Chapter 20: July 1863

From Harm’s position at the top of the rise, he could see the entire field of battle in the weak light of dawn. He watched as the skirmishers on the road fell back to join the front line. He saw the rebels emerge in the distance. The bend in the road crowded them close together just as Colonel Moore had predicted.

Muskets crackled as the two sides fired upon each other. The rebels wheeled four artillery pieces into place. A cloud of smoke burst from one of the cannons, and thunder shook the ground. The shell sailed over the front line, landing just short of the trees. It sent dirt and shrapnel into the defensive works but did little damage.

A second cannon fired. Its shell smashed into the main line, blasting a hole in the carefully-constructed defensive works. A third shell did even more damage. Then all fell silent. Harm stared at the gaping holes in the main line. Soldiers lay half-buried in dirt and rubble.

Three riders appeared from Morgan’s camp under a white flag of truce. They rode forward and stopped at a knoll halfway between the opposing lines.

“He’ll demand complete surrender,” said Major Harrod.

Colonel Moore stood in his stirrups. “He picked the wrong day for that. The 4th of July is no day to surrender.”

“But his artillery....”

The colonel raised a hand to silence the major. “We’ll reinforce the front line so our sharpshooters can take out the artillery. Captain de Boe, I’ll need some of your finest.”

Before Captain de Boe could respond, Kees had stepped forward.

The captain called up a number of others to join him, including Howard, Ted, and Harm.

“Very good,” said the colonel.

Harm’s knees trembled as the colonel gave them final instructions. Then, they worked their way forward to reinforce the front line.

Meanwhile, Colonel Moore rode forward to meet the rebels. He listened to their demand and gave his firm response. As he returned past the front line, he told them, “Keep those rebels occupied, boys. So our sharpshooters can take out their artillery. Everything depends on it.”

Harm settled into a rifle pit and peered over the defenses. His heart raced. The rebels were so close. Their bayonets bristled in the gray morning light. As soon as the white flag was removed from the field, the rebels waved their caps over their heads and gave a fearsome yell. One of their officers held a sword high and gave the order to advance.

Musket balls buzzed like hornets about Harm’s head. Kees, who stood to Harm’s right, fired back. Smoke billowed from his musket. Harm’s breath came in ragged gasps. His arms seemed to lack the strength to raise his musket. Then he caught sight of the regimental flag, and remembered its inscription, “This flag is
given in faith that it will be carried where honor and duty lead.” Nervous tension gave way to resolve. He braced himself and fired.

The jolt of the musket in his hands felt familiar. Endless hours of drill took over. He was hardly aware of what his hands and fingers were doing. He placed his musket butt down on the ground between his feet, drew a cartridge from his cartridge box, tore it open with his teeth, and poured the powder down the barrel. He set the ball, rammed it down the barrel, replaced the hammer, and attached a percussion cap. He was ready to fire again.

The skirmish continued for half an hour. Then, suddenly, the cannons fell silent. The sharpshooters had done their work. The rebels had covered half the distance to Harm’s line, but broke off their advance and fell back.

The sky lightened. A dozen rebels lay facedown on the field. Some cried pitifully. Most were silent. Harm frantically scooped dirt and clay into the gaps in his defenses. Why hadn’t they been more thorough the day before? He peered out at the rebel line, unsure what to do next. Was it over? Would they turn back?

But no, they regathered, yelled, and charged again. Harm aimed and fired. Kees was already reloading. The fighting continued as before, with the rebels gradually gaining ground. Harm targeted a big rebel with a blue cord tied around the brim of his hat. The man fell, then staggered back to his feet.

Howard, who stood to Harm’s left, fired at the same man and he fell again. But still he didn’t give up. Crawling toward them, he brought his musket to his shoulder and fired. The ball tore through a gap in the branches just inches from Harm’s face.

Harm stumbled to a knee, nearly losing hold of his musket. The big rebel was on his feet again and lunging forward. Howard fired once more. The man stumbled and fell onto the sharpened branches of the defensive works. He didn’t move again.

More rebels reached the frontline defenses. They crouched and stabbed over them with their bayonets. From the top of the rise, the bugle signaled for those on the front line to fall back. Harm scrambled back, following Ted and Howard.

Sensing victory, the rebels scrambled over the defenses. But the main line waited for them and opened fire. The rebels dropped to the ground, but the trench had been built to give no cover from the main line. They retreated back behind the defenses.

Harm worked his way back to the rest of his company. Kees had somehow beaten him there. The fighting ceased for several minutes. It seemed an hour. Perhaps Morgan was re-assessing his advantage. Perhaps he realized he’d met his match. But no, the rebels clambered over the defenses and advanced again. The main line fired down on them.

Dozens of rebels fell in a moment, leaving gaps across their line. Others scrambled to fill the gaps. There seemed to be no end of them. Wave after wave of Morgan’s men threw themselves at the main line. But
Colonel Moore had chosen his position well. His soldiers were well-disciplined and well-drilled. They beat back advance after advance.

After hours of frustration, the rebels changed tactics. Back near the abandoned artillery, they turned from the road and poured into the wooded ravine on their left. Colonel Moore saw it and signaled a warning. The bugle called the reserves into action.

“This is it,” called Captain de Boe. “Don’t let them get at our flank.” He leapt a split-rail fence and led his company down into the wooded ravine. The ground sloped too steeply to maintain any kind of lines. Harm and the others made their way into the trees, doing their best to spread out evenly.

The rebels advanced boldly, confident of success. The crack of musket fire filled the wood from the top of the ridge to the bottom of the ravine. Several rebels fell. The rest scrambled for cover. They tried to slip forward from tree to tree, but every movement drew fire.

As Harm reloaded, a ball smashed into a tree to his left, shattering bark in his face. He went blind for a moment, clawing at his eyes. Ted reached out a hand to steady him. The darkness cleared, and Harm’s eyes focused again.

Kees fired and a rebel cried out. Before Kees could reload, another rebel appeared, musket leveled at his chest. Harm heard the sharp crack of musket fire and lost sight of Kees in a cloud of blue smoke. When the smoke cleared, the rebel lay twisted on the ground. Gerrit lowered his musket and reloaded.

A soft drizzle began, let up, then began again. The soldiers from Holland stood their ground and gradually drove the rebels back. After an hour of heavy skirmishing, the rebels retreated and withdrew from the ravine. Harm kept his musket trained on the shadows ahead. It would be just like Morgan to fake a retreat and then return when they least expected it.

Harm strained his ears to catch any hint of their return, but heard only the cries of the wounded. Then came the shuffle of horses’ hooves and the creak of the artillery wagons. General Morgan was retreating back down the Columbia – Lebanon Pike.

It took a moment to sink in. The 25th Michigan, really only half of the regiment, had stopped Morgan. Company I emerged from the wooded ravine and re-joined the rest of the detachment. The field was littered with fallen soldiers.

“They’re all rebels,” said Kees in amazement.

“Not all.” Harm pointed to a soldier in blue lying near the front line.

“Hey!” Kees ran over to him. “You all right?” He knelt down to turn him over, but his hand jerked back involuntarily at the sight of the boy’s lifeless eyes.

Kees’ face drained of color at the stench of death and the buzzing of flies. He stumbled back toward the woods, but didn’t make it before dropping to a knee. His shoulders arched violently and he began to be sick. Harm felt the sickness rise in his own throat, and turned away before it could take him.
The shock of death hung over the field as thickly as the flat gray clouds. Scores of rebels lay dead. Six members of Harm’s regiment had been killed as well, including one from his own company, Pieter ver Shure. Harm hung his head. He knew Pieter well, and his family, too. His father was an elder. His brother worked at the fish market.

Colonel Moore had given General Morgan permission to bury his dead, but he slipped away without doing so. The colonel then assigned the task to Company I. They gave the Union soldiers a proper burial, but the rebels were merely laid side-by-side in a long shallow trench.

Harm noticed Sarah’s brother, Howard, struggling to pull a rebel off from the frontline defensive works and went to help him. Howard saw him coming and quickly wiped the back of his hand across his face.

“What’s wrong?” asked Harm.

“Nothing.” He looked at the rebel. “It’s just…I killed this one.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I do. I remember that blue cord around his hat.”

Harm remembered the blue cord, too.

Howard wiped his face. “Look at him. He’s big, but he’s no older than us. He probably sat by his campfire last night joking with his friends, thinking of home, maybe even saying a prayer.”

Harm helped Howard twist the body free from the jagged branches. Together, they carried him to the burial site.

Frank de Windt stopped them and stuffed his hand into the soldier’s pocket.

“What are you doing?!” demanded Howard.

“Checking if he’s got anything interesting. No use burying him with something we can use.”

Harm slapped his hand away. “Stop it.”

“Look around,” said Frank. “Everyone’s doing it.”

Harm turned to look. A number of his fellow soldiers gathered mementos of the battle. Kees held a brass belt plate with the letters “CSA.”

Later, when the field was cleared, the boys from Company I returned to their tents. Those who’d left the field earlier had already put the dismal scenes of battle behind them. They spoke only of a glorious victory over the infamous raider, John Hunt Morgan.

Soon, Harm’s friends joined in. A kind of euphoria set in. They were alive. They were victorious. They’d been tested and found true.

“So much for the ‘Thunderbolt’,” said Kees.

“Who never attacks unless he can win decisively,” said Gerrit.

“The wily old veteran,” said Ted.

Harm joined in, too, but couldn’t put the big rebel with the blue cord out of his mind.
At the end of the day, they gathered for devotions. Ted read Psalm 144, focusing on verses 1 and 2:

“Blessed be the LORD my strength which teacheth my hands to war, and my fingers to fight: my goodness, and my fortress; my high tower, and my deliverer; my shield, and he in whom I trust; who subdueth my people under me,"

They sang Psalm 18,

_Thee, Lord, I love; Thou art my strength and power._

_My fortress is the Lord, my rock and tower;
He, my deliverer, to him I flee,_

_My shield, my helper, who will rescue me._

_My stronghold and the horn of my salvation,_

_To him I bring my praise and adoration._

_I call upon the Lord; He hears my pleas,_

_And I am saved from all my enemies._

Harm felt enormous gratitude for God’s care in the battle and for giving them the victory, but still struggled to make sense of it all. Why must people settle their differences with violence? Why must it come to war? He knew what the Catechism taught about depravity. Adam and Eve listened to the lies of the devil and turned away from God, bringing death on themselves and all humanity. But having seen war up close, he realized depravity wasn’t just an idea. It was real. It affected everyone and would destroy them all, apart from the gospel of grace.