

Just then the shelling stops.

A hum rises in my ears from a quiet I haven't heard since leaving Mushkegowuk.

A whistle, high and piercing, echoes somewhere in the cottony air behind me. A moment later, the desperate roar of men scrabbling their way over the top and approaching me a hundred yards behind.

Elijah and I peer through the falling snow for signs of movement. I keep one hand by the trigger of my rifle, the other shielding the scope from falling snowflakes. Enough light now that I can make out the details of their line, sandbags and brightly coloured cloth, no discernible patterns in it. The shelling appears to have been accurate. Huge gaps have been blown in Fritz's line and there is still no movement anywhere to be seen. I swing my rifle along the blasted trench, scanning through the snowflakes for any movement. Nothing. Is it possible that we've blown Fritz into the other world? I can hear the approach of men behind me. The terrain's difficult and they are obviously struggling up it with their heavy packs and rifles and muddy boots. But still they continue their shouting, more desperate and breathless now. I move my eye away from my scope and squint at Fritz's line. Unbelievable. Still no movement. Maybe all the talk of this place being an impregnable fortress was lies.

That's when I spot something.

I peer through my scope and focus in on the clear outline of a rounded Fritz helmet and below it the pale face of a young man struggling, his tongue sticking out, to do something with his hands that is out of my view. I am mesmerized by the young German. He feels so close through the scope that I might reach out and touch him. Just one man. Only one man is left who has survived the shelling!

But then my stomach goes into my throat. Soldiers pop up from nowhere through the settling smoke of the barrage and fall into place along the parapet, rifles trained directly at me. In the seconds that I

watch, their line fills up with the outlines of shoulders and heads, all pointing rifles toward the soldiers approaching behind us. It dawns on me that through all of the winter that the Canadians dug tunnels toward the Hun, the Hun have been digging down deep to hide from the shelling.

"Look at them all!" Elijah says.

Without thinking, I place the crosshairs of my scope squarely on the chest of the struggling soldier that I first saw and firmly squeeze the trigger. My rifle bucks and the soldier sails backwards as if pulled from behind with great force, a startled expression flashing on his face before he disappears from view. The concussion echoes dully in my head and I realize that this is the first rifle shot to shatter the morning. Then the world seems to erupt once more.

The Canadian artillery opens up again in a creeping barrage somewhere nearby in the falling snow. I squeeze my eyes shut and pray that it is in front of me and not behind. The Canadian barrage falls so close to us in its attempt to cover the advancing soldiers that the air is hard to breathe, most of it sucked up by the concussions. I want to run screaming but my body is an impossible weight stuck in the earth. I cannot dig deep enough to escape it, but try anyway, burying my face in the mud. Is it in front? Yes! It is!

Gradually the tremendous pound recedes just enough to let me know it moves away and not toward. McCaan's calculations and Elijah's instincts were right. We are just behind the invisible line where our artillery begins its pounding cover. The whole earth is on fire in front of me, exploding in huge fountains of mud and fire. I can feel the rumble below me, through me, swallowing me. My whole body vibrates with it. We both remove our arms from over our heads and watch the shells steadily creep forward toward the Hun.

But audible just below the shells is the sound that empties the stomach of every infantry soldier as he makes his way across open ground toward the enemy. The rattle of machine guns barks out into

the grey morning. Elijah systematically fires, reloads, fires, reloads, picking off soldiers whose heads appear suddenly through the snow and smoke and spraying mud, then just as quickly disappear. My greatest fear is that we will give away our position, but so far the bullets are well over our heads.

I try to locate where the machine-gun nests are, but in the snow, seeing much of anything is difficult. All I do know is that with every minute, their bullets are hitting Canadians. Elijah nudges me and points in the direction of a rise. When I look long enough I see what Elijah has caught, the flash of muzzle fire that gives away a nest's position through the thickening snow. We both train our rifles on the flash and I aim mine just above it, hoping that with luck I might hit the soldier working the gun. We both begin an even, methodical fire, but the flashes continue. Elijah pauses to reload a magazine and I have two bullets left before I must do the same. I aim through my scope again, and in a brief slowing of snowfall think I can make out an outline hunched above the flash. I squeeze off one shot, then another. The flash of the machine gun stops. I wait for it to begin again, but it doesn't.

"I think I got him!" I say to Elijah, excited.

"Impossible to say," he answers.

We will keep up a covering fire until our troops make it to this position, then we are to stand and join them in the sweep up the hill. From the sounds behind me, they are getting close.

Dirt and pieces of brick kick up in front of my face. Somebody has spotted my muzzle flash. I sweep my scope across the parapet but snow has fallen onto the lens and makes it more difficult to see. More bullets zing by my head. I duck out of the line of fire and look over to Elijah. He continues to focus in on a target, fire and reload. A slight smile has settled on his lips.

"We've been spotted!" I shout to him in Cree.

He apparently doesn't hear what I say. That or he is ignoring me. Bullets cough up dirt all around him. I look back. The Canadian

soldiers are only forty or fifty yards from us now, but another machine gun cuts large holes in their line.

I look over to the secondary position that Elijah and I had scouted last night. I can slip down into the shell crater behind me, crawl along it and take position there without being seen by their line. I shout my intention to Elijah and then make my move, not waiting for an answer. He's in his own world. I scramble in case I'm not as invisible to them as I hope I am. Once in place, I pull some dry cotton from inside my coat and pat my scope dry. I nudge my rifle barrel between two piles of brick, make sure I have a clear line of fire and once again begin searching for the machine-gun nest that is inflicting so much damage. A pillbox lies a hundred yards or so in front and to my right. The pillbox is so blasted by shells that it's now more a pile of rubble than a structure. Elijah and I had both known it existed but assumed that it was too damaged to be of use. But something tells me to train my scope on it. I scan the blasted concrete and brick but there doesn't seem to be any place to fit a machine gun in the flattened wreck.

That is when I see the telltale flash of muzzle fire spitting out, not from somewhere on the bottom of the pile, as I'd assumed, but from up on top. They've cleverly concealed themselves with canvas, grey like the colour of the flattened pillbox. It seems obvious to me now. I would have done the same thing. I should have known better.

The machine gun continues its stream of fire. I squint through my scope and in the lightening snowfall can once again make out a soldier's head just above it, peering down his sight. I can also see that the machine-gunner's partner is beside him, feeding the gun its belt of ammunition and spotting for him. It makes sense to me to take out the gunner first, then his partner. Breathing out, then in deeply, then out again, I try to steady my nerves. I let out half my breath as my crosshairs find the place just below the lip of the gunner's helmet, and I gently squeeze the trigger. Once again my rifle bucks, but I

keep my eye on the target long enough to see the soldier jerk back. I move the scope to my left and focus in on the other. He hasn't noticed yet, his gaze on his hands doing something below the point where I can see. I watch him look up and see for the first time his dead mate. His mouth makes an O and then he hurries to take over the position behind the gun. Once again I breathe and exhale. Nothing exists except the sound of my own breath in my head. I pull the trigger and the soldier falls back in a spray of red.

The first of the Canadians make their way to us now, their mouths open and chests heaving, no longer screaming so much as whimpering in the clatter of rifle fire aimed at them. Their faces are grimy and drawn and their eyes are wide. Their bayonets are attached to their rifles and look heavy in their hands.

I reach down to my belt and feel for my bayonet, pull it from its sheath and slide it onto the barrel, clicking it into place. I lie on my back for a second, feeling the snow fall on my face, and try to calm myself into standing up in this stream of fire. I sit and breathe deeply, my face toward the sky. The snow feels cold, good on my face. I look over to see if Elijah is still alive and am surprised to see that he is no longer there.

Men begin to pass me more frequently now, and I stare up into their faces as they run as fast as they can, at a slow jog now, staring ahead at the rifles that shoot at them. I see a face that I recognize approaching. Gilberto. Gilberto sees me too, and turns toward me, offering his hand to help me up, an expression on his face as if he's finally found a long-lost friend. I reach up to take it, just as the smile on his face blooms into a red flower. He collapses onto his knees and falls across me. Screaming, I struggle to push my friend's heavy weight from me. When I manage this, I stand up and begin running with the others toward the German line.

The rise gets steeper the further I get. Men all around me scream and fall to the ground grasping themselves. Others slump like sacks

of flour. I think that in a little while no one will be left but me. The world has gone almost silent in my head but for a deep hum and what sounds like the faraway surge of waves crashing on a beach and then pulling away. I try not to think, but a memory of me playing on the muddy shore of the Great Salt Bay comes to me, a presence near me, my watchful aunt protecting me. You, Niska. I don't know why I think of you now as bullets zing by my head so close that they whisper to me. One cuts through my coat and I can feel my side burning. I think I have been shot but the pain is almost absent, just an annoying bite. I begin to mouth your name over and over, like a protection against the bullets. *Niska*, I whisper as I run up the hill and approach a stretch of barbed wire. *Niska. Niska. Niska. Niska. Niska.* I realize as I stumble and fall to my knees that the sound of the waves crashing in my head is my own breathing.

I look up to the wire in front of me and see that it is still a tangled mess despite the shelling that was meant to blow it apart and despite the efforts of the sappers, many of whom lie dead and tangled in grotesque positions on the wire. Others all around me shout and scurry toward it, their mouths moving but no sound coming out. I stand again and push ahead. A break in the wire and men bunch up at its opening, trying to get through. Not knowing what else to do, I head toward them, but see that too many are being shot and too many corpses jam up the hole for anyone to get through now. I look along the stretch of wire and notice that a few others have found another place to get through by throwing themselves on the ground and crabbing under it. Others are climbing over the bodies of the dead or throwing planks of wood carried up from their trench to create bridges over the wire. I find a place that will allow me to scamper under it.

Bullets tear up the ground all around my head, tossing up painful clods of dirt into my eyes. I make it through the wire and see that I am close to their parapet, Germans leaning over it and shooting

point-blank. Lying on my belly, I aim my rifle, the scope useless now that I'm so close. I fire at one soldier who seems to be doing a lot of damage. The soldier drops and I reload and fire at another, dropping him too. I want to just lie here and keep shooting until I myself am shot, but the legs and bodies of the other Canadians block me from shooting any more. I stand up then and with a desperate scream join them on the charge at the parapet.

For the first time, the faces of the Hun look nervous. The Canadians are so close now that rifle fire is almost useless, and the ones just ahead of me are on the German sandbags, stabbing with their rifles at the men below them. The Canadians pour over the line and into the enemy trenches. A great panic takes over the men as I stare for just a moment at the chaos below me. Soldiers battle with rifles, frantically using them like pikes to stab and parry. There is none of the smoothness of our training in their movements. Others desperately struggle with their hands, strangling one another or using whatever they can, helmets, rifle butts, pieces of wood, to smash each other's skulls.

Gripping my rifle in both hands, I jump into the trench. A young man with startling green eyes runs at me, his rifle pointed, his small frame almost like a child's in his oversize coat. I sidestep the rifle and let the momentum of the German's charge carry him onto my Mauser's bayonet. The boy's eyes go wide and I feel the knife's length cut into his body. Then the point hits something hard and stops. The young soldier opens his mouth as I try to pull the bayonet from him. But it is stuck and I am forced to raise my boot to the soldier's belly and kick hard to dislodge it. He falls back, clutching his stomach.

I turn from him to stop myself from throwing up, just as another soldier runs at me, this one much larger, a giant of a man it seems to me, his red hair and eyes wild as if on fire. He carries a war club in his hand and swings it clumsily but with great force at the top of my skull. I jump to the side and the force of his attack carries the man

forward and onto the ground so that he is on all fours. Before he can get up, I raise my rifle with both hands and drive the bayonet into his back. I can feel it bounce sharply off his spine before it finds a softer spot and sinks in halfway. The big man falls onto his stomach as I struggle to pull the bayonet out.

The German swings his arms wildly behind him, trying to reach that centre place in his back as if he has a great itch. I pull with all my might but the bayonet is stuck. I have no choice but to stand on the man's back, and as he writhes around I pull up hard, the knife suddenly coming loose so that I fly off him and land on my tailbone, the breath knocked from me. All around me are the legs and torsos of men struggling with one another, and as I gulp air I can only watch in horror as the red giant stands up with dazed anger in his eyes and on wobbly legs bears down on me, hands outstretched to squeeze my neck. The man leans down so close that I can smell his sour breath. He mutters something I cannot make out, and it is then that I realize I'm going to die now, my diaphragm relaxing in this knowledge so that I can breathe a little again. The German's hands are calloused and very strong as he begins squeezing, and all I can do is stare up into his angry bloodshot eyes. He is no monster, just a man, I think, as my eyes bulge and I stop breathing once again.

Throat burning, I catch the movement of someone coming up beside the big man, and as I look over I see McCaan with his officer's revolver drawn. He places it to the side of the big man's head and I watch his finger pull the trigger. The man's head pops open in a spray of red and grey that covers my face in its warmth, a startling feeling in the cold air. I suck in a great breath of air and blood, then begin sputtering. McCaan calmly moves on, aiming his revolver and firing as he walks along the trench.

When I have the strength, I stand up, but then fall back down again. From what I can tell, the Hun are retreating. My eyes close, but I am still alive.