

The ship creaks beneath them, worn timber groaning as it rolls with the swell. It rounds the headland toward the cove at Gallipoli, the dawn light painting a sunrise of smudged pinks and bruised purples. The sky feigns any ordinary day.

Where there had once been chatter — nervous, excited, boyish — there is now silence.

Lawrie clenches his hands to stop them shaking. His legs tremble anyway.

‘Mate, you right?’ a voice cuts through the silence.

Ethan — all strength and sun-dark skin, curls dancing in the breeze. A man always grounded, like he belongs to the earth itself. His wide shoulders make him stand out, even in a crowd of khaki.

The kind of man who looks like he belongs in a uniform.

‘You look like you’ve seen Djaanak,’ Ethan says, flashing a grin.

Lawrie tries to return it, but it barely reaches his lips.

‘It’ll be fine,’ Ethan says, his voice brushing the air like it believes it. ‘We’ll show those whitefellas what we’re made of. Watch ‘em run with their Turkish tails between their legs.’

Lawrie’s heart thuds harder against his skinny ribcage as the vessel edges soundlessly toward shore.

When the ship finally slows, boots splash into shallow water with near soundless precision.

Rifles are raised, jaws set.

And still, the sky pretends.

As Lawrie wades forward, water pulling at his ankles, he thinks of his father. Of the medals in a box at home. Of quiet pride and expectation.

*I’m not like him. I’m not brave. I’m not ready.*

Then the gunfire starts.

A sharp crack splits the air. Turkish soldiers rise from the hills like shadows, guns precise.

Screams rise.

Smoke chokes.

Men fall.

Lawrie runs.

He stumbles through water and smoke, flinging himself into the shelter of pine trees. His malnourished chest heaves. His ears ring.

He wants to fight — but can’t move.

*You’ve always been a disappointment,* the voice in his head spits. *But this? This is something else entirely.*

Through the branches, he sees Ethan.

Still standing. Still calm in the storm.

They lock eyes. Ethan shoots him the same characteristic grin. But something else hides beneath the smiling façade — pain.

His body snaps backward. A bullet. A single, merciless shot.

He collapses. One hand on his thigh, blood blooming like ink in water.

Lawrie stares.

*Not him. Not Ethan.*

He surges forward, panic driving him. Bullets hiss past him as he slides through blood and grit until he reaches his friend.

‘Got you,’ he whispers, more to himself than Ethan, who doesn’t reply, rich brown colour drained from his face.

Lawrie drags him back, inch by inch, teeth clenched, heart thudding as the world screams around them. Bodies of the fallen lay scattered across the shore — friends, strangers,

enemies. All the same in death.

Finally, they reach the trees. With trembling hands, Lawrie drops to his knees, tears off his jacket, and presses it hard against the wound. Blood soaks through instantly.

‘I don’t know what to do,’ he mutters. ‘I don’t know how to help.’

Ethan doesn’t answer. His face is pale, jaw clenched tight.

‘I don’t know what I’m doing,’ Lawrie mutters. ‘I don’t know how to fix this.’

A sound behind makes him spin.

A soldier steps from the brush — pale skin, silver buzzcut, rifle in hand.

The Turkish emblem stitched on his chest alongside a patch bearing his duty.

DOKTOR.

The barrel of the gun points directly at them.

Lawrie freezes.

‘Please,’ he wheezes, adrenaline seeping into his boots. ‘Please — he’s dying.’

For a moment, the soldier doesn’t move. His eyes dart from Lawrie’s to Ethan, shuddering violently against the ground, deep red ink staining the dirt.

Then he lowers the rifle.

Wordlessly, he drops to his knees, pulling a medical kit from his vest.

He works fast — gauze, pressure, tape. Steady hands.

‘Best I can do,’ he says in accented English.

But it’s enough.

Colour returns to Ethan’s cheeks. His eyes blink open.

He looks at the man — the enemy — and manages a crooked grin.

‘Thanks, mate.’

The Turkish soldier nods once, then disappears into the trees, rifle slung behind him like a defeated adversary.

Lawrie slumps back, his shirt damp with sweat and blood.

Around them, the gunfire hasn’t stopped. He doesn’t know if they’ll survive the day. But for now, Ethan is breathing.

For now, he is alive.

A small victory against the chaos.

And for the first time since they left the ship, Lawrie’s hands are still.