

Fortress: Sweet Science

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2008

“Captain! Captain, it's time.”

The hand on his shoulder maintained its relentless pressure in spite of his efforts to ignore the regular, insistent and far from gentle shaking. He finally murmured a sleep-slurred: “Piss off!” and attempted to burrow further under the bedclothes but found there was no significant reduction in the ongoing attempt to rouse him. Finally he emerged from his cocoon and squinted through the gloom towards the muted torchlight which, at least, his tormentor had seen fit to aim at the floor.

“This better be good,” he mumbled, warningly, knowing that he wasn't operational and seeing no other reason to be up before the sun unless, of course, Jerry was bombing the shit out of the base, in which case... He sat up and rubbed his eyes. “Okay I'm awake. Whassup?”

“Training.” He recognised the voice and the hulking shape of Sergeant Sanchez hunkered awkwardly by his cot. “Remember? The fight? Gotta get you in shape.”

Captain Chris Larabee, pilot in the US Eighth Air Force, fell back onto his pillow and groaned, recalling only too well his promise of the night before to champion the squadron in the forthcoming boxing tournament made, if he remembered correctly, in front of the entire mess. Well intentioned and sincere but definitely made under the capricious influence of strong liquor.

“For Chrissake, Josiah, it's the middle of the night!”

“Sunup,” corrected Sanchez, “Now how 'bout you stop bitching and get your ass moving. The fight's only two weeks away and the honour of the squadron is in your hands!”

Larabee groaned again.

“Why'd you let me do it, Josiah?”

The older man laughed quietly, a sound totally without sympathy.

“Hell, you were in no fit state to see reason. Besides, I've seen you in a fight. Reckon my money's on you, Sir.”

With a heavy sigh, he cradled his head and softly cursing, willed the throbbing ache behind his eyes to go away. Whatever had possessed him forget the most basic tenet of the armed forces: never volunteer for anything?

“Sir?”

Sanchez was still waiting patiently so, with the deep and regular breathing of his mess-mates, Lieutenants Tanner and Standish, mocking him he quickly grabbed his kit and

trudged after his burly top gunner and into the misty dawn.

After a punishing half mile of running, the ache behind his eyes had evolved into a pounding headache that seemed to echo the pounding of his feet on the airfield's perimeter road but, determined not to show any sign of weakness in front of the Sergeant, he suffered in silence. He considered himself to be reasonably fit although now he thought about it he hadn't done anything physical - at least nothing of the variety that didn't take place between the bedsheets - for at least a year. And he wasn't getting any younger.

By the end of the next half mile he had found his second wind and his stride, finally settling into an easy jog where he didn't feel as if his lungs were about to implode or that he was going to throw up at any minute. Comfortable enough, in fact, to be able to contribute more to the conversation than monosyllabic responses and non-committal grunts which had characterised the distinctly unbalanced dialogue so far.

“Remind me again, Josiah. Why am I doing this?”

“Would you like the long version or the short version?”

“Let's make it quick, huh?”

“Okay. How's this? A couple of bottles of single malt scotch, Ezra, Buck, Captain Matthews and a substantial wager. Ringing any bells yet?”

Chris stopped running and, leaning forward with his hands braced on his thighs as he caught his breath, groaned aloud.

“Like frigging Big Ben!”

Josiah laughed as he took pity on the blond officer and dismounted, leaning his bike against the fence and stepping forward to clamp a meaty hand on Larabee's shoulder.

“Trouble with getting on friendly terms with the whiskey, Captain, is that it's liable to start doing the talking.”

“You don't say?” Chris rubbed his aching forehead and tried to recall some of the finer details of the previous evening which seemed so far to have escaped him. “So how long have we got?”

“Three weeks or to be exact 20 days.”

“Shoot, Josiah, I haven't boxed since college!”

“Don't worry,” the big Sergeant reassured him, “It's like riding a bike. In two weeks you won't know yourself.”

Chris straightened, his expression dubious, as he eyed the other man.

“That's what worries me!”

Sanchez laughed heartily and grabbed his bike signalling that rest time was officially

over.

“Come on. We've got a lot of work to do.”

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Forty-eight hours later he would happily have gone into the ring with Sugar Ray Robinson if it meant he could have avoided having to do the Schweinfurt run. He hated Schweinfurt with a vengeance, and he knew at least his exec was of a similar mind, if not the entire crew. It might have been a decent enough town under any other circumstances, even given the obvious downside that it was in enemy territory, but when you were faced with a mission where fifteen percent losses were the norm it was almost impossible to find any kind of affinity with the place. Well, as far as Larabee was concerned it did. Only a couple of weeks ago sixty bombers went down on a similar raid. 600 men. Shit!

Quickly pushing aside thoughts of his own mortality, he settled into the routine of the flight, switching to a mode of self-preservation which enabled him to focus all his energy on the mission he had been given and flying the plane that he fully intended to bring home, but above all the responsibility he had to keep his crew safe. Yeah? Tell that to the Luftwaffe.

They were being hammered. Flak. Fighters. Ground fire. Everything the Nazi war machine could throw up in its own defence was being hurled at them in a frantic effort to protect their heavy industry. Who would have thought that ball-bearings would ever be worth losing men and planes over? But that was then and this was now.

They had started with eighteen planes in the formation. One had been forced to turn back before they had even crossed the north sea, another two had gone down in flames as they had first engaged the fighters and God only knew how many more would succumb to the merciless barrage of shrapnel and bullets. Still they flew on with a single-minded determination as the Fortresses, true to their name, withstood the merciless punishment being inflicted on them while retaliating with their own hefty firepower.

Sometimes Chris envied the gunners their more aggressive role. As a pilot his only mandate was to get the aircraft to where it was supposed to go, keep it on target and get them all back home again. As such he was vulnerable - a sitting target in the truest sense of the word - and he could only hope that the guys manning the machine-guns managed to keep the Luftwaffe bastards at enough of a distance to allow him to do his job. A job that

had become increasingly difficult since the fighters had found that attacking the formations head-on was the most effective way to bring down the heavily armed planes. And Larabee's Lady was definitely on somebody's hit list today.

Pumped with adrenaline that had no physical outlet, Larabee focused on keeping the aircraft steady and on course. The fighters diving and swooping in and out of the formation, attacking relentlessly, were a distraction that he could not afford to pay heed to in spite of the fact that as they screamed past within feet of the cockpit he felt the all-too-familiar reflex tightening in his scrotum. Fuck the bastards!

On his right he heard Ezra quietly curse, realised that it was probably even worse for the co-pilot and wondered why anyone in his right mind would want to fly in the dummy seat. Hell, who in their right mind would want to be flying at thirty thousand feet deep into enemy territory while being endlessly pounded by flak and fighters both of which were systematically trying to blow you out of the sky? Yet who was the crazy man who had signed on for a second tour? He almost laughed out loud at the irony of it.

He didn't feel anything at first. He had instinctively braced himself as the Messerschmitt came at them with what seemed to be suicidal intent, although common sense told him that any such reaction was useless, and had felt the jarring of the air-frame as cannon had ripped through the air-frame but the pilot had miraculously brought the plane hard around and veered dramatically to port with seconds to spare, and he had breathed again. His heart-rate was off the scale as a fresh surge of adrenaline flooded an already overloaded system and he gave thanks anew to any deity that might be listening for his continued existence, however brief that may prove to be.

It wasn't until he had finally relinquished the controls to Tanner, whose job it now was to deliver the payload on target, that he was having trouble getting his left hand to cooperate in what should have been an entirely natural movement. Looking down he noticed a sticky, wet patch on his thigh that could only be blood and made the connection. Goddammit! Not without some difficulty he prised his fingers off the yoke, grimacing as he started to peel off the glove which he only now realised was sliced cleanly across the back, the exposed sheepskin lining no longer off-white but stained a deep, dark red.

He wondered after if that might not have been a mistake. Firstly, it hurt like hell but worse, he could no longer move his fingers. The back of his hand had been laid open and beneath the wet, bloody flap of skin he could see what he guessed to be the white of bone and the shiny, glistening threads of tendon. He was not squeamish about blood, even his own, but his stomach now did a back flip and he broke out in a cold sweat, feeling

dangerously sick and dizzy. Around him the noisy activity of an aircraft completing its bomb run ebbed and flowed, until at last the jubilant confirmation that the bombs were away cut through the buzz. Time to get the hell out of there. Voice tight as he fumbled one-handed with a shell dressing which he had somehow managed to dig out of his flight jacket, he relinquished control of the bomber.

“She’s all yours, Ezra. Take us home.”

II

“Hey, Larabee!” Chris turned at the summons, yelled as it was across the mess hall. He recognised the man, a lieutenant, although he was not from his squadron and half-guessed what was about to come next if only because he had been listening to the same crap since his injury had become public knowledge. “Guess some guys will do anything to get out of a fight, huh?”

He started to rise from his seat, the lieutenant finally being the one who had taken the baiting from push to shove and who, if Larabee had anything to do with it, was about to eat his words, only to feel a restraining hand on his arm.

“Now, Captain, this is really not the time or the place to allow oneself to be goaded into a reaction that might prove, in the long term, to be unwise.” The Southerner received a glowering frown in reply, an unspoken warning that few elected to ignore, but Lieutenant Standish maintained his grip on the pilot’s sleeve and pressed on regardless. “After all they do say that revenge is a dish best eaten cold and, more to the point, there’s more than one way to skin a cat.”

“Yeah, but I only need one!”

Standish sighed and shook his head; a gesture of resigned disappointment.

“And I’m sure that you would indeed be able to hand the churl his entire skin on a platter, however the issue of the fight - and the squadron’s lack of contestant since your unfortunate injury - still stands. Correct?”

“Ezra’s right,” seconded Tanner, scooping another forkful of scrambled egg into his mouth, “Can’t hand it to them without... well, you know, without a fight.”

“Quite, Lieutenant Tanner,” agreed Standish, obviously thankful for the unexpected back-up from the Texan.

Larabee looked ruefully at his bandaged hand and sighed then, finally yielding to the combined protests of the other two men, sat down but not before shooting a thunderous glare at the offending junior officer. He would keep.

“So, what do you have in mind?”

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The crew of “The Lady”, as Captain Chris Larabee's thirty-six thousand pound, four-engined, flying mistress had been affectionately dubbed, had - over several beers and suitably lengthy deliberation in the uncharacteristically quiet setting of the local pub - come to the inescapable conclusion that they had had better weeks. So far the only levity to interrupt the generally morose gathering had been when Ezra had, in an act of desperation, attempted to convince Buck to take to the ring on Chris's behalf. In fact the sergeant was still laughing into his beer; an obvious source of irritation to the Southerner.

“Ah, come on, Ezra,” chided the gunner, affably, “Be honest. It's not the honour of the squadron you're interested in, it's losing commission on running the book that bothers you! I reckon if you thought you could get away with it you'd send old Agnes there behind the bar into the ring if it would make you a few bucks!”

Standish took a long, slow drink of his pint of before carefully setting the beer down and, with a slight, questioning, tilt of his head, gave Buck an appraising look.

“That, Sergeant Wilmington, is a not only a most heinous accusation but a slur on my standing as an officer and a gentleman...” He began indignantly then, without taking his eyes off the other man, he suddenly smiled. “It is also, in this case, the absolute and unutterable truth.”

Even Larabee was forced to laugh at the Southerner's candid admission although he had been in a sombre mood all evening.

“Not like you to be that forthcoming, Ezra.” Slouched lazily back his chair and seemingly distracted, Chris slowly rotated his glass of beer with his good hand. “If you're hell bent on making a profit out of this thing, maybe you should glove up yourself and have done with it, seeing as no one else looks like stepping up to toe the line.”

“Please, Captain Larabee,” protested the lieutenant, “You don't have a dog and then bark yourself.”

“Meaning you'd rather let someone else do the donkey work while you sit back and make

the money,” observed Nathan, drily, making no effort to mask his criticism.

“I like to think of myself as an entrepreneur, Sergeant Jackson,” returned Standish without heat, but the slightest emphasis on the non-com’s rank was a subtle indication that he was not about to let Nathan’s deliberate goad go unchallenged.

There was a hasty exchange of meaningful glances among the others as the air turned suddenly frosty and from the sidelines Chris watched the two men keenly in case the barbed exchange threatened to escalate to something more serious.

It was no secret that Standish, with his roots in the Deep South, and the Africa-American gunner did not always see eye to eye. The Southerner, a likely, though never openly confessed, descendent of slave-owners, seemed to represent everything that Jackson had struggled all his life to overcome and while there had never been any open hostility between the two men, there was certainly a degree of ambivalence.

For his part Jackson tended to be openly critical of what he saw to be the Lieutenant’s shortcomings, namely his fixation with monetary gain and his entirely flexible approach to moral issues. Standish, on the other hand, completely incorrigible to the end, saw no reason to justify his way of life to Jackson or, for that matter, anyone else. The reality was infinitely more complex but although the two men were, at first glance, diametrically opposed they shared one thing; a finely-honed instinct for survival. More than anything else that was the connection that allowed them to find common ground. That, of course, and the fact that they had a war to fight that outweighed any personal animosity there might be between them. At least most of the time.

“Making money off someone else’s pain, you mean!” continued Nathan, “With you there always has to be an angle.”

Ezra spread his hands and gave a tiny shake of his head.

“I merely provide a service in response to a demand.”

“And turn a handsome profit, I’ll bet!”

The Southerner gave a short laugh and aimed a finger at Jackson.

“See? Prophetic words from your own lips, no less: I’ll bet. And that’s what every man on this base will want to do come Saturday week. I shall merely be on hand to facilitate the necessary financial transactions.”

Jackson shook his head, lost for words but now more accepting than angry.

“There’s no shame in you, is there?”

Standish gave a wry smile, ducking his head as he reached to pick up his beer.

“Not one bit.”

Larabee relaxed again as the moment of tension passed, but he kept his eye fixed on Standish as a half-remembered conversation started to prick insistently at his memory.

“You went to college here in England didn't you, Ezra?” he ventured slowly, aware that he seemed to be taking the conversation off on an unrelated tangent but at the same time giving the impression that neither was this a casual enquiry. Rather, for anyone who knew Chris, it suggested a definite purpose.

Ezra's eyes narrowed, something in the senior officer's superficially innocuous question triggering warning bells for the Lieutenant.

“Cambridge,” he agreed warily, “Spent my graduate year here.”

Chris, thoughtful, nodded wordlessly but there was a cunning smile on his face that suggested he had just struck the mother lode. Very slowly he looked up and locked eyes with the Southerner, his grin - now wolfish - widening appreciably.

“And I seem to remember you telling me that you took up boxing for a while there...?”

Standish set his beer down and leaned back, hooking an arm over the back of the chair then crossing his left ankle over his right knee, before assuming an air of studied nonchalance that, under Larabee's close scrutiny, he did not entirely feel.

“I did. I also rowed double sculls but I'm not thinking of trying out for the next Olympic Games,” he drawled, keen to emphasise the absurdity of the idea while managing to sound both indifferent and bored, finishing with a dismissive: “And you're talking fifteen years ago, for God's sake!”

Buck leaned forward, his eyes alight with a fervour that Ezra recognised all too well, and stabbed an accusing finger at the Southerner.

“Sonofabitch! Just a teensy detail you forgot, huh? Here we are bustin' our britches to find a new contender to put in the ring so we don't forfeit the fight and you're sitting right there - maybe the only guy in the squadron who's ever laced on gloves 'sides Chris here - keeping schtum! Whassup, Ezra? You putting your money on the other side or somethin'?”

“Well, now that you mention it, Buck, that might not be such a bad idea...”

JD Dunne, the youngest of the crew, looked aghast at the Southerner.

“Ezra, you wouldn't!”

Wilmington laughed aloud, his amusement genuine.

“Ha! Ezra here might steal the pennies off a dead man's eyes but even he wouldn't sink as low as that! This is the squadron we're talking about not some half-assed, penny ante, crapshoot.”

Standish gave an artful smile and again picking up his glass raised it in a mock toast.

“Why, thank you, Sergeant Wilmington for that heartfelt, if somewhat backhanded, endorsement of my more laudable and upstanding qualities.”

A wave of laughter rolled over the group of airmen, attracting more than a few disapproving glances from the scattering of locals at the bar, but leaving in its wake a perceptibly lighter mood than had been evident all evening.

“Seriously, Ezra,” continued Buck, when the noise had once again died down to a quiet hum, “What the hell’s the problem? Dammit, man, we’re about to go down in flames without firing a shot here!”

Instead of the half-expected throw-away remark laced with sarcasm and intended to forestall any further comment, the Lieutenant took his time answering. Looking slowly around the circle of faces he finally stopped at Wilmington, his expression sober and showing no hint of guile.

“Buck, my talents, such as they are, do not usually include deliberately putting myself in a position where I am likely to be beaten to a pulp.” He paused to consider that for a moment then tilted his head adding, with a wry smile: “Present career-choice notwithstanding, of course.”

“Then just don’t let the sonofabitch land a punch,” reasoned Wilmington, still trying to reel the Southerner in and clearly not willing to let him off the hook without a fight.

“If it’s that easy then why aren’t you doing it, Buck?”

This from JD after which the table again erupted into appreciative jeers and catcalls, leaving the lanky sergeant lost for words as he struggled, and failed, to come up with a fitting reply. Finally he aimed a sideswipe at the younger man and blurted: “Hey, wise-ass, I thought you were on my side!”

“I thought we were all on the same side,” countered Dunne, an observation that earned him a flicker of what might have been guarded appreciation from the Southerner and a nod of approval from Larabee.

“We are, son,” he said, a tone of weariness creeping into his voice as he directed a warning look at Wilmington, “Just doesn’t always seem that way.”

An awkward silence followed and for several long seconds all that could be heard was the quiet hum of conversation being carried on around them and the reassuringly familiar clink of glasses. Josiah was the first to speak.

“Well, I guess that’s it then. No contest.” He kept his gaze on Standish as he finished off his pint and lowered the empty glass to the table. “Pity to let that purse go though...”

“Purse?” Ezra cocked his head to one side, the delivery was casual enough but there was

no mistaking the heightened interest; the hawk marking the hare. “I thought this was a strictly 'friendly' bout.”

“Officially it is,” agreed Larabee, “but it's tradition between the squadrons that there's a sweetener for the winner.”

Ezra moved his own empty glass in small, deliberate circles obviously taking a moment or two to process this latest piece of information. Finally he looked up.

“How sweet?”

Chris suddenly grinned. *Gotcha.*

“Let's say it's more than enough to pay your mess tab for a few months at least.”

No one else made a sound but all eyes were suddenly fixed on Standish, a situation of which he was not unaware, but his own unwavering gaze remained locked on Larabee for several more beats. Neither man spoke but in those few seconds it became clear to those watching that at some arcane level an understanding had been reached.

With a sigh that signalled his capitulation the Southerner gave a quick, almost disbelieving, shake of his head before smiling craftily.

“So, where do I sign?”

For the third time that evening the gathering of American airmen erupted in a noisy display of hand shaking and back-slapping amid calls for more beer, a transgression immediately forgiven when the boisterous fly-boys declared the next round for the entire pub to be on their dime. Whatever the local feeling about Yanks being overpaid, oversexed and over here, the gesture was accepted in the spirit in which it was offered and, while none of them were sure exactly what they were celebrating, two dozen pints were promptly raised before the pub again subsided into its more customary subdued chatter.

Suddenly the centre of attention, Ezra found a shot of whiskey had miraculously replaced his empty beer glass and Buck enthusiastically shaking his hand with a grin as wide as the Grand Canyon on his face.

“Thought you were gonna go belly-up on us there, Looey!” The accompanying slap to the Southerner's shoulder was delivered with such vigour that the lieutenant barely succeeded in keeping his whisky from slopping over the rim of the glass but in his enthusiasm the gunner seemed not to notice that Ezra's expression reflected more scepticism than celebration and continued with a sincere: “Take my word for it, Ezra, you won't regret this!”

Brushing a few scattered drops of amber liquid from the front of his uniform Standish cast a watchful eye over his grinning colleagues and downed the whisky in one swallow.

Grimacing at the raw bite of the alcohol he fixed Buck with a dubious look as he deliberately set the shot glass down on the table with a gentle thud.

“Oh, believe me, I already do.”

III

Somewhere in the long-distant past of his schooldays Ezra had acquired and, oddly enough, retained the information that the human body was made up of more than 600 muscles, a fact that he would readily admit had meant little to him either at the time or in the years since. Now, after two solid days of intense physical activity, he was prepared to believe it, if only because he was certain that every single one of them had seized up in protest.

With a muted groan he shifted a hip on the unforgiving military-issue mattress and decided he would forego any further movement for the time being. It was still early; too early even for the dreaded routine wake-up call that would see him, along with dozens of other men on the flight roster, make their way to the briefing room. From there it would be a short drive to the flight line and the armed and fuelled aircraft to wait for the signal to take off to God-only-knew-where.

Given his present acute discomfort he began to wonder if the bomb run might not actually be preferable to another day of exhausting training exercises but with Chris out of action the command of The Lady had fallen to him and today he would be flying with a rookie co-pilot. It was a close run thing but, above all else, Ezra considered himself a pragmatist and while the unaccustomed training might feel like torture it wasn't going to kill him. As for the bombing mission... well, who knew when your number might to be up? In the light of what he was about to do, facing five gruelling rounds in the ring with a man whose sole intention was to beat him into unconsciousness no longer seemed quite so insane.

Knowing that there would be no more sleep for him now, he eased out of his bunk coaxing resistant muscles into action while trying to persuade himself that his suffering was all in a good cause and taking some small comfort in the knowledge that at least it was only temporary. On the downside his arms already felt like lead and, to rub salt in the wound, he still had a good few hours of wrestling with the yoke of Larabee's Lady to look forward to. Still, he mused, it could turn out to be a milk-run or better yet, if the gods

were truly smiling on him, the day's raid might be cancelled altogether...

...and then again, it might not.

They were getting hammered.

Rather than the heavens raining down any kind of beaming benevolence on the pilot and crew of the beleaguered B17 it was instead throwing a barrage of 88mm shells, courtesy of the well-drilled German anti-aircraft batteries, at them. Set to explode at 49,000 feet, difficult to see coming and even harder to avoid, the flak showered the aircraft with deadly shards of shrapnel that pinged off the solid sections of the airframe and tore through metal - and human - skin like a hot knife through butter. There was no defence from it, no evasive action that could be taken that wouldn't prove to be equally dangerous, and the best anyone could hope for was not to take a direct hit.

Doggedly keeping his position in the formation, rocked and buffeted by the blanket of anti-aircraft fire and strafed by machine-gun fire from the wickedly effective roving fighters, Ezra flew by the book and followed the leader in for the start of the bomb run. He tried not to think about the gaps that had appeared in the formation around him or what that might mean in terms of crew. Instead he focused on the fact that engine two was running hot and that he still had a bellyful of three-hundred pounders to offload before he could call it quits, gain some altitude and get the hell out of there; things over which he had a modicum of control.

Adrenaline pumped through his system, a pulse-pounding combination of fear and exhilaration that was, in its own way, as addictive as the most potent stimulant. He knew some pilots who craved that rush - the war lovers and the glory seekers - who seemed to be utterly oblivious to the death and destruction around them, instead looking for the thrill that, paradoxically, seemed to accompany extreme danger. He was not one of them. He flew because his life, and that of countless others, depended on it. He flew to survive. And if there was one lesson this particular Southern son had learned, and learned well, it was the art of self-preservation.

A round of flak exploded a little too close for comfort off the port wing, buffeting the big bomber and peppering her with shrapnel, but the damage was minor and the aptly named Fortress stubbornly maintained its course and flew on. This time.

Ezra always found it disconcerting to surrender control of the aircraft to the bombardier during the bomb run. Granted it was Vin who was guiding them in and not some raw recruit just cutting his teeth on the Norden bomb-sight but he was a pilot and, while he had every

confidence in Tanner's abilities, he couldn't help feeling an even greater sense of vulnerability until he once again felt the aircraft responding to his touch on the yoke. Dame Fortune was a fickle and demanding enough mistress without putting temptation in her way.

In the interval while the Texan bombardier was zeroing in on their target he allowed part of his mind to wander, although in truth it was more of an opportunistic sprint while someone else was minding the store than the luxury of a leisurely ramble, and seizing the moment he immediately found himself following a familiar and already well-trodden path. A path that lead straight to a sixteen foot square arena of rope and canvas and to what would surely be his nemesis.

He still didn't know what had made him do it. A momentary lapse in sanity was the best he could come up with but, for better or worse, he was now committed and there could be no back. In hindsight he had to admire Larabee's cunning - and timing. A faint smile touched his lips. There was no denying that the Captain's strategy had been flawless and he, Ezra Standish, the master of the con, had himself been well and truly conned. But there was one small detail that seemed to have been completely overlooked in the push to get him into the ring; nobody had asked how many fights he'd actually won.

“Bombs clear!”

Immediately he focused his attention on retaking the controls of the now considerably lighter aircraft and with a smooth and practiced movement he pulled back on the yoke, opened up the throttles and, peeling off to port, concentrated solely on getting plane and crew out of there in one piece. Relieved of several thousand pounds of payload the four thundering 1200 horsepower Wright engines responded eagerly and, gaining height, Larabee's Lady immodestly picked up her skirts and ran like hell for home.

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Chris Larabee was smiling; an entirely unremarkable occurrence in itself but one which Ezra had come to regard, in recent days at least, with a certain degree of unease if not downright suspicion. It was the kind of smile that would not have looked out of place on a cheshire cat - or for that matter, a starving wolf - and the Southerner had still not decided which one he preferred; neither was in any way reassuring and, as far as he was concerned, neither boded well.

The fact that Chris was waiting out on the flight line to meet them was not unusual. Ezra knew from past experience the stress and strain of being one of those left behind and the almost masochistic need to count the squadron in, but this time there was more to it than that he could tell. Already weary and starting to feel the physical and emotional slump that followed quickly on the heels of adrenaline overload, he shouldered his gear and shot a questioning look at the man who had over the course of a few short days become both mentor and tormentor.

After the initial exchange of good-natured banter between the side-lined Captain and his crew which didn't quite manage to mask the genuine relief on both sides that they had once more, against incredible odds, made it back safely from yet another sortie, Chris fell into step beside the Southerner. He slowed, dictating the pace, until the pair had fallen a little way behind the others, a strategy which only increased Ezra's sense of foreboding. Finally Larabee spoke, his grin widening as he turned to look at the obviously weary lieutenant.

“How does a 72 hour pass sound?”

Ezra cocked a skeptical eyebrow.

“It would sound a whole lot better if you'd ended that sentence with: 'no strings attached',” he replied drily, “What's the catch?”

Chris laughed and shook his head.

“You really don't trust anyone do you, Ezra?”

“As a rule I try not to,” he agreed, affably, “There are fewer disappointments that way.”

“Well trust me on this. The Colonel's already okayed it. You're going to London.”

“London?” Ezra's head snapped up as he came to a sudden standstill, a shrewd look in his eye. “Why, I do believe I can feel those strings being tugged right about now.”

“C'mon, gimme a break, Ezra,” protested the older man, feigning indignation, “I just about had to make a blood sacrifice to finagle this.”

“Really?” drawled the Southerner, unimpressed, “Not mine I hope.”

Larabee gave a casual shrug admitting nothing and walked on, but he was still smiling.

“Chris?” Catching up in a couple of strides, Ezra snatched at Larabee's sleeve checking his forward momentum and bringing the other man to an abrupt halt. “Chris!”

“Okay,” he admitted, “it's not just rec leave. It's gonna be two days of solid work at a gym the Colonel recommended in London; some fight trainer he knows. We leave in a couple of hours.”

“We?”

“You didn’t think I was gonna let you loose in the big city all on your ownsome did you?” He laughed openly at Ezra’s somewhat pained expression then paused for a moment before he continued, his tone no longer teasing. “Call it moral support.” He sighed and ruefully held up his still-bandaged hand. “Ain’t much good for anything else right now.”

It was obvious that Ezra had been caught off-guard by Larabee’s sudden change in tack, and his expression slipped, fleetingly, into what might have been sympathetic understanding before morphing into a decidedly bemused smile but if he was in any way affected by the suddenness of the proposal or, indeed, the lack of prior consultation he didn’t show it.

“London it is then.” Digging his hands into the pockets of his flight jacket he started to walk again. “Hell, anything that gets me out of another sortie before the weekend is just fine with me!”

With a slow smile of what might have been satisfaction Chris ambled along in his wake.

“Can’t argue with that,” he agreed readily, then added with a devilish grin, “Think maybe you just might’ve changed that tune a little come Thursday though.”

To his credit Ezra merely offered an equally roguish grin in return.

“Oh, Captain Larabee, I’m willing to wager that’s a foregone conclusion!”

IV

“Okay, guys, break!”

Breathing hard Ezra took a step backwards, wiped the sweat out of his eyes with his forearm and wondered again at his spectacular error in judgement in thinking that he could possibly manage to get into fighting trim by the coming weekend. Who was he kidding? Hell, he was getting perilously close to forty and his college days were a long way behind him; he might still know the moves and be able to land a decent punch but he no longer had the stamina.

“Ezra, remember that southpaw gives you a natural advantage - use it! And move in quick, get close and make those punches count. Jeff, how’s it feeling?”

Feeling even more like the new kid on the block, the Southerner waited and readied himself for the expected criticism from his sparring partner who had seemed to move at the speed of light delivering a barrage of lightning-fast punches that felt like hammers of

stone as they unerringly hit home. He had been too busy defending himself and getting a punch away when he could to analyse his own performance but he guessed it was less than stellar.

“The bugger hurts, I’ll give him that,” grinned the other man, “got a left hook that’d stun a bleedin’ bullock. Get his block knocked off though if he don’t learn to move a bit sharpish like.”

The trainer, a grizzled and battle-scarred ex-paratrooper Sergeant invalidated out of the service after losing a leg and an eye, leaned on his cane and looked critically at the Southerner.

“I’ll be honest with you, lad, I can see real potential but it takes time to make a good fighter and time is the one thing you just don’t have. On the other hand this isn’t exactly a title fight we’re talking about, so…” he sighed heavily, as if he was going against his own better judgement then suddenly the scarred face twisted into a lopsided grimace as he smiled, “we focus on your strengths and let the rest take care of itself. Be warned though, it will mean hard work.” He pierced Ezra with a hawk-like stare out of his good eye. “Not afraid of hard work are you, lad?”

Standish was, for once, stuck for words. He wasn’t sure that now would be the time to admit that he came from a long line of Southerners who believed that a gentleman did not debase himself by engaging in anything that remotely resembled physical labour. Before the lack of response became embarrassing Chris smoothly butted in with a crafty smile: “He’ll do whatever it takes, Frank.”

Ezra smiled weakly and mutely nodded his agreement. What could he say?

The groan escaped before he could stop it and he considered himself fortunate that it hadn’t manifested as a whimper instead. Caught mid-way between lying and sitting he had but two choices; either collapse back on the bed or bite the bullet and sit up. Gritting his teeth and giving voice to a curse that sprang all-too-readily to his lips, he chose the latter as the lesser of the two evils if only because he had no intention of putting himself through the same again.

“Whatever it takes,” he muttered darkly as he slowly got to his feet and tentatively stretched tight muscles. “Thank you , Captain Larabee.”

As it happened the man in question was not in the room. His bed, barely an arms length from Ezra’s own, was empty and it was a testament to the Southerner’s overall fatigue that he had not even heard the other man leave the room. With a sigh he looked around the

cramped space in the sickly yellow glow of the bedside lamp.

They had taken lodgings in a pub not far from the gym, recommended more for its proximity than the quality of the accommodation. Still it was clean, and the food was surprisingly good considering the restrictions imposed by rationing. Low ceilinged and definitely on the cosy side, Ezra estimated the building had probably been in existence since the Pilgrim Fathers had set sail on the Mayflower. He was still in two minds as to whether it would be a blessing or a crime if the place became the victim of a German bomb.

Crossing to the window he lifted the edge of the heavy blackout curtain and looked out over the down-at-heel and slightly care-worn inner-city street, the usually stark outlook now transformed by the weak amber light of an Autumn dawn as it took on the more subtle shades of a sepia-toned Victorian postcard.

Across the cobbled road a row of narrow terrace houses stretched in ordered neatness like a hand of dominoes, a matched set yet each with its own identity; a splash of colour from a few struggling geraniums in a window box here, an ornate brass door knocker there, all the little nuances that changed a house into a home.

As he watched, the door of the house directly opposite his window opened and a woman dressed in a woollen wrap stepped out onto the stoop, glancing up and down the empty road as if looking for someone or something. Curiosity piqued but feeling slightly voyeuristic, he waited. He smiled when a few moments later after a final, furtive, check of the street, she hurriedly ushered out a somewhat rumpled-looking man who still appeared to be in the process of getting dressed. With a firm but not unkindly shove she sent him on his way; he purposefully not looking back as if to do so would incur the wrath of the Medusa herself, she looking with a degree of fondness at the man's departing back before retreating inside and shutting the door behind her.

It was a simple scene but for a just a brief moment he had looked in on other lives, in another reality to his own, and he suddenly regretted his earlier ill-considered fancy of a bomb dropping on the neighbourhood. He sighed and let the curtain drop. Hell, of all people he should know better but this was hardly the time or place to start examining his conscience. He was saved from any further indulgence in self-critical analysis by Larabee's timely appearance.

"Tea's up!" Awkwardly carrying two enormous mugs in his uninjured hand Chris nudged the door shut with his free elbow and gestured for Ezra to take one with an apologetic: "Sorry, it's condensed milk. It was that or nothing."

The Southerner quickly hid his surprise at the unexpectedly thoughtful act on Chris's part in making tea for them both and gave a little shake of his head wordlessly signalling that it didn't matter. One thing the air force had taught him was that you could get used to anything - and very often had to. What it hadn't taught him was how to accept that friendship did not always come with conditions attached; that someone could give without expecting something in return.

Larabee gave Standish a knowing look.

"It's just tea," he said mildly, the ghost of a smile on his face.

Ezra gave a guilty laugh and sat down on the edge of his bed before taking a sip of the hot, sweet brew. To give Chris his due, he didn't always say much but he didn't miss much either.

For a while neither man spoke but it was a companionable silence between two men who were enough at ease in each other's company not to feel the need to fill the empty spaces in the conversation with meaningless chatter. It was a trait that had developed as much from spending long hours shoulder to shoulder in the cockpit as from within themselves.

Finally Ezra glanced at his watch and drained his cup.

"Well, best get a move on," he sighed, "Can't waste what little time we've got left now, can we?"

Chris set his cup down and gave Ezra a long, appraising look.

"You've done good, Ezra. Real good."

The Southerner quickly rose, turning his back on Chris to hastily gather his clothes from the foot of the bed before heading purposefully towards the door.

"Best reserve that judgement until Saturday, eh, Captain?"

As the door clicked softly shut behind the other man Chris let out a long sigh. He couldn't really blame Ezra for being a bit touchy. If he had learned anything over the past couple of days it was that once Ezra had committed to something, near enough was just not good enough for the Southerner but the reality was that time was against him.

Two punishing days of training and sparring behind them and there was no denying that Standish could box. He might not have stepped into a ring since his college days but he still had all the moves and if his sparring partner was to be believed, a killer left hook. The man was a natural in-fighter, his counter-punches delivered with a deceptive economy of movement and brutal effectiveness. And he had style. What he didn't seem to have, and couldn't hope to develop in the few short days he'd been given, was the wind to go the distance. Hell, he wasn't so sure that he'd be able to do any better but it was no longer his

fight. For better or worse it was now up to Ezra - and it was all his doing. Larabee looked with disgust at his bandaged hand. Shit!

V

Flexing his fist he stared down at the binding of white gauze and tape firmly encasing his right hand and wrist, nodded and held out the other for the same treatment. The wraps were primarily intended to protect the bones and tendons of his hands from injury but Josiah had assured him that applying the right amount of compression would also allow him to hit harder, and at this stage he was ready to take any advantage he could get. He was going to need it. He'd seen his opponent.

Former Master Sergeant Eddy Jablonski. Buck's description of him being as ugly as a bag full of frogs had been fairly accurate as far as it went but Vin's latest intelligence of the man being a mean son-of-a-bitch who had been busted down more than once for brawling and done time in the brig for assault, while not exactly reassuring, at least gave him some measure of what he was up against. His gut feeling though told him that the kind of fights at which Jablonski probably excelled tended towards the bare-knuckle variety where the Marquis of Queensbury would be most definitely *persona non grata*. Only time would tell if that made him more or less of a danger in the ring.

Looking over Josiah's shoulder at the clock on the wall he felt a ripple of apprehension roil his stomach, quickly followed by a pressing need to use the bathroom again, as he watched the second hand sweep relentlessly around the dial. Dear Lord! How had he ever allowed himself to be talked into such an act of madness?

A hand settled on his shoulder and he turned just as Chris levered himself awkwardly up to sit on the table beside him.

"So, champ, how're you feeling?"

"Like I should have been offered a last meal."

"Nah, couldn't do that," grinned Larabee, giving his shoulder a friendly squeeze, "By now you'd have been puking your guts out."

"At least a final drink then," amended the Southerner, already feeling as if Chris's hypothetical outcome might yet come to pass. The very thought of food was making him queasy.

Chris sucked in his breath and shook his head, his expression sobering but his eyes still twinkling with humour.

"Ooh, bad move! Can't have anything impairing your judgement. Gotta keep you sharp."

Ezra gave him an amused sidelong glance.

"Your concern is laudable, Cap'n Larabee," he drawled, "but you're timing could definitely use some work. I believe it would be safe to say that sound judgement fell by the wayside the first moment I agreed to do this."

"Second thoughts?" ventured Josiah, completing the last turn of the hand wrap and deftly securing the tail of the bandage.

"And third... and fourth," admitted the Southerner with a rueful grin.

Sanchez gave him a look of understanding that was wholly unexpected.

"Just go out there and do your best, son. Nobody can ask more than that."

Caught off-guard by the big sergeant's softly-spoken words of advice that, for once, made no demands of him at a time when the hopes of the entire squadron rested squarely on his shoulders, he found himself lost for words so settled instead for a silent, but subtly emotive, nod of gratitude. The timely arrival of Buck and Vin saved him from the need to make any further comment; the former in his usual boisterous form, the Texan less forthcoming but both men obviously in high spirits. In their wake came the subdued but unmistakable swell of noise from the gathering crowd, quickly damped by Wilmington closing the door behind him, but still enough to trigger the Southerner's already over-stimulated imagination to create a mental picture of a feral entity baying for blood.

Muttering a barely audible excuse he launched himself from the table and, avoiding eye contact with anyone, headed for the men's room. He really needed that pee.

Larabee shot a quick glance over his shoulder at the departing Southerner then turned to the two new arrivals.

"So? What's the word from the front lines?"

Tanner held out his hand, palm down, and rocked it from side to side.

"Right now the book's favouring Jablonski for a knockout," confirmed Wilmington, keeping his voice low, "the guys want Ezra to win for the sake of the squadron but I gotta say that they sure ain't putting their money where their mouths are."

"Figures," sighed Chris, then gave a crooked smile, "but Ezra of all people would understand. It's nothing personal; it's economics."

Vin shuffled uncomfortably, dropping his gaze for a moment, before seeming to come to a decision and focusing again on Larabee.

"There's somethin' else, Chris."

The blond Captain looked quickly from Vin to Buck and back again before giving a weary

sigh.

"I don't wanna hear this, do I?"

There was a moment's hesitation before Tanner reluctantly spoke.

"Heard a whisper that Ezra's been fingered to take a dive."

Chris chewed his lip for a few moments before shrewdly eyeing the two of them.

"You really think he'd throw the fight?"

"Don't matter what I think..."

"That's where you're wrong," interrupted Josiah, gravely, "I'd say it matters a whole lot."

"Well, you know Ezra," replied Buck, slyly, "Do almost anything for a quick buck."

Chris shot him a warning glance.

"Yeah, *almost* anything."

The Texan in his usual unhurried way thought carefully before he answered again.

"Where this guy Jablonski's concerned, I think he'd give anything a shot to tip the odds," he hedged, considering the possibilities even as he spoke, "and fight fixin' sure as hell wouldn't have him losin' any sleep..."

"Go on!" prompted Chris, more sharply than he intended, aware that a Pandora's box of innuendo and doubt had just been opened by the Texan's quiet revelation.

Vin's reluctance to say more was obviously not shared by Buck, who took a step closer to Larabee and lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper.

"Hell, Chris, you can't blame a man for thinking that there might be something in it," he murmured with quiet intensity, "there's a lot of money staked on this fight, and I ain't the only man on this base running a book!"

"Sounds to me like you've already got Ezra down and out in the first round."

Wilmington leaned back, a stubborn set to his jaw that Chris was all-too-familiar with.

"All I'm saying is..."

"Well don't! 'Less you have some kinda proof?"

The mustached sergeant opened his mouth to speak then, thinking better of it, shut it again and shook his head although it was clear there was much more he would like to say.

"Anything else?" challenged Chris, curtly, "Anything *useful*?"

Vin regarded Chris with a cool expression that suggested he thought him guilty of shooting the messengers and, showing no sign of contrition, continued as if there had been no interruption to the conversation.

"Picked up on a few of this guy's tricks. His game plan seems to be fairly predictable.

He comes on like a bull straight outta the chute and tries to grab the advantage in the opening seconds. He likes to cut his opponent early - make 'em bleed. Kinda gets them on the back foot from the go-get and then he hammers them into the ground before they can recover.”

Larabee thoughtfully pulled at his lip.

“Great. So got any good news.”

Tanner finally smiled.

“He can’t keep that kinda pace up for long. If the guy he’s fighting can take the punishment for first coupla rounds he’s in with a chance.”

“If he lasts the first two rounds,” muttered Buck, morosely, not quite prepared to give up without at least a token last word.

“Well, thank you Sergeant Wilmington for the vote of confidence.”

Unnoticed, the Southerner had slipped quietly back into the room and now he was greeted with an uneasy silence which hung awkwardly between the five men for several heart-beats. Tanner was the first to react, intent on defusing what could prove to be an explosive rather, than just uncomfortable, moment.

“Don’t mind him, Ezra,” advised the quick-thinking Texan with an easy grin, “He’s just got his shorts in a twist thinking about what’s gonna happen when he has to work out all the math on these markers he’s holdin’. Y’all know if he needs to count any higher than ten he has to take his boots off!”

The comment was accompanied by a sly but none-too-gentle dig in the ribs with his elbow which limited Buck’s inevitable protest to a sudden, sharp, and decidedly inarticulate, grunt.

Ezra was never an easy one to read and there were a few guiltily surreptitious glances exchanged between the others before the Southerner’s expression relaxed into a slow smile.

“Perhaps now would be an opportune time switch places, Buck, given my own natural predilection for the pecuniary over the pugilistic.”

Wilmington held both his hands up in a warding gesture as he wagged his head from side to side.

“Hell, no! You can keep that all to yourself. I told you before, I ain’t no boxer.”

Standing now in front of Josiah to undergo the final ritual of having his gloves laced Ezra spared a quick glance for the gunner, only this time there was no masking his expression as his eyebrows lifted meaningfully and in his lazy Southern drawl he muttered: “No bookie

either it would appear.”

Wilmington comically hurt expression attracted little sympathy but a great deal of good-natured ribbing followed until Josiah, mindful of the minutes ticking away, finally ordered the three men out of the dressing room. The fact that he was outranked by two of the party made no difference; here and now - as Ezra’s designated second - he was the one calling the shots. There was a fight to be won and he fully intended for Ezra to win it. In no uncertain terms he made it clear that he wanted them, and their distracting influence, out of the way.

In spite of the facetiously exaggerated salute Chris aimed at the burly Master Sergeant, he obediently ushered his companions out of the door to take their places ring-side but not before he turned to look back at the Southerner, his expression now a mask of concentration.

“Give it your best shot, Ezra. We’ll be out there rootin’ for ya!” He started to close the door then hesitated for a split second before adding: “Oh, and Ezra, you take care out there, you hear? ”

Standish smiled faintly.

“Rest assured, Captain Larabee, that is probably the surest bet you could make tonight.”

VI

Separated by a mere eighteen inches of space and the solid presence of the referee between them, Ezra eyed the other man with a critical calm that he did not feel and if he had been obliged at that moment to choose a single word out of his extensive vocabulary to describe the sneering and undeniably confident Eddy Jablonski then the one that immediately sprang to his mind was *neanderthal*, with *thug* following rapidly on its heels. In fact together they seemed a perfect fit for the grinning sergeant.

At 5 feet 11 inches and weighing in at 180 pounds the lean turret gunner had an inch and a good ten pounds on him. For him that translated into the unwelcome probability of a longer reach which, from Ezra’s point of view, meant it was going to be hard to get inside his defences without first taking a bit of punishment. He gave a mental shrug. No one had ever said it was going to be easy.

He rolled his shoulders in an effort to keep the muscles from tensing, never taking his eyes off his opponent even as the referee doggedly went through the customary

preliminary spiel and the roar of the crowd melded seamlessly with the roar of blood in his ears. He focused on his breathing because for some reason he seemed to have forgotten how to do it then suddenly he realised the referee had taken a step back, the pressure on his elbow a prompt that he was expected to observe what was likely to be the last social nicety of the evening. The two men briefly touched gloves - the equivalent of a handshake - although Ezra doubted that Jablonski's murmured promise to rearrange his pretty face was quite in keeping with the spirit of the moment. But then, that was the trouble with symbolic gestures. Etiquette observed the Southerner moved back to his corner. It was time.

Balanced lightly on the balls of his feet he waited for the bell to signal the start of the first round, his heart pounding with the adrenaline that was already pumping freely through his bloodstream but his head as clear and calculating as if he was about to sit down to a high-stakes poker game. The difference being that in playing cards he was not likely to have to fight to reach a satisfactory conclusion although admittedly, over the years, there had been the odd exception.

He had been warned about Jablonski's opening gambit but even so he was stunned by the sheer power of the other man's ferocious and unrelenting initial attack. At the bell he had thrown himself forward to meet Ezra, his momentum carrying both of them towards the ropes putting the Southerner on the back foot before he even had time to throw a punch of his own. Instead he found himself on the defensive, tucking chin down and arms in and raising his gloves to protect his face as a barrage of blows landed on exposed flesh. Yielding to give himself time to regroup Ezra heard a long groan from the press of servicemen gathered close to his corner before he shut out the distraction and focused on staying on his feet and in the fight. Hell, if he went down in the first it would look like he had opted to take the easy way out and deliberately thrown the match but - *Jesus!* - the bastard had fists of stone. If he hit the canvas it would be genuine.

Still protecting himself from the savage rain of punches he looked for a pattern, prepared to take a few hard hits until he could find an opening and there was no doubt in his mind that he would find one.

Jablonski was a brawler who relied on the raw power of his early punches to wear down his opponent, and while Ezra felt as if he was being rolled over by a Sherman tank, the sergeant's technique was messy and the Southerner knew he would eventually be able to exploit that weakness. But as erratic as his delivery might be Jablonski still knew how to land a punch and there was only so much punishment Ezra could take before it would

really start to slow him down.

A quick, powerful, right hook caught him in the flank and he grunted involuntarily as he felt the shock-wave all the way to his toes. Back-peddalling a few steps he danced momentarily out of reach, keeping his arms close to his sides and his gloves up knowing the respite would be all-too-brief. Goddamn it! He didn't have time to analyse the man's fighting style. Another few body blows like that and he'd be out for the count.

Abruptly turning his right shoulder towards Jablonski to present a smaller target he darted back in and under the lean gunner's guard, throwing a left hook that connected solidly with the lower edge of his ribcage then followed with a quick jab with his right that landed with a gratifying thud against the side of the other man's head. Jablonski rode the punch and although his head snapped round with the force of it he recovered quickly, shaking his head like a grizzly ridding itself of a troublesome wasp. Still, the rapid-fire combination had hurt and the hot-eyed glare he shot at the Southerner was a promise that he would pay for it.

And he did.

For the next sixty seconds it was all he could do to stay on his feet as sledgehammer fists kept up a punishing barrage of body blows that forced Ezra to go on the defensive, ducking and weaving and only just managing to avoid being trapped against the ropes more than once as he fended off a vindictive and determined Jablonski. The man was a human juggernaut throwing his entire body-weight behind his fists. Crude but definitely effective.

The bell sounding the end of the round, while perhaps not being his salvation, was as welcome as any lover's endearment to the panting and sweating Southerner. Never before had two minutes seemed so long and it was with a profound sense of relief that he sought the safe haven of his corner, as brief as the respite would be.

Breathing hard he quickly rid himself of his mouth-guard and took a welcome swig of the water that Nathan thrust at him. Resisting the temptation to swallow he instead spat into the bucket and leaned back, unresisting, as the medic efficiently sponged him down then rubbed and kneaded at his upper arms until he winced. The bastard had methodically targeted his biceps, a fact that had obviously not gone unnoticed by Jackson, in an effort to wear him down as quickly as possible. Dear Lord, the pain was exquisite, verging almost on pleasure, but it felt as though he would never lift his arms again!

Through the background buzz of the crowd and the blood roaring in his ears he realised Nathan had been talking the whole time he had been working on getting him ready for the next round and he tried to focus on what he was saying while still keeping his eye on the

boxer in the opposite corner.

With barely time to get his breathing under control before the bell for the start of the second round sounded, Ezra bit down on the mouth-guard that Nathan had deftly slipped back in place and launched himself back into the ring.

Not ten feet away but as distanced from the Southerner as if they had been on opposite sides of the Atlantic Chris Larabee watched the fight unfold in silence. At his right elbow Vin watched with equal intensity but whatever was going through his mind he kept to himself. It was no less than Chris would expect from the quiet Texan and why he was glad that tonight it was Tanner keeping him company and not Wilmington. In all the years he had known Buck he had never learned when to keep his mouth shut and right now any distraction would have been about as welcome as the Luftwaffe staging a thousand bomber raid.

The intelligence Vin had gathered on Jablonski's tactics had been sound at least, yet Chris hadn't decided if knowing the man would try and steam-roller him in the first couple of rounds had given Ezra any kind of edge. From where he stood it looked as though the Southerner had taken quite a hammering anyway, although to give him his due he had not seemed to yield an inch where he didn't have to. But he found himself wondering if there might not be a little too much of the gentleman in Ezra for him to take on - and beat - someone who showed all the feral instincts of a rabid wolf.

He flexed the fingers of his injured hand, an unconscious action but one that didn't escape notice by the Texan at his side although his attention seemed to be wholly on the fight.

"He's doin' just fine, Chris." He gave a ghost of a smile. "And yeah, you woulda done it different but that don't mean you woulda done it any better."

Larabee's grin came easily. Hell, sometimes he thought Tanner knew him better than he knew himself.

A sudden roar from the crowd was met with a disgruntled curse from Texan that was echoed in still harsher terms by the older man. Not twenty seconds into the round and Jablonski had drawn blood. In Larabee's experience that was never a good sign.

The Southerner, blocking, gave a quick flick of his head, spraying a fine arc of ruby drops that splattered both the canvas and several of the nearest spectators as blood flowed freely from a cut over his left eyebrow but instead of backing off Ezra responded by counterpunching in such a solid combination of short, powerful jabs that Jablonski was forced onto the back foot and into a hasty defence.

For the brawling sergeant it was both a wake-up call that this was not going to be the cakewalk he had first thought and a signal to step up the pressure. Thumbing his nose he hunched shoulders that would not have been out of place on an ox, and launched himself at the other man. No one put Eddy Jablonski onto the ropes and got away with it twice.

Ezra felt the change in more than just the raw power of the fists connecting with his body and suddenly he knew that he was fighting for more than a squadron title, he was fighting to stop a madman from smashing him to a bloody pulp. And there was no doubt in his mind which was more important to him.

Sweating heavily now and breathing hard as he struggled to see clearly through a haze of blood that not only obscured his vision but upset his perspective, the Southerner was drawing on every bit of skill and cunning he possessed just to stay in the fight. It didn't matter that he was falling back, constantly on the defensive, yielding too much canvas and spending more time covering and blocking than counter-attacking, he was still on his feet and that meant, whatever the odds, that he was still in with a chance. That's all he needed - a chance. That, and an inordinate amount of luck.

This time at the bell the referee was obliged to separate the two fighters although for Ezra's part the clinch was as much to give him a respite from the unending rain of savage punches, however brief, as to contain his opponent.

Reeling drunkenly, he staggered to his corner and gratefully slumped onto the stool, his arms resting on the ropes at shoulder level as both Jackson and Josiah, acting as his second cornerman, went to work. Unresisting he allowed their attentions, surrendering completely to their expertise as he struggled to recover both his wind and his equilibrium. Even the sudden, intense, pain that shot through his brow as a dusting of styptic powder sealed the open wound came as a welcome sliver of reality that served to ground him more firmly in the here and now. He winced but kept his head steady as Jackson finished the job with a generous smear of vaseline as, from the other side, Sanchez kept up a steady flow of advice and encouragement as he massaged life back into leaden muscles, but his focus remained firmly in the ring. Three rounds still to go but the crucial first two were squared away and if what Vin had suggested was right this could well be the turning point; Jablonski should start to tire in the third.

The clang of the bell suddenly jarred through his consciousness and he found himself propelled back into centre ring by two pairs of firm but supportive hands. Without them he doubted he would have made it up from the stool. He didn't recall his mouth-guard being replaced, in fact he had barely been aware of anything that had transpired in the last sixty

seconds, but it no longer mattered. The important thing was that he could see properly again although the tender flesh above his left eye throbbed with a vengeance but, if anything, the pain was a potent reminder of his fallibility. He was going to have to pull out all the stops and give everything he had - and a whole lot more that he didn't - to get through the next round.

If he got through the next round.

The fists of stone were no less powerful and if Ezra thought there might be a fractional slowing in the delivery it was not enough to save him from another punishing onslaught. *Jesus!* The bastard just never gave up.

A slugger, Jablonski's basic strategy was to bolt from his corner at the first sound of the bell like a bull at a gate and let loose with a flurry of untidy punches some of which, by the law of averages, were bound to make contact. The fact that they did, and with monotonous regularity, attested to the success of the sergeant's formula. That he was slower than the Southerner and lacked finesse yielded no advantage when balanced against the raw power of his punches.

Ezra was an in-fighter. His strength lay in his speed and ability to throw punches hard and fast at close range. What he needed was an opening to do just that. So far Jablonski's style had worried him but less than a minute into the third the patterns started to come together for him. Jablonski was becoming predictable. He would have smiled if he hadn't been working so hard to keep the other man moving.

Sooner or later any man will give away his secrets and as an inveterate gambler Ezra had spent too much of his life looking for subtle signs not to recognise a tell when he saw it and the sergeant's technique was starting to show several flaws. And in Ezra's book a flaw, however tiny, was there to be exploited. The thin end of the wedge.

A left hook under his ribs reclaimed his full attention, lifting him onto his toes and shocking him into immobility as the power of it reverberated through his body. For a few seconds his consciousness wavered and he sank into a clinch, gripping the other man's arms and buying himself the time to catch his breath while masking the fact that his legs had suddenly ceased to function. The urge to throw up passed with merciful swiftness and as Jablonski shoved him back he was relieved to find he could still stand, although for a few interminable seconds it was touch and go. He circled warily keeping his fists high in front of his face, aware of the crowd's changing mood as a chorus of voices urged Jablonski to finish him off, and pulled air deep into his lungs to drive out the last vestiges of dizziness. That had been close.

In spite of the dull ache in his side he seized the moment and pressed home with a counter-attack of his own. Jablonski had a tendency to fight with his chin up and, especially after landing a successful punch of his own, pull his head back and lean to the right, putting all his weight onto his back foot. Taking advantage of his momentary imbalance Ezra dived to the inside and, ignoring a hastily executed roundhouse to the kidneys, opened with a right jab to the sergeant's midriff and followed by doubling a left hook to a nicely exposed chin.

Taking his second big hit of the night the vacant-eyed Jablonski stumbled groggily backwards and bounced off the ropes, the force of the rebound seemingly the only thing keeping the thick-necked sergeant upright. It hadn't been enough to knock him down but it had been close.

Ezra, himself panting like a blown horse and certain he was no more than a millisecond away from disgracing himself by retching uncontrollably, allowed himself a fleeting moment of elation even as the harsh clamour of the bell signalled the end of another round.

Larabee had watched the fight unfolding with a studied calm keeping a tight rein on his emotions which had, for the past fifteen minutes, swung erratically through a wide range of feelings from moments of pure anxiety to a curiously satisfying sense of pride. Exhaling loudly he realised that during the final seconds of the round he had been holding his breath and, exchanging a quick glance with a grinning Tanner, he gave a short, almost guilty, laugh. He didn't need to say anything, the sudden release of tension had been mirrored by most of the now buzzing crowd, including the lean Texan beside him.

"Goddamn! I thought he had him then," he murmured, admiration tinged with just a hint of frustration.

"Yeah," agreed Vin, quietly, "And I'll bet Jablonski ain't gonna let him forget it."

"Close one, huh?"

An unexpected third voice joined the conversation.

Wilmington.

Larabee spared a quick look for the tall gunner who had appeared, apparently from nowhere, at his shoulder but his eyes flicked just as quickly back to the ring. "Still think he's going to take a dive, Buck?" He kept his voice low and conversational but it was the deceptively soft sound of a blade being unsheathed.

The other man shrugged indifferently but even though Chris was no longer looking at

him he had the grace to look uncomfortable.

“Hey, that was just the scuttlebutt, alright? Didn’t mean nothing by it.”

“That right? So tell me you didn’t put money on Jablonski.”

It was said without heat and Chris kept his attention firmly fixed on the activity in the Southerner’s corner but the blade was now out, the edge keen enough to draw blood.

Wilmington ducked his head and stroked his mustache, a nervous gesture that signalled his unease.

“Aw, hell, Chris! Ain’t nothing personal. It’s just business. Got a little side bet is all. Anyway, how’d you know?”

Larabee turned to look at his friend. “I didn’t.” His expression eased into a wolfish grin. “But I do now.”

Stricken, a red-faced Buck started to bluster through a hasty defence trying to salvage what remained of his tattered dignity but, failing miserably, he finally settled for silence ultimately saved from incriminating himself further by the bell that announced the start of round four.

Both men were showing signs of tiring and the plum-coloured swelling above Ezra’s now partially-closed eye gave him a beaten-up look that was thankfully not yet reflected in his stance or his movements.

Jablonski had abandoned his customary aggressive opening strategy nstead coming out on the defensive, his switch to covering and blocking a good sign that Ezra’s last hard-hitting combination had hurt. Now the two fighters warily circled each other and Chris allowed himself a quick, tight-lipped smile recognising that the balance had subtly but surely shifted. The sergeant had learned something in the dying seconds of the third; a lesson that many before him had failed to learn until it was too late - that it was a mistake to ever take Ezra Standish on face value.

A quick opening right from the sergeant followed by half a dozen rapid-fire body blows that landed on just about any surface that he could find - arms, midsection, head - met with a roar of approval from a good section of the partisan crowd. Instead of counter punching Ezra stood his ground merely turning and blocking, keeping his elbows tucked in and fists up as he absorbed the punches. Sensing a change the crowd howled, a crude mix of elation and despair, as the Southerner rolled back. At his left shoulder Vin sucked in a sharp breath that Chris heard even above the roar of the men around them, while to his right Buck quietly cursed. They all knew that for Ezra to yield now would give Jablonski the opening he needed to go for his trademark big-hitting knockout and all around him the

men erupted into a frenzy of yelled advice underscored by a buzz of dismay. Larabee's own pulse was jumping and his fists clenched involuntarily as watched his executive officer take a step away, backing off just when he should have been answering with his counterpunch. Goddamn! It was almost as if he was inviting Jablonski to hit him.

The temptation was enough for the sergeant to reach out with a strong right but, forced to shift his weight onto his leading foot, he was momentarily off balance and that was all it took. The Southerner slipped straight into the opening, delivered a fast jab with his right and followed up with a left hook that sent the other man staggering back several paces before he could recover and launch a counter-attack.

In a breath-taking sixty seconds the two men traded hard-hitting blows, neither giving any quarter. Ezra showing he was prepared to take three hits to land one, totally committed, punch; Jablonski jumping in and slugging away at the slightly smaller man to score as many hits as he could in the time remaining, openly displaying his frustration, and desperation.

The Southerner was bleeding again. The cut above his left eye had re-opened in a determined and deliberate attack by the lumbering sergeant who, visibly tiring, was ready to exploit any and every advantage in an effort to end the fight. Ezra responded by planting his feet and standing his ground, obviously hurting from the intensity of the blows Jablonski was raining down on him but accepting the fact, and throwing his whole body weight behind his own punches making each and every one count.

From the sidelines Chris silently urged the Southerner to keep his hands up and hang in as he watched the seconds on the clock unwind with agonising slowness. To be sure the fight was slowing but Ezra was taking a lot of punishment and he could see the tell-tale signs of fatigue creeping in.

Nudging Tanner he leaned towards him having to raise his voice to be heard over the noise of the spectators, many of whom were now on their feet and goading the fighters on.

"I thought Jablonski was supposed to fade in the third," he said, his voice tight.

Vin shrugged.

"Never can tell when a man's gonna go that extra mile, Chris, and tonight it looks like Jablonski's pulling out all the stops. He ain't gonna go down easy." He looked at the two men who had fallen into an exhausted clinch, neither able to do much more than remain standing and that only with the support of the other then, as the bell ending the round sounded above the roar of the crowd, he gave Larabee a long look before adding with a faint smile: "But then, by my eye, neither is Ezra."

VII

Sweat-slicked and breathing hard he slumped inertly against the corner post. Just pulling air into his lungs was a singular effort and even the astringent sting of the styptic powder making contact with raw flesh failed to produce any more than a tiny jerk of his head. Pain had become a distant thing. After all what was one more hurt among many?

Going through the motions without any conscious thought he wearily spat out his mouthguard and took a welcome swig from the bottle of water Josiah tilted into his open mouth, caring nothing about the excess flowing down his chin and onto his chest. The taste of copper on his tongue was strong and, spitting, he rinsed a second time but a quick exploration with his tongue reassured him that his teeth were still intact. For some reason that satisfied him; in this game a man had to be thankful for small mercies.

Closing his eyes he counted slowly making a conscious effort to regulate his breathing before the bell summoned him again. Just one more round. Just two more minutes. But, Dear God, one hundred and twenty seconds out there seemed like a lifetime.

Too soon he was on his feet again. Feet that felt as if he had lead in his boots. Muscles screaming, he raised his fists and squared up for the last time to a man he didn't even know whose only purpose was to see him down on the canvas and out for the count. Too late to question his own sanity now. He already knew he was crazy and the only thing he could find in his favour was that, across the ring, Jablonski looked as bad as he felt.

A chance then. The gambler in him latched onto that thought. A chance was all he could ask for and, God willing, all that he would need.

Fifteen seconds in the Southerner took a right to the kidney that almost send him to his knees. *Holy Christ!* It felt as though the hard-slugging sergeant had punched clean through flesh and bone. Sucking air into suddenly empty lungs he made his feet respond to move him just out of reach as he clumsily changed his stance and barely managed to block the next punch which, had it landed, would have finished him.

Reeling from the shock of the body blow he hung on with the tenacity of a pit-fighting dog, forcing himself to keep moving in a dodge and weave pattern that kept him out of range as he bought himself some time. The downside of that particular strategy was that it kept a frustrated Jablonski simmering. Ezra, still feeling the crippling effect of Jablonski's left, wondered what chance he was going to have when the sergeant finally boiled over.

Deciding he wasn't going to wait to find out Ezra abruptly changed tack. Wading in, he slid forward and planted his feet firmly on the canvas, meeting the other man on his own

terms. Grinning, the slightly taller sergeant was quick to see his advantage and ploughed in with quick left-right combination that rocked the Southerner to his toes. Hurting now, Ezra shook his head as blood spurted from his nose but he held his ground in his favoured southpaw stance filling his lungs with air and hunching his muscular shoulders as Jablonski, looking to land the knock-out punch, came back for another bite of the cherry.

Keep coming you neanderthal bastard.

The punch came all the way from his toes as he pushed off the mat, thighs bunching as he brought his full body weight to bear behind his dominant hand. Swivelling his hips he twisted his upper body and snapped forward his arm and fist, firing off a tremendous left hook that found its mark powering in under Jablonski's right elbow. The effect was instantaneous. Like a deflated barrage balloon the other man dropped to one knee, shock and pain etched on his ashen face.

Panting raggedly through a haze of controlled rage, Ezra found himself straining forward constrained only by the referee's extended arm and realised that he had reached a point where, had there been no physical barrier between himself and the other boxer, he would have mindlessly kept going and pounded the man into the canvas. It took him several seconds to realise that the referee was counting; that Jablonski was really down.

Chest heaving, Ezra wiped his bloody nose on the back of his glove, swaying slightly as the blood sang in his ears. *Goddamn!* When Jablonski got up again he was finished. He had nothing left to give. Suddenly he had the insane urge to laugh. A breath of air could have knocked him down at the moment; the brush of a feather; hell, a harsh word would probably do the trick. He thought he would like to lie down.

The sudden noisy eruption of the crowd cued him that something at least had happened although he was finding it difficult to focus on just what was going on and he braced himself for the start of another punishing onslaught. Then it registered. The referee had finished the count and Jablonski was still down.

It took another several seconds for the reality to sink in. It was over.

“Jesus Christ, Ezra! I still don't believe it! Where the hell did that last punch come from, huh? Just tell me that will ya? I was sure he had you and then...wham! The guy's on his knees with pâté for a liver.”

They had come together in Ezra's makeshift dressing room once the brass and various well-wishers had all said their piece and finally given the lieutenant some breathing space and a chance to unwind.

Ezra, now stretched out on the trestle table with a cold compress over his left eye, struggled to awkwardly raise himself on one elbow and looked steadily at Wilmington as the sergeant ranted.

“It’s called self-preservation, Buck,” he answered mildly, “with just a dash of desperation.”

“Whatever it’s called,” interrupted Chris, smoothly, before Buck could continue with his enthusiastic cross-examination of the Southerner, “that was a damned good fight, Ezra. A real barnburner.”

A look of what on anyone else might have been embarrassment briefly crossed the Southerner’s face as he eased back down onto the table with a weary sigh.

“Be that as it may, Captain Larabee, I now officially declare my retirement from the ring.”

“The shortest boxing career in history,” grinned Tanner, leaning easily against the back wall, “Gotta be some kinda record.”

“So how many wins is that for you now, Ezra?” asked JD, butting in keenly, “I mean, you had all those college fights before this one didn’t you?”

An expectant hush fell that stretched awkwardly into a protracted silence before Standish started to laugh. A low, almost bitter, chuckle that left the others exchanging puzzled glances before all eyes returned once again to the Southerner.

“Well?” Buck, less patient than the others, demanded.

Ezra, still laughing quietly to himself, uttered just a single syllable: “One.”

“ONE!” blurted Wilmington, “Goddamn it! Are you telling me you didn’t win a fight before tonight?”

Standish, with no small amount of difficulty, swung his legs off the table and sat up with one hand cradled around his ribs. Even now, there were still spots of high colour on his torso where Jablonski’s fists had made their mark.

“That’s exactly what I’m saying, Sergeant Wilmington. You see, as ashamed as I am to admit it, I always found it far more...” he hesitated, “let’s say, lucrative, to lose.”

The lanky gunner stared open-mouthed, then suddenly laughed uproariously.

“You *lost* all your fights? You’re saying you’d take a dive to order?”

“For the right price,” admitted Ezra, adding with a wry and totally unrepentant smile: “Something I confess that didn’t go down too well with the Dean once it all came out. Almost got sent down for that...indiscretion.”

“You didn’t say...” accused Buck, jabbing a finger at the Southerner.

“You didn’t ask,” countered Standish, smoothly.

Buck looked as though he might blow a gasket, his moustache bristling with indignation.

“So tonight - *tonight* is the night you decide to find your goddamned principles?”

Ezra gave the lanky sergeant a cunning look, making eye contact and holding his gaze for several long seconds. Sometimes what hadn’t been said screamed louder than that which had.

“Tonight was as good as any time, Buck.” His lips curved into a smile. “You see I generally stick to one very basic tenet...”

“Yeah, and what’s that?”

“Never give a sucker an even break.” He glanced away then, his expression losing none of its affability. “In fact you might want to remember that Buck the next time you’re deciding just where to place your bets.”

Wilmington’s mouth dropped open as he looked mutely around the room for some kind of support but the others seemed to find the whole situation incredibly amusing.

Across the room Chris shook his head, his eyes dancing with amusement, as his gaze moved slowly from Wilmington to Standish.

“Ezra, one day - if I live that long - I just might figure you out.”

The Southerner returned Larabee’s gaze with a smile but there was a hint of sadness to it that he didn’t trouble himself to hide.

“And that, Captain Larabee, is the day I move on.”

