

AUTUMN DOGS

By

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FADE IN:

EXT. NO-MANS-LAND - DAY

A single tree stands splintered and charred amid a shell-torn landscape. The rest is mud.

SUPER: WESTERN FRONT, 1917

EXT. BRITISH TRENCH - DAY

CAPTAIN HANSARD, mid 30s, lean, unshaven, exhaustion showing on his pale face as he post-holes through the mire. He bears his weight with pain, refusing to let it slow his pace.

Wretched and sodden INFANTRY watch him pass from funk-holes cut into the trench walls.

A haggard CORPORAL, late 20s, steps up to meet him.

HANSARD

You sent the runner?

CORPORAL

Aye. Forty yards, maybe more.
Relief heard him in the night.

HANSARD

Why is he still out there?

CORPORAL

Relief heard him, not us.

Hansard brushes the Corporal aside, foots the firing-step -- the Corporal grips his arm.

CORPORAL

Good way to catch a bullet.

Hansard glowers.

HANSARD

It's not the only way.

The men take refuge in their holes, wanting no part of this.

Chastened, the Corporal backs off. He watches grimly as Hansard scales the breastworks.

EXT. NO-MANS-LAND - DAY

Hansard rises to his feet. He stares across the expanse -- beyond a tangle of barbed wire to an enemy waiting massed and unseen. He stands there, a man awaiting judgement...

He blinks.

So far so good.

Wind RINGS through the wire. Hansard works his way forward, fighting the morass with every step.

He stumbles, clutches his chest, bent in pain. He pauses, catching his breath.

His attention shifts to a waterlogged crater -- its banks littered with mangled corpses.

One man has sunk to his neck in mud. He appears dead. Slowly his eyes open, appraising Hansard with a glazed defeat.

Hansard stares back, impassive. He stands, moves on.

EXT. BRITISH TRENCH - DAY

The Corporal presses to the wall, listens...

EXT. NO-MANS-LAND - SHELL-CRATER - DAY

The body of LIEUTENANT WATERS, 19, lies partly submerged. His head is turned to one side, a camouflage of grease-paint coats an expression frozen in agony. One eye gouged from its socket.

Hansard traces a puncture wound to the dead man's back. Notes the crawl marks trailing the body up the depression.

He turns a pair of identity discs in his hand, lost in a moment of private grief.

PANTING...

Hansard looks up to see a thin DOG watching from the crater's rim. Blood stains its muzzle.

A flash of torment lights Hansard's eyes. He tears the rank insignia from Waters' tunic.

EXT. BRITISH TRENCH - DAY

A sound, faint, getting closer...

The Corporal inches his head above the parapet.

CORPORAL

Christ.

EXT. NO-MANS-LAND - DAY

Hansard drags Lt. Waters' body towards the trench.

EXT. BRITISH TRENCH - DAY

Hansard drops onto the fire-step. Lt. Waters' corpse flops into the mud below.

CORPORAL

Is it him?

Hansard sinks against the wall, close to passing out. He fixes bitterly on Lt. Waters' EMPTY HOLSTER.

HANSARD

No.

EXT. WHEAT-FIELD - DAY

A REVOLVER --

stuffed into the belt of LANCE CORPORAL ALEX 'EVANS', late 20s, taut and alert, his face blackened with grease.

He crowds his way through rotted wheat stalks, supporting PRIVATE 'WILL' EVANS, 18, grease-painted features streaked with sweat, arm held in a sling, bandaged at the shoulder.

TWO SOLDIERS move a short way ahead of them. A wounded COMRADE slung between them.

Evans casts a wary glance back over his shoulder.

EXT. ROAD TO DES CHENES - DAY

Night closes in. The steady clip of hooves on stone.

A SERVICE CAP bears the red band of the military police --

STAFF SERGEANT MCCABE, early 50s, hunched astride a BAY MARE, his face hidden in the greatcoat wrapping his thick frame.

Shells ROAR overhead, landing with a distant THUMP.

McCabe's head lolls with his mount's stride...

...he's asleep in the saddle.

INT. COMPANY HQ - FINCH'S OFFICE - DAY

Sparse. A blackout curtain shades a window.

MAJOR JOHN FINCH, mid 50s, peers out from behind wire-rim glasses at the identity discs before him on the desk.

Hansard stands watching with growing impatience.

Across the room sits THE BRIGADIER, late 50s, detached and watery-eyed. His bearing hinted at by the broad stretch of service ribbon adorning his uniform.

FINCH

You're sure he wasn't recognised?

HANSARD

(bitterly)

I'm certain of it.

FINCH

You realise what you're asking?
It's my name on the report, if they
should question--

HANSARD

Mutiny pays a price to our good
Lord himself.

Finch locks eyes with Hansard, bristling at the interruption.

HANSARD

Every moment we waste here they
slip further away.

FINCH

I'm well aware.

Finch looks to the Brigadier for support -- it's not there. He swallows his pride, humiliated.

FINCH

I'll need the others, all of them.

Hansard produces a set of orders, places them on the desk.

Finch takes up a pen, hesitates --

FINCH

I'll assign a man to accompany you.

Before Hansard can protest:

FINCH

You want my hand in this I'll need assurances it's done right.

Deadlock. They turn to the Brigadier for the final word. He considers, nods his consent.

HANSARD

And what do we tell him exactly?

FINCH

You're aware of the rumours?

Hansard checks with the Brigadier -- clearly they aren't.

EXT. DES CHENES - MAIN STREET/COMPANY HQ - DUSK

Rubble lines the roadway. A row of buildings smashed and burnt by shellfire.

Light radiates from the doorway of a chateau, one of few structures unscathed.

The Bay carries McCabe instinctively towards it.

A pasty AIDE, 20s, scurries down the steps, bemused to find McCabe still dozing in the saddle.

AIDE

Staff Sergeant McCabe?

MCCABE

(rousing)

Des Chenes?

AIDE

You didn't see the signs?

McCabe's rheumy eyes take in the ravaged hamlet. He gives the Bay an affectionate pat.

MCCABE

Aye.

AIDE

Better hurry, they're waiting on you.

INT. COMPANY HQ - LOBBY - NIGHT

A former chateau converted into a military billet. Windows and doorways reinforced with sandbags. A main staircase rises beyond the reach of hurricane lamps.

The Aide steps through the entrance, pauses at the sight of McCabe crouched before a fireplace.

The Aide COUGHS for attention --

McCabe continues to soak in the warmth.

Another COUGH, forceful.

McCabe picks up a poker, rakes the coals to a glow.

MCCABE

Knew a certain sister given to impress the need for manners, a thankless task of which she never tired. For us boys who continued to lack a certain grace of being she fell upon a more practical means.

He replaces the poker. Turns his hands to the heat -- exposing the scarred, melted flesh of his palms.

MCCABE

A man could learn a lot from a woman of her resolve.

A side door opens -- the Aide snaps to attention as Finch steps into the room.

FINCH

Leave us.

The Aide exits, grateful for the reprieve.

FINCH

Is it true?

McCabe creaks to his feet. He removes his cap -- a solemn gesture, the kind offered by a man with bad news.

INT. COMPANY HQ - FINCH'S OFFICE - NIGHT

McCabe stares straight ahead.

MCCABE

Infantry, they're deserting the
French line in droves, more joining
by the day.

Finch, seated at his desk, McCabe standing before him. Finch reaches for his cigarettes, digesting this.

MCCABE

From what we could gather it seems
they sustained heavy casualties in
a bid to take the Chemin Ridge.
Likely this trouble stems from
there.

Silence.

The Brigadier watches McCabe from his chair. Hansard does likewise from a corner, unimpressed.

HANSARD

Clearly we're beyond rumour...

FINCH

It's beyond sanity. What in God's
name are they thinking?

McCabe sweeps his grey hair into order. He's exhausted -- holding it together.

HANSARD

Do you believe our own men could
turn in such numbers?

McCabe falters, not sure how to answer.

FINCH

This is Captain Hansard, the
Brigadier and he have requested our
assistance.

HANSARD

Are you sick?

MCCABE

No, sir, day was long.

HANSARD

If ever they were short.

Hansard nods to Finch who slides the identity discs across the desk to McCabe.

HANSARD

Those belonged to one Lieutenant Waters. His body was found close to the line, a single wound to his back, likely a bayonet.

The Brigadier's grip tightens on a walking cane. He bites back a flicker of emotion.

HANSARD

The men in his command remain unaccounted for. Sentry reported a party of five crossed to the rear, several wounded among them. They never reached the aid post.

MCCABE

You think these matters related?

Finch passes McCabe a thin file marked 'CONFIDENTIAL'.

HANSARD

A most damning decision on their part.

McCabe dons a pair of glasses, scans the file's contents.

FINCH

The Captain is tasked with locating one Lance Corporal Alexander Evans and those under his direction. You're to see he proceeds unimpeded. Given your understanding of the wider picture you'll appreciate the need to move swiftly and with absolute discretion.

MCCABE

Report lists these men as killed undertaking a night raid..?

Finch extinguishes his cigarette.

HANSARD

Officially.

McCabe reads Finch's unease. He closes the file.

FINCH

Should the French command fail to contain this rabble the whole line falls apart. Much as I despair at the notion we've to contend ourselves with the reality, without them we're finished. Nineteen years old, cut down by his own men and left to die. We've no time for measure. Find them, don't bring them back.

McCabe stares at the desk in silence, as if deciding on a choice he doesn't have.

The Brigadier watches, his face a mask.

MCCABE

Sir.

FINCH

Perhaps the Captain will be good enough to direct you to your quarters.

INT. COMPANY HQ - LOBBY - NIGHT

McCabe trails Hansard to the staircase.

MCCABE

You know this Evans?

HANSARD

It's the good Provost's bent to mistake me for a concierge. I trust it won't be yours.

He takes to the stairs, disappearing into the shadows above leaving McCabe to ponder the ascent wearily.

INT. COMPANY HQ - FINCH'S OFFICE - NIGHT

Finch gazes at the would-be window.

FINCH

You think he's up to it?

THE BRIGADIER

Saw fit to discharge himself.

FINCH

Not his wound I was referring to.

THE BRIGADIER

Then your questioning his appointment?

FINCH

There's isn't much I don't question anymore.

(changing tact)

I do know I'd like a view with my next office, this one hasn't taken.

THE BRIGADIER

You'll see to the facts. I'll tend to the aesthetics.

FINCH

I'm sure they'll both be favourable.

Finch gathers the identity discs, proffers them up.

FINCH

My deepest condolences, it should of been so much more.

THE BRIGADIER

It will.

The Brigadier stands.

THE BRIGADIER

Can your dog heel?

FINCH

Mine still knows what's good for him.

An uncomfortable moment passes between them.

The Brigadier straightens, exits the room.

Finch stares after him, the discs draped in his palm.

INT. COMPANY HQ - MCCABE'S QUARTERS - NIGHT

A thin mattress on an iron frame. Damp mars the walls.

McCabe's service cap rests on the windowsill --

He sits staring at it sourly.

INT. COMPANY HQ - HANSARD'S QUARTERS - NIGHT

An open bottle of wine stands on a bedside table.

Hansard sits writing at a desk.

Finished, he leans back, shirt unbuttoned to show a blood stained bandage wrapping his chest.

He turns Lt. Waters' rank insignia in his palm --

Snatches up the wine.

INT. COMPANY HQ - CORRIDOR - DAWN

Hansard sweeps through the building, still half drunk. He intercepts the Aide coming the other way.

HANSARD

When's the mail to leave?

AIDE

I can find out.

HANSARD

I've a report, you just see for me
it's sent up to battalion.

AIDE

Yes, sir.

He presses an envelope into the Aide's hand.

The Aide watches Hansard continue from view. He thumbs the envelope, glances to a side-room:

The door rests ajar, revealing Finch at his desk.

INT. COMPANY HQ - MCCABE'S QUARTERS - DAWN

McCabe stands at the window, dressed and alert.

KNOCK KNOCK.

MCCABE

It's open.

Hansard enters. He notes McCabe's polished boots, the neatly made bed, perhaps unused.

He crosses to the window -- McCabe catches the glazed look, drunken sway in his step.

HANSARD
Private Carver...

Hansard nods to the courtyard below:

Six SOLDIERS lined side-by-side, rifles in hand. Behind them, a wooden post stands before a bullet pocked wall.

Finch checks a pocket watch from the side-lines.

A CHAPLAIN, 50s, rail thin and grey, moves ahead of TWO REDCAPS, 30s. They lead CARVER, 18, towards the post, head down, hands bound before him.

HANSARD
Fled his post. Heard your lot found
him hiding in a barn.

McCabe looks away, the sight unsettles him.

MCCABE
Can you ride?

EXT. DES CHENES - MAIN STREET/COMPANY HQ - DAWN

McCabe watches from atop the Bay as a STABLE-BOY, 10, steadies a GELDING for Hansard.

Hansard winces his way into the saddle. He snatches up the reins, self-conscious of his injury.

A wiry Frenchman limps into their midst leading a pony.

SERCHE, 40s, his battered woodsman attire and drooping mustache lend him a feral quality.

Hansard regards the stranger frostily.

MCCABE
This is Serche, our guide.

HANSARD
I made no such request.

MCCABE
Their party's a two day lead,
through country he knows.

HANSARD
It's not what he knows, it's his
ability to keep it to himself.

MCCABE

He's seen what I've seen, he's no more given to it.

McCabe turns to the distance: light crowns the horizon.

He reigns his mount and guides it on.

Serche climbs into the saddle.

HANSARD

Do you speak English?

Serche scratches at his mustache and follows after McCabe.

Hansard stares after him until he spots the Brigadier on the chateau stoop. They meet eyes. A cold, brooding distance between them.

MALE VOICE (O.S.)

(loud, authoritative)

Present arms!

Hansard kicks the Gelding into a trot.

EXT. DES CHENES - MAIN STREET - DAY

Hansard and Serche fall in beside McCabe. McCabe holds out a water bottle -- Hansard begrudgingly takes it.

A volley of rifle fire CRACKLES out from the direction of the courtyard.

McCabe tightens in revulsion.

EXT. DRAINAGE DITCH - DAY

PRIVATE DONNER, late 30s, bites down on his hand in a bid to mute his groans of pain.

Evans huddles at the lip of the ditch, keeps his head down as a party of troops file past on the road above.

Either side of him are the soldiers seen from before:

PRIVATE BRAMBLE, early 20s, wiry and harried. A rough bandage wraps his head. He grips his rifle nervously.

PRIVATE CEDARS, early 30s, hard bitten and wound tight. He rubs at the camouflage covering his face, indifferent to the proximity of the passersby.

One by one they turn their attention to Donner. He lies on his back at the bottom of the ditch, Will holds a blood-soaked rag to his gut.

CEDARS

I'll do it.

Evans leans in close to Donner.

EVANS

We talked it over.

Donner stares back -- doesn't need to be told.

BRAMBLE

We get home I'll find 'em for you,
tell 'em how it went down--

DONNER

Boy, you keep your trap shut an'
die old.

Bramble shrinks back.

DONNER

Don't you leave me down here.

EVANS

We'll see you right.

DONNER

Alright big man, they're waiting on
me.

EXT. ROADSIDE - ABOVE DRAINAGE DITCH - DAY

Cedars emerges from the foliage. He casts a quick look about before dragging Donner out behind him.

He smooths Donner's hair, whispers something before stealing back into the drainage.

Donner lies there, chest rising and falling...

EXT. RURAL ROAD - DAY

Hedgerows flank the roadway. The THUMP of artillery resounds like some earthly heartbeat.

Serche rides ahead, neck craned to the sky as a biplane drones somewhere high above.

McCabe and Hansard follow, riding side-by-side.

HANSARD

Would have passed through the line
not far from here.

McCabe squints at the sky, seeking out the plane.

HANSARD

Likely they'd head toward Le
Curve, find somewhere to lay up.

MCCABE

Likely they would.

HANSARD

(re: the plane)
Ours?

MCCABE

All look the same from down here.

HANSARD

Could be we all look the same from
up there.

They slow their mounts at a break in the hedgerow. Beyond it stretches a swathe of no-mans-land. A single tree rises naked in the distance.

Hansard pauses, stirred by the sight.

HANSARD

They say it happens.

McCabe frowns, not understanding -- caring less.

HANSARD

One in the back. Ever see it?

MCCABE

Can't say I have.

McCabe continues.

HANSARD

Who would?

EXT. FOREST - DAY

A small cabin sits off in the near distance. It occupies a clearing. A well, outhouse and smoke-shed dot the grounds.

RUSTLING -- Cedars emerges from the undergrowth to rejoin Evans, Bramble and Will.

CEDARS

Chickens, mouser or two. No dogs.

Evans nods to himself, the decision made.

EXT. FOREST - EDGE OF CLEARING - DAY

Cedars trains his rifle on the cabin as Evans races across open ground to take up position beside the entrance.

He pauses to listen, sends Cedars a nod.

Cedars follows to flank the other side of the doorway.

EXT. CABIN - FRONT - DAY

Evans tests the door, it CREAKS open, unlocked. He trades a look with Cedars.

INT. CABIN - MAIN ROOM - DAY

Cedars kicks open the door, the pair rush in, guns drawn.

A simple, two room cabin. Grime covers the windows. A cot occupies one corner, a stove another. A canary CHIRPS in a cage suspended from a beam.

Evans stalks the room, eyes straining into every nook.

Cedars squints in at the bird.

RATTLING...

Evans makes for the stove, curious.

A cooking pot rests on top. A bubble of liquid pops from beneath a wavering lid.

Evans tenses, he spins --

A FIGURE stands in the back-room doorway -- a rifle levelled -- WHUMPF! Flame erupts from the gun's barrel --

Cedars stumbles back, FIRES once from the hip.

The Figure ducks into the bedroom.

Evans FIRES two rounds through the thin interior wall and takes cover beside the bedroom doorway.

Cedars pats out a smoldering patch of greatcoat, nods to Evans, singed but unhurt.

Evans steadies his nerve, steps into the --

BEDROOM

-- smoke curls from a discarded musket.

The Figure sprawls beside it, blood soaking their sheepskin coat like a dying animal.

A face peeks from the collar, a GIRL, 13, pale, freckled. She stares at the ceiling, lips trembling in shock.

Evans crouches beside her, mortified.

Cedars enters, rifle trained...

EVANS

Get a blanket.

...he spots the Girl.

CEDARS

Jesus wept.

EVANS

A blanket!

Cedars stares at a small bed in the corner.

Evans' attention turns to the two sets of frightened eyes peering back at them from the space beneath it.

INT. CABIN - MAIN ROOM - DAY

Those same eyes belong to HELENA, 7, rose cheeked and dark curled locks; and ALAIN, 4, all puppy fat and innocence.

They rest on the cot beside Will. Their attention shifting nervously among the strangers.

Cedars clears the dirt from a window and peers out.

Evans sits at a table, face pinched in his palms. He rouses as Bramble emerges from the bedroom.

They trade a grim, knowing look.

CEDARS

Better stuff a sock in her gob an' help her off.

EVANS

That all you got?

CEDARS

Rather we sit here waitin' for her to bleed out?

BRAMBLE

Could be she'd make it, I mean I seen a fella once--

CEDARS

You ain't never seen no bairn!
(to Evans)
Put some ground between us an' them, you said it yourself.

EVANS

Will's shot through, we barely scraped it this far.

CEDARS

You even know where this far is?

EVANS

I know where it ain't. Play it right we get back on our feet, keep going to the coast, all of us.

CEDARS

All of us?

Cedars snatches up his rifle and heads outside.

The kids look on in frightened confusion.

Evans looks to Bramble -- Bramble hangs his head.

EXT. ROAD FROM LE COURVE - CROSSROADS - DAY

A postcard lays trampled in the mud. Not far from it rests a small statuette of the Eiffel tower.

McCabe and Hansard wait atop their mounts. They watch an OLD MAN wobble past pushing a handcart overflowing with trinkets and souvenirs.

A steady flow of DESERTERS and REFUGEES weave around him. The blue uniform coats of the French Infantry dotted among them, thin, haunted men, marching on like ragged ghosts.

Across the road, Serche converses with a GENDARME, 30s. The Gendarme squats, beaten, face bloodied from a head-wound.

A DESERTER, 20s, breaks towards them shouldering a trunk. He puts it down, waggles a cigarette.

Hansard stares down at him, cold, indifferent.

The Deserter spits, collects the trunk and wanders on.

McCabe notes the dark glances from passing infantry.

Serche joins them, nods to the Gendarme.

SERCHE

(French accent)

Says a soldier was found on the road. English.

He looks back along the roadway.

SERCHE

Le Courve, maybe dead already.

Hansard's jaw tightens. He reigns his mount against the press of refugees.

SERCHE

Is dangerous there, these men are loyal to no-one.

Hansard continues unfazed.

McCabe and Serche regard the Gendarme.

SERCHE

He tried to turn them back. They beat him, took his horse.

McCabe turns his collar to the cold, follows after Hansard.

EXT. OUTSKIRTS OF LE COURVE - CONVENT - DAY

A weathered building on the edge of a large village. A large red cross daubed on its stone facade.

Two walking wounded, 30s, share a cigarette at the entrance. They watch as McCabe, Hansard and Serche ride up.

NOTE: ITALICS IN FRENCH TO BE SUBTITLED IN ENGLISH.

SERCHE

Who is in charge?

The question is met with silence. The BEARDED ONE, his face scabbed from shrapnel blast, tips his ash.

BEARDED ONE

I am.

The riders share a look, unconvinced.

Bearded One laughs, claps his partner on the back.

BEARDED ONE

And so is he.

INT. CONVENT - CHAPEL - DAY

Light filters through stained glass. MOANS of suffering fill the air. A voice carries a lament from the shadows.

Wounded men overwhelm the floor-space, a pair of NUNS, 50s, scurry dutifully between them.

MCCABE, HANSARD and SERCHE pick their way through the tangle of cots, searching...

...wounded men stare back with a mixture of mistrust and scorn.

A BURNED SOLDIER, 20s, sits blindfolded, his torso raw and blistered. A SISTER, 30s, guides his head as he drinks.

She witnesses their passing with suspicion. McCabe catches her eyes shift nervously to a SIDE CHAPEL.

SERCHE

We are not welcome here.

MCCABE

Keep looking.

INT. CONVENT - SIDE CHAPEL - DAY

SISTER AISLA, early 20s, soft features framed by her habit, stands beside a bed, its occupant unseen.

She turns as McCabe enters. He pauses, taken aback by her blood stained scapular.

She lowers her eyes, bashful.

McCabe removes his cap, crosses to a chair, inspects the bloodied army tunic folded there.

MCCABE

Is he dead?

SISTER AISLA

(French accent)

He is close.

MCCABE

Who brought him here?

She wrings her hands, reluctant.

MCCABE

He was found on the road. I wish to know by whom. ...I need a name, to ask them a question, no more.

SISTER AISLA

Bertrand. Monsieur Bertrand.

Hansard enters.

HANSARD

Get out.

Sister Aisla hesitates -- Hansard takes her arm, leads her to the exit, closes the door behind her.

FOOTSTEPS echo on stone, gathering pace as she hurries away.

McCabe rests his cap on Donner's chest. His eyes flicker open to fix on the red band.

DONNER

(hoarse)

Got one, not as pretty as yours.

MCCABE

I'm Staff Sergeant McCabe, I don't expect you to know me, I do expect you'll know why I'm here.

DONNER

The Girl, where's she? I don't
wanna die with your ugly mug the
last thing on my mind.

MCCABE

You served a Lieutenant by the name
of Waters.

DONNER

Don't know no Waters.

Hansard steps forward, revealing himself to Donner who
regards him with shock then resignation.

DONNER

Gets so a man can't even bleed in
peace.

HANSARD

Tell me where it hurts.

DONNER

France mostly--

Donner HOWLS as Hansard presses a thumb into the dressing
covering his wound.

McCabe looks on in alarm.

HANSARD

Here?

Donner writhes.

HANSARD

Who was it?

DONNER

Fritz!

Hansard presses harder, Donner arches in agony.

FOOTSTEPS echo from the corridor -- closing in.

HANSARD

Secure that door.

McCabe wavers, uncertain.

HANSARD

You'll tell me.

DONNER
I done it, they're all dead, he got
'em all killed--

HANSARD
You ran with the rest of them--

DONNER
We thought you was dead.

HANSARD
They'll sooner wish I was.

McCabe stares at Hansard, struck by this revelation.

HANSARD
The door.

MCCABE
You're mistaking me for a
concierge.

Hansard moves to draw his knife.

McCabe grips his arm -- restraining.

MCCABE
Be of no use to us cold.

Hansard snatches up Donner's identity discs.

HANSARD
Was of less warm.

The door opens, MOTHER SUPERIOR, 50s, a small hill of hard
faced piety, strides in. Wipes her bloodied hands on a rag.

Serche trails breathlessly after her.

MOTHER SUPERIOR
Non. Partir. Maintenant!

HANSARD
Leave us.

Hansard blocks her.

She slaps him, leaving a smear of blood on his cheek.

He slaps her back -- an instinctual reaction which seems to
surprise even him.

Mother Superior doesn't so much as blink.

Donner chokes out a laugh.

The Captain snatches the rag from her grasp, skirts around her for the exit.

DONNER

(hoarse)

To hell with you, Hansard, I'll see you there. Be like old times!

EXT. OUTSKIRTS OF LE COURVE - CONVENT - DAY

Hansard marches towards a rundown inn, wiping the blood from his face as he goes.

McCabe emerges from the convent entrance behind him, makes to follow, has second thoughts, pauses to wait for Serche.

MCCABE

Find me a Monsieur Bertrand.

SERCHE

We should not be here.

MCCABE

Find him, bring him to that inn.

McCabe takes off after Hansard.

SERCHE

If he will not come?

McCabe keeps walking.

Serche casts around for a likely place to begin his search.

Behind him, the Bearded One steps forward, grins broadly.

BEARDED ONE

I am Monsieur Bertrand.

Serche kicks a scattering of dirt at him in answer.

INT. RUNDOWN INN - BAR AREA - NIGHT

Cigarette smoke clouds the air. A party of FRENCH INFANTRY DESERTERS line the bar. Broken and disheveled, faces heavy with drink.

Hansard sits at a corner table, a half empty bottle of wine before him.

McCabe settles into a seat opposite.

MCCABE
Why wasn't I told?

Hansard's attention is focused across the room...

HANSARD
You knew all you needed to.

...on a BARMAID, mid-teens if that. Petite, delicate features -- a rose amongst thorns. She wears a SCARLET SCARF.

She tends to the Deserters with a beleaguered sense of duty, conscious of the way they watch her from out the corner of their eyes.

MCCABE
They'll bury him, you'll never know nor care where. The rest? Maybe we find them, take more than a borrowed rag to clean the blood off your hands when we do.

Hansard sends him a dark look. He signals the Barmaid, notes a lean deserter -- RAWBONES, 20s, a hint of something darker in the way his eyes follow her across the room.

HANSARD
I've a growing notion you don't approve.

MCCABE
I'll be in good company.

HANSARD
Finch understands what's at stake. He's to make them heroes.

MCCABE
I won't be a part of your personal bloodletting.

HANSARD
Then it remains to be seen what you will be a part of.

He nods to McCabe's service cap on the table.

HANSARD
Finch's bastard hell dog, a poor fit from what I've seen. Fortunate
(MORE)

HANSARD (cont'd)
 for me it's his reputation. You're
 hereby relieved, leave your man,
 he's proving himself useful.

McCabe broods -- Hansard's played his ace.

The Barmaid arrives, sets a bottle of liquor and a glass on
 the table.

HANSARD
 Did you hear what I said?

McCabe looks to the Barmaid -- she takes the hint and
 leaves.

Hansard leans back, almost sympathetic.

HANSARD
 It's no more a matter of conscience
 as it is law, necessity demands it.

He nods to the deserters, tone serious now:

HANSARD
 Dissent, like a seed, grows from
 the dirt up. You've been at this
 game too long to tell me you'd
 stand to see it.

MCCABE
 I'm talking about a fair say, it's
 the least a man can expect.

HANSARD
 No doubt Carver valued the effort.
 Was it you brought him in?

McCabe sours, looks away.

HANSARD
 Maybe not, but there were others
 just like him. We've orders alike
 you and I, I've no more
 satisfaction in mine.

Hansard reaches to fill McCabe's glass.

HANSARD
 There's a cellar of wine going to
 ruin on these cretins. Beds too.
 I'm sure it wasn't temperance saw
 you this far...

Hansard knocks back his drink. Waits... McCabe collects his glass, does the same. Hansard pours them another.

HANSARD

And certainly it wasn't providence. No man in God's fold would've stood for a hand raised against a servant of the Lord like that. I confess to my shame.

MCCABE

Don't put your sins on me, I was raised on the mercies of the Poor Sisters of Nazareth. I've known their hand, their boots, belts -- all that was holy and within reach.

HANSARD

Lord's mercy, it's not like ours.

MCCABE

Doubt He'd find it any more agreeable.

HANSARD

And where would a poor boy be without the King's Shilling?

McCabe stares into his glass, remembering...

HANSARD

You serve in the colonies?

MCCABE

There, elsewhere and everyplace in between.

HANSARD

Left quite the impression on you those sisters.

MCCABE

Queens. Was the Queen's Shilling.

Hansard raises his glass.

HANSARD

To our dear departed Majesty, certainly she got her money's worth out of you.

McCabe straightens, offended.

Hansard looks past him -- Serche weaves towards them with MONSIEUR BERTRAND, 60s, a ruddy, flower-nosed drunk in tow.

They reach the table. Bertrand clutches his hat nervously, oblivious to their conversation.

SERCHE

This man is Monsieur Bertrand. No Anglais. Francois when sober. He is not sober.

MCCABE

He found our man?

SERCHE

Perhaps a mile, west.

HANSARD

Then he'll take us there.

Serche looks to Bertrand. Bertand looks to the wine.

SERCHE

I made, promises...

McCabe slides his drink across the table.

Bertrand weighs it up with a pout.

Hansard slides over the bottle, kicks out a chair for Bertrand to sit.

HANSARD

Tell him to join us. Wouldn't want him scampering off into the night, They say it isn't safe.

The Barmaid returns with another bottle.

Hansard pulls her close, brushes the scarf admiringly.

HANSARD

Scarlet, my favourite of all reds.

She looks nervously around -- several Deserters watch Hansard with simmering hostility -- Rawbones among them.

Hansard returns the look unmoved.

His hand finds the knife on his belt, reassured.

HANSARD

Vino.

She nods and hurries away.

McCabe stands.

MCCABE

These beds...

HANSARD

Surely, one of us missed a vocation.

INT. RUNDOWN INN - MCCABE'S ROOM - NIGHT

A candle flickers in the darkness.

Voices, muffled, rising with urgency. A Woman SCREAMS.

McCabe wakes, strains to make sense of the sounds. A GUNSHOT rings out. He snatches his Webley service revolver from a bedside table.

Serche flanks the bedroom door, flat to the wall, a hunting knife in hand.

McCabe peers from the window into the dark street below:

CLIP of hooves on stone. Muzzle-flash lights up the night.

INT. RUNDOWN INN - CORRIDOR - NIGHT

McCabe moves swiftly towards the stairs, pulling on his tunic as he goes. Serche follows, shotgun in hand.

Something on the floor -- McCabe crouches, gathers up the Barmaid's scarlet scarf.

He looks to the staircase -- blood smears the wall.

INT. RUNDOWN INN - BAR AREA - NIGHT

The Barmaid stands breathless with shock, nose bloodied, dress torn at the hip. She turns as McCabe and Serche reach the foot of the stairs. They pause to take in the room:

Rawbones slumps in a chair, gasps for air as a pool of blood collects beneath him.

A nod from McCabe sends Serche out the building's rear.

MCCABE
Fetch me a bandage, a blanket,
something.

The Barmaid spits at Rawbones and backs away.

McCabe snatches up a tablecloth, presses it to a gash in Rawbones' abdomen.

ANGRY VOICE (O.S.)
(from the street)
Angleise! Angleise! Baiseur!

Serche returns, concerned.

SERCHE
The Captain's horse, gone. The
others--

A rock shatters a back window. The Barmaid shrieks.

SERCHE
They are still here.

ANGRY VOICE (O.S.)
Putain!

MCCABE
The light.

Serche snuffs out a lantern on the bar, the room dims.
Moonlight filters through the windows.

McCabe guides Rawbones' hand to the cloth in a bid for him to keep pressure on the wound.

He withdraws, grabs the Barmaid and leads her to the edge of the room into shadow.

Serche slips behind the bar, out of sight.

Two deserters spill through the rear. EDOUARD, 40s, portly and unarmed, remains by the door.

GUY, 30s, wavers drunkenly to Rawbones, rifle in hand. He stares at his friend, too inebriated to help.

Rawbones directs his attention to the shadows.

McCabe steps forward, gun drawn, shielding the Barmaid.

Serche rises to cover Guy.

GUY
Where is he?

Edouard eyes his partner warily.

MCCABE
 Tell him to put down the rifle.

GUY
 (more forceful)
Where is he!

Serche tightens his aim.

Guy struggles to chamber a round -- his rifle jammed.

MCCABE
 Serche...

A CRY of alarm from outside.

Edouard breaks for the front door, peers out.

EDOUARD
 Cavaliers!

Guy pounds the rifle in defeat.

WHISTLES from the street. More CRIES.

EDOUARD
 Gendarmes. Gendarmes! Aller!

Edouard takes flight out the rear.

MCCABE
 The horses.

Serche hurries out after him.

FRENCH TROOPER, 20s, steps through the front entrance and takes position at the door.

A dour French Captain, LEGARD, 40s, enters behind him. He takes in the scene with measured calm.

LEGARD
 Le proprietaire?

Guy freezes.

The Barmaid steps out from behind McCabe. She nods to the back stairs.

Legard gestures to a liquor bottle on a table.

LEGARD
Placez-le sur la barre s'il vous
plait.

She places the bottle on the bar.

LEGARD
Le reveiller.

With a last look to McCabe she ascends the stairs.

Guy watches as Legard pours a measure from the bottle.

LEGARD
Votre fusil.

McCabe looks between them, concerned.

Trooper turns his attention to the street, unfazed.

Legard holds out a hand for the rifle -- Guy reluctantly hands it over.

Legard deftly ejects a spent cartridge -- the casing RATTLES across the floor. He chambers a fresh round and passes the weapon back. He gestures to the drink -- an offering.

Guy looks unsure...

LEGARD
S'il vous plait.

...he slinks to the bar, leans his rifle.

He takes up the glass, studies the contents. Downs it.

Legard studies Rawbones, though he addresses McCabe:

LEGARD
(French accent)
What brings you here?

MCCABE
Sleep.

LEGARD
Another life perhaps. In this one
we have only our duty.

Guy steals a look to his rifle.

LEGARD

What to do when a man refuses that honour?

MCCABE

Remind him of the six that will.

LEGARD

And if that man becomes many?

McCabe tenses.

Guy's hand twitches towards the rifle --

Legard draws a pistol, shoots him in the back of the head.

Guy rag-dolls to the floor.

Rawbones' eyes swivel to McCabe, pleading.

McCabe studies Legard with contempt. Sucks it down.

LEGARD

There is no sleep for you here.

EXT. ROAD FROM LE COURVE - DAWN

McCabe and Serche ride side-by-side.

A figure stumbles towards them.

They trade a look, watch as a bleary-eyed Bertrand scurries past muttering to himself.

EXT. ROADSIDE - ABOVE DRAINAGE DITCH - DAY

The Gelding shucks nervously --

Hansard levers a broken shoe from the animal's hoof. His hand is caked with dried blood. He continues as McCabe and Serche halt behind him.

HANSARD

This is the spot, if the old man's to be believed. Bandage in a drain says he could... Fritz pushing down from the north, our lines at their backs, which way would you go?

McCabe settles on an expanse of forest beyond the roadside. His jaw tightens, knows Hansard is right.

MCCABE

There's a boy back there with his belly slit.

HANSARD

Love has a price, lust will cost a man dear. Would've waited only our friend got cold feet, rather lost his bearings in the moment. I'll trust you stayed long enough to gather a witness account? Be only too willing to offer my own.

They stare at one another.

MCCABE

Walk him awhile. I'll scout ahead, send word back.

Before Hansard can offer his thoughts, McCabe spurs his mount from the road onto a rough trail towards the forest.

HANSARD

I believe that word to be you.

Serche draws his shotgun and follows.

Hansard waits till they're out of sight. He takes a deep breath, steadies himself against the pain of his wound.

EXT. CABIN - REAR GROUNDS - DAY

Birdsong filters through the branches. Bramble crouches, playing with a rangy kitten.

INT. CABIN - MAIN ROOM - DAY

Will rests upright on the cot. He's stripped to the waist, his body coated in sweat. He flinches as Evans removes a clump of bloodied gauze from his armpit.

ALAIN (O.S.)

Savez-vous mon Papa?

EVANS

Stay still.

Cedars keeps watch from the window. Alain at his side.

ALAIN
Savez-vous mon Papa?

CEDARS
I ain't your Papa. I ain't no-one's
Papa.

EVANS
Chop, he wants chop.

CEDARS
I look like a butcher?

EVANS
As in axe you fresh sack. Wants you
to chop wood. Savvy lad, can see
your potential.

Helena pulls her brother back, protective.

HELENA
Ne pas leur parler.

EVANS
Give it a rest eh? Grow some
troubled roots you stand there much
longer, have Bramble relieve you.

Cedars thinks. Makes a 'chopping' motion with his hand.

CEDARS
Chop. That shut you up?

Alain tilts his head, not understanding.

EVANS
Keep your head down.

CEDARS
Two years in the Bumper, any lower
I'll be knocking skulls with Old
Nick himself.

Will manages a smile as Cedars grumbles his way outside.

WILL
Mum'd be proud of you, learning the
lingo like that.

EVANS
It'll do him good.

The children settle to watch as Evans tends Will's wound.

EVANS
We'll give it another night to
break this fever.

WILL
What about the Girl?

Evans sours.

WILL
We could still get her to an
aid-post.

EVANS
She'd slow us up.

WILL
No more than me. What if I was to
take her, you could get us close--

EVANS
You gonna tell 'em you went an' got
yerself lost? Don't matter to them,
truth'll get you shot sooner than a
lie.

WILL
I ain't a coward.

EVANS
That what you think we are?

WILL
It's what they'll be sayin'.

Evans tosses the gauze into the fire and slams the stove
door. He hunkers there in angry silence.

EVANS
Waters got what he deserved. More
than a few'll be sayin' that, you
bet they will.

WILL
An' what about the Captain?

EVANS
He got what he wanted.

He taps the side of his head with his finger 'crazy.'

EVANS

He was gone, you seen him,
volunteering us for every stunt on
the line. No helping a fella like
that, we'd be out there with him.

WILL

He weren't dead, he was calling
out, I heard him.

EVANS

Forget what you heard.

WILL

I can't, we left them.

From outside comes the steady CLUMP of an axe on wood.

WILL

You don't leave your mates to die,
not out there alone like that.

EVANS

The hell do you know about what we
do, what we don't?

EXT. FOREST - TRAIL - DAY

A narrow track winds through a tangle of dense forest. The
war has yet to reach this place.

McCabe pushes ahead, determined. Serche follows, shotgun at
the ready. Alert to every sound.

EXT. FOREST - STREAM-SIDE - DAY

A bloodied knife-blade slips beneath the water.

Hansard watches the blood diffuse into the current.

Reaching inside his shirt he cuts the bandage free to reveal
a jagged scar -- a shrapnel wound, freshly sutured.

He feels it tentatively.

The soiled bandage snakes its way downstream where it
catches on a snag, wavers with the flow.

EXT. FOREST - INTERSECTION - DAY

The trail intersects with a dirt road to form a T-junction.
 Serche crouches, scours the ground for sign of disturbance.
 McCabe watches from the saddle. A faint THUNK distracts him.
 Serche studies the slip of sky above them -- notes the way
 the canopy sways with the wind.
 He scents the air.

SERCHE

Lupin..?

MCCABE

You tell me.

SERCHE

Maybe I teach you one day, when
 this is over.

MCCABE

Better you just go home. Maybe I'll
 write.

Serche sniffs, wets his lips.

SERCHE

Lupin, how you say, rabbit..?

McCabe's face wrinkles, it takes him a moment to catch on.

SERCHE

You would not write. Do I owe you
 money?

(re: the 'rabbit')

Could be un Lievre, oignons is for
 certain.

THUNK. McCabe looks off --

EXT. CABIN - FRONT - DAY

Cedars wrests the axe from a log.

He thumbs the bit unimpressed.

INT. CABIN - BEDROOM - DAY

The Girl lies semi-conscious. Mumbles to herself.

Evans watches over her in silence.

He pulls a chair, settles in.

INT. CABIN - MAIN ROOM - DAY

A stew bubbles on the stove.

A foot, the skin blistered and swollen --

Bramble eases off his other boot, rubs his toes, savouring the freedom with a grin.

BRAMBLE

You ever dance?

Will groggy, watches from the bed as Bramble performs a rough sashay across the room.

BRAMBLE

Were a fair mover me. Be thankful I
can still count to twenty by the
time we're free of this bother.
Still I got both balls, that's what
counts.

His face lights up at the sight of a clay pipe on a shelf.

He plucks it from its rest -- it's loaded with tobacco,
ready to go.

BRAMBLE

(mocking)

Really, you shouldn't have.

Helena turns from the stove.

HELENA

Monsieur!

BRAMBLE

Got a light, Billy boy?

Bramble pats his pockets down. Nothing. He turns his search to the cabin. Helena dogs his heels, her protests ignored.

Cedars enters with a bundle of kindling. He quickly reads the situation and sets the wood down.

He snatches the pipe from Bramble's mouth.

BRAMBLE
You get your own--

In a flash Cedars pins Bramble to the wall, a hook-knife pressed to his cheek.

CEDARS
That ain't for you.

Will's eyelids flutter, trying to focus.

BRAMBLE
Go on, be doin' me a favour.

Cedars lets him go.

CEDARS
I don't owe you one.

Helena takes the pipe from Cedars, grateful.

The canary chirps, flutters around the cage.

Alain rushes to the window.

ALAIN
Papa?

Curious, Cedars moves to the boy's side. His face clouds, quickly pulls Alain from view.

CEDARS
(hissing to Bramble)
You fucking clown!

INT. CABIN - BEDROOM - DAY

The revolver rests on a pillow in Evans' lap.

The Girl twitches beneath the blanket, stretches a hand in his direction --

The door bangs open, Evans is on his feet -- Bramble's breathless panic tells him all he needs to know.

INT. CABIN - MAIN ROOM - DAY

Evans peers through the window:

McCabe and Serche approach the cabin leading their mounts.

Cedars takes up a rifle, checks the breech.

EVANS

No, not yet.

EXT. CABIN - FRONT - DAY

McCabe sets to tethering the horses. He keeps one eye on the cabin as Serche edges closer.

The door CREAKS open. Serche stops. Helena peers from the doorway, shyly.

SERCHE

*Hello... I'd like to speak with
your father..?*

HELENA

He's away.

SERCHE

Away where?

Helena looks to McCabe, as if this is her answer.

SERCHE

Your mother?

Her eyes dip to the ground. A bad memory.

Serche draws closer.

She inches out, shuts the door behind her.

McCabe places his canteen on the low wall ringing the well, lowers the bucket.

Serche crouches a few feet away from Helena.

SERCHE

Who takes care of you?

HELENA

Moi.

SERCHE

*Of course. Big heart. Strong hands.
My name is Serche. You are?*

HELENA

Helena.

SERCHE

*This is a pretty name. Helena we
are here to look for our friends.
Soldiers, like him.*

He points to McCabe.

SERCHE

*They are lost, we are sent to find
them. Have you seen such men?*

Helena tugs nervously at her dress, lowers her head.

HELENA

Non.

SERCHE

She lies.

McCabe's hand drops to his side-arm.

Serche gently tilts her head. A tear runs down her cheek.

SERCHE

A father always knows.

CRACK!

A bullet rips through Serche's cheek.

McCabe tumbles back over the wall in his haste to take cover behind the well.

Serche palms the wound, blood spilling through his fingers. He shrugs free the shotgun, angles for a shot --

Helena stands frozen with fear, blocking his line of fire.

McCabe draws his Webley. Peeks out to see Serche scooting back on his haunches towards a wood-pile.

CRACK! --

Mccabe ducks as a bullet blasts the stonework.

INT. CABIN - MAIN ROOM - DAY

Cedars takes cover by the doorway, chambers another round.

EVANS

She's still out there!

CRACK! -- Cedars fires again.

Bramble smashes a pane of glass, takes aim with a rifle.

No going back now. Evans frees his revolver and takes cover.

EVANS

Christ.

EXT. CABIN - FRONT - DAY

A bullet SWISHES overhead.

A second pierces McCabe's canteen, knocking it to the dirt.

Serche scrambles for cover, unable to return fire on the doorway for fear of hitting Helena.

SERCHE

Descendre! Descendre!

Movement in a window --

Serche swings the gun, BOOM! --

Glass shatters.

Helena shrieks, drops into a ball.

Serche glances back at the wood-pile --

THUT! -- a bullet pierces his side.

McCabe returns fire --

INT. CABIN - MAIN ROOM - DAY

A bullet shatters a window spraying Bramble in glass.

Cedars ducks as another blasts through the half-open door.

EXT. CABIN - FRONT - DAY

McCabe makes a run for the wood-pile.

A bullet CRACKS past. Another plows the ground ahead.

He reaches the stack, takes cover.

Helena curls into a ball.

The mounts rear in panic. Serche's pony tears free and bolts from the clearing.

McCabe peers out to see Serche just feet away. The Frenchman raises his shotgun -- THUT! -- he's hit again.

McCabe discards the spent casings and reloads. He weighs the distance to his horse.

A round splits the wood close to his head. He rises, FIRES along the cabin's length.

INT. CABIN - MAIN ROOM - DAY

The mutineers take cover as McCabe's rounds punch through the cabin walls.

Silence. Dust swirls. Alain whimpers.

CEDARS

He's out.

EXT. CABIN - FRONT - DAY

McCabe loads his few remaining bullets.

EVANS (O.S.)

Give it up.

Evans and Cedars stand a short way from the cabin. Cedars holds Helena before him, like a human shield.

EVANS

We won't shoot, you've my word.

MCCABE

Same one you gave Waters?

Evans and Cedars exchange a look.

CEDARS

There's a girl here be more than
grateful you did.

Bramble covers them from the doorway. His finger twitches
about the trigger.

Evans produces a grenade from his greatcoat.

EVANS

Course you could stay put. I'll pop
a Mills your way, see if that don't
get you movin'.

McCabe weighs his options grimly.

The trio wait...

...McCabe's Webley arcs out from behind the wood-pile to
land in the dirt. He rises into view, arms raised.

Evans signals Bramble to move forward.

EVANS

See to the horse.

CEDARS

Sooner see to the Cherry.

EVANS

I give my word.

CEDARS

(disparaging)
That you did.

BRAMBLE (O.S.)

Poor cow's still kickin'.

Serche's eyes roam loose and unfocused.

Cedars collects the Webley...

MCCABE

Let me help him.

...checks the weapon's cylinder.

MCCABE

For Christ's sake man, he's a
civilian, you've no cause--

BANG! -- he shoots Serche point-blank.

Bramble recoils in horror.

Evans looks on, sick to the stomach.

Cedars crosses to McCabe, draws level --

McCabe straightens, knows what's coming.

Cedars spins --

THWACK!

EXT. FOREST - TRAIL - DAY

Hansard rides at a trot. DRUMMING of hooves, closing in.

He draws rein, listens...

...Serche's pony rounds a bend ahead at a gallop.

Hansard's mount shies as the pony tears past. It's a moment before he can regain control.

He traces the path of the pony's flight: fresh blood mixes with the dirt. He spurs the Gelding forward.

INT. CABIN - MAIN ROOM - DAY

McCabe sits at the table, his temple streaked with blood. He smooths his hair into place, careful to avoid the welt.

Evans broods at the window -- McCabe notes the revolver in his waistband.

Helena holds a shell-shocked Alain on the cot. Will lies wracked with fever beside them.

MCCABE

You're Evans?

Evans looks to the floor. No answer.

MCCABE

Cold'll do nothing for the boy.

Evans moves to the stove, crouches to tend it.

MCCABE

That man was my guide. See he's buried right, for his wife.

Evans blows on the embers, watches as the flame takes hold. He turns to McCabe, almost hopeful.

EVANS

Did they bring him in, Waters?

The front door opens, Cedars and Bramble enter. Cedars bears down on their captive.

CEDARS

Where's the rest of em'?

MCCABE

I told you.

Cedars sets his face inches from McCabe's -- the hook-knife pressed to his throat.

CEDARS

Been puttin' up with shit-kickers like you a long time.

Evans stands.

EVANS

Back off.

CEDARS

You started this thing to keep us alive.

EVANS

I ain't for putting a bullet in everyone we cross to keep it that way.

CEDARS

Tell it to the poor bitch back there.

He pulls the blade tighter.

CEDARS

Bury one, bury two.

Evans thinks fast.

EVANS

He could help her, could get her to an aid station--

CEDARS
Ride alone'd kill her.

EVANS
It's an even chance.

He draws the revolver, offers it up.

EVANS
You wanna do him? Then go back
there an' see to her an' all. I
ain't for murderin' no bairn, it
ain't in me.

MCCABE
Either shave me or don't, somebody
close the door.

Bramble instinctively moves for the door...

CEDARS
It ain't his place to bark.

...Bramble stops.

EVANS
Close it. Longer Will's down,
longer we're here. More of them
there'll be lookin' for us.

A trickle of blood runs along the knife blade.

Cedars relents, steps back, closes the door. He settles in
the entranceway to gaze coldly at McCabe.

EVANS
(to McCabe)
Get up.

INT. CABIN - BEDROOM - DAY

Sweat beads the Girl's brow. She's barely conscious, her
breath shallow.

Evans skulks in the background as McCabe checks her pulse.

EVANS
We was lookin' for food was all.
She pulled a musket on us, it
misfired.

McCabe lets her wrist down. Grave.

RUMBLE of artillery in the distance, landing perhaps several miles away.

McCabe crosses to the only window, lifts a corner of the cloth shade, peers out.

EVANS

He panicked.

MCCABE

Waters?

Evans eases himself into the chair, exhausted. His lips curl into a hopeless smile.

EVANS

Old man's a brass. Reckon they'd wear our side of it?

McCabe studies Evans, weighing the truth in his words:

EVANS

We went up to man a sap. Maybe they heard us, maybe they had the position ranged. Mortars started falling right on us.

MCCABE

(surprised)

There was no raid?

EVANS

Just bad luck. We lost the Captain. Waters was our second, just froze, called every man for himself. There were a fog, he got us all turned around, started us the wrong way, would've led us right back out there. We set to arguing, just a lad, all piss an' vinegar, knew he'd be for it givin' up the position like that.

He opens the revolver -- four bullets remain.

EVANS

Don't reckon he meant to do it. Nerves got the better of him. He shot Donner, then Will. Bullet went right through, clipped Bramble.

He taps his head, intimating Bramble's wound.

EVANS

I didn't wait to see who was next.

He snaps the gun closed.

EVANS

We're for the wall, you know it.

MCCABE

There's orders to shoot you on sight.

EVANS

Better for me then I'm not seen.

MCCABE

Donner's dead. The boy could still get through, but not with you.

EVANS

Boy's my brother.

MCCABE

How far you think you'll get with that wound of his before infection sets in? You let me bring him in. I know the Provost, he's a good man, we go back a long way.

EVANS

Maybe you didn't hear me.

MCCABE

I'll take the girl too, ease that conscience of yours.

EVANS

I'm what's keepin' you right side up an' I ain't much convinced of it neither.

MCCABE

I'm offering you a chance. There'll be others, I can assure you they won't.

EXT. FOREST - INTERSECTION - DUSK

Hansard's dark eyes stare out from beneath his cap.

He stands his mount at the crossroads, weighing his options. He fixes on point ahead, nudges the horse forward...

The scarlet scarf hangs from a tree-branch, left there as a sign. Hansard follows the direction of the limb -- it points right along the roadway.

INT. CABIN - MAIN ROOM - DUSK

Will lies on the cot, groggy, fever breaking. Alain sits beside him, the canary CHIRPING softly in his hands.

WILL
Who's your little pal?

Will waggles a hand in a flapping motion. Nods to the bird.

ALAIN
Oiseau.

WILL
Wazoo?

ALAIN
Oiseau.

WILL
I had rabbits. Mum called them all
Stu. Better that way she said.

Alain touches Will's bandaged shoulder, curious.

WILL
Bang--

He mimes a gun with his thumb and forefinger -- POW! -- mimics a gunshot.

Alain casts a sad look to the bedroom door.

Will closes his eyes, lulled by the canary's gentle CHIRPS.

INT. CABIN - BEDROOM - DUSK

The Girl shifts beneath the blankets, her breath quickens.

INT. DRYING SHED - DUSK

Low beamed. A wedge of light enters through a narrow door.

Two figures pick their way through the gloom.

Evans strikes a zippo, the flame reveals strips of meat strung to dry from the rafters.

Bramble produces a sack.

EXT. CABIN - REAR GROUNDS - DUSK

KRUMP of shellfire in the background.

McCabe, stripped to his undershirt, he scrapes out a shallow grave with an entrenching tool.

Cedars keeps guard. He rolls a cigarette, struggles to steady his hands against the noise of the barrage.

CEDARS

Never tell you 'bout the diggin',
ain't a hole for the livin' it's
one for the dead. Seen one poor
cove take a bullseye from a
nine-two, never thought to see the
like.

McCabe glances to Serche's body -- a glint of metal catches his eye.

CEDARS

Like a meat firework, coulda'
posted him home on the back of
stamp. That's for me, save some
poor sod the sweat.

MCCABE

Not too late. They'd go easy on
you, first man out, you stand true,
give your account.

CEDARS

I'm no rat like you.

MCCABE

I'd sooner hope you're a good
sport.

He drops the entrenching tool, crosses to Serche's body.

MCCABE

One that wants to live, if only for
the scrap. You like the scrap don't
you, Cedars?

McCabe drags Serche's corpse towards the grave.

CEDARS

All for it, don't you doubt. Gut
Fritz in his sleep an' take my
precious about it. Young Mister
Waters put paid to that. His
choice, not mine.

Cedars sets to gumming the papers.

Seeing his chance, McCabe appears to stumble. He falls back
into the grave, pulling Serche's body with him.

Cedars scowls, searches out his matches.

McCabe slips Serche's hunting knife inside his boot. He
frees himself of the body and climbs out.

Cedars lights the cigarette.

CEDARS

His old man inspected us once, come
on down the line, all puff n' pout,
the pampered fuck. Not a word, nowt
so much as a good luck Tommy. To
see the look on his bloated old
face.

MCCABE

This old man, he a brigadier?

Cedars takes a long drag on the smoke, dead-eyes McCabe with
an air of suspicion.

HELENA (O.S.)

(distressed)

Rosalie!

Cedars stands, turns --

McCabe's hand snakes for the knife, stops --

Cedars cocks his head, as if sensing McCabe's intent. He
doesn't turn, almost daring McCabe to make a move.

MCCABE

Ought to see what that's about.

CEDARS

Aye, we should.

EXT. CABIN - FRONT - DUSK

Tears stream Helena's cheeks. She stares off into the trees. Will supports himself on the jamb, holds her back.

WILL
I'm sorry Alex, I'm sorry. I just
closed my eyes.

HELENA
Rosalie!

Evans and Cedars scan the tree-line.

Bramble exits the cabin holding a blood stained blanket.

BRAMBLE
She ain't in there.

CEDARS
She's shot half to death.

EVANS
(to Will)
Get the kid inside. Bramble watch
the Cherry.

EXT. FOREST - SOUTH FLANK - DUSK

Evans wades through the foliage in search.

EXT. FOREST - NORTH FLANK - DUSK

Cedars makes a half-hearted sweep.

EXT. CABIN - FRONT - DUSK

Bramble sits, struggles to pull on his boots.

The Bay shies. McCabe watches it paw the dirt. He looks to the sky, listens -- the artillery has stopped.

Bramble pounds his boot against the ground in frustration.

MCCABE
Swollen.

Off Bramble's look:

MCCABE

Your feet--

BRAMBLE

You think I don't know?

MCCABE

Be no use stood here, could be
anywhere, she's a slip of a thing.

Bramble shifts, McCabe's getting to him, he doesn't like it.

MCCABE

Step right over her, not even know.

BRAMBLE

You heard what he said.

MCCABE

Aye, he told you to watch me.

He takes off across the clearing. Bramble stares after him, mouth agape. He looks to his rifle, hesitates -- looks to his bare feet.

MCCABE

Grand job so far Private.

EXT. FOREST - SOUTH FLANK - NIGHT

Last light. Evans stops, listens...

EXT. FOREST - SMALL CLEARING - NIGHT

Cedars slows, pulls off his hat, face creased in despair.

The Girl/Rosalie staggers into the brush ahead.

Cedars sinks to his haunches.

EXT. FOREST - NORTH FLANK - NIGHT

Evans pushes through the foliage. He reaches the --

SMALL CLEARING

-- and slows, confused to find Cedars knelt in silence.

Cedars raises to look in the direction Rosalie disappeared, his eyes wet with tears. He shakes his head.

CEDARS
Father, forgive me.

EXT. FOREST - NORTH FLANK - NIGHT**INTERCUT: MCCABE/BRAMBLE/EVANS/ROSALIE**

Bramble curses over the rough ground, he's barefoot, struggling to keep up with McCabe.

Evans weaves through the trees, towards a growing clamour.

Rosalie nears a thin swathe of brush lining the forest road -- all that separates her and the column of TROOPS passing in the darkness beyond.

Horses SNORT. Wagons CREAK and RATTLE.

Evans scoops her up, holds her, frozen in shock.

A RUSTLING off to his side.

VOICE (O.S.)
Wer ist da?

A figure emerges from the shadows --

GERMAN SOLDIER, 20s, a bundle of kindling in his arms.

Evans stands there, helpless.

Horror creases the German's face. He drops the wood, gropes for the rifle slung on his shoulder.

A hand covers the German's mouth, McCabe twists the hunting knife into his side.

In one practiced move McCabe thrusts a foot into the hock of the German's knee, forces it to the ground. He drops his weight downward, folds the man back on himself with a CRUNCH.

McCabe buries his face in the dying man's side, stifling a cough as he recovers his breath.

Evans sinks into shadow. Rosalie's lifeless body cradled in his arms.

They watch, motionless as the column marches on.

END INTERCUT

EXT. FOREST - LAY-POINT - NIGHT

Hansard sits against a tree twenty yards from the passing column. He unwinds a wrapping of oiled rags from his rifle.

INT. CABIN - MAIN ROOM - NIGHT

Bramble lurches forward, wild with anger.

BRAMBLE

We're behind the fuckin' lines!

Evans blocks him, shoves him back. Bramble hobbles back on one foot -- the other bloodied from the chase.

McCabe sits in the corner, weathering the storm with calm.

EVANS

They don't know it, he just put one
in the dirt to keep it that way.

Bramble flops down in tears of frustration, sets to tending his injured foot.

BRAMBLE

She were never gonna make it,
should've done em' both--

EVANS

I'm warnin' you.

BRAMBLE

Warn away, I'm done with this,
fuckin' swim home I have to.

MCCABE

It's a vanguard, they won't get
far. We're behind nothing, not yet.

BRAMBLE

Oh listen to him, goin' on! Just
fuckin' do him!

Evans snatches him up by the collar, slaps him.

EVANS

You shut-up an' get your boots on,
kinda soldier goes barefoot!

Evans kicks Bramble's boots towards him. He paces away, collects an entrenching tool, pauses to glare at the others before exiting into the night.

Cedars watches after him.

EXT. CABIN - FRONT - NIGHT

Evans listens to the murmur of the German column.

Cedars sidles past, stops a few steps ahead.

CEDARS

Let him go he'll cut for the
nearest post, every patrol in the
country'll be lining up for a pop
at us.

EVANS

If he's telling the truth about
this Provost? Could be Will's a
chance.

Cedars pitches Serche's knife into the dirt at Evans' feet.

CEDARS

That's your chance.

EVANS

And the children? The old man ain't
comin' home, you know it.

Cedars sends him a look, heads back inside.

EXT. FOREST ROAD - NIGHT

Empty. The rumble of the column in the distance.

EXT. FOREST - LAY-POINT - NIGHT

Hansard strips to his undershirt, pulls on a wool hat.

He scoops up a wad of earth, spits in it, kneads the mixture into mud.

EXT. CABIN - REAR GROUNDS - DAWN

A CAT paws the freshly turned earth of a small grave.

The Bay stands tethered beside the cabin.

Cedars exits, stops to piss. He studies the sky -- strains of blue chase out the night.

INT. CABIN - MAIN ROOM - DAWN

Evans squats before the stove. His blistered, soil stained palms outstretched before him.

McCabe sits with his back to the wall. Looks like he hasn't slept in days.

Bramble stares nervously from the window.

Will lies asleep. Fever broken.

Sensing a presence McCabe looks up to find Cedars watching him from the doorway.

EXT. CABIN - REAR GROUNDS - DAWN

The Bay's ears prick up.

EXT. FOREST - EDGE OF CLEARING - DAWN

Hansard, face blackened with mud, creeps towards the cabin. He's barely visible amongst the foliage.

He eases into a firing position some thirty-feet out. Sights his rifle on the window, tracks to a figure inside -- their identity obscured behind the grimy pane.

INT. CABIN - MAIN ROOM - DAWN

Cedars wakes Will. He stares back, confused.

CEDARS

Take the young'uns in back. Stay
put till we say.

Will frowns, finds his brother -- Evans hasn't moved.

WILL
Alex?

EVANS
Do as he says.

Bramble helps Will to his feet, sends him on his way with the children in tow.

Cedars paces across the room.

MCCABE
Man of your word.

CEDARS
If you only slept.

EXT. FOREST - EDGE OF CLEARING - DAWN

The foresight pans from the first figure to a second as it steps into view: the second target removes a cap...

...Hansard's finger eases off the trigger.

The foresight pulls back to the first figure.

Finger takes in the trigger's slack.

INT. CABIN - MAIN ROOM - DAWN

McCabe, standing now, sweeps his hair into place. Regards his would be killers each in turn, unimpressed. He refits his cap.

MCCABE
Shall we?

Cedars nods to the front door.

A CHIRP from the canary freezes them all.

EXT. FOREST - EDGE OF CLEARING - DAWN

Hansard, poised to fire --

His eyes swivel from the sight -- hearing them before he sees them -- the CLUMP of hooves, CLANK of metal.

Two riders draw into the clearing. They wear the field grey uniform of the German army, horses laden with pots and pans.

SMOKES, a portly mid 30s, slung with water carriers, puffs on a cigarette.

SCARVES, 20s, sour-eyed, wrapped head to jaw in a thick scarf.

They halt some twenty feet from Hansard's position. Smokes dismounts.

EXT. CABIN - FRONT - DAWN

The door CREAKS open. Helena slips out, edges forward.

SCARVES
(impatient)
Gehen Sie einfach zu sehen.

Smokes waves him off, approaches Helena.

She stands there, eyes scrunched shut in anticipation.

He crouches, plucks a rock from the ground. Cocks his head, puzzled by her behaviour.

SMOKES
Hallo?

HELENA
Bonjour.

SMOKES
Salut. Wasser?

She opens one eye to regard him.

He taps a water-carrier, mimes drinking. Nods to the well.

SMOKES
Wasser?

HELENA
Oui, eau.

She nods and closes it again.

SMOKES
Eau?

HELENA
Oui.

Smokes shrugs, lets it go.

EXT. FOREST - EDGE OF CLEARING - DAWN

Hansard tracks Smokes to the well. The German tosses the rock into the opening. Satisfied he turns to Scarves.

SMOKES

Nehmen Sie die Pferde. Sammein Sie
alle Kantinen sie können.

Scarves turns his mount, heads back towards the road leading the second horse.

Smokes slips the water-carriers free.

INT. CABIN - MAIN ROOM - DAWN

Tense silence.

Evans peeks through the window. Cedars waits at the doorway beside him, rifle in hand, poised for action.

Bramble stays low, breathless with fear.

McCabe notices the bedroom door slightly ajar -- Will peers from the gap, meets eyes with McCabe.

EXT. CABIN - FRONT - DAWN

Smokes hums a tune as he lowers the bucket into the well.

EXT. FOREST - EDGE OF CLEARING - DAWN

Hansard spots McCabe's canteen, inches from Smokes' foot.

EXT. CABIN - FRONT - DAWN

Smokes repositions himself, his foot catches the canteen.

He frowns, gives it a nudge -- the remaining water slews from the bullet hole. He does a quick scan of the cabin -- spots the bullet pocked windows.

Helena stands tensed with her fingers in her ears.

The colour drains from Smokes' face -- something's not right. His humming rises a pitch with nerves.

EXT. FOREST - EDGE OF CLEARING - DAWN

Hansard carefully fixes his bayonet into place.

EXT. CABIN - FRONT - DAWN

Smokes fills the water-carrier. He keeps the cabin in his peripherals, feeling the exposure of his position.

EXT. FOREST - EDGE OF CLEARING - DAWN

Hansard watches as Smokes gathers up the water-carriers.

SMOKES

Adieu.

EXT. CABIN - FRONT - DAWN

Smokes makes toward the treeline, his pace quickening with every step.

INT. CABIN - MAIN ROOM - DAWN

Evans gathers his breath, returning to the moment.

EVANS

Do it here, quick an' quiet.

CEDARS

Cold it is.

Cedars pulls the hook-knife.

BRAMBLE

Shit!

They turn to find McCabe gone -- a RUMBLE from the bedroom.

INT. CABIN - BEDROOM - DAWN

McCabe braces the door with his weight.

Will drags the iron bed frame towards him.

BANG! -- the door jars. McCabe ducks --

THUNK! -- a bayonet punctures the wood.

MCCABE

Quickly.

Will redoubles his efforts. McCabe reaches out to help pull the frame the last few feet to block the door.

McCabe scans the room -- the window, too small to fit through. He sets his jaw. Trapped.

Helena drags the rusted musket from a corner.

McCabe gives it the once over: an antique, unloaded -- it'll have to do --

WHAM!

The door bucks, splinters at the hinges. It won't hold.

WILL

I'm sorry.

MCCABE

Get 'em back, don't let 'em see it.

EXT. FOREST - TOWARDS ROAD - DAWN

Hansard weaves through trees, feet placing sure and silent.

EXT. FOREST ROAD - DAWN

Smokes glances behind him: the cabin no longer in sight he breaks into an awkward run, weighted by his load.

INTERCUT: SMOKES/SCARVES/HANSARD

Smokes closes the gap on Scarves.

SMOKES

Hey! Hey, warten! Halten!

Scarves doesn't hear -- his ears muffled beneath the scarf.

Hansard changes direction, arcing through the brush.

Smokes wheezes to a halt.

SMOKES

Hey! Angles!

Scarves turns in the saddle.

Was? SCARVES

Angles! SMOKES

Wo? SCARVES

Hansard bursts from the tree-line in answer, thrusts the bayonet up into Scarves' chest.

The horse rears --

Smokes watches helplessly as his companion falls from the saddle.

Scarves pleads --

Hansard runs him through, struggles to free the bayonet from his ribcage.

The moment catches up with Smokes who breaks for the trees to his left.

Hansard twists the bayonet free of its fixing. He draws a bead on the fleeing German, stops, glances back along the road -- too risky.

END INTERCUT

EXT. FOREST - TOWARDS MEADOW - DAWN

Smokes runs for his life.

Hansard barrels after him, a hunter bent on the kill.

EXT. MEADOW - DAWN

Smokes bursts from the tree-line into long grass, sheds the water-carriers.

Ahead of him, the meadow stretches to the road from the forest. A rearguard of GERMAN TROOPS wend their way along.

Hansard sees them, discards the rifle.

Hier, hier! SMOKES

EXT. COUNTRY LANE - DAWN

A German MOUNTED OFFICER, 30s, glib, turns in the saddle. He searches the distance...

...grass and wildflower stretch to the forest's edge. A pheasant breaks cover.

The Mounted Officer watches a moment, cheered by the sight.

EXT. MEADOW - DAWN

The pheasant rises skyward --

Below, Hansard pummels Smokes into bloody submission.

He covers the German's mouth and pulls his knife. Smokes' eyes go wide with fear.

Hansard stops, thinks...

HANSARD

You understand Anglaise?

Smokes weighs his options -- nods vigorously.

EXT. FOREST - EDGE OF CLEARING - DAY

Smokes stands blindfolded. He breathes through his nose -- a result of the sock wadded in his mouth. A satchel is strapped tight to his back.

HANSARD

Now, you do understand?

Smokes nods, terrified.

Hansard pats his helmet into place and moves off, unfurling a ball of string as he goes.

SMOKES

(muffled)

Bitte.

HANSARD

(prompting)

Zwanzig, neunzehn, achzehn--

SMOKES

(muffled)

Achzehn...

INT. CABIN - BEDROOM - DAY

McCabe wields the musket like a club -- he's cornered, his uniform torn and bloody.

He parries a thrust from Cedar's bayonet.

Dodges a blow from Bramble's entrenching tool.

No sooner does he fight off one than the other attacks.

Will huddles with the children.

WILL

Call 'em off! Please, call it off!

Evans hovers in the doorway, revolver drawn.

McCabe's eyes dart between his tormentors, vying to second guess their next move.

He deflects a thrust from Cedars.

A swipe from Bramble's shovel blade gashes his arm.

Will leaps forward, wraps himself around Bramble's waist.

BRAMBLE

Get him off me!

Evans leaves his post to pull Will back.

McCabe knocks the bayonet aside, swings the musket's stock up into Cedar's jaw -- CRACK -- sends him reeling.

McCabe makes for the open door.

Cedars wheels, drives the tip of the bayonet into McCabe's thigh. McCabe tears free --

MAIN ROOM

-- his momentum carrying him through the doorway. His leg buckles, he SLAMS to the floor.

The musket skitters out of reach.

He stretches for a shard of glass beneath a broken window.

Above him, the canary bats about the cage.

WHUMPF!

Cedars kicks him. McCabe tries to pick himself up, slips in the blood trail from his leg.

Cedars kicks him again.

Evans and Bramble gather behind them.

CEDARS

On your knees.

McCabe makes to crawl --

Cedars responds with a flurry of kicks. He pulls McCabe to his knees, snaps his head back, draws the hook-knife.

McCabe spots the agitated canary --

He looks beyond the window, his eyes narrow.

Cedars sees it too, freezes.

EXT. CABIN - FRONT - DAY

Smokes inches into view, twirling the scarlet scarf above his head. He halts a stones throw from the cabin.

SMOKES

(muffled)

...zwei...

The string runs from the satchel trailing behind...

...the other end knotted to a tree a short distance away.

SMOKES

...eins.

He lets the scarf fall --

It folds to the dirt.

INT. CABIN - MAIN ROOM - DAY

McCabe tears free, throws himself to the floor.

The door swings open, Hansard FIRES --

Bramble takes a bullet in the throat.

Two more find Evans' chest.

Cedars charges --

Hansard FIRES, they collide, Hansard is knocked to the floor.

Cedars scrambles out the doorway as Hansard's remaining bullets splinter the frame in his wake.

EXT. CABIN - FRONT - DAY

Cedars stumbles away clutching his arm.

INT. CABIN - MAIN ROOM - DAY

Evans slumps into a chair in shock.

Reloaded, Hansard snaps the revolver's chamber into place and coolly draws a bead --

BANG!

Blood mists from Cedars' coat, he staggers, half-steps now...

Hansard steadies his aim...

EXT. CABIN - FRONT - DAY

Blindfold gone, Smokes vies to free himself of the satchel. He looks up in horror as Cedars' foot snares the string --

SMOKES

Gott--

A muffled series of CLICKS from the satchel --

INT. CABIN - MAIN ROOM - DAY

-- WHUMPF!

The satchel explodes. Smokes and Cedars vanish in a fury of dirt and flesh.

Hansard lowers his gun. Inspects a gash to his stomach from Cedar's knife -- he'll live.

Blood seeps from McCabe's thigh. He grits his teeth and tightens a rough tourniquet with his belt.

Evans slips a shaking hand inside his greatcoat.

Will appears in the bedroom doorway, stares at Evans in concern.

EVANS

(weakly)

It's nothing. Just stay there mate.

McCabe finds Evans' revolver, dropped in the melee.

HANSARD

Patrol found me. Waters wasn't so fortunate. I saw where he dragged himself from hole to hole, where the rats had eaten at his face.

Bramble GURGLES on his own blood.

HANSARD

Would've been slow.

Evans removes his hand from his pocket. He holds a grenade. He rests it on the table, fingers wrapping the lever. The safety pin dangles from his thumb.

EVANS

Time to go.

Will stares at his brother, speechless.

EVANS

Take the horse.

WILL

I can't.

EVANS

They'll kill you.

Will shrinks into the corner.

EVANS

Get out!

WILL

I ain't runnin'.

Hansard kneels. He watches Evans, ignoring the flow of blood as he removes Bramble's identity discs.

Evans sees Helena watching from the bedroom. She clutches the up-turned bed-frame, uncomprehending.

EVANS

You never was.

Evans' eyes grow vacant.

Hansard wraps Evans' fist before the grenade's lever can spring. He reinserts the safety pin.

Evans is motionless now. Dead.

Will sinks against the wall, stricken with grief.

Hansard turns the gun on Will --

CLICK.

McCabe shakily stands, covers Hansard with the revolver, hammer cocked.

MCCABE

The boy comes with me.

HANSARD

You know the order.

MCCABE

I know I was lied to.

Hansard studies him, almost impressed. He holsters his gun, turns to the window, listens...

SHOUTS in the distance.

HANSARD

Hear them? It won't be water
they're coming for.

He collects a rifle, fishes a handful of shells from his pocket and calmly sets to reloading.

HANSARD

Your call McCabe.

INT. CABIN - MAIN ROOM - DAY

A pair of GERMAN INFANTRYMEN, 20s, storm through the open door, rifles levelled.

Bramble sprawls in a pool of blood.

Evans sags in the chair.

EXT. CABIN - FRONT - DAY

The Mounted Officer squats amidst the blast area. He picks at the singed remains of the scarlet scarf, puzzled.

EXT. FOREST - STREAM-BED - DAY

Hansard and Will ride double. McCabe follows, children tucked before him. They guide their mounts in silence.

EXT. COUNTRYSIDE - BLUFF - DAY

McCabe's party crests into view. They halt, searching the landscape stretched out below.

A farmstead nestles on the plain. A FIGURE loads belongings onto a cart.

Helena clings weakly to Alain. A rag-doll, barely conscious.

Hansard watches McCabe, sensing his dilemma. They exchange a look. Hansard breaks into a gallop along the ridge.

McCabe wraps an arm around the children, spurs the Bay toward the holding.

EXT. FARMSTEAD - DAY

DAUGHTER, 40s, stout, turns from loading the cart to watch McCabe's approach.

WOMAN

Papa!

MOMENTS LATER

A leathery farmer, PAPA, 60s, steadies the Bay as McCabe hoists himself into the saddle.

Daughter holds Alain on her hip. Helena steps out from her side, the tobacco pipe clutched to her chest.

She looks up at McCabe, her eyes seem to plead with him to stay. A flicker of emotion finds his face, guilty, embarrassed.

He wheels the horse around, kicks it into a gallop.

EXT. PLAIN - DAY

McCabe rides hard for the bluff.

EXT. ROAD TO DES CHENES - DAY

Will sags, his hands bound. Hansard, seated behind him, guides the Gelding in the direction of the hamlet.

Will slides to one side, about to pass out. Hansard pulls him upright. He reigns in the horse, looks around -- no-one else on the road.

No witnesses.

His hand falls to his revolver...

WILL

(weakly)

I heard you... you called my
name... I didn't know what to do.

...shifts instead to his canteen. He braces Will as he holds the canteen to his lips, helping him to drink.

Hansard's gaze strays to Des Chenes -- conscious of what and who awaits them.

INT. COMPANY HQ - STUDY - DAY

The Brigadier sits in an armchair reading a letter.

Finch hovers by the window, watches wearily as the Redcaps jostle his desk onto a wagon bed outside.

FINCH

I had the company reports directed
through me for approval. Felt it
prudent, lest some minor detail
prove inconsistent with my official
despatch.

The Brigadier balls the letter in his fist. Stares straight ahead, jaw set, burning with inner turmoil.

FINCH

It seems the Captain has somewhat
more of an affinity for the truth
of what happened that night than
serves our interests.

THE BRIGADIER

There's only one truth, yours.

FINCH

What do you think battalion would make of contrary reports? Likely we'd find ourselves subject to an inquest. The kind to cast a shadow over our future prospects.

THE BRIGADIER

Hansard's unstable, you saw it yourself, any man could see.

FINCH

Not just any.

THE BRIGADIER

Any that knows his place!

FINCH

It's quite possible for the fog of war to cloud a man's recollection. It is to our misfortune the Captain is no man, he's a commissioned officer. One of yours...

THE BRIGADIER

Send your report.

FINCH

I think I've rather overplayed my hand--

THE BRIGADIER

I said send it!

Finch tightens. He snaps on his cap and heads for the door leaving the Brigadier to his rage.

EXT. DES CHENES - MAIN STREET/COMPANY HQ - DAY

SOLDIERS ferry supplies onto wagons. A ragtag of CIVILIANS carry personal affects in hasty exodus.

Finch exits onto the stoop, flush with anger. He spots Hansard approaching, his face clouds at the sight of Will.

FINCH

(to the Redcaps)
You two.

Will half falls from the horse into the Redcaps' waiting arms.

Hansard dismounts.

FINCH
You're alone?

HANSARD
I'd bet against it.

Will stands before Finch like a soiled uniform on a broken hanger. Finch dismisses the Redcaps.

FINCH
Name and rank.

WILL
Private Evans, sir.

FINCH
Evans..?

HANSARD
Just the one.

He pats his breast pocket -- intimating the I.D. discs.

FINCH
Get him to the guard-room, you
don't sign him in, you say nothing.
Then report to my office.

Hansard shifts his gaze beyond Finch to a fast approaching rider. He can't help a faint smile of admiration.

FINCH
Is there a problem, Captain?

HANSARD
Remind me what it was we were
supposed to tell him again?

Finch turns at the CLIP of hooves.

A dust coated McCabe draws to a halt and dismounts.

He limps to Hansard. They stand eye-to-eye -- McCabe snatches the knife from Hansard's belt.

Hansard tenses.

MCCABE

Major, the Private is a witness to
the murder of Lieutenant Waters.

McCabe cuts the rope binding Will's wrists. He hands the
knife back to Hansard.

MCCABE

He's here under my protection.

It takes Finch a moment to process. He straightens, steps in
close to McCabe, voice lowered.

FINCH

Just what do you think you're
playing at?

MCCABE

The boy's innocent.

FINCH

That can't be.

MCCABE

He was wounded, acted out of
duress.

FINCH

You misunderstand me, McCabe.

Finch turns to Will, circles in.

FINCH

Your wound, it was sustained how?

WILL

I was shot, sir.

FINCH

Hardly unforeseen.

WILL

By Mister Waters, I mean the
Lieutenant, sir.

Will lowers his eyes.

FINCH

Eyes front.

Will straightens.

FINCH

And how is it you deigned to catch
a bullet from one of your own?

(impatient)

Come on, answer the question.

WILL

It were dark. We was ambushed.

FINCH

So you caught a stray?

WILL

No. He shot me an' two others in a
retreat--

FINCH

Don't lie to me lad.

WILL

God's truth, sir.

FINCH

I were you I'd concern myself with
yours.

The Brigadier appears in the chateau window above. He
watches, giving nothing away.

Finch remains oblivious to his presence.

Hansard doesn't.

Will sinks to his knees, exhausted.

FINCH

Get him up.

McCabe raises Will up, supports him.

WILL

He didn't know which way to go.

FINCH

And did you?

WILL

Alex, Lance Corporal Evans did, the
Lieutenant wouldn't listen--

FINCH

But you're a listener. Only to your
brother and not your C.O.

MCCABE

Major, the boy needs a doctor, he's sick, been a day in the saddle--

FINCH

He tried to stop you, keep you together, disciplined, yes?

WILL

I don't know, sir--

FINCH

Were you not present?

MCCABE

Lance Corporal Evans committed the act, I'm witness to the confession.

Finch tightens his circle.

FINCH

He gave you orders.

MCCABE

Hear me out, John--

FINCH

Which you refused to obey.

WILL

He were wrong.

FINCH

Well now he's dead!

WILL

We just wanted him to put down his gun.

Finch stops. He rocks back on his heels, satisfied.

MCCABE

That's enough lad.

FINCH

That it is. The order stands.

MCCABE

There's grounds for remit, you well know it--

FINCH

This man stands guilty of mutiny
and desertion--

MCCABE

Found in his absence.

FINCH

The sum of his guilt!

MCCABE

He had no choice!

Finch takes a breath. A change of tact --

FINCH

Captain Hansard, you were present
at the time of Private Evans
arrest?

HANSARD

I was there.

FINCH

Do you support Staff Sergeant
McCabe's assertions?

HANSARD

He's your man, Major, I dare say
his word carries your assurance.

Finch clenches his jaw, his rage barely concealed.

INT. COMPANY HQ - STUDY - DAY

The Brigadier watches the scene unfolding outside.

His grip tightens on the cane.

EXT. DES CHENES - MAIN STREET/COMPANY HQ - DAY

Finch, flush with anger.

MCCABE

There was no raid, Lieutenant
Waters abandoned his command, fired
on his own men in panic.

FINCH

Clearly you've not read the report.

MCCABE

Clearly I didn't write it.

Finch looks like he's swallowed a thistle.

MCCABE

This was never out of concern for the French, it's bloody-minded revenge -- the boy's innocent and you know it.

FINCH

I'm warning you--

MCCABE

I request counsel for retrial. The three officers presiding, their names, if you would, sir.

Finch stiffens, defensive.

Hansard sends McCabe an almost pitying look.

McCabe looks between them, slowly realising the answer to his question. He fires a look at Finch, disgusted, betrayed.

MCCABE

I'm invoking the prisoner's right to petition the monarch for clemency--

FINCH

Don't quote me the bloody book.

MCCABE

Then to whom shall the request be passed, sir?

THE BRIGADIER (O.S.)

A day in the saddle.

Finch about-turns in surprise.

The Brigadier stalks his way down the steps towards Will -- a hawk sighting its prey.

McCabe coils, the final piece falling into place.

THE BRIGADIER

A long time for some, a lifetime for others. I'll have an M.O. sent for.

(to Will)

(MORE)

THE BRIGADIER (cont'd)
You were there?

Will stumbles over his words.

THE BRIGADIER
Speak up.

WILL
Yes, sir.

THE BRIGADIER
Is it true?

WILL
Yessir.

A distance clouds the Brigadier's face.

THE BRIGADIER
I'll review the Staff Sergeant's
request. Personally.

MCCABE
Review..?

THE BRIGADIER
See the prisoner to holding.

MCCABE
(enraged)
Review? It's not a privilege, it's
his bloody right!

THE BRIGADIER
Confine this man to quarters, use
of threatening language towards an
officer. It's in the book as I'm
sure he's aware.

Off Finch's hesitation:

THE BRIGADIER
I am not given to the issue of
opinions!

FINCH
Ten-shun!

McCabe restrains himself, fighting to control his anger as
Finch leads him up the stairs onto the stoop.

The Brigadier shuffles away, never so much as a glance back.

HANSARD

Still want to see me in your
office, Major?

Finch pauses in a moment of private implosion, he lets it go, continues inside.

Will stands hunched with cold.

INT. BASEMENT CORRIDOR - HOLDING CELLS - DAY

Hansard leads Will towards an improvised 'cell.'

A gruff TURNKEY, 40s, opens a cellar door ahead of them. Hansard dismisses him with a wave. He halts Will in the entrance, removes his I.D. discs and ushers him inside.

Hansard closes the door, draws the bolt. Stares at it, lost in self doubt.

INT. COMPANY HQ - MCCABE'S QUARTERS - NIGHT

McCabe perches on the bed buttoning his tunic. A fresh bandage wraps his thigh. He gazes at the floor, downcast.

A MEDICAL OFFICER, 50s, tired, snaps his travel-bag closed. He steals a sheepish look at McCabe and exits, brushing past Finch in the doorway.

FINCH

King of Belgium stayed here on the
road to Paris. This very room,
there's a plaque in the lobby.

He crosses to the window.

FINCH

He wants to see you.

MCCABE

What did he promise you?

FINCH

It's all that he couldn't. Question
my orders McCabe, but don't you
ever doubt my conviction.

INT. HOLDING CELL - NIGHT

McCabe steps inside. He carries a blanket.

The door closes, the bolt drawn behind him.

Will lies curled on a cot, despondent. He raises to take in his visitor, squinting in the gloom.

WILL

Thought you was a doctor.

MCCABE

Brought you an extra.

WILL

Was wondering, if it's alright to ask, if you'd write my mother? To let her know..?

MCCABE

There'll be a chaplain to see you, his hand'll serve you better.

Will searches his face... The penny drops.

WILL

Clemency, the Brigadier, said so himself, you was there.

McCabe slips a flask from the blanket. He presses it into Will's grasp, nods towards a small window.

MCCABE

First shade of blue, you drink it, every drop.

WILL

No, we didn't mean for it, none of it. I can still fight.

Will loses himself, distraught.

WILL

What'll my mother say?

INT. COMPANY HQ - CORRIDOR - NIGHT

McCabe limps through the building. Ahead, the Aide opens a door to receive him.

INT. COMPANY HQ - STUDY - NIGHT

The Brigadier stokes a fire from an armchair.

McCabe stands at attention, cap held before him.

MCCABE

You sent for me, sir.

THE BRIGADIER

I sent for wine.

The Brigadier tosses something small into the fire. It quickly ignites, shrivels to ashes.

THE BRIGADIER

A thorough man that doctor. Make a fine fellow of law should he choose.

He produces an envelope, places it on a side table.

THE BRIGADIER

You've quite the record. Began your service under Chelmsford no less.

MCCABE

May God rest his soul.

THE BRIGADIER

Lie about your age?

MCCABE

Have to know it to lie.

THE BRIGADIER

Cut my teeth in Africa myself, a cursed place if ever there were. Never met a mosquito that didn't hold me in high regard.

He taps his leg.

THE BRIGADIER

I'm reminded of their affection to this day. Here we are, survivors. A simpler time, perhaps. You've served your country far beyond your calling.

MCCABE

I've been fortunate, sir.

THE BRIGADIER
 And yet where has such modesty
 gotten you?

Silence from McCabe, there's no answer to such a question.

THE BRIGADIER
 Tell me, about Isandlwana...

A chill spreads through McCabe. He hasn't heard this name in
 a long time.

THE BRIGADIER
 You escaped the slaughter by hiding
 in a water-barrel... half frozen
 and near death by the time the
 relief hauled you free. Merely a
 boy, what could you of done?

McCabe just stares.

THE BRIGADIER
 You know what the Zulu did to those
 boys they found alive...

MCCABE
 Aye.

THE BRIGADIER
 Those men, those boys, they played
 their part. Dead and buried every
 one. Were it not a matter of
 record, whomever were to know you
 were there?

He plucks an identification disc from his lap. Thumbs it,
 allowing McCabe to see.

THE BRIGADIER
 What is experience but the sum of
 our years? Mine taught me that war
 becomes bureaucracy. No deed nor
 bullet left in doubt.

He pitches the disc to the flames.

THE BRIGADIER
 Who, without such witness, could
 say it was ever otherwise?

The Brigadier gathers a final disc. It dances in the
 fire-light, a name etched upon it: PVT. WILLIAM EVANS.

THE BRIGADIER

There's a fresh offensive in the offing, this French debacle only strengthens the need for us to push the initiative. Drive the Hun to his heels. Every available N.C.O is to join the line... Of course a man deemed unfit would find himself relieved of such an undertaking.

He slides the envelope across the table -- an offering.

THE BRIGADIER

When was the last time you saw home?

Taking McCabe's silence for his answer:

THE BRIGADIER

Company moves at dawn. See to it Captain Hansard is not among their number.

He flings the disc to the fire.

McCabe blinks.

MCCABE

Sir.

INT. TAVERN - NIGHT

Candles struggle to reach into shadows.

Hansard sits nursing a bottle of wine. He's drunk, dishevelled in his shirtsleeves. A man without a care.

BARTENDER, 60s, despairs at the bar. He looks up as McCabe enters, flicks a hand along the counter -- 'help yourself.'

Behind the bar, McCabe selects a bottle, leaves several coins in its place.

Hansard stirs as McCabe draws a seat opposite.

HANSARD

You're going up the line...

MCCABE

Aye.

HANSARD

Where would you be without a war?

MCCABE

Drunk.

HANSARD

It never lasts.

Hansard downs his drink.

HANSARD

There a place for you back there?

McCabe searches the space between them.

HANSARD

They wouldn't know you existed,
wouldn't sleep if they did. Sisters
of Nazareth went too far, burned
those bloody stripes right into
you. It's their dirt McCabe, you'll
just bleed in it. Here, there and
every God-forsaken place in
between.

MCCABE

And I'll be ever grateful for it.

HANSARD

Did he send you?

They lock eyes. McCabe uncorks his bottle, rolls his
shirt-sleeves. His answer unspoken, but understood.

HANSARD

There's little glory in truth. A
man like him could never live with
that... I don't recall the blast,
even the pain comes to pass. But
the silence, realising I was
alone...

His hand travels to the wound on his chest.

HANSARD

I couldn't see them, but I could
hear them, the rats eating the dead
around me. Halfway between death
and disgrace, waiting for them to
come for me...

Hansard takes up the bottle, his identity discs slip through
his shirt as he finishes the wine.

HANSARD

He was at my bedside when I woke,
told me his boy, his only son was
missing. Doubtless killed in our
glorious action. It meant the world
to him to hear it... Should've seen
the look on his face. Waters didn't
deserve to die like he did, but
I'll be damned if he or any one of
us finds glory in a lie.

McCabe fills Hansard's glass. Hansard takes it, knuckles
whitening with his grip.

HANSARD

You could no more of saved that boy
as I could his.

Beneath the table, his other hand flips open the catch on
his belt knife.

HANSARD

Drink with me you bastard.

EXT. DES CHENES - TAVERN/MAIN-STREET - NIGHT

Hansard pitches drunkenly forward, catches himself on a
rail.

McCabe exits the tavern after him. He looks around, spots a
BURLY REDCAP, 40s, patrolling further down the street.

McCabe hauls Hansard to his feet. Hansard gropes for his
knife as McCabe walks him out into the road.

Burly Redcap turns a corner out of sight.

Hansard finds his knife --

McCabe CRACKS him in the jaw, sends him sprawling.

INT. COMPANY HQ - THE BRIGADIER'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

McCabe stands at the window, calm, sober.

Outside: the first hint of blue shows in the sky. Below, the
Chaplain passes through the courtyard.

McCabe smooths the envelope in his hand before holding it
over a candle. The flame quickly takes, reducing it to ash.

A figure lies sleeping, their identity hidden from view. An empty bottle of wine rests beside them on the nightstand.

McCabe shakes the sleeper -- they groan, pull away. McCabe rips back the covers to reveal --

EXT. COMPANY HQ - REAR GROUNDS - DAWN

-- The Brigadier, dressed in his nightclothes, squints blindly at his surroundings.

THE BRIGADIER
The hell is this?

McCabe keeps step beside him.

MCCABE
Walk with me, sir.

THE BRIGADIER
This is madness, my glasses, I
can't see worth a damn.

MCCABE
A little farther now.

They cross open ground, McCabe guiding, the Brigadier struggling with his footing.

They move away from the walled courtyard of the chateau in the direction of a RUINED OUTBUILDING.

EXT. COMPANY HQ - COURTYARD - DAWN

Will's head lolls on his chest. A blindfold wraps his eyes. He sags from a wooden post, a rope about his torso all but holds him upright.

Hands pin a white target card to his shirt over the heart.

EXT. RUINED OUTBUILDING - DAWN

The Brigadier falls to his knees, looks around confused. His brow knots as he strains to focus on a grave before him.

THE BRIGADIER
Tell me it's not, you damned
fool...

McCabe hauls him to his feet.

THE BRIGADIER
 ...I don't need to see it!

Sweat coats his face. He struggles to catch his breath, his jaw goes slack as he realises McCabe's intent.

MALE VOICE (O.S.)
 (loud, authoritative)
 Take aim!

McCabe raises a revolver.

The Brigadier looks back, sober with horror.

MALE VOICE (O.S.)
 FIRE!

McCabe shoots the Brigadier. The sound of the shot lost amid the CRACKLE of gunfire from the courtyard.

MOMENTS LATER

The Brigadier's body flops into the empty grave.

Several shovel loads of loose dirt follow...

EXT. DES CHENES - MAIN STREET - DAY

A freshly polished riding boot braces itself in a stirrup.

McCabe climbs into the saddle. A steel helmet is strapped to his haversack. A Lee Enfield rifle slung on his shoulder.

He pauses as a pair of CIVILIANS, 50s, emerge from the courtyard stretching a body wrapped in blankets.

McCabe watches, leaden.

EXT. RUINED OUTBUILDING - DAY

The Civilians lower Will's body into a grave. It comes to rest on a layer of soil masking the Brigadier's corpse.

A clump of earth shifts to reveal the 'sword and baton' symbol of the Brigadier's insignia.

The Civilians take up shovels and fill the hole.

INT. COMPANY HQ - GUARD ROOM - DAY

Hansard pulls himself up on a cot. He winces at his surroundings. Rubs his bruised jaw.

TINK-TINK-TINK...

Burly Redcap sits at a table, stirs a cup of tea.

Hansard swings his bare feet to the floor.

Burly sends him a bored look, slides the knife into view.

BURLY REDCAP
Grim stuff that local brew.

HANSARD
What're the odds you've my boots
too?

EXT. COMPANY HQ - STOOP/STREET - DAY

Hansard buttons his overcoat to the cold. He looks around, gathering his bearings, searching to recall.

He spots McCabe riding along the roadway.

McCabe passes the stoop, eyes forward, unhurried.

If he registers Hansard it doesn't show.

Hansard steps out into the road and watches after him, at first puzzled, then accepting. He casts a look around at the shattered and deserted hamlet, as if unsure of his place.

McCabe continues on his way, horse and rider growing smaller against the rumble of distant guns.

FADE OUT