

UNDER THE OAKS

by

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EXT. FOREST - DAY

Sunlight filters through the towering trees, creating thin golden shafts that slice through the shade.

JOHN AYLES, a baby-faced 19, wears the uniform of a Union soldier. He advances cautiously, rifle gripped in his hands.

SUPER: APPOMATTOX, VIRGINIA, APRIL 8, 1865

John walks alone. Nearby, the sounds of war echo. Cannon shots boom. Bursts of rifle fire crackle. Bugles blare.

John scans the forest. Sees nothing but nature.

A gunshot rings out, perhaps fifty yards away. John immediately drops to one knee. He grips his abdomen, cries out in pain. He lifts his hand, sees a growing red stain over his stomach.

John drops his rifle, manages a few steps before falling to both knees. He pulls out his Colt revolver, then looks ahead and sees a figure dart between trees.

John fires four shots. The figure disappears from sight. John tries to get to his feet, but staggers backward until he slams into a large oak tree. Slowly, he slides to the dirt.

John tears open his shirt, sees the hole in the center of his gut. Blood flows continuously from the wound.

Another gunshot. Shards of bark explode off the tree six inches from John's head. He sees the figure scurry among the bushes, some fifty feet away. He aims and fires the final two shots from his Colt.

Footsteps. The figure approaches, hidden by the thick woods. John grimaces as each footfall crunches pine needles and twigs.

The business end of a bayonet pokes out from behind a mighty oak that rises twenty feet from John's position.

ALVIN FITCH, 32, steps out from behind the tree. He wears Confederate gray. His dark beard and battle-hardened features make him appear older than his years.

Alvin takes a few steps forward, bayonet pointed at John. Blood seeps from a wound just below Alvin's left rib cage.

John aims his Colt, pulls the trigger. Empty. The metallic click resonates like a thunderclap.

Alvin advances, but stumbles forward. His bayonet digs into the ground.

He uses his rifle as a crutch for a few moments before stumbling backward against the oak tree. The impact nearly takes his breath away and he slides to the dirt.

The two soldiers stare at each other. Neither one blinks.

Alvin sees John's wound, then reaches for the inner pocket of his jacket.

John nervously clutches the handle of a Bowie knife strapped to his belt.

Alvin produces a tin flask. He unscrews the cap, takes a swig, shudders as the alcohol flows down his gullet. He looks over to John.

ALVIN  
Fancy some hooch, Yank?

John stares at him for a few moments.

JOHN  
Sure.

John tries to get up, but quickly sinks back to the ground.

JOHN  
Can't move my legs.

Alvin hesitates, then guzzles half the flask. He groans, twists the cap back on, throws it over to John.

John catches it, opens the top, nods to Alvin.

JOHN  
Obliged.

John takes a sip, winces as the rotgut hits his stomach.

ALVIN  
What's yer name, Yank?

JOHN  
John.

ALVIN  
Where you from?

JOHN  
Illinois. Little town called Cobden.

Alvin runs his hand over his bleeding wound, closes his eyes.

ALVIN  
Name's Alvin Fitch. Outta Obion, Tennessee. God's country.

Alvin holds up his hand. Blood pours from his fingertips in thin rivulets.

ALVIN  
Ain't right. A Tennessee boy dyin'  
in Virginny.

He wipes the blood on his pants.

ALVIN  
Well, it's in Dixie, leastways.  
Close enough.

Alvin inhales deeply, coughs as he exhales.

ALVIN  
You married, John?

JOHN  
No.

ALVIN  
Got me...got me a fine wife.  
Elizabeth. And two sons.  
Frederick and Michael.

JOHN  
Got a sweetheart. Miss Jane  
Barrow. Was gonna ask for her  
hand, once I got home.

Alvin nods slowly, locks eyes with John.

ALVIN  
You the last livin' soul I'm ever  
gonna lay eyes on, John. Ain't  
that somethin'?

Alvin clenches his teeth, growls in pain.

JOHN  
You believe in salvation, Reb?

ALVIN  
I do at that.

JOHN  
You think...you think the Lord's  
gonna judge us? For the killin', I  
mean.

ALVIN  
Don't rightly know. I sent a mess  
of men to their graves the last  
four years. I'll answer fer it.

John coughs up blood.

JOHN  
If I see ya up there, Reb, I'll  
testify for ya.

Alvin smiles.

ALVIN  
Obliged.

Alvin raises his deathly pale face, looks to the sky. His breathing slows.

ALVIN  
I believe I'm crossin.'

John stares at him, spellbound.

JOHN  
What's it feel like?

ALVIN  
Can't feel nothin.' Can't see  
nothin.' Can't barely hear you no  
more, John. Just some...sweet  
singin.'

John struggles to focus on Alvin.

JOHN  
Good luck to you, Alvin.

Alvin's eyes fix upon a point in the sky.

ALVIN  
I thank ya.

He exhales his last breath, a tortured rattle from deep in his lungs.

John reaches into his jacket, pulls out a small tintype photograph of a beautiful young woman in a high-collared dress. His fingers smear the edges with blood.

His eyes flutter as he stares at the photo.

JOHN  
I'll wait for you.

He slumps to the ground. The photo slips through his fingers, settles in the dirt.

Nearby, the sounds of war rage on. A soft breeze blows through the forest, sending leaves into the air.

FADE OUT.

THE END