

## II

# THE BILLETS IN FLESSELLES

FLESSELLES, FRANCE

1916

"So they killed him?" the boy asked, entirely too invested in Hickit's story.

"But what about Lucy?" asked the girl beside him, "What happened to her? They didn't force her to marry that dick Drebber did they?"

"For five days he trunched back to the town," Hickit continued, lowering his voice, "not knowing his true loves fate." He paused for effect, the two soldiers were at the edge of their seats. A bump in the road caused the truck to jump a little, they both almost fell forward into Hickit.

"When he was almost back in town, he ran into a familiar face, a Mormon named Cowper.

"'I am Jefferson Hope,' he said to him, 'you remember me. What has become of Lucy Ferrier?"

"'She was married yesterday... To Enoch Drebber.'"

"Shit!" the girl cried, "What happened next? He rescued her, right?"

It had been like this for most of the journey, and Daisy was entirely fed up. After a failed attempt at explaining the plot of *A Study*

*in Scarlet* to Daisy, Hickit had found two soldiers in the truck that were as enthusiastic about literature as he was. The others in the truck—about six of them—listened on, not as disinterested as they appeared to be, given their silence.

The trip took just a few hours, though it felt like much longer. It wasn't far enough to warrant travel by train, so they had spent most of it on horseback, or in a carriage. Near Doullens they were able to catch a ride in a truck, in which they were now sitting.

They arrived at Flesselles just before sundown, and, after parting ways with the soldiers in the truck, Daisy checked their letter. It said to report to Lieutenant Evans, who was in the town's church.

The pair headed down the road towards the town.

The sky was painted in the brilliant pink-orange hue of the setting sun, and long clouds streaked across the sky. Everything was lit with a warm light, with trees that cast long shadows across the green plains. A butterfly flew past her, and disappeared into the shrubs that lined the path.

If this was what the French countryside was like, Daisy liked it.

It was a lovely place, well clear from the constant rumble of artillery fire, and the stench of mud, rot and sweat. Daisy inhaled deeply, tasting the sweet, clean air. Hickit did the same.

It wasn't long before they arrived at the edge of town, and the two of them continued towards the church, marked in their sights as the tip of a spire, peaking over the roofs of the stone apartments.

They passed soldiers from the third battalion. Many of them sat on the cobblestone along the edge of the street, recovering from a hard day's work of 'resting'.

Though there were lots of Australian soldiers on the streets, unsurprisingly, the they were more French civilians present. They didn't seem in as bleak a mood as Daisy expected. Some chatted with the soldiers, through either the language of food or that of communicative hand gestures. Most locals though, did their best to go about their day without the soldiers interference.

Daisy and Hickit stopped and waited for a parade of soldiers marching down the road to pass before crossing the street towards the church.

Heading inside the large, arched doorway, they didn't immediately notice any soldiers. Instead, there were mostly locals. A

large number of them, in fact, spread out along the hall.

They spotted a few soldiers chatting by a door near the back end of the room. Upon asking them, they were told that the military was operating out of every room in the church except the main hall.

After being given directions to Evans' office, the two of them made their way inside.

It was a small area, with around half a dozen rooms. It didn't take long until they located her room.

Evans sat at a large desk in the centre of the room, reading through some papers.

Daisy and Hickit entered the room, and saluted. "Lieutenant Evans sir! Corporal Parker and Private Hickit reports!"

The woman placed the papers down on her desk, and stood up. She was tall, her large figure obscuring the light of the window behind her. Her light blonde hair was pulled back into an incredibly neat bun, and on her right arm, she was brandishing an armband with the red letters "MP": Military Police.

Evans glanced disapprovingly at their boots, dirtied from their trip from the front.

"You're excused in this instance," she said, "but from now on, *do not* enter my office without first getting permission from me, is that understood?"

"Y-Yes sir, understood."

She adjusted the cuff of her sleeve, and glanced at the two of them. "Did Yale send you?" she asked.

"Yes sir," said Daisy. She took out the letter, and handed it to her.

Evans read it intently, brushed it off, then put it down on her desk, parallel to the previous papers. "I see. And Yale picked you because?"

"Because we solved a murder!" Hickit smiled.

"In the front lines?"

"Yes."

"*For once, Yale does something right,*" Evans muttered. "Come with me," she said, "we have our own murder to solve."

"You want us to help?"

"That is why you're here, isn't it?"

She led them down a corridor. "The murder occurred two days ago," she explained, "the room has already been cleaned; all the

evidence for the case is being kept in a storage room, you can look through it in there.”

“And it’s still under investigation?”

“Yes,” Evans replied, “in truth, we’re at a bit of a standstill, maybe your insight could prove useful.”

Once they arrived in front of a door that looked exactly the same as every other door in the building, Evans came to a stop, and knocked on it.

Another MP, a short woman with dark skin, answered.

“Lieutenant!” she said. She then glanced at Daisy and Hickit, “Who’s this?”

“This is Corporal Parker, and Private Hickit,” Evans said, “I’ve brought them in to help with the Swinbourne case.”

“Is that so?” she smiled, “I’m Special Agent Kapadia, it’s nice to meet you.”

“Likewise,” Hickit smiled.

Kapadia stepped out of the doorway, “Come in, I’ll grab the crate.”

The storage room wasn’t actually a storage room, it was merely the same layout as most of the other rooms they’d seen, but with a layer of boxes over every surface. Kapadia made her way inside, and picked out a crate in the corner. She dumped it onto a table by the wall, and began pulling out files and paper bags. Hickit and Daisy followed Evans inside, and up to the table.

“The victims name was Lieutenant Swinbourne,” Kapadia said, pulling out a file, “he was stabbed to death in his office in the church at around twenty-one hundred, two days ago. He was in charge of organising labour for soldiers behind the lines.” She passed them another file, it was a list of reports, from around half a dozen lieutenants.

“When we talked with those present that night, almost everyone at the church could identify a suspicious figure. A corporal, a woman with long blonde hair and blue eyes.”

Daisy scanned through the witnesses.

“What most of the witnesses also noted was the woman’s hair wasn’t tied up, as well as her uniform being wet, with droplets of blood on it.”

“Was she just back from the front?” Hickit asked.

"That's what we figured," said Kapadia.

Daisy looked through another evidence bag, this one being full of bloody documents.

"And everyone saw her, except for a 'Lieutenant Rooney?'" Daisy asked, looking back at the reports from the church.

"Yes, she was in the church at the time, but was the only one who didn't see her. We've yet to talk to her."

"How come?"

"Well, it's pretty clear this blonde corporal killed him, and we've spent most of our energies organising a search for her."

"Have you talked to 'Major Derling' yet?"

"Hm?"

Daisy waved the bloody note she was holding, "This note was sent by Major Derling, dated the night Swinbourne died. It also has a different blood pattern than the other notes, instead of being soaked in a pool of blood, like these other papers were, this one is splattered with small droplets. I think he was holding this when his throat was slit."

Kapadia took the note, and examined it. "Interesting... Yes, we have talked to him, he and his company got back from the front a few days ago, we figured our killer was from there too."

"And?"

"And she was, Derling knew her personally."

"But you still don't know where she is?"

"No."

Kapadia took out another paper, with a two or three inked blotches. She handed it to Hickit.

"We have some of her fingerprints too, they were left on the doorknob in blood, so we know it belongs to her."

"Fingerprints... they're like a biological ID, right?"

"Yes, no two peoples are the same, so if someones prints match those found at the scene, they're our killer."

"So this is how you're searching for her? Fingerprinting everybody?"

"It's not entirely efficient," Evans said, "but finding her is of upmost priority."

"It seems like you have everything figured out," Daisy said, "what

can *we* possibly do?"

"You don't have a motive, do you?" Hickit asked.

"Nope, haven't the slightest clue."

"You can speak to Major Derling in the morning, it's getting late."

"Sounds good."

Kapadia collected up all the documents. "We'll see you at O six hundred," she smiled.



The two of them had just managed to catch the billeting officer before he headed off for the evening, and had gotten him to find them a place to stay for the night. Hickit was sent off with a few other soldiers on their way out of town, they'd be staying in a barn, whereas Daisy was brought to an apartment not far from the church. She wondered whether the difference in billeting was due to the fact that she was a corporal, or a woman. Either way, she wasn't complaining.

When they arrived at the apartment, the billeting officer knocked on the door. A woman answered. In French, the officer introduced Daisy and explained that she'd be staying with them. The woman gave Daisy a big smile, and firmly shook her hand. She waved the billeting officer *adieu*, and, still holding on to Daisy, took her down the hall.

It was a cosy place, with the room at the end of the corridor, and the candles scattered around, spotting the house with a calming, warm light.

The woman led her into a dining room. There were other people present, two French women, and two soldiers. Three of them were sitting at a table in the centre of the room, one French woman stood leaning against the wall, and another peeked her head out from around the corner of a doorway.

"*Je m'appelle Simonne,*" the first woman she met said, pointing to herself. "*Quel est votre nom ?*"

"Uh, Parker," Daisy nodded.

Simonne smiled, then moved over to the French woman sitting at the table, "*Voici mes filles, Madeleine,*" -she pointed to the woman in the other room,- "*Pauline,*" -and to the woman by the wall- "*et Camélia.*"

They all looked to be around their early twenties, attractive, probably in shape to enlist. Noticing the absence of a father, Daisy figured that's why they're still here.

A soldier sitting at the table waved a hand at her, "The name's Kaur."

"Sir," the girl next to her added, "The name's Kaur, *sir*." She looked to Daisy, giving a faint smile, "I'm Jones, sir."

Daisy gave a slight nod, "Do either of you know any French?" she asked.

"Nope," said Kaur, "I mean, I know how to say that I *don't* speak French: *Je nu parlou par Fronsay*."

Jones rolled her eyes.

Simonne, called her two eldest—the brunettes, Pauline and Madeleine—into the kitchen.

The youngest daughter, Camélia, leant idly against the wall.

Daisy went and stood next to her, peering into the kitchen. It didn't sound like they were cleaning up. "Haven't you eaten already?" she asked.

"*Je ne sais pas ce que vous dites*," the woman said blankly.

"We've already had food, but I think she's gonna make you some as well," said Kaur.

Daisy probably should have said something polite, maybe offer to go without. But she hadn't had a good meal in weeks, and whatever Simonne was cooking, it had to be better than the shit she'd eaten in the trenches.

"*Elle est toujours comme ça*," muttered Camélia.

Daisy looked at her, she wasn't sure who it was directed at, if it was to anyone at all. She was staring off into nothing, looping her finger around a coil of her long, golden hair.

Women in the military can't have their hair below the collar, and even then, most women, after spending quite a few weeks in the trenches, opted to have it shaved.

Daisy found her to be quite beautiful, which was a distinction from attractive that she didn't make often.

Camélia noticed her staring, and turned to look at her. Daisy evaded her gaze, and found herself looking at the few photos that framed the wall.

One had their family, their full one. Simonne and her three daughters she had just met, as well as their father, a tall, handsome looking man, with short blond hair. Another photo caught her eye, it was their father, with two younger kids. A boy and a girl. They were all wearing military uniforms, standing proudly in front of their apartment.

"Are they your siblings?" Daisy asked, pointing to the kids in uniform.

Camélia pointed to the father, "*Mon père,*" and to the two younger soldiers, "*et mes cousins...*" She trailed off. "*C'était il y a environ... un an.*"

Camélia said nothing for a moment, just stared at the photograph.

Daisy had seen that mask before, it hid both sadness, and anger. At the world, and yourself.

She'd worn it too. A long time ago.

Camélia then pointed to another photo. This one had a middle aged man. He stood, very proud looking, in front of a barn. "*C'est mon oncle, il possède une ferme*" she said in a brighter tone, though it felt almost mechanical, "*Il nous donne parfois du lait.*"

Camélia opened her mouth, presumably to talk about another photo, but she stopped herself.

They both looked at them together, in silence. There were so many different people, such a large family. Daisy almost let herself feel jealous.

After some time of Kaur's tiring small talk, and a few entirely made up war stories, Simonne and her two daughters emerged from the kitchen. They had a bowl of stew, which Simonne gleefully handed to Daisy.

"Thank you," Daisy smiled.

"*Nous aimons avoir des invités,*" Simonne said, one-upping her enthusiasm.

It was somewhat awkward considering Daisy was the only one at the table eating, but it was the best food she'd had in a long time, and on top of that, it was hot.

There was silence for a moment, then Simonne made a sound as if she'd remembered something.

She disappeared into the adjacent room again, and emerged with a bottle of milk, a brightly coloured label plastered along the front.



*"Voulez-vous du lait ?"* she offered Daisy, *"Il est frais."*

"Oh, no thank you," Daisy shook her head, "you've been kind enough already."

Simonne smiled, and returned to the other room.

Kaur huffed, "She didn't offer *me* any milk."

After the food, Simonne had set Daisy up in one of the bedrooms. Simonne and Pauline were in one. Madeleine, Kaur and Jones were in another, and Daisy was staying with Camélia. Despite not having a bed, Simonne had given her as much linen as she could find. Only a few blankets, and a pillow, laying on the hard wood, but Daisy appreciated it.

When Daisy found herself to be alone, she peeled off her uniform, and the many layers of clothing that she had accrued during her time at war. She placed her clothes over the windowsill, and folded her uniform into a pile nearby. Her cigarette case, lighter, and wristlet—among other miscellaneous personal items—sat on a stool next to Daisy's makeshift bed.

She was about to light herself a cigarette when she heard the door open. She turned around, in the doorway stood Camélia, she was carrying a pitcher, and a glass. She hesitated, noticing Daisy was in nothing but her undergarments, but walked into the room anyways.

*"Mère veut que je te donne ça,"* she said softly, placing the pitcher down on the stool beside Daisy.

"... Thank you," Daisy said, lowering her voice to match Camélia's.

Camélia glanced at her, and noticed her shoulder. It was Daisy's scars. Shrapnel wounds, multiple of them. They formed together to make a single distortion of flesh, which crept from the back of her left shoulder over to her left breast. They were almost a year old by now.

*"C'est ..."* Camélia brought her arm up to Daisy's shoulder, and brushed her hand over her mottled skin. *"C'est ce que ça te fait ?"*

Daisy saw her expression change. She was angry, not at her, but at the war.

At her father too, and her cousins. She hated them for leaving, for thinking that it would achieve anything. It was just suicide.

She looked at Parker, would they come back as scarred as her?

Would they come back at all?

"It's just skin deep," Daisy said quietly, "I'm fine."

Camélia looked up, and met her eyes. Daisy became aware of how close their bodies were. She could feel Camélia's breath on her neck, the touch of her fingers on her skin, the smell of her hair. Her eyes gazing into her own. They stood there for a moment, neither of them moving. Daisy placed her hand on Camélia's waist, and slowly, kissed her neck.

Camélia took a sharp inhale, and jerked her head back.

She brought her hand to the spot where she'd been kissed, lightly touching her skin with her fingers. Daisy noticed two small bruises, partially obscured by her hair, on the left side of Camélia's neck.

Daisy took a step forward, and looked closer at the bruises, they were the kind that formed when you were kissed too hard. They weren't new, the spots a pale blackish-blue colour.

Daisy moved to place her hand on Camélia's cheek, but she grabbed her wrist.

"*Lâchez-moi !*" she growled.

"I'm sorry." Daisy tried to wedge her hand free, but Camélia's grip was tight.

She dug her fingernails into Daisy's skin, "*Ne me touchez plus jamais.*"

Camélia let go, and flicked a lock of hair over her neck. She quickly left the room.



Daisy had awoken at around O five-thirty, and followed the wafting crowd of soldiers trickling in from outside of town till she came across where breakfast was being served. It was a large courtyard, mossy stones paved the centre, with the few wooden benches dotted around the square being packed to the brim with far too many people than should be necessary. Food was being served by a tent, placed on the side of the courtyard leaning up against a neighbouring building.

The food was certainly an attempt at a beef stew, except without whatever the hell made beef taste like beef. It was nice, just not as good as what Simonne had made the night prior. Daisy sat herself in

the corner of the square, under a tree, while she ate. She spotted Kaur and Jones, as well as Hickit. Hickit was chatting with who Daisy presumed to be the boys he stayed with last night, clearly recounting another adventure of that *Sherlock Holmes* of his.

After a while, the group of soldiers began to thin out, as they went off to their jobs and chores assigned to them.

Who assigned these jobs? Daisy found that an interesting question.

That had been Swinbourne's job, and now that he was dead, someone had to replace him.

After Daisy had cleaned out her mess tin, she scanned the courtyard for someone with some semblance of authority. Despite not fitting that singular criterion, she spotted a shy looking boy with a board clip gathered around a group of soldiers. He stood atop a wooden crate, an attempt to counteract his short height, and cleared his throat.

"Men's group Duff!" he announced, "you'll be reporting to Sergeant Windon, and then heading out east. You'll be cutting and hauling lumber for transport by train!"

There was a round of chatter, and the group made their way out onto the street. When the crowd dissipated, Daisy approached him.

"Oi, you."

The boy turned to her, "Uh, hi. Can I help you?"

"Did you work for Lieutenant Swinbourne? Or are you his replacement?"

The boy inched backwards. "Why do you ask? Are you with the MP?"

"I'm working with them, yes." Daisy waited a moment, as if to say: *my question still stands*.

The boy cleared his throat again. "No, I'm not *his* replacement. The woman who worked for Swinbourne replaced him, but everyone else has had to take on extra work. I didn't use to work for them, I was just pulled out for some menial labour."

"And who is this woman who replaced him?"

"Lieutenant Rooney," he said.

*Well, well, well*, Daisy thought. "Can I speak to her?" she asked.

"Sure," the boy said, "I'll let her know."

Though Daisy had a feeling it might piss Evans off, she arrived at the church thirty seconds past six.

When she turned into the doorway of the church, she almost ran straight into her.

"Parker," Evans said, brushing herself off, "You're late."

"I know."

She kept walking, and Daisy fell in line beside Hickit and Kapadia, the former giving her a big smile.

"Derling is out on a bivouac, about a kilometre east of here," Evans said, "We've already questioned him when the initial investigation began, but you are free to ask anything that you think might help."

Daisy didn't feel like walking a kilometre, but thought of no better way to get there. She sighed, it shouldn't take too long.

"How was your night Parker?" Hickit asked. "We got to sleep with cows, they were cute."

"It was fine," Daisy said, "the family there was really friendly; They made us dinner."

"Lucky," Kapadia chimed, "the family I'm staying with hates us."

"Well from what I could tell," Hickit said, "the cows in my barn were very welcoming. Did you know cows don't actually sleep standing up?"

"Yeah, they only do that for light naps," Kapadia said.

"How can they sleep standing up?" Daisy said, thinking out loud.

"Never been on a farm Parker?" Kapadia teased.

"Ooh, are you a city girl?" Hickit laughed, "Where are you from, Sydney?"

"I was born in Melbourne, actually."

"Then how did you end up in the second battalion?" Kapadia laughed.

"It's a-" she exhaled. "Forget it."

"Why? Is it super embarrassing? I'm sure it can't be that bad."

"She clearly left to join the grand adventure that is" -Hickit spread his hands to the sky- "the war to end all wars."

"No no no, she obviously met a *super* hot Sydneysider who lured her away to the big city."

"Don't be ridiculous, she must have-"

"I *said* forget it!" Daisy snapped, "Fucking- shut up!"

They both went silent.

"Watch your language corporal," Evans retorted, "Kapadia is your superior."

"Apologies, lieutenant. Special agent."

Kapadia tried to give her an apologetic look, but Daisy didn't so much as glance at her.

The entrance to Derling's bivouac was marked with the parting of a line of tents. There was no formal entrance, and so the group had to jump the fence between the camp and the road.

Evans—somewhat annoyingly—had decided to go the long way around, continuing along the road until she found an actual gate. While waiting for her, Daisy, Hickit and Kapadia stood alone.

Kapadia opened her mouth to speak, but it took a moment for her to find the words. She didn't know what she said, only that it struck a nerve.

"I'm sorry," was all she knew to say.

"Don't worry about it," Daisy said blankly. "Really."

There were a few soldiers about the camp, sitting outside small tents, cooking meals in their mess tins. They all looked grizzled and miserable.

Evans led them directly down the main parting between the men's and women's sections, and up to a large tent.

Being unable to knock, Evans parted the canvas, and went inside. As Kapadia, Daisy and Hickit followed, they each saluted to Derling. Evans introduced their names.

Major Derling wasn't a young fellow, he looked to be in his mid to late fifties; A clean grey beard gave him an air of maturity most boys around here lacked. He sat comfortably at his makeshift desk, nodding in acknowledgement to the four visitors.

"Major Derling," Evans said, "apologies for the repetition, but I have a few associates joining in on the Swinbourne case, they just had a few questions."

"Of course," he said. He gave a polite smile to Daisy and Hickit ushering them to a few seats, "Sit down, sit down. It's not too comfortable though, it's only temporary."

The major shifted in his seat, and turned towards Daisy.

"So," he said, looking to Daisy, "what is it you two wanted to

know?"

Hickit procured the evidence bag containing the bloody note, and handed it to Daisy, who passed it off to Derling.

"I believe this note was the last thing Swinbourne was holding before his throat was slit by a blonde haired woman. Kapadia told us you knew this woman personally, did she send that note?"

He took the note out from the evidence bag, and squinted at the writing. "The letter was to notify Swinbourne that my company was taking a few extra days in the back lines; I wanted them to keep up with work in the mean time. And yes, I do know the blonde haired woman. Her name is Agatha Cieres, she delivered that note to Swinbourne."

"And she hasn't been seen?"

"She hasn't," Derling said, "not since the murder happened."

"Where was she last seen?"

"At a barn just west of here. They went there at around O nine hundred, by the time everybody else woke up, she'd disappeared."

"Why didn't she sleep with the other soldiers here?" Hickit asked.

"I had her billeted there," Derling said. "It's a warmer than sleeping out here, even if just a little bit."

"And where did you sleep two nights ago?" Daisy asked.

"In town," he said.

"Do you have any idea why she'd want to kill Swinbourne? Did you see the two of them together before they met?"

"No, never met the man myself. And Cieres didn't either." He leaned forward, and looked the two of them in the eyes.

"I don't know what you think you know about her, but you're wrong. She didn't do this."

"And why's that sir?" Daisy asked.

Derling sighed. "To put it bluntly, she's a complete narcissist."

"And narcissists aren't capable of murder?"

"The only person she cares about is herself," he said, "nothing else really matters to her. Lot's of people don't like her, chances are Swinbourne didn't either. But she doesn't care, never has. Sure, sometimes she refuses to tie her hair up, but she's your equivalent of a straight A student, she thinks too highly of herself to do something as stupid as murder."

"Do you know why she ran away then?" Hickit asked.

"The only reason I'd say she'd disappear is because she's scared. She must know what happened that night, and is worried that *she'll* be charged for it."

There was a moments silence, the two of them stewed in their thoughts.

"You said that she doesn't tie her hair up, what do you mean by that?" Hickit asked.

Derling leant back in his chair. "It's the one thing she always fights me over. Cieres prefers to keep it down, but it's military tradition to tie it up. Eventually I gave in on the matter."

"Does she often have it down outside of camp?"

"Unless she's trying to woo some French women, then no. Other officials aren't as lenient as I am." He paused, "Why do you ask?"

"The people who reported seeing her the night of the murder said that her hair wasn't tied up."

"So she was horny!" Derling said, throwing his hands up into the air, "That doesn't mean she killed anyone!"

"Major, several people saw her that night. She was there."

"Did they see her stab him?" he prodded.

Silence.

"I didn't think so." Derling sighed, hiding his face in his hands.

"Please. Just find her."

"We're trying our best sir," Evans said.



Daisy had decided to bring the others with her to talk to Rooney. They had all crowded together in the lieutenants small office. Daisy, Hickit and Kapadia sat down in front of her desk. Evans had taken a particular disliking to the messiness of the place; She stood around the outside of the room—far away from Rooney's cigar smoke—inspecting dust on shelves.

Rooney sat, feet up on her desk, with a large cigar in her mouth. Strands of her dark brown hair flew about in all directions, contained only by the messy bun it was tied in, and the officers cap on her head. Daisy liked her.

Rooney exhaled a puff of smoke, "So, I know what you're thinking: *Rooney killed her boss to take his job, lust for power, money, blah blah blah and all that shit, right?*"

"Not entirely, we figured you'd be the one who knew Swinbourne the best."

"Smart girl," Rooney said, jabbing the cigar in her direction. "Truth is I don't give a flying fuck about Swinbourne's job, sure, it comes with more pay, and I'm not going to pretend I'm not happy about it, but it also comes with more responsibilities, and *that* is what I'd rather do without."

"Tell us about Swinbourne, what was he like?"

Rooney tilted her head, back and puffed a ring of smoke towards the ceiling. "Yeah, he was a good guy. Did all his paperwork. Handwriting was shit though."

"Can you think of anybody who might've meant him harm?" Daisy asked.

Rooney thought for a moment, "Honestly? No. As I said, he was an alright guy, I can't think of any actual reason why someone would want him dead."

"Have you ever seen or heard of Corporal Agatha Cieres?"

She thought for a second.

"No," she lied, "what's she look like?"

"Long blonde hair, blue eyes?"

"Pretty?" Hickit added.

Rooney snapped her fingers. "Shit, I saw her and Swinbourne together the other day," she lied again.

"Do you know why?" Hickit asked.

"Can't say I do. But from the looks on your faces, I'm assuming it's not good."

Evans, by a shelf on the far side of the room, shifted aside a framed portrait of Jesus, and compared the difference in dust to that where the photo once stood. Rooney glanced at the woman.

Daisy changed subjects: "Who do you think stands to gain from Swinbourne's death?" she asked.

"I mean, I do, clearly," Rooney laughed, "But my position is only temporary, they're currently looking for a more 'qualified' replacement."



"I can see *why*," Evans muttered from the corner. Rooney pretended not to hear.

"So why are you asking about that Cieres girl?"

"All of your subordinates reported seeing her the night of the murder. You were there too, were you not?"

"Yeah. Yeah that's right."

"But you didn't see her."

Evans moved across the room, over to a drawer.

"No," Rooney said, telling the truth this time, "I usually keep my door closed. She must have walked right by. Scary thought really."

Something on the drawer caught Evans' eye, and she pinched at the surface, grabbing something between two fingers.

Rooney eyed her. "Permission to speak freely sir?" she asked flatly.

Evans didn't look at her, just focused on whatever she was holding. "Permission Granted."

"Quit touching my shit and sit the fuck down."

Evans looked startled for a moment, then shrugged. *Fair*.

She sat down beside Daisy. After a moment, she nudged her shoulder, and showed her what she picked up from the drawer.

Daisy stood up, then saluted.

"Thank you for your time, lieutenant."

Hickit and Kapadia looked surprised, but quickly and quietly followed along as they left the room.

When the door shut, Kapadia was the first to speak.

"What the hell was that? We weren't finished questioning her."

"Yes we were," Daisy said.

Evans held up her hand. In between her thumb and forefinger was a strand of long, blonde hair.

"The drawer I found this on also had a notable lack of dust, even though there were items on the surface. Meaning the top was disturbed, smearing the dust off, then the items were replaced."

"Cieres was here," Daisy said, "and I think I know why."

The group retrieved a few items from the evidence crate, and revisited Derling. On their way to and from, Daisy explained her theory.

Much to Rooney's surprise, the group returned shortly after they first left.

They all sat down, and before Rooney could speak, Daisy dropped an item on her desk. It was Derling's signed note, the top half stained illegible by dried blood.

"Are you familiar with this sir?" Daisy asked.

Rooney looked at all of them, then the note.

"Is this why you barged in here?" she asked, a tinge of fear in her voice.

"Answer the question."

Rooney rolled her eyes, and picked the note up. She looked at both sides, then put it back on the desk.

"I've never seen that before," she said.

"That's a lie."

"Excuse me?"

"That note was written by Major Derling, who sent Cieres to give it to Swinbourne," Hickit said, "But have a look at the paper, it doesn't specifically mention him, does it?"

She didn't look at the paper, instead leaning back in her chair.

"We just double checked with the Major, and he said that he only assumed she sent it to Swinbourne based off of the information from the murder; he didn't know anyone's names here, he only said to find the one in charge."

"When we spoke with you last," Daisy said, "Evans found this:"

Evans procured the golden hair. "From what we have gathered about Cieres, her most distinctive feature is her hair. The length in particular, is of note."

"You were lying when you said you'd never seen Cieres before the murder. You were also lying when you said you saw her and Swinbourne together."

"You don't want to be associated with her, do you?" Kapadia said, "Even when its clear that she's been here before, you lie about it. Why? What's there to hide?"

Daisy leaned forward. "You had sex with her, didn't you?"

Rooney scoffed, shifting in her seat, "That's fucking insane."

"Your subordinates, the ones who saw Cieres the night of the murder, described her to have her hair down. It was an odd detail, and the reasoning behind it was what had me confused. Derling said that she only had it down when she was trying to charm someone,

which didn't make sense if she was going to see Swinbourne. But she didn't bring that note to Swinbourne, she brought it to *you*."

"So you're accusing me of fucking a murderer, what's this got to do with her killing Swinbourne?"

"We don't think she killed Swinbourne. We think *you* did."

"No," Rooney growled, "I've had enough of this. Get out."

"Some point after Cieres left, Swinbourne found out what you did. I don't know if he saw you or if one of your subordinates ratted you out, but he called you to his office. He threatened to report you. It would cost you your job, your reputation, everything. So you killed him, and planted the note Cieres gave you to make it look like she did it. Now, we don't know what happened to Cieres, you might have killed her—she's a loose end, might have even accused you of sexual coercion—or maybe she just ran away in fear of prosecution. In the end, it was two birds with one stone: you get rid of the only people who knew about your hook up, and get a nice promotion in the process."

Rooney pinched the bridge of her nose, and sighed, until eventually the sound turned into a frustrated groan. She slammed her fist on the table, Hickit jumped a little.

"*This*" -she jabbed a finger at Daisy, then waved it at the others- "is all *fucking* conjecture. Get the fuck out of my office."

"Care to explain who this belongs to?" Evans held up the hair.

Rooney laughed, "Its a fucking hair! how are you supposed to prove that's Cieres? It could have been left by any blonde woman who came in here. Hell, it could even be a man."

"A few fingerprints were found at the scene," Evans said, "you're willing to supply your prints for comparison?"

"Oh I'll do you one better." she held up her right hand. Across her palm streaked a sickly scar, which created a clean divot a few millimetres deep.

"If I touched anything enough to leave prints, you'd *fucking* know about it."



The group sat slumped over a table outside of a cafe. Hickit and

Kapadia sipped at their tea.

"I still think we were on to something," Daisy said, "If she had nothing to hide, she'd have cooperated."

"She gave us her prints," Kapadia said, "she didn't kill Swinbourne."

"Which means we got something right, it just wasn't the murder," Hickit said.

"It was their affair," said Evans, "she couldn't cooperate with us because it would mean admitting she'd seen Cieres before, it would mean losing her job."

"Slippery little bastard knew we didn't have enough to court martial her, she was playing it safe." Daisy groaned, "I *knew* she was lying."

"That is the definition of hearsay," Evans said, "and it won't pass in court, irregardless of how accurate you are, Parker. We need something more... substantial."

"Cieres' testimony would do, wouldn't it?" Hickit asked.

"It would," Kapadia said, "if we ever find her that is."

They sat in silence, Hickit took another sip of his tea.

"She's really the key to everything, isn't she?"

They all nodded simultaneously.

Hickit put his mug back down, and brought a hand to his chin. "So what *do* we know?"

"We know that Cieres visited Rooney's office that night, then—although the 'why' still alludes us—was spotted by Rooney's subordinates as she headed to Swinbourne's office. She handed him the note, then slit his throat."

"And then she fucking vanished."

Kapadia laughed, which lightened the mood as much as one could when discussing murder. "And then she vanished."

*"Excusez-moi."*

They all turned to the voice, half expecting it to be the waiter. Instead it was a French police officer, a tall man in a bright blue uniform.

He saluted to Evans. "*Vous êtes le Lieutenant Evans, n'est-ce pas ?*"

They all looked to her.

"This is usually the part where we follow him."

As they made their way east, Evans explained how this process usually works.

"The French Gendarmerie only get us involved when an incident involves our troops. They tell us their charges, we discipline them, it's easier that way."

"What kind of 'incidents'?"

"Stealing, drunken assault, things of that ilk."

Hickit glanced at the gendarme again, who had quickened his pace, "Then how come he looks so worried?" he asked, "does he usually come find you specifically?"

"I must admit," Evans said, "this *is* unusual. They often just send the soldier over with a report; They don't make us bother coming all the way out here."

They passed Derling's bivouac, and continued down the road until they reached a barn. There were about a dozen other gendarmes present, most of which hung around the left side of the large entrance. The gendarme they'd been following led them to an older man, a major.

"Escoffier," Evans said, "What's going on here?"

The man said a few words. His voice sounded as bristly as his moustache.

"One of your soldiers has been killed," said the young woman next to him—an interpreter officer. Escoffier nodded.

"As in murdered?" Hickit asked.

"Yes," said the interpreter, "We are not really sure what happened; We sent for you as soon as we got notified."

Escoffier waved over a French civilian. A middle aged man who, by the look of it, owned the barn. Daisy thought he looked familiar.

"This is Georges Auclair, a group of women have been billeted in his barn for the past week or so, we believe the victim was too."

Georges spoke, his voice frail, and worried.

"He says that he only found the body after the women noticed a smell, he believes she must have been there for at least a few days."

"Do we know who she is?" asked Kapadia.

After the interpreter relayed this to Escoffier, he reached into his breast pocket, and pulled out an identity disc. He handed it to them.

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They all exchanged glances.

"Can we see the body?" Kapadia asked. The interpreter—Lavigne, Daisy saw from her uniform—nodded, then lead them down the edge of the barn. Evans stayed with Escoffier, and the civilian.

About halfway down the length of the barn, a few gendarmes were crouched against the wall, writing notes down on paper.

The scene that surrounded the men was all too familiar, blood on the dirt, the smell of death, the unfeeling expression shared on all their faces.

Just behind them, laid the body. It was unmistakably her, from the bright blue eyes, to the long gold hair.

Daisy figured the woman was moved postmortem, a scraggy blanket was wrapped around her, and her uniform sat in a folded pile nearby.

"Where was she when you found her?" Daisy asked.

One of the gendarmes pointed away from the barn, to a large line of bushes a few metres down an incline.

*"She was hidden in that bush, but she was killed right here,"* he then pointed to the ground between them, the gravel and dirt was hastily scratched over, covering the faint stain of blood.

*"Next to it was a pile of glass shards, the larger pieces were hidden in the bush."* The gendarme passed them a brown paper bag, inside was the remains of a milk glass, a brightly coloured label torn between a few shards. Some of them were tipped in blood, long since dried.

"This is what killed her?" Kapadia asked, "was there milk in it at the time?"

"Yes," the gendarme said, he then moved over to Cieres body, *"She was struck on both sides of her skull with a blunt force, then stabbed in the stomach at least six times."*

"That fits the profile of our killer," Kapadia said.

"What? The same killer who's lying dead in front of us?"

"I'm just spit-balling here!" Kapadia said, *"Someone killed her, and in the same way that Swinbourne was killed. How do we know Cieres did at all? She could have been dead by then, the body has been here for days."*

"They all fucking saw her, that's how we know."

"Maybe Rooney did this?" Hickit offered, "got one of her subordinates to do the deed for her, and that's why her prints don't match?"

"No, I talked to them, they all corroborated. Nobody working in the church that night killed him."

"Which narrows our pool of suspects down to...?"

"Half of the third battalion."

Daisy reclaimed the attention of the gendarme, then pointed at Cieres. "How come you took her clothes off?"

"We *didn't*," the man said, "*we found her like that.*" He pulled the blanket down, and revealed her bare abdomen, caked in black blood. "*The only thing spilled onto the woman's uniform was the milk and blood from the head wound, nothing on her stomach.*"

"So our killer hit Cieres over the head twice, then took her uniform off before killing her?"

"Was she sexually assaulted?"

The gendarme shrugged, "*We're not the ones who would check,*" he said, "*but it's possible.*"

The three of them went over and crouched by the body. She didn't appear to have any other injuries other than those mentioned.

The injuries to her head weren't as severe as her stomach, the right side of her forehead was bruised, but not bloody, whereas the left side still had fragments of glass caught in her hair, painted slick with foul milk and blood.

"If the bottle only broke on the right side, that meant she was hit on the left first. If the killer was right handed, maybe they snuck up on her?"

"No, the angle is more to the front of her forehead, she must have turned around first, caught the killer by surprise, maybe that's why there's two strikes."

"If this was premeditated, why use a milk bottle? Why not use a clasp knife?" Daisy said.

"Maybe it wasn't premeditated," said Hickit. He thought for a second, before confirming the idea with himself. "I think the killer used their left hand for the first strike, then the right for their second."

"So, you're saying they're ambidextrous?"

"I don't think so," Hickit said, "the strike on her right side was not nearly as severe as the left, it didn't even break the bottle."

"Which means?"

"They were caught off guard, grabbed the only thing they could, with the only hand they could."

"So in this situation, Cieres was what, coming at them?" Kapadia asked, "what was she doing, and why?"

"I can't say."

"How does this fit in with Swinbourne's death?" asked Kapadia. "She kills him, then heads to her billets, then is stabbed to death by some unknown individual. That can't be a coincidence."

"Wait a minute," Hickit said, he then took Cieres tunic, and held it up. The left shoulder was sprinkled with blood, and most of the tunic was soaked with dry, off milk.

"Rooney's subordinates described Cieres as having her tunic soaked with liquid, and spattered with blood. You and Evans presumed it to mean that she was just back from the front—which lead you to Derling—but maybe, maybe she was just back from here."

"Back from here, as in back from the fucking dead?"

"Are you proposing that that woman is not Cieres?"

"No, I think *she* is, but I think the person who killed Swinbourne isn't."

"Oh shit," Daisy said, "they took off her uniform. Cieres was being impersonated."

"For that to work, the woman would have to look just like her, what are the chances?"

They all looked at Cieres again, and for Daisy, a face came to mind.

"Hickit, give me the glass again." She reached out her hand, and he passed the paper bag back to her. She reached inside, and pulled out the largest shard. Across most of the shard was the same brightly coloured label, the one she saw not only a few minutes ago, but last night as well.

She ran out to the front of the barn and quickly located the barn owner, next to Evans and Escoffier. She definitely recognised him, she'd seen him before, albeit a few years younger.

She waited for Lavigne to catch up, before speaking.

Daisy held out the glass shard to Georges, "Did you make this



milk?" she asked.

The man nodded, "*Pourquoi ?*"

"*Shit.*"

"What is it corporal?" Evans said.

"I think I know what happened here," Daisy said, "and who killed Cieres and Swinbourne."



With slight caution, Simonne invited Daisy, Hickit, Kapadia, Evans, Escoffier, Lavigne and two other gendarmes inside. Her small dining room was quickly crowded.

Simonne offered them tea, but they all shook their heads.

"Is your daughter, Camélia, here?" Evans asked.

"*Euh, oui.*" She called out. A few moments later, Camélia emerged from the doorway, the sight of so many MPs and gendarmes almost making her jump.

"*Maman, qu'est-ce qu'ils font ici ?*" she said in a low growl. Lavigne didn't feel the need to translate.

"Officer," Simonne asked, "*what's this about?*"

"Take a seat," Evans smiled, "we have something we need to discuss; your cooperation would be appreciated."

Evans, Hickit, Kapadia and Lavigne sat down, the rest remained standing.

Daisy moved over to the back wall, and the several photos that hung on it. She pointed to one of them, it was a photo of Georges Auclair.

"This is your uncle, correct?"

"My brother," said Simonne, "*he owns a farm just east of here.*"

"Yes, we just came from there. Nice place."

"Wait, *is everything okay?*"

"He's fine, one of the women billeted there was murdered."

"Murdered?" Camélia said.

"Simonne," Daisy asked, "does your daughter visit your brothers farm often?"

"*Every now and then, yes. We just collect some milk from him. Sometimes he brings it over, but usually, Camélia gets it.*"

"And when was the last time she went there?"

"Two days ago," Simonne said.

Daisy glanced at Evans.

"Why is this important?" Camélia grumbled.

"Can we see the milk she brought?"

"O- Of course."

She got up, and hurried over to the kitchen, returning with a metal basket. Out of the four slots, there were three bottles, one of them being empty.

"Does Camélia often return with four bottles?"

"Y-Yes, why?"

"What happened to the fourth one?"

"Camélia said th-"

"Taisez-vous !" Camélia shouted. "Shut up!"

"What do you think you're doing, barging into our home to ask about- milk! Are you honestly serious? You Australians are running around here as if you own the place, when you should be out fighting! What good are you doing? All you've done by coming here is to bring about more suffering!" She slammed her palm on the table, "It's your fault I'll never see my father again!"

"Simonne, answer the question."

The poor woman was too stunned to speak, and on the verge of tears.

"She- She..."

"Simonne," Camélia warned.

"She said she dropped it."

The pieces of the incident two nights ago finally slotted into place in Daisy's mind. She took a seat at the table, and glared at Camélia.

"Camélia Auclair, you murdered Corporal Cieres, and Lieutenant Swinbourne. This is how it happened:"

"Two nights ago, you were on your way home after collecting milk from your uncle, when you ran into Cieres. Or rather, she ran into you."

Kapadia slid Cieres' portrait across the table, there was an uncanny resemblance.

"This woman strikes me as a kind of person who'd find a sick sort of pleasure in having sex with someone who looks just like her. Against your wishes, she came onto you. In doing so, giving you those

bruises on your neck.”

Simonne gasped, and pressed her hands together. Camélia sunk further back into her chair, covering her neck with her hair.

“Before Cieres could do anything severe, you grabbed a milk bottle, and clubbed her over the head. The second strike broke the glass, and knocking Cieres out cold.”

“Now, we don’t know what lead you to this, but you found a note, the one written by Derling, that was addressed to the authority in the church. I think you saw your opportunity, a chance to give back the pain you’d felt, and you took it. You stripped Cieres of her wet and bloody clothes, and stabbed her to death.”

Simonne was crying, very quietly. “*You- You’re lying.*”

“I’m sorry Mrs. Auclair, but we’re not finished.”

“You donned Cieres uniform, and headed to where the note said: the church. You were—at a glance—indistinguishable from her, albeit you forgot to tie your hair up.”

“Everyone in the church saw you, as you made your way to the office of a lieutenant. Swinbourne’s office. You handed the man the note, then slit his throat. Once he was on the floor, you stabbed him to death. After that, you fled, taking the uniform back to Cieres’ body, and returning home.”

Camélia so far hadn’t said a word, she just stared at the table in front of her.

“I just have one question,” Daisy said. “Was it worth it?”

This garnered a single glance, where her eyes flicked up for only a second.

“Did the pain you caused make you feel any better than you did before?”

“*What do you know?*” she said, barely a whisper.

“I know the amount of pain it takes to drive someone to do something like this... I’ve almost been there myself.”

Camélia shed a tear, still staring at the table.

“Your father’s not coming back, nothing you did that night will change that.”

She jumped up, and flung the basket of milk off the table, “*You don’t get to talk about my father!*”

“It was a lot of effort to go and kill Swinbourne, what were you

hoping to achieve?"

*"I don't know!" she shouted, "I- I wanted you all to leave! I thought I could stop you... Make you all go away."* She wiped her eyes, and smiled an emotionless smile. *"It was all pointless... Wasn't it?"*

No one dared break the silence.

"It was," Daisy said.

She nodded to Evans, they both stood up.

"Take her fingerprints, then arrest her. We're done here." Evans looked at Simonne, and flashed a sad smile.

"I'm sorry Mrs. Auclair."



"I have to say, you two certainly proved yourselves these past few days."

"Thank you sir," Daisy said.

Evans sat herself down at her desk, and after straightening her chair, and her tie, and her bun, she clasped her hands together, and leant forward. "I'd like to offer you a position, both of you, to be a part of the Provost Corp, alongside Kapadia and I."

Daisy glanced at Hickit. He was standing as tall, stiff and still as he could manage, though nothing could wipe the giddy smile off his face.

"Cases like this won't be the only kind of work you'd be doing, obviously I'd like to believe situations like this won't happen often."

"Thank you sir."

"Do you accept?"

Daisy looked at Hickit, and wagered that putting up with him would be better than a bullet in her side. They both looked at Evans, and nodded.

"Yes."

Evans nodded, "Very well." She stood up, opened the top draw of her desk and procured two black and red MP bands. She walked up to Daisy, and slid the band up her right arm. She took a step back, and saluted.

"Corporal."

Daisy returned the salute, "Lieutenant."

She took a step to her left, and did the same for Hickit. "Private."

“Lieutenant.”

Evans returned to her desk, and sat back down. “Obviously there is paperwork to be done, a change of pay, uniform, and billeting is in order. But for the sake of the gesture, welcome to the Anzac Provost Corps.”