

# Prologue

**Vimy Ridge, France**

**The wee hours of April 9<sup>th</sup>, 1917**

The door between death and life is so thin. I could melt into the passageway as easily as floating on water. It is a place just one step away from drowning. I could be buoyant and breathing one minute, then not. Death's door becoming a fluid birth.

Will they find me and the intelligence stowed away in my shoe before I die? Will I die before I can make a break for freedom? Death resembles a sort of freedom, I suppose, one I find almost welcoming. My mind tells me it would be easy to surrender to the pull of the mud and the slimy, icy water, but my body won't let me. It struggles to survive. My lungs suck in quick gasps of air through a copper tube as I stay covered in my watery grave, but I need more. Soon, I will need to breathe, really breathe, for I am starving for oxygen. Unless I die of hypothermia first. Perhaps the mud acts as an insulating layer.

Should I listen and give in to death's call?

Maybe, for I don't even know who I am anymore. The man I used to be haunts me and grieves me with accusations. I am a killer. I am a liar. I am a cheater. I'm worse than my father ever was.

Does war really give us a bill of rights to become such things?

Maybe death would erase the wrongs I have done and the atrocities I have seen, the images of men blown to bits before my very eyes, their visceral remains flecked upon my face like macabre confetti. Skewered, bayoneted bodies pile up in my memory like stuck pigs ready for the roasting. We are all preparing to be roasted, for the way of mankind has delved into the depths of hell. Here, I rest in this muddy trench, a narrow sea of mud, water, rats—the living and the dead.

*Just let go. It'll be easy . . .*

The thought reverberates in my tired soul. But I can't. An image of myself as a boy flashes before me—hanging off the cliff at home by the distant shores of Superior. My fingers grip the dirt and rocks again as if it were yesterday and not twenty years ago. In the vision, my feet slip, and I am a fall away from death's embrace, but Someone intervenes. My soul now cries as that boy once cried.

*"Help me! Save me!"*

I open my eyes and see by the light of the silver moon—a face, smeared like a dark, watercolor painting through the water. I see a shadow pass before the moon, and before I know what is happening, I feel a tug. I am pulled from the black embrace which called me to

release, and I break the plane of the frigid, murky water at the bottom of the trench, wondering who has me in their grasp.

“Luis? Luis!” a voice fiercely whispers, inches from my face.

He looks like . . . *Oshki?*

Am I dreaming? How can this be? My ragged lungs take a deep surge

of air as I spit out the thin, metal pipe which has kept me alive for the last . . . how long has it been? Hours? Minutes? I can't be sure. I shake and shiver in the night air.

Oshki, my young friend. He represents home, hope, and everything good. But I am not of that world anymore. I have been sculpted by darkness.

“O-sh-ki?” I finally sputter out. The tremors of my body make my voice rattle in my chest.

He pulls me into a standing position. The water sloshes around us like a simpering witch's cauldron. We stand thigh-deep in the lifeless dirge of the trench. I must look like a frightened fool to him. My eyes focus only on his.

We are in an outlying spot that is supposed to be occupied but has recently become flooded. I hoped they wouldn't think to look for me in this deserted portion of Pan's labyrinth, and I certainly didn't think my own countrymen would find me.

“You're safe, Luis. There are no Krauts here. But how did you . . .?” Oshki's hands grip the lapels of my uniform.

I want to believe he's real. I do. But the mind plays funny tricks in the darkness.

I focus on nothing but him. “How did you know I was here?”

“A fella named Rooster told us, a German turncoat. He escaped and mentioned an escaped prisoner with him. We were told to investigate, and what do I find?” Oshki slaps me on the back with a splat. “You are one crazy Canadian, my friend.”

*Good.* Rooster made it. I hope he hasn't told Oshki too much. Besides the major, he's the only other person who knows the truth.

I glimpse the outline of another man at Oshki's side, but I concentrate on my friend. He offers an explanation for their appearance.

“We were going out this way anyway cause Staff Sergeant Jenkins sent Lenny and me to gauge the state of the trenches at this end and if they are passable or not.” He pauses and looks deeper into my eyes. I avert my gaze and busy myself with wringing some water from my drenched clothes.

“Why were you acting like a sewer rat?” he asks.

"I got a bit lost in the dark is all, and I thought I'd attract too much attention sloshing around. They were close on my tail." I stand up straighter and back away from him a bit, hoping he doesn't notice my German military jacket. Oshki doesn't know who I really am or what my position really is. He just knew of my recent placement as a lieutenant with the Allied ground forces near here. The men were told I was captured.

"Well, lucky for you they moved on a while ago." He points to the hands of the serviceman waiting to lift me up out of the place I thought would be my grave. "Come. We've got to get ya warm, but stay low." He moves ahead, but suddenly he turns and looks at me incredulously.

"I still can't believe you're alive and . . . free."

I am reminded of my prayer. "I had a little help, it seems."

Oshki grins at me in the silver light and thumps me affectionately on the back. He's shorter than me but stronger. I try to grin back to hide who I've become. But war has changed us all irrevocably—even he looks older to me.

He says nothing, but I catch his eyes searching me to the core. He must sense more to my story. The spirit of an Ojibwe wise man rests in this young man. Even though his eyes shine hazel, they remind me of the knowing, black eyes of his aunt, Maang-ikwe. Eyes which can see every part of you. It makes me want to hide again. But, no, I must be brave.

*Brave.* I have been brave for years. I am tired of being brave.

But I choke down my fatigue and force myself to move. It is what I do, because I am a soldier and . . .

I am a spy.