

Fortress: Reunion

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Twenty-five years. Had it really been so long?

Of course it had. 1945. Since then there had been other wars. First Korea. And now Vietnam; where he had lost a son. His only son. For a moment he paused, glancing away from the mirror and his own reflection to the framed photo on the dresser and felt the pang of loss, no easier after three years than it had been when the wound was still fresh. The father had outlived the son. Anathema.

He turned his gaze back to the looking glass and completed the knot securing his tie. Tonight he was going back in time. For just a few hours he would become once again a part of the Mighty Eighth. His gaze wandered again, settling on the second frame on the dresser, and he spent a moment letting his eye rove across the faces, forever fixed in time, that looked out now from the sepia shades of a faded photo. Ten young men posed in front of an aircraft. A B-17G bomber; the famed and beloved Flying Fortress of the US Air Force. Larabee's Lady.

Chris Larabee. He was over seventy now. Still running his ranch in the Rockies, raising horses and still full of piss and vinegar. He'd broken his hip the previous Spring breaking a yearling in, but was back in the saddle three months later. He hadn't seen Chris in a few years, not since Richard's funeral, but they still touched base by phone once or twice a year and hearing that voice always brought back memories.

Vin. The Texan had never settled after the war. He had drifted around, turning up every few years, still looking lean and lonesome, staying a while and moving on. The last he had heard, Tanner had started up his own company conducting wilderness tours. He had been meaning to look him up but somehow the years had slipped by and they had lost contact. Maybe it was time to change that.

Wilmington. He smiled. Good old Buck. He had seen the affable and still incorrigible ladies' man only last month. Their paths had continued to cross periodically over the years but now Wilmington lived in the same city and by virtue of parallel occupations they had met more times in the past six months than in the previous two decades. Buck might be thicker around the waist and have less hair than he once had but he still had an eye for the ladies and it had been no surprise for him to learn that Wilmington had recently divorced for the third time.

He reached out to pick up the silver framed picture and traced a finger over the remaining faces. JD Dunne. The youngest of them. Reminded suddenly of his son, he gave heartfelt thanks that JD had made it through the war; a war that had seen him grow from boy to man. As the ball-turret gunner he had been lucky. Two years they had flown as a team; the seven of them against all odds. Hell, he had even passed up a command of his own to stay with Larabee's Lady, although he had never told Chris that. Nathan Jackson. The gunner who doubled as their medic and had always just been there doing his job and finally Josiah Sanchez, the big Staff Sergeant who had been the flight engineer and who had been their touchstone; their balance in a crazy world that every day sent young men out into the wild blue and hoped they would live to return. It came to him that Sanchez would be almost eighty now. With a sigh Ezra set down the frame. They would all be

there and with a curious flutter in his stomach that was half anticipation, half trepidation, he wondered how it would be. After all these years, together again, all seven in one place. Twenty five years. A quarter of a century. They were old men now.

He had flown in from Boston in one of his own charter planes. Unlike Chris he had never stopped flying. It was in his blood and he had built up a business after the war that had become both profitable and successful enough for him to retire on the day of his 60th birthday. That had been two years ago. Although his plans for the future had withered on the vine when Richard had been killed, and if he had found it hard to go on, his wife had found it impossible. She had left him, unable to cope and unable to live with the constant reminder of Richard reflected in himself. So he had been left again without a family. The wheel had turned again. Now he wondered if those years with a group of men who, drawn from disparate backgrounds, had forged a friendship under fire that remained to this day, might not indeed have been the best years of his life. He straightened his jacket and pulled his cuffs free. Well, Lieutenant Standish; time to go.

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Deja vu. For a moment he was swept on a tide of nostalgia so strong that it threatened to overwhelm him. The music, the decor, the familiar faces, the whole atmosphere instantly transporting him to a reality hundreds of miles and a veritable lifetime ago. Bassingbourn. He remembered with sudden clarity the Quonset huts, pre-dawn awakenings that in two years he never did get used to, winters that were cold and beer that was warm, and he remembered above all the young man who had been irrevocably changed by that experience. He smiled and suddenly he knew why he had made the effort to come here.

“Ezra?”

He turned without haste feeling a light touch at his elbow, instantly recognising the voice. Not trusting himself to speak, he looked instead for a long moment at the man who stood before him. To say he had not changed would have been a lie. They had all changed, but the blue eyes were as vivid as ever, looking out from a tanned and weathered face, and the Texan’s slow smile tugged at an emotional heartstring that caught the Southerner off guard.

“Vin!” He reached out and found his hand clasped in a firm handshake before Tanner pulled him into a back-slapping clinch, a brief embrace that Standish returned in full measure. “Been a long time, Vin.”

“Yep. Too long.” Tanner broke away but held Ezra at arm’s length, one hand on his shoulder, the shadow momentarily darkening the Texan’s eyes not lost on Standish and he waited for what he knew would come next. “I’m sorry. About Richard. Was tied up in Guam when I heard. Just couldn’t make it back in time.”

Ezra nodded, understanding. He knew Vin would have been there at the memorial service if he could have. No hard feeling there. He slapped the Texan on the arm, pushing back the memories.

Tonight was not for mourning.

“Come on, the bar awaits and we’re wasting valuable drinking time, Lieutenant Tanner.”

They both laughed, recognising a familiar phrase that neither had thought about in twenty-five years but which came with natural ease to Ezra’s tongue as if no time at all had passed between drinks.

“Sounds good to me,” confirmed Vin, then he smiled, “Think they’ll have shipped in any English beer?”

Ezra stopped in his tracks and shot a look of exaggerated dismay at the Texan.

“Dear Lord, Vin, I sincerely hope not.”

Ezra was not quite sure what he had expected but the strong emotions that seeing Vin for the first time in almost twenty years had initiated, did nothing to prepare him for the cumulative effect of that same emotion quadrupled. Sanchez, still a formidable figure at almost eighty years of age, had enfolded both himself and Tanner in a bear hug, and fond memories of Josiah’s ready affection quickly reminded the Southerner that these were the only men he had ever allowed close enough to be that comfortable with. Then Nathan had arrived, less demonstrative but nonetheless unable to keep a broad grin off his face, and had done the rounds shaking hands with each of them. Heavier, grey-haired but still the familiar Nathan who had been there to patch them up. In some measure they all owed Jackson; some of them for their lives. A debt he had always said they had repaid ten times over by staying alive. The four of them were still exchanging greetings and news, when Buck Wilmington descended on them.

“Whoa there, boys!” His voice boomed over ten yards of space, “Old Buck is here now, gimme some room and we’ll get this party rolling!”

“Can it, Buck!” A new voice cut through the escalating noise. “You’re still as full of bullshit as ever!”

The moustached man laughed searching for the face that went with the voice. “J.D!”

Dunne, young enough to be merely middle-aged, pushed his way into the group, his expression as open and enthusiastic as the first day Ezra had seen him. Maturity had taken some of the soft edges from his face but he was still the irrepressible JD. Ezra smiled. Buck and JD. There was a definite synchronicity in seeing them as they mock wrestled their way through an emotional greeting.

The years rolled away. Without thought, without effort they were transported back to a time in their pasts when for two years they had beaten the odds. Time and time again they had flown deep into enemy territory; had been shot down, had crash landed, had been wounded and above all had been scared but they had done it and they had survived. Now they were together again as if it had all been yesterday.

Except for Chris. The pre-dinner drinks were over and there was still no sign of Larabee.

As the gong sounded for dinner, Ezra glanced quickly at his watch then at the door, unaware of

Vin's almost casual scrutiny until the Texan spoke.

"Don't worry. He'll be here."

The Southerner turned, a guilty expression crossing his face as if ashamed that he had been caught showing any concern for Larabee's absence. *Damn it, but the man could still manage to know what you were thinking before you thought it.*

"Trust me," Tanner persisted, "He won't miss this."

Ezra fell into step beside Vin as they walked into dinner, feeling that sense of comfortable companionship that he had not achieved with anyone since the crew of Larabee's Lady had been demobilised and gone their separate ways. For a short time at least he had discovered what friendship could really mean, but he tried not to dwell on the fact that he had never achieved that degree of trust with anyone else either before or since. As he took his place at the table, he looked at the five men around him, suddenly remembering:

"Gotta work on those landings, Lieutenant."

He had just destroyed the Ace in the Hole after a spectacular crash landing. Chris was lying in hospital concussed and blinded by a cannon shell and he had come out of it with several broken ribs.

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

"You did all right, Ezra."

"You think so?" He had been doubtful; self-critical.

"I know so."

"The plane's bound for the scrap heap you know?"

Chris had given him a strange look but his next words had made an impact on him that he never forgot.

"There'll always be another plane, Lieutenant, the most important thing is the people in it...whatever you're thinking, that was a fine piece of flying today, Ezra and I just want to say...thanks."

Ezra had been hard pushed to control his emotions but had finally managed to speak.

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

Chris had smiled then.

"Not too bad at all, Lieutenant Standish."

No. Not too bad at all. He owed Larabee, if only for having the faith in him that he had not had in himself. He had learned a few hard lessons along the way, but he had also learned to give as well as to take, and he had in some small measure learned what it was to trust.

"You all right, Ezra?"

Standish blinked suddenly, JD's voice from across the table bringing him back to earth. He gave a brief smile.

“More than all right, JD.”

Dunne nodded, satisfied. Understanding.

An elbow in the ribs from Vin on his right, claimed his attention and the Texan gestured with his head in the direction of the door.

“What did I tell you?”

Chris. Older certainly, but still with that familiar round-shouldered, loose-hipped gait now marred only slightly by a limp, and he still knew how to make an entrance. Ezra watched as he stopped at a couple of tables, shaking hands and briefly exchanging greetings with some of the 91st that he recognised. It was clear that he had already marked their table but as he approached he slowed his stride, the sea-green eyes sweeping the group. Searching. Checking.

It was done without thought. Ezra pushed back his chair and stood, a mark of respect. Vin smiled, remembering a similar scene in a barracks room twenty-seven years ago, and followed suit. In the ensuing silence, each man at the table rose as Larabee approached, his face registering both genuine surprise and acute embarrassment, although it was obvious that the gesture had touched him just as it had once before.

“Jesus, I was trying to sneak in quietly,” he protested, his face breaking into one of his rare smiles, “Sit down for Christ’s sake, and gimme a drink!”

The table erupted as the six men surged forward to surround Larabee, the tide of emotion a palpable thing. Nothing had changed for them; they were seven men who had fought -- and triumphed -- together and now, twenty-five years on, they were together again. Ezra held back, waiting, until Chris finally turned and made eye contact. A brief handshake turned into a rough embrace, and Ezra felt the tightness of raw emotion in his throat.

“So, you crazy Southern son-of-a-bitch, you still flying?”

Yes, indeed the wheel had turned full circle.