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" Encounter"

By White Queen

Kirby hustled through the graveyard, shoulders hunched, hands jammed in his jacket pockets. A fog had settled in the night before, and the autumn sun had not dispelled it. Wisps of mist clung to the trees and shrouded the graveyard's farther reaches. The damp cold infiltrated his field jacket with ease. The sooner he reached that little café in St. Jovite, the better. Kirby picked up his pace, almost trotting. But when he rounded a curve, he stopped.

A baby carriage lay to the left of the road, its bottom toward Kirby. Though there was no breeze, one wheel spun lazily, as if someone had given it a casual spin. Kirby scanned the area for the buggy's owner. He only saw row upon row of crooked tombstones standing sentinel in the mist. He started to walk away, but stopped on a whim and moved close enough to peer inside. It was empty, not even a blanket or rattle remaining. Kirby shivered. The vacant baby carriage seemed like an open mouth laughing at him, mocking him for thinking he might find something in it. Who would leave a baby in a graveyard, after all? When the Krauts had shelled St. Jovite the night before, the cemetery had received its share of the damage, and now shell holes yawned here and there like freshly dug graves. No one would bring a baby there -- the carriage had probably been abandoned days ago.

As Kirby straightened up, a woman's wail split the still air. He started and looked around him.

A young woman stumbled out from behind a crypt on the other side of the road. She ran toward Kirby, sobbing and waving her arms, her tangled, dark hair streaming behind her. Tears spilled down her cheeks, and her simple white dress was dirt-streaked and rumpled. "My baby!" she cried. "My baby!" She stopped at the road's edge.

Kirby looked from the woman to the empty carriage and back. "What happened?"

"I cannot find him." Her French-accented words were wobbly with tears.

"Is this your carriage?"

"*Oui*. But my baby is gone."

"Gone? If somebody took your baby--"

"Please!" the woman sobbed. "He cannot be far. Will you not help me look for him?"

Kirby hesitated. He was supposed to have met Cajé in St. Jovite an hour ago. The image of the empty carriage laughing at him returned, and he shivered again. "Sure, I'll help."

"*Merci!*" the young woman said. "Thank you."

"Got any idea where he might be?"

The woman held up her hands and shrugged. "We came down this road -- he cannot be far," she repeated.

"Okay." Kirby began searching between the first rows of headstones parallel to the road, checking behind each one. If the baby was alone nearby, shouldn't he be able to hear it crying? He saw the woman watching from across the road. Why wasn't she searching too? Why did she just stand there, looking haunted and forlorn? And wasn't she freezing? She didn't even have a coat on, just the white dress. Yet she never so much as shivered.

"What a great way to spend a weekend pass," Kirby muttered. He moved over a couple rows and headed back toward the baby carriage. A sudden gust of wind lifted a few dozen dead leaves from the ground and sent them dancing toward Kirby, only to drop them at his feet. The sour smell of decay rose from the leaves when Kirby crunched them under his boots.

Kirby was almost parallel with the carriage when he saw the scrap of white cloth. It peeked out from behind a tree that had grown around a tombstone. Kirby rounded the headstone and stopped. The bundle on the ground was the unmistakable size and shape of a baby. It didn't move, and Kirby didn't have to touch it to know he was too late. But he knelt and hesitantly touched the bundle anyway. It held no warmth, made no sound.

He glanced over at his shoulder at the woman. She stood across the road from him, hugging herself and swaying from side to side. Kirby's first instinct was to hide what he'd found. How could he tell a mother her baby was dead? Maybe he could pile some leaves over it. Or pretend he hadn't seen it. If the woman thought he'd searched this whole area, she probably wouldn't bother. She'd never find the bundle.

He looked at the woman again. Her face held a deep sadness, as if she already knew what he'd found. Kirby shifted his gaze to the overturned carriage. She hadn't righted it, hadn't made even the slightest move toward it. It was like she didn't expect the baby to be alive anymore. She only wanted to find it.

Kirby lifted the bundle and unwrapped the layers until he found the tiny face. The baby's eyes were closed, tiny lashes stark against the colorless cheeks. Kirby cradled the body in one arm and rose. He headed across the road. "Madame, I'm so sorry...."

"You found him!" the woman said

"Yes, but--" Kirby stopped in front of her.

The woman did not reach out to take her baby like Kirby expected. Instead, she simply said, "*Merci*." Then she leaned close and kissed the baby's pale cheek.

As soon as her lips brushed the baby's skin, the woman vanished.

Kirby yelped and stumbled backward. He took off running, still clutching the tiny bundle. He half expected a ghost to rush him from behind every gravestone.

As he ran, his gaze skimmed over a crater to the right of the road. The mound of earth tossed up by the explosion partially hid a body, clothed in white.

"No," he said softly. He stood on the road for a minute, not wanting to see what lay on the other side of the shell hole. Then he looked down at the body in his arms, so tiny and alone. And Kirby knew what he had to do.

Kirby slowly walked around the crater. There lay the same young woman, her body crumpled like a doll tossed aside by a petulant child. One arm stretched toward the road as if she died reaching for something. Kirby knelt and placed the baby in the crook

of her out-flung arm and paused for a moment. "You're welcome," he said at last, and stood up.

A silent rain began falling as Kirby returned to the road. It dispelled what remained of the fog, succeeding where the sunlight had failed. Kirby plodded toward St. Jovite, hands back in his jacket pockets. Caje would ask what had taken him so long, and Kirby wasn't at all sure what he would tell him.

The End