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"C'est La Vie"

By White Queen

Saunders halted his squad at the edge of the French village Dutrouz. It was a small village, with one main street and four side streets, and before the war it had probably been a sleepy hamlet, full of farmers and gossips. The Germans had only sideswiped it on their way through, hitting it with a little artillery, but not enough to destroy more than a few buildings. They hadn't even bothered to occupy it at all. Dutrouz wasn't large enough to mean anything to them.

This lack of destruction made it the perfect spot for the American Army to send men on R&R, which was precisely why Saunders and his squad stood on the outskirts of Dutrouz next to a neat white picket fence that was missing only a few dozen slats here and there.

"We meet back here in twenty-four hours," Saunders said, looking each man in the eye to make sure they were all listening. "That's eleven hundred hours tomorrow morning." He crossed his arms and added, "I don't have to give you the usual run-down, do I?"

"Yeah, yeah, we know." Kirby rolled his eyes. "Be nice to the locals, stay outta the way of the local constables, and don't bother the barmaids." Under his breath he added, "Much."

Caje grinned. "We got it, Sarge."

"All right. Dismissed."

The squad split into three groups. Caje, Kirby, and Braddock headed toward town, intent on cramming as much fun into twenty-four hours as the law would allow. More, if they could. Billy Nelson and Littlejohn trailed behind them, savoring the freedom of ambling instead of marching. Grady Long stayed next to Saunders as the others scattered. "Whaddaya say, Saunders?" He punched the sergeant's shoulder playfully. "I'll buy you a drink."

"No you won't." Saunders shook his head. "Not until I've bought you one first."

Grady chuckled. "Fine. Every other round as usual." They followed the rest of the squad, taking their time and enjoying the absence of booming artillery, gunfire, and the other sounds of war that usually filled their lives.

Kirby, Caje, and Braddock halted when they noticed Littlejohn and Billy tagging after them. "Hey, three's company, five's a crowd," Kirby said, hands on hips.

"This is the only street into town," Littlejohn pointed out. "We can walk here if we want to."

"Where're you guys heading?" Billy asked quickly, hoping to avert yet another Kirby-Littlejohn spat.

"Nowhere you'd be comfortable," Braddock assured him.

Caje tapped Braddock's shoulder. "Hey, maybe it's time we let the kid join us."

"No way!" Kirby said. "One look at him and the girls would stay miles away."

"Don't worry, Billy," Littlejohn said, glaring at Kirby. "Well find some nice, quiet place to relax, where we won't be annoyed."

"Good plan," said Braddock. He and the other two Rover Boys hurried off without another word.

"Well, look who's here!" crowed Littlejohn from his seat at a ridiculously tiny table he and Billy shared outside a cheery café. "What's the matter, fellas, run out of red paint already?" He made a big show of checking his watch. "It's only twelve hundred, that didn't take long."

Braddock, Kirby, and Caje plopped into three chairs around the other minuscule table occupying the sidewalk. "Some town," Kirby complained. "One restaurant. Bet this joint doesn't even serve booze."

Billy nodded toward the café. "Sarge and Grady are inside drinking beer," he reported. "I think they have wine in there too."

Kirby was not appeased. "Well, I haven't seen one pretty girl in this whole town!"

Littlejohn chuckled. "Oh, just wait 'til you see the waitress."

"Yeah?" Caje sat up, interested.

"Yeah." Littlejohn curved his index finger and thumb into the OK sign and winked.

Billy giggled.

Braddock shook a finger at him. "See, this is why you couldn't come with us," he said. "No giggling!"

"Here she comes now," Littlejohn announced.

Three pairs of expectant eyes turned toward the café's entrance. Out stepped a dark-haired woman who inspired one word in their minds: plump. Quite plump. Maybe a little beyond plump. Possibly bordering on ample. She was well-endowed, no doubt about that. Well-endowed everywhere.



The waitress started to say, "*Bonjour, Monsieurs,*" but she stopped halfway through *monsieurs*, threw up her chubby arms, and shouted, "Robert!" With a squeak of delight, she plopped onto Braddock's broad lap and flung her arms around his neck, uttering a torrent of joyous French.

Braddock instinctively put both arms around her middle and looked very pleased with himself. "Well, hello, yourself," he

chortled. "Hey, Cajé, what's she saying?"

Cajé looked a little confused. "Uh, she says—"

The waitress drew away from Braddock a little, shook her head until her curly dark hair bounced enthusiastically, and said, "Robert! You do not recognize me? It is your own Madeleine!"

Braddock shook his head. "Nice to meet you, Madeleine, but uh – I'm afraid we've never met before."

She laughed. "Silly Robert. Not in real life, of course. But in my dreams, oh how often we have met there!"

"In your dreams?" Braddock now looked thoroughly confused.

Littlejohn and Billy were trying very hard not to laugh out loud, although the effort to contain their mirth resulted in red faces for both of them. Billy kept making little splurting sounds, as if his giggles were trying frantically to escape.

"Of course! I am – how do you Americans say it? – psychic? I have dreamed about you for so long now, my darling, and here you are! Of course, you do not look exactly the way you did in my dreams, but that can be remedied." She removed Braddock's knit cap and ran her plump fingers through his hair. "Dearest Robert, how long I have waited!"

"Uh, I hate to disappoint you, Madam-oh-zel Madeleine," Kirby broke in, "but his name ain't 'Row-bear'."

"Not Robert?" Madeleine's eyes widened, and her lower lip trembled. "How can you say this is not my Robert?"

"Because—" Kirby started again.

Braddock interrupted him. "What's in a name?" He smiled at Madeleine and gave her a squeeze around her middle. "A rose by any other name, and all that."

Madeleine pinched his cheek. "You *are* my sweet Robert!" she exulted. "Exactly like in my dreams."

Cajé whispered to Kirby, "I've heard you should dream big, but..."

Kirby snorted. "If I was a girl and Braddock showed up in my dream, I'd call it a nightmare."

Madeleine gave Braddock an audible smooch on his cheek, right where she'd pinched it a moment before. "I am so happy you finally arrived." She gazed deeply into his eyes. "I have so many things to tell you; there is so much to talk about." She hopped off Braddock's lap and seized his hand. "Come!" she ordered, pulling him to his feet.

"Where're we going?" Braddock asked, amiably allowing her to haul him away from the café.

"To my home! Come, there is no time to lose! I have waited too long already for you." Madeleine tugged him down the street and around a corner before any of the others could say a word.

A shocked silence settled over the two tiny tables. Billy Nelson was the first to speak. "Can she do that?" he asked, eyes and mouth wide.



"She just did," Cajé said.

"No, I mean, can she really dream about some guy and then he shows up?"

"You ever had your palm read at the county fair?" Littlejohn asked him.

"Well, yeah."

"What'd they tell you?"

"That I'd get an important job and go on long business trips."

Littlejohn looked around them, at the few buildings along the main street of Dutrouz.

Billy frowned. "Are you saying you think psychics are for real?"

Littlejohn smiled and shook his head. "I'm not saying anything one way or another."

"Aaannh," Kirby said. "It's all just a bunch of hooley. Don't listen to him, kid. He don't know what he's talkin' about."

"Kirby." Littlejohn held up his hand, palm out toward the scoffing soldier. "See this?" He pointed to the middle of his palm.

"Yeah."

"I predict this will make very close contact with your face if you don't shut up right now."

Kirby scowled, but Cajé laughed. "Real or not, that woman sure believed she dreamed about Braddock." He smiled, gazed down the street toward the corner where the portly pair had vanished, and sighed. "*C'est la vie*, eh?"

"It's almost eleven," Billy Nelson said the next morning, pacing back and forth in front of the white picket fence on the edge of Dutrouz. "You don't think Braddock could be in trouble, do you?"

Kirby chuckled. "If only *I* was in that kind of trouble." Despite having been unable to spend his twenty-four-hour pass passed out in an alcoholic euphoria, he was in a remarkably good mood. Maybe it was because for once, he didn't have a hangover.

Grady Long shook his head. "Well, if ever there was a matched pair, it was Braddock and that waitress. Two peas in a very large pod."

Saunders nodded. "But if he doesn't get here before the truck does, he's going to wind up a creamed pea."

As if to emphasize his words, a truck's engine growled down the road that led out of town. It jolted into view and lurched to a stop a few yards from the picket fence. Expectant soldiers poured out of its back, two more squads hoping to find a little fun on a quick pass.

Saunders and his squad had been so distracted by the arrival of the truck, they didn't notice Braddock approaching until he stood right behind Kirby. "Just in time," he panted.

They turned to look at him, and even Saunders couldn't resist a grin. Braddock's uniform was unprecedentedly clean, his hair was washed and slicked down, and he looked as if someone had polished his skin until it shone. "Hi," he said with a sly grin.

"Look at you!" laughed Cajé. "Did she run you through her wringer-washer?"

"Practically." Braddock shook his head. "That is one determined woman."

"But you convinced her you weren't Robert?" Billy asked.

"Eventually." Braddock winked. "But not until after breakfast."

Kirby cackled and was about to make a characteristically ribald remark when from down the street came a familiar cry.

"Robert!" Madeleine was rushing toward them with more speed than one might have expected, her ample form jiggling in an admittedly pleasing manner.

"I thought you'd convinced her," Cajé teased.

Braddock shook his head, looking bewildered. "I thought I had."

As Madeleine came closer, however, she veered around Saunders and his squad and made for the group of men behind them.

A deep, husky voice said, "Hey, what's the idea?"

The squad turned to see a soldier who looked remarkably like Braddock, only with darker skin and curly black hair. He looked slightly shocked as Madeleine clasped her arms around his neck and crowed, "Robert!"

"Hey, how'd you know my name?" the stout soldier asked, trying to duck out of her embrace.

"Have you not dreamt of me too?" she asked, pulling away a little and pouting.

"Well, not that I recall." Robert eyed her up and down, then smiled. "But that doesn't mean I won't from now on."

"My dear Robert!" Madeleine threw her arms around him again and kissed his cheek. "Come, you must meet Mama and Papa!" She broke away and grabbed his hand. While Robert's friends hooted their congratulations, she tugged him toward town. As they passed Saunders' squad, Madeleine looked over at Braddock, shrugged, and said, "*C'est la vie*, Braddock!"

"And the same to you!" Braddock smiled and waved, then sighed. "You know, for a while yesterday, I was almost tempted to change my name?"

Grady laughed and clapped him on the back. "I don't think even Madeleine could handle two Roberts."

Braddock shook his head. "I wouldn't be so sure." Grinning, he followed the others to the truck. Once they were all aboard, the vehicle lurched away from Dutrouz, Braddock gazing out the open back as the town faded from view. "I wouldn't be so sure at all."

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