

Fortress: Beginnings

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Chris Larabee listened to the steady, relaxed voice of his new co-pilot running through the routine but essential landing procedure checklist and the reassuring responses from his crew as he maintained a flight path over Bassingbourn field in preparation for landing the heavy bomber, just one out of three squadrons of twelve aircraft, all of which had returned this time out. A successful mission in anybody's book.

"Landing gear down?"

Disembodied voices from the crew confirmed that both main wheels were lowered and locked and that the tail wheel was down: Sergeants Buck Wilmington and Nathan Jackson, his two waist gunners. Buck, his oldest friend, had been with him from the start; they had even signed up together stateside. Now here they were a team again on the opposite side of the Atlantic, flying together and trying to bomb the Third Reich into submission. Nathan was a more recent addition to the crew – a mere six missions -- but a valuable man to have aboard and a good medic too. Another voice informed him that the trailing antenna was in.

"Check brakes and hydraulic pressure." The co-pilot again, procedure demanding a reply.

"Brakes okay, pressure seven-fifty," Larabee chimed in with his own response.

"RPM twenty-one-hundred. Turbos...set."

Captain Chris Larabee of the US Eighth Air Force, 91st Bomber Group, 321st Bombardment Squadron, brought the huge B-17G around to start the downwind leg of the landing, pleased for once that the Fortress had escaped with little more than a few bullet holes in the fuselage and that he was making the descent with all four engines intact, fuel still onboard and no casualties. What more could a man ask?

His last flight out had been a different story. Best not to dwell on that one. The squadron had been well and truly hammered that day. He had lost three of his crew on that mission, barely making it to the English coast flying on two engines and with the tail shot away. His co-pilot of twelve missions had been one of the victims, shot in the eye and killed instantly by a stray bullet. Goodbye Mitch. The tail gunner, Dave Evans, had disappeared along with most of the tail section somewhere over Germany - no parachute jump to safety for him - and his ball turret gunner, just turned nineteen, had been emasculated poor little bastard, by a shell fragment. He thought about the new kid taking his place. J.D. Dunne. Hardly looked old enough to be out of school but he knew for a fact that he was twenty-two. If he made it to twenty-three he'd be one of the lucky ones.

"Airspeed?"

He flicked his gaze to the instrument panel.

"One forty-seven."

“One third flaps.”

This one had been a milk run. Good thing too with three new crew members on board. A quick 200 mile sortie into Holland, good fighter coverage, hardly any flak. His bombardier, a Texan by the name of Vin Tanner, had done all that was asked of him and knocked a substantial hole in the target. As if that wasn't enough the eager bastard had shot down a fighter too. He cast a sideways glance at the younger man in the co-pilot's seat. Standish, a first lieutenant, and from his performance today a damn good second officer. Larabee knew little about him except that he came from Georgia -- or was it South Carolina? -- and that he had until not too long ago been in North Africa. The guy had already made a few enemies in the squadron by virtue of his smart-mouth comments and his incredible talent for winning at poker but he came up with the goods where it counted -- in the right-hand seat. Larabee banked the plane into the final approach.

“Full flaps.”

“RPM?” This time he was quizzing Standish.

The co-pilot laconically read off the diminishing revs.

“One-twenty, one-fifteen, one-ten...”

He checked the hydraulic pressure. This was it, decision time -- was it safe to continue or if he would be forced to go around for another try? Today was a go-er and he brought the B-17 in for a smooth landing, taxiing to the end of the runway and the parkway.

The standard procedural routine was somehow comforting as they shut down the heavy bomber, the two pilots checking off each item systematically. Check and double check.

“Cowl flaps open and locked.” Check.

“Turbos off.” Check.

“Booster pumps off.” Check.

“Wing flaps up.” Check.

“Tail wheel unlocked.” Check.

“Generators off.” Check.

The co-pilot took it to 1000 rpm -- by the book -- before cutting the inboard engines. This guy sure hadn't missed a beat throughout the mission, thought Larabee approvingly, someone who liked to do it by the numbers. Reassuring when you might have to depend on him to bring the crate back safely. If something happens.

“Chocks in.”

Larabee put on the parking brakes and waited for the engines to stop turning before finally cutting the ignition. He radioed the tower to get the all clear as the co-pilot went through the final check, the quiet Southern voice reeling off the list.

“Booster pumps off; landing gear, wing flaps neutral; deicer, anti-icer up; inverters off;

batteries off; mainline off.”

Larabee sighed and relaxed. Home.

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Ezra Standish groaned and pulled the thin pillow over his head as the sound of trucks on the move reverberated outside the barracks. It was full dark but the base was coming alive as the ground crews went to work. He brought his wrist close to his face and squinted at the luminous hands of his watch. Jesus! Four o'clock. It was briefing in just half an hour. He tried to muster his sleep-addled thoughts and wondered if he had slept through the wake-up call, deciding it was highly unlikely as that sadistic bastard, Lieutenant Preston, always shone his torch right in his face. He struggled from under the blankets and gasped at the shock of cold air. Goddamn country! At least in North Africa it had been warm.

He grabbed his flying gear trudged to the latrine before braving the shower. He was late, most of the warm water had already been used and he endured a necessarily brief but icy dousing that, if nothing else, woke him up. He dressed quickly, shivering as he pulled on his clothes, hoping Preston would at least have made coffee by the time he got back to the barracks. Shrugging into his leather flying jacket he hurried out of the shower block, his breath misting in the chilly pre-dawn air as he crossed back to the barracks wondering what Bomber Command had planned for the day. He found himself fervently hoping it wasn't Schweinfurt again.

He had been part of that particular screw up – his first European mission -- and he still came out in a cold sweat thinking about it. A hundred miles in a dead straight line across German territory with the entire goddamn Luftwaffe, or so it seemed at the time, trying to shoot them out of the sky. Sixty bombers lost out of the 346 that had set out, 552 aircrew designated missing in action. He pulled his jacket closer around him but the chill now came from within. Fuck Schweinfurt!

He was the last into the briefing room and was rewarded with an icy stare from Larabee as he took up a position at the side of the room leaning nonchalantly against the wall. Good work, Standish, get the Captain offside before you even start. He had been transferred from the Mediterranean theatre of operations only five weeks ago and had since then been moved between a number of different crews, filling in for wounded flight officers, plugging the gaps; now it looked like he was being assigned to Larabee and the “Ace in the Hole” permanently. He shrugged mentally wondering how long he'd last this time.

Submarine pens at Nantes. Could be worse. Chris Larabee, like everyone else who flew the daylight raids in the B-17s, had his own opinions as to which targets were easy pickings and which were the ones where the flak was going to be so thick that you could walk on it and the fighters

would be swarming around like angry bees. France was a relatively short run; less chance of being brought down by the Luftwaffe boys but a lot of heavy flak expected.

He glanced across at Standish who had climbed into the jeep behind him, ready for the quick run out to the bombers already waiting and primed by the ground crews.

“Have a good sleep, Lieutenant?”

Ezra did not miss the sarcasm lacing the pilot’s voice.

“A slight misunderstanding, Captain Larabee. Lieutenant Preston neglected to include me in the wake-up call.”

The blond pilot stared hard at his exec for a long moment then looked away as if coming to a decision.

“Don’t let it happen again, Standish.”

The Southerner knuckled his forehead in a mock salute and muttered under his breath: “No, Sir!”

Standish quickly appraised the group of airmen lounging around the plane. Eight men sitting, leaning or standing in various attitudes as they talked among themselves. One of the sergeants peeled himself away from the others and jogged across the stretch of grass towards Larabee.

“Hey, Chris! Where to?”

“Nantes.”

“Great. There’s this cute little miss I just met in the village...”

“Buck!” The Captain’s voice held a warning.

The mustached sergeant held up his hands.

“I know, I know. Don’t make waves with the locals.”

“Just keep that in mind when you’re lookin’ to get into this cute little miss’s britches.”

Wilmington laughed and slapped Larabee on the back.

“You know me better’n that, Cap’n.”

The blond pilot raised a sceptical eyebrow.

“I wonder.” He glanced across at the remaining men. “How’s the kid doin’?”

“More guts than sense,” admitted Wilmington, “But I guess that’s what it takes to squeeze in that little glass bubble hanging from the underbelly of a warplane. Not enough room in there to even get a hard on!”

Standish looked doubtfully at the waist gunner.

“Are you suggesting, Sergeant Wilmington that there should be a connection between the two?”

Buck just laughed.

“Hell, Sir. Ain’t much else to do on your own down there on a long trip.”

The two pilots traded a look that needed no verbal clarification and Chris nudged the Southerner with a shake of his head.

“Come on. Don’t mind Buck, you’ll soon get used to him.”

Standish watched the affable sergeant move back to the others before following Larabee.

“I’m sure I will.”

Engine start was scheduled for five-thirty but Larabee, the old hand that he was, waited for the green flare from the tower ten minutes later before firing up the four power plants in sequence and finally signalling the chocks away. The takeoff went smoothly enough; ninety six B-17s airborne at thirty second intervals and at twentytwo thousand feet the Ace in the Hole joined the Group formation, slotting in on the left flank. The RAF Spitfires would join them as they left the English coast but with needed.

Chris obeyed the command to climb to thirty-five thousand feet as they approached the English Channel and the complaints started coming thick and fast over the intercom about the cold.

“Jesus!” someone uttered, “How high’re you planning on going, Chris? It’s freezin back here.”

“You should be down here, Nathan,” muttered the youngest member of the crew from his perspex bubble, “a brass monkey wouldn’t stand a chance.”

Given the fate of the previous ball turret gunner, Chris believed Dunne’s comment to be a mite closer to the truth than the kid would want to know. It was cold though, much worse than usual and the B-17 was reacting in its own way to the dramatic change in temperature. Larabee glanced across at his co-pilot.

“She’s flying like a lame duck,” he commented, “You take her. See what you think.”

He relinquished the controls to Standish and rubbed his hands together, glad he wore gloves but feeling the cold nonetheless. The Southerner was frowning in concentration as he piloted the craft, finally looking over in Larabee’s direction.

“It’s the propellers. Like they’re fixed pitch.”

Chris smiled grimly.

“Yeah, reckon the oil in the propellor hubs has congealed with the cold. I’ve seen it happen before.”

“Makes for an interesting trip,” conceded the Lieutenant, but Larabee noticed that he did not immediately surrender control and continued to keep the the plane in formation in spite of the difficulty.

The man definitely knew his way around an airplane. So, he was late to briefing; so, he had been warned by at least two other pilots not to take him on; so, he had a history -- as far as Chris was concerned he just wanted someone in the right hand seat who could fly a plane, who would cover his ass, stay out of trouble and keep his head in a crisis. Larabee came to a decision then: he had found his new exec.

Nantes. Ezra squinted down at the distinctive shape of the submarine pens on the right of the

formation and gave silent thanks that they had met no enemy fighters on the run in. While the huge plane was not named Fortress on whim and would take a prodigious amount of damage he much preferred not to have the Luftwaffe's finest trying to blast him out of the sky. That particular delight he had already experienced and he had no great ambition to repeat the process. The English Channel was a damn sight colder than the Mediterranean for a start.

Chris had already surrendered control of the aircraft to the bombardier, Tanner, and as the Texan began the acquisition of the target through the bombsight the B-17 began to turn. It always unnerved the Southerner at this point that the bomb aimer was in effect flying the aircraft and he found himself holding his breath as the Fortress began the bomb run. At the same time Chris had given over control to Tanner the flak batteries opened up, and the barrage was so intense that Ezra began to wonder if a few dozen Messerschmitts might not be a better option after all, then at least they had a fighting chance. Right now they were a sitting duck.

The anti-aircraft fire bloomed spectacularly around them, roughly buffeting the aircraft and behind him the Southerner could hear the frantic reports of crew battling damage throughout the plane. This was the time when adrenaline peaked, the rush of combat, of being fired upon by an enemy intent on nothing more than destruction of as many planes in the formation as possible. The "Ace in the Hole" bucked and a sharp yelp came from the rear followed by a tirade of abuse and curses aimed at the German gunners. Chris and Ezra exchanged glances and the senior officer jerked his head giving the nod for the exec to help out with damage control.

Buck, the only casualty so far, was clutching his neck where had been burned by a hot piece of shrapnel which had penetrated the fuselage, swearing while trying to extinguish a fire one-handed. Nathan was fighting a losing battle trying to get Wilmington to stand still long enough for him to assess the damage. Deftly taking over the sergeant's fire fighting activity Standish listened to the easy interaction between the two gunners.

"Jesus, it nearly took my goddamn head off," he complained loudly, "D'you think I'm up for a purple heart?"

Nathan laughed as he covered the angry, blistered area of skin with a shell dressing.

"Buck, I've had closer shaves with a dull razor."

The three men staggered almost in unison as one of the 88mm shells fired by the German batteries detonated so close to the midsection of the plane that the shockwave rocked the huge craft and a sizeable section of the fuselage exploded inwards. The Southerner instinctively hunched his shoulders and ducked, extinguishing the last of the flames as a sliver of aluminium, part of the Fortress' skin, sliced a bloody furrow across his cheek. His ears were ringing from the percussion and he turned to find Peter Sorenson, the radio operator, behind him yelling soundlessly. Shaking his head and wiping the blood from his stinging cheek he concentrated on watching Sorenson's lips.

Chris. He had to get back to the controls. Reeling across the bomb bay walkway and through the radio compartment he lurched unsteadily to the cockpit, another shudder of the airframe sending him crashing into his seat. Larabee glanced back down the length of the fuselage and back to Standish.

“Everything okay?” He had to shout to be heard.

In reply he Lieutenant gave the thumbs up indicating no major problems and settled into his seat, ready for the next phase.

The noise was deafening as the flak burst in a continuous barrage around them, the gunners quickly having found their range, but there was no escaping it now or any time soon, they were locked in and committed to the bombing run. It was now down to luck and timing.

The light suddenly winked on signalling that the bomb bay doors had opened and Standish raked a practised eye across the instrument panel, checking the details, waiting for the confirmation that the bombs were away: twelve five hundred pounders which would hopefully hit the U-boat base right on target. A miss meant that had to come back that much sooner to finish the job. Ezra swore expressively as the aircraft below and forward of them to the starboard side went down, half of its port wing sheared off by debris falling from a damaged plane above. Nathan’s dispassionate commentary, soon augmented by an excited Dunne in the ball turret, followed the stricken aircraft’s uncontrolled descent to terra firma.

“No ‘chutes. They’re not bailing out,” observed Wilmington, then more softly: “Come on boys. You still got time. Jump for Christ’s sake.”

The stricken plane dived almost lazily towards the ground, spinning slowly on its axis, out of control and spewing smoke and flames. Ezra turned away to focus once again on the instrument panel before the aircraft plunged into the sea. There had been no ‘chutes. Another ten men who would not return.

“Holy Christ!” J.D. from the ball turret then: “Bombs away!”

Josiah’s voice from the bomb bay confirmed the racks clear and Ezra reached to flick the toggle switch that would close the bomb doors as Chris once again gripped the yoke and assumed control. The Southerner decided it was safe to breathe again. As the craft quickly gained airspeed with the loss of weight Larabee turned to starboard and began to descend; no sense of haste, calm controlled movements as if they had all the time in the world. By the time Larabee had taken the plane down to 5000 feet the flak had fallen away behind them and only the roar of the four engines, all still operational, filled the cockpit.

Sergeant Sanchez ducked into the cockpit, stretching his brawny arms along the backs of the pilots’ seats. Chris turned to look over his shoulder.

“Much damage?”

“About fifty holes up back, couple of fires; some major structural damage by the starboard waist hatch and unless I can fix it you’ll be landing without a tail wheel but otherwise we got away pretty lightly. Those bastards were right on target today.”

“I can only hope we reciprocated,” commented Standish drily, wincing as he absently fingered the cut on his face.

Josiah’s hand descended on his shoulder.

“Have no fear of that. From where I was standing we blew the mother’s out of the water.”

Larabee grinned.

“That’s what I like to hear. Long way to come just to be shot at if you’re gonna miss.”

An almost conversational: “Fuck you too, Larabee,” from the bombardier came through the intercom and the Captain’s grin widened. Tanner was just about the best bomb aimer he had flown with and was rightly proud of his steadily growing record of direct hits on targets.

“I’ll buy you a beer if it was right on target.”

“Only one? And what d’you mean ‘if’?”

Chris shook his head and switched his attention back to the controls as the navigator, Tad McEvoy, started relaying a change in heading. Standish smiled as he heard Larabee mutter under his breath: “Cocky bastard.”

They were heading east at 300 mph steadily gaining altitude again and waiting to clear the mainland of France before turning north for the long flight over the Atlantic to England. In three hours they would be back on home soil. Another mission chalked up.

Ezra settled the oxygen mask over his face and gave the order for the for the rest of the crew to do the same as they continued through the cloud cover up to 25,000 feet. At this altitude a few minutes without oxygen would quickly result in loss of consciousness but after a few hours breathing the gas the Southerner knew he could expect a hell of a headache at the end of it. He shifted in his seat, feeling the temperature in the cockpit plummet, and kept his eye on the instrument panel. With a little luck they may just escape being attacked by roving German bandits on the way home and he could look forward to the prospect of two days of upcoming leave. It was rumoured that Merseburg was the next target and the Southerner was only too happy to leave that one alone. He smiled grimly behind his mask. Hell, Schweinfurt, Berlin and now Merseburg -- was there anywhere he really did want to go except back home?

“Navigator, give us our position.”

The disembodied voice of Lieutenant McEvoy confirmed that they were about to make landfall at Lands End. Almost home. Here, at the southernmost tip of the British mainland the formation would descend to 12,000 feet and spread out.

“That’s a lot of cloud out there,” commented a soft, Texan voice through the intercom, voicing

what Larabee was already thinking. “What’s the weather forecast?”

“Ten thousand foot ceiling with unlimited visibility,” replied Standish, “Should be coming out of this any minute but I believe the forecast may be a little over optimistic given the evidence of my own eyes.”

Larabee took the plane down, through thick white stratus and cast a wary glance at his co-pilot.

“Ten-tenths cover, Ezra? That’s not in the plan.”

The altimeter needle swept past the eight thousand feet mark and the cloud still clung to the huge plane like a shroud. They had seen no other plane for some time and the feeling of being alone in an empty sky intensified.

“Sorenson, give me C channel. Let’s see what’s going on down below.”

Immediately the voices of the other crews in the formation came through, some alarmed by the unexpected weather conditions.

“Shit, I’m at two thousand feet and still not clear.”

“Five hundred feet, can’t see a goddamn thing.”

“I’m at two hundred, still not clear.” The voice held a tremor of panic.

Several planes opted to try for another field, unwilling to risk descending any further in zero visibility.

“Jesus,” breathed Sanchez, leaning between the two pilots, eyes straining to pierce through the dense fog, “we’re really in the soup now. You going for it, Chris?”

Standish answered the question by tapping the fuel gauge.

“I would hazard a guess that we are irrevocably committed to this particular venture, Sergeant Sanchez.”

The clouds darkened as they descended still further, filling the plane with an eerie, half light and although they were now at two thousand feet the cockpit was still freezing. If there were any other of the squadron near by, the fog had rendered them invisible. Larabee’s keen gaze kept scanning to right and left, eyes raking the impenetrable fog, his expression alert but sombre.

The Southerner raised an eyebrow, knowing the fuel was already dangerously low. Even having to go around for a second approach would leave them vulnerable but the decision was Larabee’s alone.

“How far’s the next field?”

“Tad, any chance of switching fields?”

“Um, I’m not sure of our exact position. How much fuel have we got?”

“Not enough,” came the terse reply, then more to himself: “And now we’re fucking well lost!”

Larabee continuing down through the murky darkness, his tension palpable as he anticipated the shock of hitting the unyielding earth. Landing on instruments was technically possible but fraught

with danger and not something Chris wanted to try unless no other option was left.

At two hundred feet a yell went up from Tanner and McEvoy in the nose as the Fortress broke into clear air, the supercharged engines roaring as Larabee frantically worked to stop the B-17s descent. He could hear the frenzied shouts from the crew as the Ace in the Hole dropped rapidly out of the sky, rushing with an eagerness that none of them shared towards the ground. Pulling back on the yoke, Larabee gained a few feet of lift as the Fortress skimmed over a barn with little to spare before gaining additional altitude and levelling out at a hundred and fifty feet.

Sanchez nudged Larabee and pointed.

“Marker straight ahead.”

“I see it.”

Indeed, the unexpected marker was part of a system used at RAF fields to funnel planes into the runway. The pilots exchanged a grin. As far as they were concerned, at this moment it hardly mattered where they set down.

“Not quite the airfield we were expecting, Captain Larabee, but I’m sure this will do admirably.”

“Light ring acquired,” Chris breathed, ‘Gear and flaps down.’”

“Switching to main tanks,” intoned Standish, slipping easily into the landing sequence.

Following the line of lights around, Larabee finally intersected the glide path indicator and rode it down to the runway. Beside him, Standish started his landing check, occasionally glancing out of the window at the overcast skies. Goddamn weather!

The ten men looked morosely around the empty Quonset hut; their hastily assigned quarters for the night. They had already missed supper and to a man, as well as being hungry they were all tired and cold.

Buck dropped down onto a bare mattress, the only furnishing on a metal framed bunk, which squeaked alarmingly in protest at his weight.

“Well, you gotta hand it to them. These Limey’s sure know how to live!”

Standish walked slowly down the length of the spartan accommodation, his expression of disbelief almost comical.

“I am certain, Captain Larabee, that we would have found more a more welcoming hostelry had we been forced to bail out over Germany and been subsequently incarcerated in a prison camp!”

Tanner threw himself down on the bunk next to the cold and dead stove.

“Only one thing wrong with that, Lieutenant.”

The Southerner turned slowly.

“And what might that be?”

“We can walk out of here in the morning.”

Larabee opted for the bunk next to the Texan, unrolling the thin mattress before stretching out, seemingly unfazed by the utilitarian state of the barracks and apparently even less concerned that officers were billeting with enlisted men.

“Man has a point, Ezra.” The amusement in his voice was obvious. “The Nazi’s ain’t too keen on letting their houseguests go.”

Standish grunted and continued to take stock of his surroundings.

“One can only hope that running water is at least an option.”

Dunne, the youngest of the crew, emerged from a room at the end of the hut and jerked a thumb behind him.

“You asked for water, sir? Right in there, just don’t expect it to be hot.”

The Southerner cocked a critical eyebrow at the grinning gunner.

“Surely you jest, Corporal Dunne?” Clearly the youngster was not. “Why on earth should I be surprised? I suppose you’ll be telling me next that I’m expected to dig my own latrine.”

A boot, launched from Wilmington’s bed, sailed in a graceful arc towards the co-pilot, thudding into the wall inches from his head.

“Standish, give us all a break why don’t ya and shut up!” A brief pause. “Sir.”

It was freezing, so cold that Tanner could see his breath misting in the air. He tucked his hands into his armpits, drew his knees in towards his chest and buried his face in the front of his flying jacket, hoping that some of the heat from his exhalations might be trapped in his clothing and transfer itself to his body. He found it worked only up to a point; his chest was warmed but the rest of him remained uncomfortably chilled. He groaned inwardly as someone further down the barracks started snoring and after several minutes of trying to ignore the irritation he finally sighed and uncurled, quietly getting off the bed and making his way between the bunks to the door. It might not be warmer outside but it could hardly be any colder.

He was wrong. It was colder but at least it was quiet and through the banks of cloud he could see stars. Thousands of stars made even brighter by the total absence of light on the ground as a result of the strictly enforced blackout. He thought of the open skies over Texas, of lying under the stars on a warm summer’s night and how he would feel if his home were to be bombed, the way that England had been bombed. The way that he had, in turn, bombed German cities. He pushed aside the unwelcome thought and stared wistfully at the familiar shape of Orion overhead.

“Why, Lieutenant Tanner. Could it be that you are also finding sleep elusive? Surely you have no complaint about the quality of the accommodations.”

The Texan started guiltily, realising that Standish, sarcastic wit in full swing, was sitting off to

the right of him, deep in shadow, reclining indolently in one of the cane chairs at the front of the hut. He had not noticed the co-pilot was not in his bunk when he had passed.

“Too cold,” answered Vin laconically, wishing suddenly that he had put on his gloves.

He heard a soft chuckle.

“I have come to the conclusion that England is always cold. Cold and miserable. At least in North Africa I had the opportunity to be warm and miserable.”

Tanner moved to sit in the chair next to Standish.

“What was it like over there?”

The Southerner raised a hip flask to his lips and took a long swallow before offering it to the Bombardier. Vin took a mouthful and felt the biting fire of alcohol burn a path all the way to his stomach, coughing at the raw taste of it.

“Jesus, Ezra! What the hell is that? Paint stripper?”

The quiet laugh again.

“Philistine!” he accused mockingly, “That happens to be the finest black market French cognac that money can buy.”

He reached to take back the flask but Tanner quickly snatched it away and took another generous draught before returning it.

“What the hell,” he gasped, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, “Might as well be warm on the inside.”

“My sentiments exactly, Lieutenant.”

“So, what was it like?” Tanner repeated after a brief pause, “North Africa, I mean.”

Standish sighed, obviously reluctant to talk.

“Like any desert you could name. Hot and dry. One becomes intimately acquainted with the properties of sand which, incidentally, infiltrates everything from the clothes you wear to the food you eat. Millions of flies and a myriad of repulsive insect life put on earth for the sole purpose of making man’s life a misery.”

It was Vin’s turn to laugh.

“I thought you liked it there?”

“Good Lord, no!” Ezra protested, “I just prefer to be able to maintain a body temperature somewhere above zero. Much as this might surprise you, Lieutenant Tanner, I find being shot at equally distasteful whichever theatre of operations I happen to be in.”

“Heard you were shot down,” said the Texan quietly, “Landed in the drink. Only survivor, right?”

The Southerner did not respond immediately, lost in a distant memory as he stared into infinity. He sipped slowly at the flask again before screwing on the cap and slipping it back into his pocket.

One hand, Tanner noticed, strayed unconsciously to rub his chest. He guessed that the purple ribbon adorning the man's uniform had been gained in that incident.

"What else did you hear?" he asked cautiously. If he had heard Vin's question, he chose not to answer.

"Nothin'. Just scuttlebutt, and I don't pay no attention to rumours." He didn't elaborate on just what those rumours had been. "Don't matter none to me whatever you might or might not have done before."

Standish fell silent for several moments, then abruptly stood up and hunched his shoulders against the cold, thrusting his hands into his jacket pockets.

"Thank you."

Tanner waved a dismissive hand, slightly embarrassed that the Southerner should see fit to be grateful for him telling the honest truth. Thoughtfully eyeing the Southerner he hesitated a moment before continuing, his voice quietly passionate.

"I'll give you some advice though, Ezra. Don't fuck with Chris. Not if you want to stay in this outfit."

Ezra ducked his head and smiled sardonically.

"I'll make it a point not to, Lieutenant Tanner."

oooOOOooo

Standish did not like beer. He especially did not like warm, English beer but he did like the local pub and its almost rustic ambiance and, for the right amount of cash, the publican could also be induced to procure a rather fine single malt scotch. A possibility which made downing the odd pint of bitter a sacrifice he was prepared to make. Skillfully negotiating a path through the early evening press of customers he deposited three pints of the dark brown ale on the table and took the last remaining seat for himself.

"Well, gentlemen," he picked up his drink, "A votre santé."

The best he could say for the room temperature brew was that it was wet and that it was alcoholic, and he knew that he would be struggling to get through a pint but his companions wasted no time in downing their own and he realised with some trepidation that he was expected to do the same.

He looked morosely at the till half-full dimpled glass tankard -- there was far too much left in it for Ezra to consider it half-empty -- wondering if his stomach would tolerate a second sampling.

"It's okay, Ezra," sympathised Vin, "You get used to it."

"I'm not sure that's even possible, Lieutenant Tanner."

“Believe me,” interjected an obviously amused Chris, “it’s possible. Give it a couple of months and you’ll love it.”

Standish shook his head.

“I wouldn’t put any money on it, Captain Larabee. I shall make it a point to keep my association with this particular beverage strictly platonic.”

Vin finished his own drink and set the empty tankard on the table, then looked appraisingly at the Southerner still pushing his glass around the table.

“You gonna finish that, or just keep it moving till it evaporates?”

Standish pushed the remaining half pint towards the Texan.

“By all means Lieutenant Tanner,” he replied indolently, exaggerating his Southern drawl, “feel free to imbibe, who am I to stand between a man and his last remaining taste bud.”

Larabee snorted a laugh as an indignant Tanner assumed a hurt expression before draining Ezra’s glass and wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

“So,” Chris leaned forward and rested his elbows on the table, “What’s it going to be Ezra? Are you going to billet with us or not?”

Standish looked evenly at the blond pilot.

“If that’s what you want.”

Larabee shook his head slowly, not taking his eyes off the Southerner.

“No,” he countered, “it’s what you want. I’m just telling you there’s a bunk free in our barracks. It’s just me, Vin and Tad McEvoy. Take it or leave it, it’s there.”

Ezra hesitated then grinned, his gold tooth flashing.

“Such an offer I can hardly refuse, Captain Larabee.”

Chris scowled, not appreciating Standish’s sarcasm.

“It’s about the only way I can be sure you’ll get to briefing on time,” he replied gruffly, “You can move your things in tonight.”

The Southerner gave a casual half-salute.

“You might live to regret this,” he warned, only half joking.

The blond pilot raised an expressive eyebrow, the warning clear.

“I’d better not.”

Larabee knew that Standish had been shot down; they all did. That the Southerner had been wounded was no secret either but the scars that marred the pilot’s muscular torso suggested a story worth hearing. His open scrutiny as Ezra undressed drew a sardonic smile from the younger man.

“Pretty isn’t it?” He fingered a pale pink scar, newly healed, down the right side of his ribcage before looking back at Chris. “Usually it’s the done thing to pretend not to notice.”

Larabee sat down on the bed opposite and leaning forward, rested his forearms across his knees.

“Not notice? For Christ’s sake, Ezra you’d have to be blind.”

“No-one wants to be reminded of their own vulnerability, Captain Larabee,” replied Ezra softly.

“Flak or fighters?”

Standish stopped folding his clothing and looked pensively into the far distance, seeing beyond the confines of the room before sighing and focusing once again on the blond pilot across from him.

“Fighters. Groundfire.” He dropped his gaze. “You’re going to make me tell you the whole thing, aren’t you?”

“Only if you want to.”

Ezra’s expression gave nothing away as he considered the questionable wisdom of sharing a part of his past -- a part of himself -- with a man he barely knew. Finally, he mirrored Chris’ actions and sat down on his bunk, resting his forearms on his knees, fingers interlaced as he stared at a spot on the floor between his feet.

“It was a raid on Ploesti...the Rumanian oil fields...”

We’d been practicing for weeks on a full scale replica set up in the Libyan desert, working on the timing, getting used to low level flying. That was the great plan, you see, using high altitude bombers on a low level strafe and bomb run was supposed to give us both the surprise and accuracy we needed to pull the raid off. It was a bitch of a mission from the get-go -- the longest haul mass raid ever attempted, two thousand seven hundred miles to cover between Libya and Rumania, for a target judged so important by the powers that be that losses of one hundred percent were considered acceptable if we could pull it off.

Two hundred B-24s left for Ploesti; fucking wall to wall Liberators as far as you could see in any direction, loaded up with extra fuel and armed to the hilt. Four thousand pounds of bombs and as much ammo as we could carry. No fighter escort for this one. On our own all the way. We lost a few before we even met any opposition, some poor bastard just went down in flames for no reason that any of us could see and a couple more turned back with overcooked engines, but until we got right into the Carpathians we saw nothing -- nada -- zilch -- in the way of enemy fighters. Flew right over Greece, no problem; at ten thousand feet, against a strong headwind and building cloud cover but at least no one was taking pot shots at us.

Ezra fell silent for a moment, lost in his own memories, then with a deep sigh he continued not noticing that Tanner had joined Larabee to sit on the opposite bunk or that both men were totally engrossed in his narrative.

The mountains were our signal to turn south for the let-down to the target and we changed our formation so we had a good chance at individual runs on the target. So we all drop down, the plan being to bomb from two hundred feet, and follow the leader in. The bastard turned too soon and we all had to go round again; that’s when the shit really hit the fan and the fighters came in. Me-110s

crawling all over us and the ack-ack batteries opening up with all they had. The lead plane was hit and in flames before it even dropped the bombs; thousand pounders on delayed fuses and we were coming in right behind just above the rooftops.

The Southerner's tone and expression never changed as he catalogued the events, but his hands trembled with the effort of keeping them still, his knuckles whitening as the pressure on his interlaced fingers increased.

The groundfire was murderous. Foster, the pilot, was killed on the first aborted run, so I took her on the go-around and we got the bombs off the second time through. After that I stuck so close to the deck that the fighters couldn't dive on us, but the groundfire was ripping up the plane. I lost half my crew just getting the hell out of there. Took a shot in the hip I didn't even know about till later. Fucking bomb-bay doors stuck, two engines feathered and a two hundred mile an hour wind blasting through the cockpit through a blown out side window.

He stopped abruptly, taking a deep breath and making a conscious effort to slow his quickening respirations. For almost a minute he remained silent, still staring fixedly at the floor then he raised his head and looked at the two men before quietly resuming his story.

The fighters were hanging around picking off the cripples. I stuck with my right wingman; hell, we were so damned close I almost had my wing stuck in his side door but it was suicide to try and go it alone. We jettisoned everything we had, including the guns and ammo to keep the old girl airborne on two engines but we were falling behind the rest and the fuel situation was looking really bad. We were supposed to head for Turkey -- friendly territory -- and then onto Cyprus if we had enough fuel. The bastards went for us anyway, easy pickings. Got shot up pretty badly.

He smiled sadly. "Me as well as the Lib."

We were so far behind the group that we lost visual, but over the radio I could hear planes going down all around us. I didn't know if I could keep her in the air much longer but you know, the Lib doesn't ditch well. You go down in the sea and she breaks up. Not much chance of getting out. I was flying slow, conserving what fuel we had but we'd been up for over eleven hours and the gauges were on zero and I already had five dead and two wounded. Then the engines gave up. Stopped, just like that. My bombardier tried to clear the fuel lines but we went down like a goddamn stone. Hit the water and broke up.

The Southerner finally unlocked his fingers, ran a distracted hand through his hair and stood up, walking slowly away from the two men.

"And there you have it, gentlemen. I still don't know how I got out, but there I was floating on my own in the water, just me, and I can tell you I wasn't in any shape to do anything much but bleed. And for that they gave me a fucking medal." He turned back and retraced his steps. "54 planes lost, some 500 men killed, missing or taken prisoner but we did what we set out to do. We

destroyed the German oil supply. ”

“So how’d you get back?”

“I was picked up by partisans, who somehow kept me alive, then I spent five weeks in a military hospital in Cyprus and was reassigned here as soon as I was cleared by the medical board. End of story. Now I hope that I’ve succeeded in satisfying your morbid curiosity, or would you prefer to see the rest of the scars for yourself?”

Ezra’s tone was flippant but it was obvious that recounting the ordeal had unsettled him, stirring up memories that were best left undisturbed.

Chris stood up and grasped the Southerner’s shoulder, a gesture that said more than the older man could ever hope to put into words.

“I just want to know one thing, Ezra. Why the hell you’re still flying in the dummy seat? By now you should be looking at a command of your own.”

Standish ducked his head, a brief and cunning smile crossing his lips.

“Well, Captain Larabee, that is another story entirely and not one you’re likely to hear from me. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have some unpacking to do.”

Standish lay awake in the utter blackness of his new quarters, listening to the slow and steady breathing of his companions, not one of whom seemed to have the slightest difficulty in sleeping. Of course none of them had just opened a Pandora’s box of memories that, once let loose, refused to go back. He turned onto his stomach and slid both arms under his pillow, squeezing his eyes shut. Goddamn, he should have told Larabee to mind his own business, the way he had told everyone else who had shown any curiosity about his past. What had he achieved by resurrecting an episode of his life that he had tried so hard to lay to rest? Nothing, except a sleepless night wrestling with demons he had thought already conquered. He shivered and burrowed deeper into the covers but he knew it was not just the cold plaguing him tonight.

Slowly drawing his left arm from under the pillow and peered at the glowing hands of his watch. Ten past two. In a few hours some inordinately cheerful airman, currently deemed unfit for airborne ops, would be rousing the crews for briefing. As an aside he wondered if Preston was in the habit of shining his torch in Larabee’s face and decided that as the Lieutenant was still in one piece, it was highly unlikely.

The forty-eight hour leave he had been looking forward to had rapidly evaporated; half of one day wasted getting back from the RAF airfield, followed by debriefing, a long, hot shower and an even longer sleep. His plans to spend a couple of days in London ruined, he had instead spent a reflective and introspective day in Cambridge revisiting old haunts. The Southerner had spent a year

as an undergraduate at King's College almost a decade before and the nostalgic attraction of the University had been too strong for him to resist. Now, it was back to reality and yet another sortie over Europe, to begin the game again and hope to beat the odds once more.

Ezra wedged a booted foot against the Jeep's dashboard bracing himself as the overloaded vehicle lurched into motion. *Gentlemen, today's target is Merseburg.* Naturally! He edged sideways to give Tanner an inch more room on his left. Christ, the man was nearly in his lap already. Merseburg. Unfriendly skies all the way and flak so thick you could get out and walk to the German town on it. Goddamn oil refineries!

An elbow in his ribs abruptly interrupted his musings and he realised that the Jeep had already made the short run out to the tarmac and come to a halt in front of the "Ace". With a sigh he followed the Texan out of the vehicle and stood for a moment looking at the massive structure that would shortly be carrying ten relatively fragile human beings across hundreds of miles of enemy territory, nearly thirty thousand feet above the ground. Just shy of seventy-five feet in length the plane reared almost twenty feet above the men on the ground and even as a pilot, fully cognisant with the principles of flight, the Southerner sometimes found it difficult to believe that the heavily armed Fortress would ever leave the runway.

"You coming, Ezra, or you just here to wave good-bye?"

Standish transferred his attention to the Texan who was just about to swing up into the navigator's compartment through the hatch in the underside of the nose, and considered a suitably acerbic response but in the end he just smiled and followed the Bombardier to take his own position in the cramped confines of the plane.

oooOOOooo

Chris stretched out on the grass, leaning on one elbow as he watched the nine members of his crew making the most of the brief respite they had been given. Fog over the target had seen them stood down; engine start had been pushed first from 0730 to 0830 and now 0930. In the meantime they had been forced to cool their heels for almost two hours until the weather cleared half way across Europe.

Standish was stretched out a few feet away, somehow sleeping through the noisily energetic football game in progress not ten yards distant. He winced as the football landed bare inches from the co-pilot's head but the Southerner slept on, seemingly oblivious to the stampede that briefly charged in his direction before the ball was swept up again and thrown back into play.

Plucking a stalk of grass from the lush turf he chewed thoughtfully on the stem and stared for a long time at the drab olive livery of the "Ace in the Hole". So many missions; so many dead. How

long could a man's luck last? He thought of Standish going down off Greece in his Liberator and cast a brief glance at the Southerner, now sleeping peacefully on the cool green grass of England. Did he know how lucky he was?

The roar of a Jeep's engine as it moved its way up the line interrupted Chris' reverie, the driver repeatedly yelling a variation on a theme to each of the crews.

"Engine start for nine thirty guys! Up and at 'em!"

He got to his feet and brushed the flecks of grass from his pants, before nudging Ezra with his foot having decided that the co-pilot could probably sleep through an air raid.

"Come on, Sleeping Beauty. Plane's leaving."

Standish moaned.

"Tell it to go without me. I'll catch it on the way back."

Larabee grinned and left the co-pilot to follow at his own pace. Mission number fifteen underway. Even Merseburg was better than waiting.

The B-17 rolled forward, Larabee straightening the big bomber on the runway ready for take-off.

"Tail wheel locked."

He nodded his acknowledgement and pushed the throttles forward, standing hard on the brakes as he counted the thirty seconds before he would follow the plane in front into the air. The thunderous roar of the four engines revving at almost maximum power as Larabee advanced the throttles, filled the cockpit.

"...twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty."

Releasing the brakes Larabee pushed the throttles wide open and the Fortress, loosed, gathered momentum, committed to take off as the next plane in line began its own countdown. The Ace in the Hole left the ground at 100 mph, Chris kicking on the brakes to stop wheelspin before taking the landing gear up and cruising easily into formation levelling out at twenty-thousand feet. Today they were in the low squadron. Purple Heart Corner. Not the place he would have chosen given the target but someone had to fly there. He knew some of the crew were superstitious about it but in the Chris Larabee book of wisdom, no ritual you could name was going to affect the final outcome if your number was up.

The group formed up in the customary Tucked-in Wing formation; three aircraft vees stacked in one direction with the squadrons stacked in the opposite direction. As the rearmost plane in the entire formation, Chris felt exposed but in reality if the fighter's were good enough, it hardly mattered where the hell you sat in the formation once one of them had singled you out.

Chris touched his throat mike.

"Okay, we're going to be taking some heavy shit today. We already know these Merseburg

mother-fuckers are good. I want everyone in flak jackets soon as I give the word. Right, Buck?"

"You got it, Chris."

"I'd better, else I'm gonna bust your ass this time."

The Sergeant laughed, and Larabee did not need to be psychic to know the gesture that was likely to accompany that sound. He smiled nonetheless. He and Buck had shared almost a lifetime together; he had no intention that it should end because Wilmington was too ornery to put on a flak jacket.

"Our little buddies are with us." Tanner announced that he had spotted their fighter escort.

"Good," responded Sanchez, from his place just behind Chris and Ezra, "Maybe they'll keep the bad guys away."

Standish gave a short laugh.

"Sergeant Sanchez, I admire your optimism but if you are by any chance a gambling man I'd refrain from laying any money on that."

"And if you're bettin' with Ezra, don't lay ANY money on it, Josiah," interrupted Buck, quickly, "He'll clean you out and leave you nothin' but the clothes you're standing up in."

Larabee turned to his co-pilot, switching off his mike.

"You didn't?"

The Southerner shrugged.

"Just a friendly game of poker, Captain Larabee. I can hardly be held responsible for Mr. Wilmington hitting a prolonged losing streak."

"How much of a losing streak?"

"Merely a month's pay."

Chris shook his head, making a mental note never to gamble with his exec and reactivated his throat mike.

"Okay, lets keep the radio clear and get down to business. Last I heard we had a war to fight."

Corporal John Dunne had exactly thirty-two hours of air combat experience. In the real world, just less than one and a half days; in the belly of a Flying Fortress, a lifetime. His youth and stature had almost guaranteed him a ball-turret gunner's position and while he found the prospect exciting, that excitement was tempered by the reality that his was possibly the most vulnerable gun placement on the ship. He still found it hard to believe that he was crammed uncomfortably in a plexiglas bubble, 26,000 feet in the air, sucking oxygen through a rubber mask as he waited for an opportunity to score a kill and send one of the Luftwaffe's screaming demons straight to hell.

He wriggled his hips back, trying to get more comfortable and escape the pressure of the safety strap wedged painfully into his crotch. Damn thing was near castrating him but he had no intention of releasing it. With no parachute, if the integrity of the turret was breached there was nothing be-

tween him and the ground thousands of feet below but the very strap that was currently responsible for bringing tears to his eyes.

He had seen a few of the P-47s riding herd on the group, the only fighters that had the range to take them 500 miles into Germany. Even with their long range auxillary tanks they only had enough fuel for a short engagement before having to head back to base leaving the bombers without a covering escort. Better than nothing but hardly satisfactory for the crews in the B-17s under attack.

“Bandits at four o’clock low!”

His gut clenched as he spun the turret round to meet the threat, his ears filled with the excited yells of the gunners of the “Ace” as they called out sightings. Suddenly the air was filled with fighters, weaving through the formation, Me-109s spitting both tracer and bullets from their twin machine guns and 20mm shells from the dual cannons, darting in to attack and screaming away before the gunners had time to line up on them. J.D. knew the idea was for the gunners to spray a wide area, each gun placement overlapping the next to provide overall protection for the aircraft but the temptation to target individual fighters was too great to ignore. Sights on a diving FW190 he waited, heart racing, for the moment he would activate his guns and with any luck blow the fucker out of the sky. Focke? He laughed crazily at the pun and fired.

“Jesus Christ! We got half the goddamn Luftwaffe up here today,” yelled Jackson as he brought the twin half-inch barrels round to bear on an Me-109 going into a slow half-roll off to starboard.

“Only half?” screamed Wilmington, at the left waist gun, “Shit, they’re thicker than fleas on a mangy dog! Eleven o’clock high, Josiah!”

“I see him!”

Sanchez in the top turret swung his guns around, the spent shells tumbling to the floor as he poured bullets into the fighter. His victory shriek was echoed by a half dozen voices as the Messerschmitt rolled lazily, smoke pouring from its engine as it peeled away, mortally wounded before nose diving into a spin that it was never going to pull out of.

Buck kicked aside some of the brass casings accumulating around his feet and paused in his firing for a moment, seeking another target.

“You okay down there, J.D? J.D!”

As if in response the ball turret’s gears spun into action.

“Fine, Buck. Just a little busy!”

Wilmington grinned and sprayed a passing FW-190. These Jerry flyboys were hard to put off when they were defending home territory; bastards never put up such a fight when they were bombing targets in France!

“Can we go home now, Chris?” he yelled, “I think I’m outta ammunition.”

Tanner hated flak, he hated it because he could see it coming at him through the plexiglas nose

of the aircraft and the one thing he knew beyond all doubt was that if he was going to die he didn't want to see it coming. He had always felt death was something that should take you by surprise.

Something hit the nose blister with a disgusting wet splatter and he reflexively ducked and drew back. Shit! Whatever it was he didn't want to know but it was enough for him that it was red and it was liquid. Great. Now he had to fly the rest of the op with someone else's blood decorating his window on the world. He leaned against the bulkhead, bracing his shoulder as he manned the cheek gun on the port side. It would just make his day if he could bring down one of those irritating little bastards. He loosed a burst from the single machine gun and smiled as he saw the wisps of smoke erupt from the engine cowling of the 109. Like licking butter off a knife.

Larabee fought to keep the aircraft steady. Pounded by flak for the last fifteen minutes, he was surprised that there was anything left of the "Ace" to fly. The fuselage and wings were peppered with holes and it was a miracle that nothing vital had been hit. They'd taken a direct hit in the horizontal stabiliser but that sure as hell was not about to stop them bombing the crap out of the target.

The fighters had gone -- seven minutes of contained fury -- but now the flak had taken over and it was merciless. All around there were gaps in the group where Fortresses had either gone down or dropped out of formation and he wondered how many empty bunks there would be tonight in the barracks.

"Engine one's cooking. Losing oil pressure."

Standish may as well have been telling him the time of day for all the emotion he showed.

"Feathering engine one."

Damn! He did not relish flying back over five hundred miles of occupied territory with only three engines and part of one stabiliser missing. Fucking flak. The sooner they dropped their bombs and hightailed it for England the happier he would be.

"She's all yours, Vin. Let's get the water in the bucket."

Tanner bent over the bombsight, cursing the continuous buffeting from the flak as he concentrated on the target below, jerking back reflexively as an Me-109 came rushing head-on towards the nose window, rolling at the last minute to avoid contact by what seemed to the Texan like a hair's breadth. His heart hammered furiously in his chest as an additional surge of adrenaline poured into his already supercharged system; the rush that was an equal mixture of fear and exhilaration as he focused again on the view through the bomb-aimer. He steadied his breathing and reached back with his left hand ready to flip the cover on the metal guard over the switch that would release the bombs.

His world narrowed to the view through the Norden sight. Nothing existed for him but the need to guide the heavy aircraft into position over the target and let loose the four and a half thousand pounds of bombs that sat armed and ready in the Fortress' open bomb bay. The exploding flak be-

came a minor distraction, the enemy fighters a distant threat, as he calmly manipulated the controls and did what he had flown five hundred miles to do. Six miles below, the target materialised in the crosshairs. *Gotcha!* Twenty seconds had never seemed so long as he maintained a bead on the refinery buildings now squarely in his sights waiting for the cue light that would be his signal to hit the bomb release switch. Fifteen...sixteen...seventeen...

They came out of the sun. Predatory birds -- the Butcher Birds of the Third Reich -- tenaciously defending the Fatherland. Machine guns and cannon loosed a viciously intense volley of bullets that ripped easily through the aluminium skin of the B-17, raking savagely across the nose in star bursts of shattered plexiglass, wounding men and machine with equal disinterest.

Noise.

His head filled with rushing blood and discordant sound. Machine guns and cannons, the cheek gun on his left barking its own furious response and filling his nose and lungs with bitter fumes. Voices in chaos creating a separate element of disharmony in his earphones as the battle cry went up; curses and jeers peppered with other, inarticulate sounds that spoke of death and dying. Bursting flak. Hot shrapnel. A short scream of rage -- of pain -- abruptly terminated.

Blood.

Bright ruby drops decorating the face of the bombsight. His blood. Understanding followed as he struggled to maintain contact with the switch under his left thumb, his arm suddenly leaden and his muscles unresponsive. In a moment of insight before the pain came at him like a solid wave of molten lava he accepted that his life was about to end. Vision greying he saw the cue light wink on, silent and accusatory. Target acquired. Holy Mother of God! Get the bombs away. His hand slipped and he fell untidily, no longer able to control his own movements with any degree of surety. Sliding on a surface slick with his own blood, he clawed at the metal cover that had flipped back into place over the switch. No! Clinging to the last shreds of consciousness and sucking in ragged breaths between sobs of frustration, he fumbled clumsily, defeated by the simple mechanism. Finally smashing his hand against the guard, he exposed the switch and with a desperate lunge thumbed the elusive toggle before darkness reached out to claim him.

Ezra knew what hell was. He had been there before and he was there again.

"Bombs away!" The shout registered at an unconscious level as, grim faced, he gripped the yoke, adding his strength to Larabee's to keep the plane level and airborne.

"Racks clear!"

At least they would not be flying home with a bellyful of unexploded bombs; some small comfort as the fighters swarmed over and around the already decimated group, picking off the stragglers, the slow and exposed. A single red eye glared at him from the instrument panel. The bomb bay doors were still open. Vin had failed to hit the switch after releasing the payload or the doors

were jammed.

“Closing bomb bay doors.” He intoned automatically, flicking the toggle down.

To his relief the light blinked off as the mechanism engaged and the hinged doors swung back into place. At least something still worked.

Chris took the wounded craft up, turning and gaining altitude, desperate now to evade the flak and fighters.

“Vin? Tad? You alright down there? Check in.” The answering silence brought a curse to his lips. “Everyone check in. Now!

“Right waist, checking in.” Nathan.

“Left waist, checking in.” Buck.

“Top turret, checking in.” Josiah.

“Radio operator, checking in.” Sorenson.

Chris waited a beat for the rest.

“Ball turret? Dunne - check in!”

A small sound came from through the earphones, a hiccupping sob then a shaky reply.

“Ball turret. Checking in.”

“Goddamn it,” breathed Chris, his relief palpable.

Neither man at the controls would pass judgement on the young gunner's emotional response, they had both been along that road themselves.

“Rear gunner? Bombardier? Navigator? Check in.” No answer. “Josiah...”

“I'm on it.” The engineer left his gun placement to worm his way down to the nose.

“Nathan? See how Flynn's doin' back there.”

Chris stared fixedly ahead, the clenched jaw and stony face signalling his concern for his men.

“Bandits at three o'clock high!”

“Bandits at eleven o'clock low!”

Ezra braced himself. Here we go again.

Sanchez came to an abrupt halt, feeling as if he had been punched in the midsection by an unseen hand, and trying to make sense of the chaos in front of him. Wind shrieked through the shattered sections of the perspex nose creating a vortex which snatched loose papers from the desk and sucked them out into the void, fist sized holes had been drilled through the aluminium skin but it was the blood that took his breath away. So much blood.

“Vin? Tad?”

McEvoy sprawled over his navigation table as if protecting his maps and if it wasn't for the blood he might have been asleep but the Lieutenant was dead. Josiah levered him up from his prone position and looked sadly on the lifeless face of the young navigator destroyed by machine gun fire.

The most he could offer was a quick prayer. He hoped he could do more for Tanner.

The Texan lay unmoving nearer the front of the nose and Josiah pushed aside the feeling of dread that slithered through his gut as he knelt beside the still and bloodied bombardier.

“Vin?”

Grasping his shoulder, he quickly turned him over, a sense of urgency driving him as another barrage of gunfire noisily peppered the airframe stitching a row of holes just inches from his head. Jesus! At least he didn't have the waxy look of death although as he rolled bonelessly under Sanchez' hand, the engineer hastily felt for a pulse in the unconscious man's neck to reassure himself that Tanner did indeed still live. Without further hesitation he manhandled the smaller man to the rear of the compartment and unceremoniously dragged him through to the relative safety of the space behind the cockpit, thankful that Vin was not able to feel the unavoidable abuse that was being inflicted on his already injured body

“Vin's hit!” he yelled to no-one in particular as he started to rip open the bombardier's flying jacket, all the time watching the shallow rise and fall of his chest afraid that the faint motion would suddenly stop. “Nathan!”

He thrust the heel of his hand against the upper part of the Texan's chest, just under his left collar bone, in an attempt to staunch the flow of blood fountaining from the worst of several bullet wounds. With his free hand he started to unbutton the injured man's shirt, exposing a second freely bleeding wound in his neck.

“For Christ's sake, I need another pair of hands here! Buck? Peter?”

Lieutenant Peter Sorenson squeezed in beside the powerfully built engineer.

“Nathan's on his way,” he panted, then, “Jeff's dead.”

“So's Tad. Now let's not make it three of a kind, huh? Hold this.”

Larabee brought the stricken B17 around forcing it into a sluggish climb that would take them out of range of the anti-aircraft guns but the fighters were relentless; fewer of them now but worrying at the damaged bomber like a pack of hyenas trailing a wounded prey. He could only hope that they would soon need to refuel; if outrunning them was not an option, outlasting them certainly was. The Fortress could take a lot of punishment.

He risked a backward glance, but Josiah's bulky shoulders obscured his view and he decided not to tempt fate and ask about Vin, he would know soon enough. Just as he knew about Flynn and McEvoy. Grimly, he eased back the throttle and levelled out. At least now they were headed for home. There was just a small matter of five hundred miles of hostile airspace swarming with enemy planes between them and England to contend with.

With only the waist and the ball turret guns manned, the mighty Fortress was exposed and vulnerable to attack, but from the noisy chatter of the guns Larabee guessed that Wilmington and

Dunne were working diligently to make up the shortfall. On his right Ezra's voice was reassuringly calm as he continued to reel off instrument readings, the information occasionally punctuated with a richly expressive epithet delivered in the same even Southern drawl, which brought a smile to the blond pilot's lips in spite of the gravity of the situation.

"Don't these bastards ever run out of ammunition?" he finally muttered, as another Messerschmitt raked the B-17 with machine gun fire, "Or goddamn fuel?"

"One can only hope, Captain Larabee," responded Standish, drily, "however my concern is not their fuel but rather ours."

"How bad?"

"If we fly lean and throttle back, we might just squeeze home on a wing and a prayer without having to take a bath in the Channel or," he paused to make a visual check of the remaining starboard engine, "we can just get the fuck out of here and worry about fuel consumption later."

"Shit!"

"Couldn't have put it better myself," murmured the co-pilot, "But right now I'd like to get as much distance between these Luftwaffe boys and this aircraft as is humanly possible or we won't need to worry about fuel at all. Here they come!"

Ezra ducked instinctively as a FW-190 met them head on, guns and cannons blazing, to deflect at the last minute, the pilot pulling back on the joystick and skimming over the top of the bomber with mere inches to spare. Jesus Christ! The man had been close enough for him to see not only the colour of his eyes but the acne scarred surface of his skin. Too close. Too goddamn close.

"Son of a bitch!"

He grabbed at the yoke as the B-17 started to go nose down, hauling back on the column and turning to Chris in mute appeal for help to bring the sluggish aircraft back into level flight. The looked-for assistance was not there. Instead, Larabee slumped limply over the controls, his face a mask of blood, as his own body weight inexorably forced the yoke forward and the aircraft into an ever steepening dive. The worm of fear rippled unpleasantly in the pit of Ezra's stomach but he bit back the shout of denial that rose in his throat and forced himself to focus on keeping the big bomber's nose up

"Sanchez! Get up here. I need you." His voice betrayed nothing of his trepidation but he was unable to prevent the physical response that accelerated his heart rate and opened his pores so that the sweat of fear slid in rivulets between his shoulder blades.

"Damn it, Ezra! Vin's bleeding all over the ship here! What is it?"

Standish maintained his grip on the yoke, the muscles in his arms bunching with the effort of holding back thirty-six thousand pounds of aircraft being pulled steadily earthward by a force greater than he could ever hope to counter alone.

“Goddamn it, Sergeant! Chris is hit and this fucking plane is going to go down unless you get up here and help me out!”

The Staff Sergeant shouldered his way into the cockpit and quickly glanced from the wounded pilot to the Southerner, who was struggling against both the weight of an unconscious Chris pushing the controls forward and the pull of gravity drawing the B17 ever downward. Sanchez, heedless of any injury the blond pilot may have sustained, roughly pulled the man back and deftly freed him from his seat. Manoeuvring Larabee onto the floor, the engineer quickly stepped over the inert form and sliding into the pilot’s seat, grasped the controls in his big hands.

Nathan swore softly, a rarity for the medic and as such a measure of his concern, as he quickly worked to stop any further bleeding from Vin’s shoulder, the bright pulsing blood a sure indicator that the bullet had torn an artery. Fixing a dressing in place he hastily bandaged over the wound and silently signalled for Sorenson to keep manual pressure on the bombardier’s shoulder. The last thing he needed was to have the young Texan bleeding to death. He braced himself against the bulkhead as the angle of the plane’s descent increased and he began to wonder if bleeding to death might not be the least of Tanner’s problems. Unless Ezra could get the plane back on an even keel they might all end up as an integral part of the German landscape.

Vin stirred, muttering petulantly at first then with increasing vigour, as the pain of his wounds registered in his awakening consciousness. Without missing a beat, Nathan reached into the medical kit and grabbed a pre-measured syrette of morphine, uncapping it one-handedly, then stabbing it through the bombardier’s pants leg and into his thigh. Not elegant by any means but effective for all that and a few minutes later, once the drug was circulating in his system, the wounded man relaxed with a soft sigh.

Jackson had found four bullet wounds in the young lieutenant. One in his left shoulder, two in his left arm and one that had nicked the left side of his neck. As the medic taped a shell dressing over the neck wound he slowly shook his head. Lucky did not describe this boy. He had avoided having his carotid severed by the narrowest of margins. With practiced efficiency he dressed the two wounds in the Texan’s arm then spared a moment to check his pulse. Satisfied, he glanced at Sorenson.

“Stay with him. And keep up the pressure on that shoulder, okay?”

The radio operator nodded.

“He’ll be okay?”

“If we get back in one piece, Pete, I guarantee it.”

Collecting his medical kit together, Nathan scrambled awkwardly towards the cockpit, his forward progress accelerated by the unnatural incline of the floor. Wedging himself in the doorway, he braced one leg against the bulkhead and grabbing the pilot by the shoulders, dragged the uncon-

scious man closer. A few feet away he was aware of the titanic struggle as Ezra and Josiah tried to bring the juddering aircraft out of its nose dive, but his real concern was for Larabee. If their fate was to crash and burn then so be it, but in the meantime he had work to do and the possibility of flying straight into the ground was not going to stop him.

The moment Standish felt the lightening of the controls, he increased pressure on the yoke, but the damaged aircraft was slow to respond and he watched the altimeter continue to unwind as he strained to reverse the B-17s uncontrolled descent. He managed a grim smile as Sanchez took over the pilot's controls and put his considerable muscle to good use but the Ace in the Hole was not going to be persuaded quite so easily to defy gravity and come up into level flight. The thought crossed his mind that with any luck they might just be able to pull up before the goddamn wings came off.

He flicked a glance at Larabee lying awkwardly on the floor next to him, very aware of the blood that covered the Captain's face and hoping that he had not managed to lose another pilot. It was getting to be a habit with him. He wanted his own command but not at the expense of another man's life and Chris, he had decided, was an okay guy. The realisation that Josiah was yelling at him penetrated his thoughts and, understanding that the bomber was reluctantly responding, he redoubled his efforts at the controls until his arms trembled with the sustained strain on already overtaxed muscles. Slowly at first, then with greater speed and finally with a gut wrenching swoop the mighty bomber's nose came up and at five thousand feet the Fortress levelled out.

For once the Southerner allowed his mask of studied indifference to slip and let out an explosive breath he was sure he had been holding since he first saw Larabee slumped over the controls.

"Jesus Christ Almighty!" His voice was not quite as steady as he would have liked, while from the pilot's seat came a quietly intense: "Amen to that, Brother."

The last thing Chris remembered was Ezra's warning shout and seeing the Focke- Wulf, emblazoned with the stark black and white Balkenkreutz, filling his forward vision, then there was nothing until he had wakened on the floor of the cockpit with a blinding pain in his head. Disoriented, he tried to interpret the confused signals that his body was sending his brain, but nothing seemed to make any sense. He attempted to obey his first instinct to get up, but the moment he lifted his head a wave of dizziness washed over him and he thought he was going to be sick. Making an inarticulate sound in the back of his throat that was part grunt and part groan, his hand strayed hesitantly to his head and came away sticky with blood. At that moment he decided that Purple Heart Corner had certainly earned its less than stellar reputation today.

His second attempt to move met with no more success than the first as a large hand descended squarely in the centre of his chest with enough downward pressure to stop any further movement.

“Jesus, man. What’s it gonna take to keep you down? For pity’s sake lie still!”

Still having difficulty in getting his eyelids to respond, he was reassured by the nearness of Nathan’s voice and the comforting, if restrictive, hand on his ribs.

“Ezra...” he began, not quite sure what he meant to say but concerned for his copilot.

“Ezra’s doing just fine,” the medic interrupted evenly, “You’re not the only pilot on his goddamn bucket of bolts.”

Chris winced as Nathan did something that sent a lance of fire through his skull and coloured lights flashing behind his eyelids.

“Hey,” he protested weakly, “That’s my goddamn bucket of bolts you’re talking about.”

“Indeed it is, Captain Larabee.” The Southern drawl was unmistakable. “And given your strong attachment to said collection of hardware maybe we should just rename her Larabee’s Lady.”

Chris managed a faint smile as he heard a rich chuckle from Nathan.

“Sonsabitches,” he murmured softly, and with a sigh surrendered to the overwhelming urge to sleep.

oooOOOooo

The Fortress was in a vulnerable position. Separated from the group, she was a lame duck, struggling on but waiting for the fox to pounce. Standish was grateful that he still had three engines, although the gratitude was tempered by the knowledge that most of one stabiliser had been shot away, that he had limited fuel and that the Fortress’ formidable arsenal was of little use when he had only four gunners left to man the weapons. Sitting duck.

They had lost the fighters after the B-17 had made its rapid plunge to 5000 feet, which although in the end turned out to be a successful -- if unplanned – evasive manoeuvre, was not one that he would recommend as a routine procedure. That the wings had remained attached to the fuselage was to him a miracle in itself. They had finally climbed above the flak, although the Southerner had agonised over every gallon of fuel used to get them out of range of the anti-aircraft guns and now, crippled and almost defenceless, they flew through empty skies.

He looked over his shoulder feeling the massive weight of responsibility for the welfare of the seven men now in his charge settle about him. Two dead, two wounded and many miles of enemy territory still to cross. Too many miles. With McEvoy out of the picture he was navigating by dead reckoning and hoping that his sense of direction was as good as he thought it was. Fuel was tight enough, without him heading cross country, if he strayed too far off course then they would have no chance at all of getting home.

Vin decided not to move. He had already tried and it had hurt too much. His entire left arm was

numb but he was at a loss to explain how something he could no longer feel could cause him so much pain. Beneath him he could feel the coarse vibration of the airframe and the reassuring roar of the Fortress' power plants filled his ears so he knew they were still airborne at least. Nothing else really mattered. He made an effort to open his eyes, not sure why every part of him felt so incredibly heavy. Even his eyelids felt weighted down.

"Easy, Vin. Just take it nice and slow."

Jesus, Nathan! I ain't exactly rushing here in case you hadn't noticed.

"What hit me?" Getting the words out took every ounce of energy he could muster.

"You got shot, Lieutenant. Several times."

That would explain why he felt so goddamn awful. He took a moment to allow his body and his brain to start being on speaking terms again and determined that the pain was centred in his left shoulder, radiating down his arm and up into his neck. He also realised that he should probably be hurting more than he was and concluded, from his woolly-head and ready acceptance of his current state of health, that somewhere in the proceedings Jackson must have given him a shot of morphine.

Thank-you, Nathan.

He managed to concentrate enough to focus his vision on the medic and stop his attention wandering.

"How bad?"

Jackson looked thoughtful for a moment, then his face relaxed into a smile.

"Say, a week's leave and a purple heart."

Vin sighed, realising that Nathan's flippant response was really telling him in a backhanded way that he was going to be all right.

"Bastard."

"I'll take that as a compliment, Lieutenant."

Tanner eased himself into a more comfortable position, and instinctively tensed as he felt the yielding softness of another human body against his shoulder. He felt a sudden ripple of unease flutter through his stomach as he considered the fact that there might be dead on board as well as wounded. They had certainly taken some hammer over the target. He turned his head as far as he could and instantly recognised the worn leather jacket almost touching his cheek.

"Chris." He breathed the name rather than uttered it, the ripple of unease turning into a cold wave of dread.

"He'll be okay, Vin." Nathan's voice quietly reassured him. "Just out cold. Took a cannon round up the side of the head."

The Texan looked at the dark, clotted blood matting the pilot's blond hair, the pallor of his skin and the barely perceptible rise and fall of his chest, and hoped that Jackson was telling the truth.

From this angle Chris looked far from okay.

“Mac’s dead,” continued the medic gently, “and Flynn. You and Chris were lucky.”

Tanner closed his eyes, not feeling in the least bit lucky.

“Yeah.”

Not for the first time Ezra wondered where the hell they were. He had maintained a roughly east-north-east heading and anticipated that they would cross the coast somewhere between Zeebrugge and Rotterdam but it was a best guess that they were still on course. They had crossed over three hundred miles of German territory unmolested and it was reasonable to assume that they were now passing over Belgium -- or maybe Holland. All he needed was a landmark.

His eye raked the instrument panel and he swore as he noticed the temperature gauge for the remaining starboard engine nudging the upper limit, a few seconds before the overcooked engine sputtered to a standstill.

“I don’t believe this,” he muttered, grimly.

Two hundred miles still to go and at the current rate it was a toss up as to whether they would run out of fuel or engines first. Right now, Ezra was putting all his money on the engines.

“Hey, Looey? Do you know where we are yet?” Buck’s voice drifted up the length of the plane.

The Southerner looked down at the green fields passing below.

“Well, Sergeant Wilmington, I can state unequivocally and without fear of contradiction that we are currently five miles up in the air. Other than that I confess to a certain degree of ignorance as to our exact location.”

Wilmington laughed.

“You mean we’re fucking lost!”

Standish grinned, Buck’s easy humour hard to resist.

“I plead the fifth.”

“Anyone know where we are?” Wilmington threw open the question.

“All looks the same from where I am,” lamented Dunne, “turnips and cabbages.”

Ezra began a slow descent in the hope that a landmark would present itself that would enable him to get an exact fix on his location. By his calculations they should be about fifty miles from the coast. The question was, which coast? At least he could take comfort in the fact that no one was shooting at them -- yet.

Flying as low as he dared over territory that while no longer Germany was still occupied, the Southerner scanned the level countryside for any familiar feature, still smiling at Buck’s suggestion that if he would just put the goddamn wheels on the ground he would volunteer to get out and ask directions.

He flicked his gaze back to the instruments, watching the temperature on the two remaining port

engines and the rapidly diminishing fuel, still not convinced that they would have enough to reach the English mainland. He quickly turned to look over his shoulder to where Jackson still tended the two injured officers.

“How’s it going?”

Nathan looked up, then moved forward crouch beside the co-pilot keeping his voice low.

“Vin’s conscious but he’s lost a lot of blood. He needs a hospital real soon. Captain’s still out like a light.”

Standish sighed. They were still over a hundred and fifty miles from home and he doubted he could nurse another hundred out of the badly damaged craft before he was running on nothing more than the vapour in the tanks.

“Any chance of getting either of them ‘chuted up and bailed out?”

Jackson frowned.

“Not a snowball’s chance in hell, Lieutenant, unless you want to kill ‘em for sure.” His expression altered subtly. “That bad, huh?”

“Sergeant Jackson, I have about as much chance of landing this crate back on English soil as flying it to the moon. I think it’s about time we considered our options...”

A yell from the ball turret gunner interrupted the co-pilot’s conversation with the medic.

“Hey, guys! That’s some big fucking river coming up to port. It’s gotta be the Rhine.”

Dunne’s was hard pressed to conceal his excitement as Ezra adjusted his flight path and turned towards the body of water.

“Corporal Dunne, I believe you may be right and, if I’m not mistaken, we’re into Holland and about to fly over Arnhem.”

“That’s great, Ezra. Glad to hear you know your geography,” interrupted Buck drily, “the big question is, which way is home and can you find it?”

“Piece of cake, Sergeant Wilmington,” quipped the Southerner, “We just follow the yellow brick road all the way to Rotterdam over Hoek van Holland and straight across the North Sea.”

“Okay, Dorothy, I’ll take your word for it. Just tell me one thing. How much of the North Sea are we talking about?”

“About a hundred miles.”

“You know something, Ezra? I really hate swimming.”

Standish concentrated on taking the Fortress higher. With any luck, if he could get enough altitude, they could avoid the flak batteries around Rotterdam. If he could get enough altitude. He turned again to look at Nathan who had not moved during Ezra’s brief dialogue with the mustached gunner.

“We have to offload some weight, Jackson. I want everything, and I mean everything, we can do without jettisoned. I have no more desire to test the water than Buck and I assume everyone else is of a like mind.”

Nathan nodded and stood up.

“The guns too?”

“Everything. If any fighters hit us we’ll have to get by with the ball and top turrets.”

In a ten minute frenzy of activity, Josiah, Buck, Nathan and Pete emptied the B-17 of every detachable item they could find that could be offloaded without compromising the safety of the aircraft. Wilmington had joked that it would save them a few hundred pounds, and be no great loss, if he detached the ball turret, drawing a string of abuse from the young Dunne still uncomfortably cocooned in the rotating sphere, hanging like a bloated tick from the B-17s underbelly.

In the co-pilot’s seat Ezra calmly continued to coax the crippled plane through the air, his face a study in determination, hoping -- no praying -- that the reduction in load would be enough to impact on the fuel consumption. Once they were within 100 miles of home base, Pete would switch on the IFF to warn friendly bases that they would be flying over and prevent their own anti-aircraft guns from opening up on them. He smiled thinly. That would indeed be the ultimate irony. If he could manage to get the Fortress over home soil only to be shot down by friendly fire. He reined his thoughts in, controlling his imagination, and focused instead on keeping the plane in the air and his crew alive.

Chris squeezed his eyes shut, certain that his head was about to explode. His brain seemed to be too big, as if it would no longer fit within the confines of his skull and with each crushing wave of pain that ebbed and flowed in tune with his heartbeat, he felt his stomach churn queasily. For a moment he was unable to recall where he was, the noise and the motion compounding his nausea and at the same time disorientating him, until slowly he was able to put the pieces back together. He had been hit by cannon fire. By the pain of it half his head must have been blown away but then, he reasoned, he would hardly be in a position to be making that assumption if it had. He swallowed rapidly, taking deep breaths and fighting the urge to throw up, wondering if it would be beyond his capabilities to at least sit. It was. The groan escaped before he could stop it. Jesus! This was going to be harder than he thought.

“Just ease up, Captain. Ain’t nowhere for you to rush off to just yet.”

Goddamn it, how could he explain that he needed to sit up; that lying down was making his head spin and if he stayed down much longer he would be puking his guts out. Determined to succeed, he levered himself onto one elbow, ignoring the new explosions of pain in his head as he manoeuvred himself upright. With bright lights still flashing before his eyes, he slowly lowered his head into his hands, and again swallowed the rising threat of nausea before it could overwhelm

him.

“Feel better, Captain?”

The sarcasm was not lost on the pilot.

“Yes!” he snapped, immediately wishing he hadn’t, then: “No!” as he realised just how sick he felt, and finally, subdued, “For Christ’s sake, I don’t know!”

“Hell, Chris, make up your mind, you’re making me dizzy.”

Larabee blinked, and raised his head, struggling to focus eyes that were determined to deliver two superimposed images of everything.

“Vin?”

“None other, pard.”

The Texan’s voice was slurred, strained, and Chris, remembering the chaotic minutes before he had himself been shot, wondered how badly the bombardier was hurt. Sighing, he leaned his head back against the bulkhead, sick and tired, and closed his eyes. It’s up to you Standish. I hope to God you’ve got the balls to see this through or we’re all dead.

“Where are we?” His voice seemed overly loud inside his head but he knew he was barely whispering.

“Last I heard we were heading for Rotterdam,” commented Nathan conversationally as he knelt next to the blond pilot and began taking down the bloodied dressing that covered the gaping wound in Larabee’s scalp.

“Missed the waypoint?”

“You might say that.” Nathan was noncommittal, intent on his work.

“Lost, huh?”

He flinched as the medic put pressure on the wound and secured a fresh dressing in place, hardly surprised at the news since they had lost their navigator. Keeping his impatience in check he waited just long enough for Jackson to finish his bandaging before pushing himself up from the floor of the aircraft and bracing himself against the bulkhead as successive waves of dizziness washed over him. If it had not been for Nathan’s steadying hand holding him up he would have fallen to his knees.

“For Christ’s sake, Captain. What’re you trying to prove? You think the Lieutenant can’t do this without you?”

Larabee leaned against the metal airframe and took a deep breath.

“Listen up, Nathan. I feel like shit, I’m seeing two of everything and I wanna throw up. I know fucking well that Ezra can get us home. I just want to be up there when he does.”

He felt rather than saw the medic nod in understanding and sighed in relief as Jackson shouldered his weight without a word and guided him through to the cockpit.

“Captain Larabee.” The soft Southern tones penetrated his concussion-induced headache as he slumped, exhausted, in the pilot’s seat. “I hope you feel somewhat better than you look.”

“Just fly the goddamn plane, Standish and shut up!”

Ezra grinned, genuinely amused.

“Yes, Sir.”

Larabee made a valiant attempt to check out the instrument panel but the gauges that had not already been blasted by cannon fire formed an incomprehensible blur before him. Rubbing his forehead he sighed, aware that, just like the rest of the crew, he was totally dependent on the skill of his co-pilot.

“What’s the situation and no bullshit, Ezra.”

“Two starboard engines out, port stabiliser’s gone along with a good part of the rudder, there’s a hole in the port wing the size of Belgium, the fuselage looks like Swiss cheese and we’re almost out of fuel.”

Larabee waited a beat before turning to look at the Southerner at his side.

“So, what’s the bad news?”

Jackson shook his head as the two pilots suddenly began to laugh and wondered if it was a requirement that all pilots be certifiably nuts.

“Bandits at four o’clock low!”

Dunne’s voice yelled a warning seconds before his guns chattered noisily into action, closely followed by Sanchez’s from the top turret. In the waist section Buck watched helplessly, his own gun no doubt now lying in some Dutch farmer’s field, as the two Messerschmitts roared in from the north east, coming in low under the stricken craft.

He hunkered down against the bulkhead and stared in fascination as the ball turret mechanism whirred and spun in response to Dunne’s fast and furious tracking of the fighter planes.

“Go for it, kid,” he whispered, “And watch your ass.”

In the top turret, Josiah swung the big guns around, firing short controlled bursts with a quiet intensity that contrasted starkly with J.Ds noisy enthusiasm, raking the 109s with the .50 calibre Brownings on each pass.

Almost at the Engineer’s feet Nathan leaned protectively over the injured bombardier as spent shells ejected from the twin machine guns cascaded around and over him, conscious of the increasing intervals between the rise and fall of the Texan’s chest. This was going to be a close one. He again felt for the pulse in Tanner’s neck and was rewarded with the regular if faint echo of the wounded man’s heartbeat under his fingers. The medic bowed his head and closed his eyes as another burst of machine gun resulted in yet another shower of brass casings.

“Hang in there, Vin. We’re almost home.”

He only hoped to God he was speaking the truth. Right now home seemed about as far out of reach as the moon.

Dunne had not seen the second fighter coming in under the B-17s wing but he had felt the bullets rip through the turret and the sudden explosion of agony in his leg. He screamed, a long wail of pain and fear, as he clutched at his blood-covered thigh, mortified to find himself sobbing as warm blood streamed freely over his fingers but unable to stop either the tears or the blood flowing.

“Kid! J.D! Listen to me! I’m gonna get you out, okay? Okay? Where’d you get hit, kid?”

Buck. The Sergeant had already thrown open the hatch and was reaching awkwardly into the turret to unhook the safety strap.

“My leg,” panted the young gunner, finally finding his voice, “Jesus, Buck, it hurts so bad.”

“I know, kid. Just take it easy. Nathan! J.D’s hit!”

J.D. felt himself hauled bodily from the confines of the turret, holding his breath to contain the scream that threatened to erupt as Wilmington wrestled him through the hatch and onto the floor of the plane among the thousands of spent cartridges from the waist guns.

“Nathan!”

The medic scrambled across the bomb bay catwalk, shooting an irritated glance at the mus-tached gunner as he dropped to his knees beside the two men.

“Heard you the first time, Buck.”

Dunne watched in shocked horror, his fingers tightening on Wilmington’s sleeve as Jackson ripped open the blood soaked fabric of his coveralls, feeling sick as he caught a glimpse of what looked like raw hamburger before he quickly turned his head away, swallowing bile.

“Buck. You wanna help me out here?”

The sergeant’s arms folded almost gently around him, pulling him firmly against his chest and holding him close.

“Yell if you want to, kid,” he heard Buck murmur, “Ain’t no-one to hear but us and we don’t count, ‘cos we’re friends.”

It was the second last thing he heard before Nathan went to work on his leg. The last was his own hoarse scream moments before he slid gratefully into the comforting void of unconsciousness.

Buck sighed as the young gunner slumped against him, all resistance gone as he collapsed in a dead faint, and focused on the ugly wounds that had ripped open the inside of Dunne’s left thigh, stitching an uneven line from knee to groin.

“Tell me it looks worse than it really is.”

Nathan grimaced as he hastily started bandaging several pressure dressings in place.

“Ain’t pretty to look at that’s for sure,” agreed the medic, “and it’s gonna hurt like blazes but no major damage done that I can see. He’ll have a few scars to show off to the girls though.”

The sergeant smiled gently.

“Yeah, once he gets far enough with one to get his duds off. You know, I reckon the kid’s scared shitless that he might have lost his wedding tackle.”

Jackson kept bandaging, sparing only a brief quizzical glance for the mustached gunner.

“Been tellin’ him stories about Micky, huh?”

“Not me, Nate. He’s a good kid. Tad was the one always winding him up about losin’ more than his cherry. Liked to tell how Micky was carried off the plane with nothin’ but a goddamn hole you could put your fist in between his legs.”

“Bastard,” muttered Nathan, “As if the kid doesn’t have enough to think about with his ass hanging out in the breeze six miles up in the wild blue!”

Wilmington watched as Jackson quickly checked Dunne’s pulse before uncapping a morphine syrette and deftly plunging the needle into the gunner’s uninjured leg, squeezing the quarter grain of the drug into his bloodstream before pinning the empty syrette to his lapel.

“That’s the last of the morphine but it should hold him till we get home.”

Buck avoided looking at the medic, concentrating instead on making Dunne more comfortable.

“If we get home.”

The fighters had gone. One moment they were strafing the crippled Fortress, the next they were peeling off and heading for home; out of fuel, out of ammo, or out of luck, any of which were a blessing in Larabee’s mind although he had an idea that Standish’s unorthodox tactics may also have had something to do with putting off two of Germany’s finest.

The Southerner had taken the plane down low and fast in an evasive action that momentarily baffled the anti-aircraft gunners and left the fighters little room to manoeuvre, losing altitude rapidly enough at five hundred feet per second for Chris to feel the build up of pressure in his skull, and finally levelling off at one hundred feet to skim the rooftops of Rotterdam -- engines screaming in protest -- before finally taking the B-17 out over the open sea.

“Jesus Christ, Ezra,” breathed the pilot, as the whitecaps of the North Sea swelled threateningly beneath them, still not quite sure if it was good luck or good management that had seen them through.

The Lieutenant turned and even through the haze of double-vision, Chris caught the momentary flash of Ezra’s gold-inlaid canine as he grinned disarmingly.

“Needs must when the devil drives, Captain Larabee,” he drawled softly, as if the risky manoeuvre was one he carried off very day.

Larabee looked again at the cold and unfriendly expanse of water churning ceaselessly and

much closer than he would have liked, beneath the B-17's belly.

"The devil, huh? My mistake, Lieutenant. From where I'm sitting it just looked like some crazy Southern son-of-a-bitch at the controls." Sarcasm oozed through his every word but there was no hint of censure in them.

"Standard operational tactics, Captain," Ezra replied lightly, "Evasive action."

"Standard operational bullshit! This is thirty-six thousand pounds of heavy bomber not a fucking P-47 in case you hadn't noticed!"

"Thank you, Sir. I'll remember that. Aircraft identification has always been a weakness of mine."

Larabee's blurred vision was not up to detecting the subtle changes in his co-pilot's expression but his imagination supplied the necessary details for him to picture the half smile, the tongue over the lower lip and the raised eyebrow that would indicate the Southerner's amusement.

"Goddamn it, Ezra, do you have an answer for everything?"

"I try."

Chris leaned back into the seat, suddenly tired, wishing that for just a few minutes the pounding in his head would go away. He closed his eyes and listened to the straining throb of overtaxed engines as the huge craft, responding to Ezra's skilful handling, struggled to maintain altitude.

"Answer me this then." His tone implied that whatever Standish might reply he had already come to his own conclusion. "We're not going to make it are we?"

The Southerner kept his eyes straight ahead, hands firmly on the yoke.

"No. I'm afraid we're not."

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"You can count me out. I ain't jumpin'"

Buck's protest reverberated down the length of the fuselage, his raised voice easily reaching the cockpit.

"That's an order, Sergeant Wilmington," snapped Chris in return, instantly regretting the fact that he had shouted.

"So put me on a charge, Captain Larabee!" The gunner stressed the pilot's rank with just enough scorn to be insubordinate. "I'm not jumping out of this plane and I'm not leaving the kid. We'll take our chances."

The blond pilot sighed wearily and put a hand to his head feeling dizzy and sick, wanting nothing more than to lie down, close his eyes and sleep. He should have listened to Jackson.

"Ezra? You make the call. You're in command."

Josiah hunkered down between the two pilots staring through the windshield at the coastline taking shape in front of them.

“Ten minutes and we’ll be over land, Lieutenant. There’s a base just north-west of Harwich.”

“Martlesham Heath,” murmured Chris, smiling, “P-47 base. Chance to show the fighter boys your stuff, Ezra.”

The outer port engine stuttered and coughed, kicking hesitantly into life again as it showed the first signs of fuel starvation. Grim-faced Sanchez looked out of the side window at the whirling propellers before addressing the Southerner.

“I’ll tell you now, Ezra, no one’s going to bail out,” he warned, his voice low, “Like Buck said. We’ll take our chances.”

Standish glanced at the grizzled engineer, then looked across at Larabee before nodding once, his mind made up as he activated his throat mike.

“Crew. Take positions for crash landing. This might be a rough one.”

The B-17 was losing height rapidly its engines, starved of fuel, coughing and sputtering threateningly as Ezra, already flying much too low, coaxed the heavy bomber towards the distant runway. The base, on alert, was ready for them but that hardly made it any easier to put the stricken plane down; it just meant there would be someone there to pick up the pieces.

At his instruction the remaining crew had retreated to the relative safety of the radio compartment, transferring the two injured airmen as quickly as they dared, each of them aware that they were fast running out of time and airspace. All save Chris who had refused to leave the cockpit.

“Goddamn it, Ezra. If we’re gonna crash and burn, I sure as hell don’t want to be sitting like some passenger in the fucking radio compartment! This is my plane and this is where I’m gonna stay so just leave me be and fly this baby home.”

Ezra had not seen any good reason to argue with him.

Now the Southerner held his breath as he initiated lowering the landing gear; the last thing he wanted was to have to make a belly landing but to his intense relief the light winked on confirming the undercarriage was down and locked. Hell, he might have no engines but at least he had wheels. One had to be thankful for small mercies under the circumstances.

The drag created by the lowering wheels almost stalled the mighty Fortress but she rallied, Standish working the controls in his struggle to keep the bomber airborne, and limped on for another five hundred yards barely clearing the tree tops as she swept in over the airfield perimeter. Touch and go. He could see the frantic action on the ground, and was reassured by the sight of waiting ambulances but he hoped to God the fire tenders would not be necessary. The Southerner shared every pilot’s fear of fire.

The two labouring port engines expired simultaneously, the propellers grinding to an abrupt halt

after a brief stuttering cough, leaving a deathly silence that froze Ezra's blood in his veins. Not now. Not so close. Not again.

"Full flaps, Lieutenant."

The quiet voice beside him broke the spell, prompting him to action as the aircraft, robbed of power, started to drop like a stone.

"Keep her nose up, Ezra," encouraged Chris softly, "Glide her in easy. Show her who's the boss."

Then in an aside obviously not intended for the embattled Standish: "Come on, you traitorous bitch, don't let me down now."

The co-pilot felt Larabee's touch through the controls, thankful for the assistance, and concentrated on maintaining level flight even as the ground rushed up -- too fast -- to meet them.

The wheels touched, bounced, touched again; too much speed to land the craft successfully and on the third touch down, the port gear collapsed under the strain and the Fortress listed drunkenly, out of control, to smash one wing into the runway.

Slewing dangerously, its forward momentum still unchecked, the B-17 began to slide into a 360 degree turn, lazily describing a complete circle as it careered down the asphalt, in a shower of sparks and grinding metal.

Overstressed, the starboard landing gear finally gave way in spectacular fashion, the fuselage crashing belly down onto the unyielding surface of the airstrip, crushing the ball turret and producing a banshee wail of tortured metal as the bomber tore itself apart, shedding parts of itself as it slid on and on towards the end of a runway never designed to land a plane of its size. Overshooting the asphalt strip, in an uncontrolled slide that took the plane onto tussocked grass, the Fortress struck a shallow ditch and tipped, one wing snapping in its death throes, to finally come to rest in shattered silence.

Ezra stirred, carefully pushing himself away from the controls, ripping off his oxygen mask and headset, ignoring the sharp stab of pain from his ribs as he struggled out of his seat. The smell of smoke and the acrid odour of burning electrics goaded him into action. Beside him Chris, looking dazed, blinked owlishly as if unsure where he was and indeed what he was doing there. Without hesitation, the Southerner grabbed him by the arm and unceremoniously started to haul him from the seat.

"Come on, Captain. This is not the navy and a commander is not obliged to go down with his ship and while I am inordinately fond of this bucket of bolts, given the distinct possibility of fire I believe we should be making our departure."

He put his shoulder into levering the still disorientated pilot out of his seat, wincing as he felt the unmistakable sensation of bone grating on bone in his chest, and urging the older man to action.

“Now, Chris!”

Ushering a stumbling Larabee in front of him, Standish negotiated the catwalk over the bomb bay and moved into the radio compartment where a grim-faced Buck was helping a medic load the wounded ball turret gunner onto a stretcher. The others had already disembarked, either independently or, in Tanner’s case, by stretcher and with a quick passing nod to the Sergeant, Ezra hustled a stumbling but unprotesting Chris past the waist section and through the crew door, out onto the grass.

The Southerner turned, staggering slightly as his gaze swept the smoking remains of the aircraft, his hand still gripping Larabee’s sleeve.

“Jesus Christ,” he breathed, unable to comprehend fully the enormity of the damage wrought on the B-17 by both enemy fire and the crash, “Will you look at that!”

Larabee’s voice was tightly controlled as he answered quietly.

“I can’t. I can’t see anything.”

He was exhausted but his mind continued to race in an endless loop from which there seemed to be no escape and although his body was at rest, sleep remained elusive. His world had been reduced to nothing more than dark, insubstantial shapes shifting in darker shadow and he closed his eyes to shut out the constant reminder that he could no longer see. The bed was hard, made even more uncomfortable by the rubber sheet that protected the mattress -- From what for God’s sake? Did they expect him to wet the bed? -- and the starched white sheets, and hospital issue pyjamas, merely compounded his sense of helplessness. In truth he was afraid.

“Now here lies a man who looks as if he’s lost a dollar and found a nickel.”

Chris, startled, snapped his head around in the direction of the voice, a movement he instantly regretted as the throbbing ache in his temples exploded with renewed intensity and his stomach rippled queasily.

“Goddamn it, Ezra!” He raised one hand, grimacing, and massaged his forehead. “I thought you’d be on your way back to Bassingbourn by now.”

He felt the mattress beside him sag as the Southerner helped himself to a generous portion of the bed, and aware of Standish’s knee nudging his side he automatically shifted sideways to give him room. He could imagine his co-pilot’s relaxed attitude, one butt cheek perched on the edge of the bed, and his leg bent to rest his thigh on the mattress.

“Bastards wouldn’t let me go after they found I’d broken a couple of ribs.” Ezra sounded indignant. “So here I am.”

Larabee heard the mechanical rasp of a cigarette lighter and a few seconds later he smelled the aroma of tobacco smoke.

“Here.”

Standish held a cigarette to his lips and he took it gratefully, inhaling deeply and feeling the acrid smoke bite harshly at the back of his throat, the taste raw and unfamiliar.

“Jesus, Ezra, what is this? Tastes like camel shit.”

The Southerner laughed softly.

“Close, Captain Larabee. Turkish tobacco. A taste I necessarily acquired in Libya.”

Larabee drew on the cigarette again, holding the smoke in his lungs for a beat before slowly exhaling.

“Busted ribs, huh? Gotta work on those landings, Lieutenant.”

He heard the Southerner pull on his own cigarette and release a jet of smoke in what was almost a sigh.

“Captain Larabee, considering my recent history I believe any landing I can walk away from to be a good one.”

The blond man was unable to resist a brief smile before responding quietly.

“You did alright, Ezra.”

“You think so?” Standish sounded doubtful; self-critical.

“I know so.”

“The plane’s bound for the scrap heap, you know?”

Chris hesitated a moment, not sure how to put into words what he wanted to say without sounding overly-sentimental.

“There’ll always be another plane, Lieutenant, the most important thing is the people in it. We lost two good men, and it could just as easily have been all ten of us but you brought us home. Whatever you’re thinking, that was a fine piece of flying today, Ezra and I just want to say...well, thanks.”

Larabee could not see the fleeting expression of surprised wonder on the Lieutenant’s face or the subsequent play of emotions that the Southerner struggled to control and which momentarily rendered the younger pilot speechless but he did recognise the tightness in his voice when he finally spoke.

“Not too bad for an old Southern boy flying in the dummy seat then, Captain Larabee?”

Chris’ smile broadened into a grin.

“Not too bad at all, Lieutenant Standish.”

Tanner knew he must be on the ground because the vibration of the airframe and noise from the engines no longer rattled his teeth and jarred his bones, although his last memory, albeit hazy, was of seeing Chris bloodied and pale struggling to stand.

The pain he certainly remembered and unfortunately, that was still there but dull and distant

now rather than sharp and insistent. Reluctantly he surrendered the safe haven of sleep and slowly blinked in an effort to make sense of his surroundings, aware at first only of subdued light and hushed sounds.

He turned his head slowly, the wound in his neck necessarily curtailing any sudden movement, and was able to see the length of rubber tubing snaking into his arm from a bottle of plasma suspended by his bed. Hospital. With a greater effort than the Texan felt should be necessary he turned his head several degrees to the left and contemplated the white swathe of bandaging that covered his shoulder and the entire length of his arm. He flexed his fingers experimentally and while the action tugged at damaged flesh he found the movement uncomfortable but not unduly painful. His shoulder was another story, even with the edge taken off by the pain-killers it still burned with white hot intensity. Damn!

As he shook off the combined effects of anaesthetic and morphine he began to consider just how long he was going to be out of action. That much longer before he could complete his tour. Closing his eyes he calculated that averaging six missions a month he would clock up his 35 just about Christmas time but if he was out of action for a couple of weeks, that would mean well into 1944. Meanwhile, and the idea irritated him more than he cared to admit, someone else would be taking his place as bombardier in the Ace in the Hole.

Larabee, he knew, was going to sign on for a second tour. Crazy bastard! Getting through 35 was a miracle, trying for seventy was really stretching the odds. Hell, here he was after only twelve missions with more holes in him than a sieve; what chance was there for going the full distance and then some? Barely aware that he had slipped back into a doze, Vin stirred again as his confused emotions vacillated between relief and dread. Another twenty-three yet to go. He wondered sadly, just how many of them would be left at the end of it all. The answer came back at him unbidden -- too few.

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They sweated out the mission together. The three of them watching almost as keenly as the ground crews for the returning bombers, straining to catch sight of the first of the aircraft to safely make the return trip. It had been a long wait. They had exhausted every variation of poker that Ezra knew, they had talked, and young J.D. still recovering from pneumonia, had even slept for an hour or two, but the hours had dragged interminably. No one had mentioned their own last sortie. No one had mentioned Chris.

Tanner sat in introspective silence, his injured arm still in a sling, with a pair of binoculars in his good hand trained on the empty skies almost willing the group to appear. Sanchez and Wilmington

had both been reassigned to a newly commissioned B-17 going by the name of "Foxy Lady", Jackson had been fortunate enough to be reunited with some old acquaintances in "Rebel Yell" and Sorenson had drawn the short straw in being allocated to the rookie crew of "Star Spangled Banner" but they were all headed for the same target -- Frankfurt.

The Ace in the Hole was gone, consigned to scrap metal, and now they had no plane -- and no pilot -- to call their own and the two lieutenants and a corporal held real, but unspoken, fears that they would be separated and permanently reassigned if Larabee did not come back to them soon but none of them was ready to put that fear into words. Their initial confidence that they would once again function as a team had begun to waver after the first two weeks, then they had stopped thinking in terms of when Chris would come back and more in terms of if he would come back. Now none of them wanted to talk about it at all.

There was a stirring among the ground crews, a heightening of awareness and the subtle signals that indicated to the watching airmen that they could expect the first wave of Fortresses back soon. These boys, better than anyone, knew down to the minute when the first B-17s should be returning and as the first familiar shapes appeared in the sky, they started counting them in.

Standish pocketed the deck of cards he had been shuffling to while away the time and stood up at the first red flare that arced across the sky. Wounded on board. That plane would take priority, as would any others showing the red flare, and across the field he could already see the ambulances and medical crews swinging into action. Turning slightly he looked at Vin, who immediately raised the binoculars, understanding the Southerner's need to know and systematically began calling the heavy bombers in by name.

They all came back. One by one the group swept out of the sky and set down, some worse for wear, one without benefit of landing gear but all the planes had made it -- this time. Ezra sighed and dug his hands into his pockets as he bowed his head; unfortunately the same could not be said for the men who had flown in them. The Fortress could take a lot of abuse before it succumbed to enemy fire, the crews were less fortunate. No one ever said much about the odds but the gambler in him knew that of every hundred airmen who embarked on a 35 mission tour, sixty would never make it. With a sigh he raised his head, feeling suddenly old as he watched the adrenaline-charged crews climb into jeeps and trucks with the eagerness of youth as they headed back for the debriefing, just glad to be alive. Christ, when would it all end?

The light hurt and he quickly shut his eyes in defence as pain lanced through his eyeballs, momentarily shocked at the sudden change from the dark shadows he had become used to over the past few weeks. Eyes tearing, he blinked, squinting through half-closed lids at the myriad of colours dancing in kaleidoscopic array in his vision.

Making a conscious effort to slow his breathing, he put his hand across his face and rubbed his eyelids, before trying again. It was like walking out of cool, shaded darkness and into the bright sunshine and for a moment he just blinked, very slowly, unmindful of the tears streaming down his face, as he allowed the shifting blur before him to coalesce into something meaningful.

The doctor had told him the loss of vision was temporary, that his concussed brain had swelled and put pressure on the optic nerves but he had stopped believing after the first week. After two weeks he had seriously contemplated suicide, unable to contemplate a future without flying -- without seeing -- a future that held no promise for anything other than total dependency and other men's pity. Not seeing he knew he could probably come to terms with, being pitied he knew he could not.

Vin had been a revelation. The Texan had visited him once just before he had been discharged and the moment had been filled with too many things unsaid, and with an awkwardness that made Chris breathe a sigh of relief when the bombardier finally made his excuses and left. It had been obvious that Tanner had been uncomfortable and in some ways Chris could lay no blame at the lieutenant's door for that. For God's sake, he was blind! Not exactly a conversation starter. Still, Vin's reaction had started him thinking and he knew then that he could never endure a lifetime of awkward silences and unspoken sympathy.

Yet, he had persevered, vacillating between the temptation to end it all and the desire to live until today. Today, when he had woken to the most exquisitely painful sunlight stabbing at his sensitive eyes and he understood that the light that he saw was more than just the light of day, it was a second chance -- it was his future.

The jeep splashed through the rain-filled ruts between the Quonset huts, kicking up mud in its wake and drawing shouts of derision from airmen on foot as it passed.

The day was grey and dreary, typical for November, with a steady drizzle falling, the only benefit of which was the fact that all missions had been cancelled due to bad weather over not only England but the entire European continent. For once there was no criticism of English weather among the American airmen. After a solid week of sorties the break was welcome.

The driver of the jeep stopped in front of one of the barracks and allowed his passenger, an officer, to disembark. Snapping off a salute, the Sergeant put the jeep into gear and pulled away, careful not to spray mud over the Captain as the wheels sought purchase on the slick surface.

Chris Larabee sighed and turned to look at the hut that he called home, wondering what kind of welcome he could expect. He felt out of place, as if he was stepping into a scene in a play in which he did not quite belong. He rubbed his head feeling the pressure of a headache building. Something, he had been told, he would continue to experience, along with light sensitivity, for some time to come. Bracing himself he walked the few paces to the door and pushed it open, half afraid there

would be no-one there, half-afraid that there would be and not really knowing how he felt about either possibility.

Larabee had expected almost anything but the sight that greeted him as he crossed the threshold. The entire remaining crew of the Ace in the Hole were gathered in the room; seven men in the middle of a poker game, the phonograph playing a lively big band number as words and money were exchanged with equal liberality. Not one of them had noticed the intrusion.

Tanner's head suddenly came up, a hound on a scent, and he locked eyes with the blond pilot, now standing sombrely in the doorway. Still holding Larabee's gaze, the Texan slowly reached out and muted the phonograph, drawing a cry of protest from the group before they realised that there was a purpose to Vin's action. An expectant hush ensued with all eyes on the bombardier until a familiar voice shattered the silence.

"Looks like you guys really missed me." He looked slowly around the crowded little room designed to hold four at a squeeze. "Do I still have a bunk?"

Every head in the room snapped in unison to stare, one expression painted on every face. Shock. For a moment Chris felt its cold wave as the seven men adjusted to his sudden appearance then very slowly and without uttering a word, Ezra pushed himself away from the makeshift poker table, retrieved his hat and delivered a crisp, by-the-book salute. One by one, each of the crew did the same, a mark of respect that brought a lump to his throat, and the stinging that he suddenly felt in his eyes had nothing to do with his photophobia. Overwhelmed, he returned the salute, and for the first time recognised the bond between them that went far beyond that of captain and crew.

"As you were."

Chris took off his hat and a slow smile spread across his face.

"Wanna deal me in, Ezra?"

The room erupted as the seven men swarmed forward to surround Larabee in a tide of emotion as strong as the combined physical embraces bestowed by each and every one of them on the surprised and slightly embarrassed pilot. Finally, as the group melted away, only Vin remained and the two men stood awkwardly apart, almost as if weighing each other up, each one reluctant to be the first one to speak, remembering their last meeting.

Finally Vin extended his hand.

"Glad to have you back, pard."

Chris tossed his hat onto one of the bunks and took a step forward, clasping Vin's outstretched hand in a quick handshake.

"Never though I'd say this, but I missed you clowns."

Ezra masterfully shuffling the cards, glanced up from the poker table, a slight frown on his face.

"Please, gentlemen, spare us the sentimental reunion and let's get down to the business at hand."

He smiled suddenly, his gold tooth on display. “Draw or stud, Captain Larabee?”

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She was a big, bold and beautiful virgin, and she was his.

He paced the distance around her 103 foot 9 inch wingspan and almost seventy five foot length, returning again to stand beside the uptilted nose that slanted arrogantly skywards. Her sleek, silver lines were broken only by the insignia that claimed her for the United States and the reclining figure painted on the nose that claimed her for his own.

Digging his hands in his pockets he could not resist the smile that crossed his face as he turned to the men that made up his crew and who now stood in an expectant huddle awaiting his reaction.

“Well,” urged Buck, finally, impatient for a response, “What do you think?”

Chris laughed and shook his head as he turned back to the gloriously explicit reclining nude, full breasted and with her more desirable attributes covered by nothing more than a silk scarf and once again ran his eyes over the delicately scripted calligraphy that read simply:

Larabee’s Lady

“It’s perfect. Just perfect.”