromping the creek, and came back to the clearing before sunset. It was clear weather, a clear dusk. He stayed in the trees watching the sentinels prepare for the end of day, as usual. But then in the quiet he felt more than heard a movement to his left. He turned and saw them creeping through the undergrowth. Dozens of Seminoles in maroon and bloodred robes, their faces painted. They moved past the boy to his left and right where he stood against a tree, gliding as if on rails. When they reached the edge of the woods they stopped. The indians were so close that Ab could hear them whispering as they brought up their muskets. He could hear the leather of their moccasins creaking as they knelt.

Ab stood pressed against the oak. He sucked in breath and held it, certain that something was about to happen; then it didn't, and he had to let the breath out, the air shuddering between his lips. In front of him the Seminoles were waiting for something too. They crouched sighting across the field at the sentinels' fires. The boy stood over them for one long minute, two minutes, three. His breath came as if through a thin reed and it was all he could do, all he could think about, breathing.

A musket rang out at last. Across the field a soldier clutched his neck and fell

without a sound. For an instant there was silence, and then a cry came. It was like a death-cry, but it came from the shooter, not the victim. There was gladness in it.

A pause, then a soldier shouted from up on the walls: The woods. The woods.

At last the indians in front of Ab stood up and began to fire. They fired again and again even as shots began to be returned from the loopholes in the fort walls. There were several groups of fighters ranged around the fort in a semicircle, maybe seventy in all. After the first volley half of the indians, every other one in the line, began to sprint and duck toward the fort through the grass. They were heading for the horse corral.

The boy observed all this at perhaps a dozen paces back of the line of indians, as they fired, threw themselves on their left sides to reload, stood up, fired again. The return fire sang through the trees, shredding leaves, thumping into logs. Still Ab stood. As one of the Seminoles in front of him was getting up to aim he received a musketball in the leg and fell back down shrieking. In a moment he pushed himself up with his hands and hopped a few yards back from the treeline and came to a patch of ground covered in ferns and fell down again. This brought him to within ten feet of where Ab was standing. The indian took a big knife from a scabbard on his waist and began laying into the wound in his thigh with the point of the blade.

But suddenly he stopped. And with an expression of a man just realizing a very curious fact he turned up his eyes from his bloody leg and looked straight at the child.

They held their positions for a moment: the brave with his knife poised over his wound, the boy standing against the tree, hiding his hands behind his back as if he had been caught stealing something. Ab thought he recognized the brave but the brave did not recognize Ab. Slowly the bemused expression left the warrior's face, and he pulled his knife up out of the wound.

As if at some shared cue the boy turned to run at the very same instant the indian stood up to chase. Neither had said a word about it. Behind him Ab heard the indian hopping along on one leg, then trying the other leg, and then beginning to limp after him at a pace that was at least as fast as the boy's. They ran like this for a few yards before the warrior shouted loudly, and was answered by several voices at the indians' front line. Other braves came running, on two good legs each. Ab dared not look behind himself to see them. He ran toward a distant tumbled-in sinkhole, thinking that somehow this would save him. He seemed to be running slower than he had ever run in his life.

But then a sound like a thunderclap came from the direction of the fort. A tree

snapped in half. The noise came again, followed by a shriek of indians. A third time, more screams, and a ten-pound cannonball came skipping through the woods a little to Ab's right. There were more blasts and the shots came through the undergrowth with a sound like a tremendous cloth being ripped.

Cannonballs flew past him on either side and still the boy did not stop running, even when he realized that the indians were not chasing him anymore, even when he passed the place where one cannonball had finally come to rest in a bed it had made for itself in the loam, even when he passed from the hardwoods into a lowland bog and a country he had never seen before nor hoped to.