

FORTRESS

The Light of Day



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Larabee had to admit that the flashy automobile was an attention-getter, and that it should be none other than his charismatic co-pilot, Ezra Standish, at the wheel came as no real surprise. The Southerner had guaranteed them transport to London without having to share a train carriage or, as Ezra had witheringly described it, an upholstered cattle truck, with a dozen other fly-boys on leave but Chris had not anticipated an open top sports car in gleaming midnight blue.

“Lieutenant,” he sighed, not entirely certain whether he should be pleased or grieved, “I’m not going to ask because I don’t think I want to know.”

“Captain Larabee, your cynicism wounds me! This magnificent marque, I’ll have you know, was won fairly and squarely only yesterday by my own fair hand.” He grinned mischievously, adding: “or rather three jacks and a pair of kings.”

“A little too convenient, wouldn’t you say, Lieutenant? Remember, we’re supposed to be over here winning hearts and minds, not winning at poker. Jesus, Ezra, it’s a goddamn car not twenty-five bucks we’re talking about!”

A long, low whistle interrupted the debate as Vin Tanner strolled up to the two pilots and did a slow circuit around the car.

“1938 Lagonda V12 drophead coupe, right?”

“Indeed, Lieutenant Tanner, and your transport for the weekend.”

Larabee’s gaze switched between the Texan and the Southerner.

“If I might just interrupt here for just one second, you do know that gas is rationed?”

Standish smiled and flashed his gold tooth at the blond Captain, holding up a buff coloured book.

“Trust me, Captain. There’s enough coupons here to do this old girl for a month!”

Chris snatched the papers from his co-pilot and flicked through the ration book, before Ezra rapidly reclaimed it and tucked it in his breast pocket.

“Ezra,” he started patiently, “The Limey’s don’t take too kindly to profiteering. You’ll end up strung up on some street corner wearing the kind of necktie that isn’t bought over a store counter, ‘less maybe a hardware store! Reckon some of us are wearing out our welcome already without you adding to the problem by scamming the locals out of their cars and gas ration!”

Standish laughed, clearly unrepentant.

“My dear, Chris. Don’t fret yourself. Besides, if you recall, as American servicemen we are completely outside British law. Now, do you wish to avail yourself of this rare opportunity to travel to the city in some style, or shall I just drop you off at the local

station to find a place in one of those charmingly provincial cattle trucks that may just get you to London by midnight if you're lucky? Vin?"

Tanner's response was to throw his pack into the car and vault after it, sliding lazily onto the back seat and stretching his lean frame across the fine leather upholstery. Reluctantly, Chris swung his own bag into the back and climbed into the passenger seat. He glanced at the unfamiliar sight of the driver sitting on the right and sighed.

"Okay, you've convinced me. Now, just shut up and drive, Ezra."

The lieutenant casually saluted and put the big car in gear.

"By all means, Captain. Believe me, you'll thank me before the weekend is over."

Larabee raised a sceptical eyebrow.

"Drive. Lieutenant!"

The amused chuckle from the back seat was ignored by both men as the heavy car rapidly picked up speed and the prospect of forty-eight hours in the capital overshadowed any doubts about the ways and means in which their transport had been procured.

oooOOOooo

Vin lay in the dark, hearing the settling of the building around him through the ringing in his ears, breathing in the dusty air and smelling the richly overpowering odour of gas. He tried to remember what had happened but his recent memory seemed to have deserted him. All he knew was that his head was splitting, something was firmly pinning his legs and preventing him from moving although he was in no great pain, and the barely healed wound in his shoulder was again throbbing with a vengeance. Damn! Where the hell had Ezra gone? And where was Chris? They had all been together -- hadn't they?

The Texan squeezed his eyes shut and tried to concentrate through the thudding hammer blows echoing inside his skull. He could not help but feel he had done something incredibly foolish but for a moment the reason for him being entombed under what might be tons of unstable bricks and mortar, for the moment eluded him.

He jerked reflexively as a pitiful mewling sounded close by his ear, then laughed to himself as he realised he was sharing his space with a kitten. He felt blindly in the dark, fumbling in the direction from which the sound had come only to snatch his hand back with a curse as the frightened animal spat and slashed accurately across the soft webbing between his thumb and forefinger.

"Goddamn it! Little bastard," he hissed, pausing to suck at the freely bleeding scratch.

"Mummy, says that's a bad word."

Jesus, Mary and Joseph! Vin's heart leapt in his chest as the young voice came out of the darkness at him, faintly accusatory but with an underlying tremor that spoke of imminent tears.

"Are you a bad man?"

Vin smiled although he knew that in the pitch black the child could not see him.

"No, kid. I'm not a bad man."

"But you said a bad word."

Tanner was momentarily floored by such five-year old logic, and judging from the sound of her voice the kid was no more than knee high to a grasshopper.

"Well, sometimes even good men cuss a little."

He heard a snuffle and a tinkling laugh.

"You talk funny."

"That's 'cause I'm from Texas, a long ways from here, right across the ocean."

The girl fell silent obviously thinking about what he had said, then finally he heard her again, a small, frightened voice that trembled as she spoke in a whisper.

"If you're not a bad man, can I come and sit with you, 'cos it's very dark and I'm scared."

Tanner felt a rush of emotion, suddenly appreciating the child's fears, trapped in utter blackness with a total stranger and a kitten for company. Hell, he was feeling a mite antsy himself.

"Sure, honey. You just be careful now."

There was a rustle of movement and a shifting of trickling dust and Vin found himself holding his breath, imagining the child groping blindly and trying to find her way in the treacherous dark, hoping that she would not inadvertently trigger a cave-in. A warm, slightly sticky hand touched his face then innocently roamed over his chest finding the landmarks of his body before sliding into his open arms. Vin tucked her against his side away from his injured shoulder and rested his chin against the top of her head. The small body wedged against him was strangely comforting, and in a moment of sudden clarity he remembered what had brought to him his current unfortunate situation.

It had been his idea, so he had no-one but himself to blame. He had been the one who wanted to see the real London; who had finally convinced Ezra that there was more to life than cards, booze and all-too-readily procurable women. Not that he had any

objection to women, but his idea of a souvenir of London was not a dose of the clap, and while the Southerner had laughed at his obvious reticence the Texan noted that Ezra never availed himself of the goods on offer either. Chris? Well, Chris had a mind and a peculiar logic all his own.

Ezra had merely smiled at his suggestion, as he showed his third winning hand in a row and neatly scooped up the modest pot.

“Lieutenant Tanner, if the prospect of “slumming” appeals to you, then by all means let us abandon the enjoyment of wine, women and song, and take a stroll along the seedier side of this fair city.”

“Slumming?” Chris leaned back in the chair, resting one ankle across the opposite knee as he slowly shuffled the deck of cards in his hand. Tilting his head, he squinted, in an attempt to avoid the smoke spiralling from the cigarette tucked in the corner of his mouth from getting into his eyes. “Ezra, your silver spoon is showing again.”

The Southerner laughed, not in the least offended.

“Are you attempting to infer, Captain Larabee, that I am a snob?”

Chris turned his attention to Vin, who sat quietly to one side with the expression of a man who has heard the joke but missed the punch line.

“Ezra apparently extends the same condescension towards the working man as he does to work.”

“On the contrary,” countered the younger man, “I have every respect for the working man. Honest toil and all that.”

Chris shook his head grinning.

“You’re so full of crap. I don’t think you even know what work is.”

“Now I believe you’re confusing work with manual labour.”

Vin sighed heavily.

“All I said was I’d like to see something more of London than the inside of a bar.”

Standish smiled then, his gold tooth gleaming.

“And so you shall. Just as soon as we finish this hand. Now, Captain Larabee, might I suggest you deal before you shuffle the tits right off those queens?”

And that had been the start of it. They had gone looking for reality -- and found it. For Tanner witnessing such wholesale destruction from the ground kindled a spark in the back of his mind, a tiny glow of doubt as he pictured the sticks of bombs falling. Entire city blocks had been flattened, bombed to rubble, and the three airmen had walked in contemplative silence through the streets. For once even the grandiloquent Southerner found nothing of value to say that would not sound pretentious under the circumstances.

Pausing to watch a little girl play contentedly among the debris, Vin dug his fingers in his pockets and stared for a moment at the incongruity of such innocence among the bleak horror of war. People had lived here, worked here, loved here and now there was nothing but a few scattered remnants of vanished lives among the fallen masonry and he wondered how many bombs had fallen here and how many innocent people, just trying to make a living, had suffered and died.

“Vin?”

The voice, quiet -- understanding even -- penetrated his thoughts and he looked up momentarily stricken.

“Do you think...? I mean...is this what we really do? Is this what we leave behind?”

He felt a hand on his right shoulder: Chris, then one on his left: Ezra.

“Don’t even take one step down that road,” warned the soft Southern voice, “I’m telling you, Vin, you can’t afford the price of the trip.”

“Ezra’s right. This was a bad idea. Let’s go.”

Tanner looked back at the scene of utter desolation.

“Do you reckon we’ve hit civilian targets, Chris?”

“I’d like to think not,” countered Larabee sombrely, “but there’s always that chance.”

“Doesn’t that bother you?” Tanner sounded troubled. Uncertainty in his Texan drawl.

Larabee took a step away from the bombardier and bowed his head.

“Yes, it bothers me, but it doesn’t stop me from doing what I’m expected to do either. I fly the plane, you drop the bombs and between the fighters and the flak we try to stay in one piece. That’s the job we’ve been given to do. This may sound a might selfish, Vin, but every time I set that crate back down on home soil, I give thanks that I’m still alive -- hell, that you’re still alive, or Ezra, or any of the crew -- and at that moment I don’t really give a flying fuck who was on the receiving end of the pay load!”

The Texan felt the Southerner squeeze his shoulder again in a gesture that managed to convey both sympathy and reassurance, and looked into overly-bright green eyes and an almost apologetic expression that spoke of Standish’s implicit agreement with the blond pilot.

Tanner rubbed his eyes, suddenly tired, knowing the pricking behind his eyelids was more than the irritation of dust. “Shit. SHIT!”

Vin forced sluggish, heavy-lidded eyes open. Had he been asleep? He was chilled to the bone but down his right side was pleasantly warm and he found that a small circle of

heat was penetrating the fabric of his uniform over his left breast and suddenly he realised that the sound he had been trying to identify was the throaty purring of the kitten who had made a comfortable bed of his chest.

“You fell asleep.”

The small voice was almost accusatory.

“Yes I did, darlin’,” he apologised, finding the soft cap of her hair under his hand and drawing the silken strands through his fingers.

“But I wasn’t frightened, honest.”

Vin swallowed past the lump in his throat, touched by the child’s attempt to be brave and he felt guilty for having abandoned her even for brief moment’s respite of uninvited sleep. Reflexively his arm tightened around her and he wondered just how much time had passed since the wall had collapsed.

The wall. He remembered vaguely that he had heard the girl scream as she had fallen through the debris. He had been standing on the sidewalk with Chris and Ezra watching her play...

“Are you a soldier? My daddy’s a soldier.”

“No, I’m not a soldier. I fly in a big plane.”

“A Spitfire?” She sounded excited. “My uncle flies a Spitfire. He’s killed lots of Germans.”

Jesus! This was just a little kid. She should be playing with dolls, without a care in the world, not playing in the rubble of bombed out houses and talking about Spitfires and killing.

“No. Much bigger than a Spitfire.”

“A bomber?”

Yes, honey. A bomber. I leave little kids like you without a home, without a family, buried under tons of rubble; dead. You see, I’m really good at what I do.

“Yes,” he answered tiredly, “A bomber.”

He felt her grip tighten as she pressed her face against him, then almost absently she started to stroke his face, feeling the dampness of tears on his cheeks.

“Did you hurt yourself,” she asked curiously, associating his tears with a different kind of pain.

“Just a little, hon. Don’t you worry about it none.”

“If I give you hug, will it make you better? That’s what mummy does when I’m hurt.”

Taking his silence for consent, she gently put her arms around his neck, as in the dark he silently wept.

“Vin, wait! Don’t!”

Chris’s warning shout had come too late and both men instinctively cowered, falling back, as the thunder of falling masonry filled their ears and the choking dust rose in a dense cloud, that showered them with stones and fine debris as it fell to earth once more. Coughing and spitting cement dust, Ezra shook his head and brushed the particles of brick dust and assorted detritus from his shoulders and sleeves before staring in stunned bewilderment at the scene before him. He felt Chris grip his jacket sleeve, the pilot equally shaken and for the moment, no more able to function than the Southerner.

“Jesus!”

Ezra moved slowly forward finally coaxing his limbs to respond and tried to remember where he had last seen Vin, but the landscape had changed in the violent upheaval of alternately shifting and collapsing masonry and the spot where Tanner had sprinted in response to the little girl’s cry was now buried under several tons of brick.

“Oh, my God,” he breathed, “Vin’s under there.”

Chris jerked savagely at his arm, pulling him along.

“Well, don’t just stand there! Do something!”

Ezra stumbled across the uneven ground, his mind screaming denial as his logical mind argued the futility of any intervention. Outwardly composed, he joined Larabee in a frantic scramble to clear the debris, afraid of what they might find, equally afraid of what they might not while through his brain ran a repetitive litany that matched the speed of his movements. *He’s alive, he’s alive, he’s alive...*

“Come on, lad. Leave it to them ‘at knows what to do, now,” urged a kindly voice, “Tha’s more like to do ‘arm than good.”

Chris turned, his expression one of bewildered surprise then he nodded slowly as he first deciphered then accepted what the elderly gentleman was saying. He was loathe to stand back but there was truth in the fact that excavation and rescue from such unstable sites was no task for the unskilled.

Miraculously aid seemed to have appeared from nowhere and now the area was cordoned off and an army of volunteer workers were rapidly clearing the debris. A mug of steaming liquid was thrust into his hand and he took it with all the animation of a zombie, raising the mug to his lips and barely tasting the overly-sugared, tannin-rich brew of tea that would normally have left him gagging.

“A mate of yours, you say?”

Larabee finally found his voice.

“There was a kid. A little girl. She fell through. Vin...” The words were disjointed as he tried to articulate what his brain had not yet fully accepted. “It happened so fast.”

The old man steered him by the elbow and deposited him away from the rescue team next to an equally perplexed Standish, the two of them trading shell-shocked glances as they sat and drank the tea that had been thrust upon them, and waited.

Chris ran a hand through his gritty hair, and hung his head. Shit! Claspings the huge mug in both hands he looked at the state of his hands. He had not noticed before but his fingernails were torn and bloody, his hands and arms covered with a myriad of cuts from digging through the rubble. He glanced sideways and noted that Ezra had fared no better, his usually trimmed and manicured fingers as bruised and bloodied as his own and for a moment he bitterly regretted having earlier accused the Southerner of not knowing what work was.

“Chris?”

“What?”

“I’m sorry.”

Larabee looked up, puzzled.

“For what?”

“For bringing us here.”

“Hell, wasn’t your fault. Vin wanted to see the “real” city.”

Ezra hung his head.

“I believe he saw a bit more of reality than he wanted to.”

The blond pilot sighed heavily and sipped the scalding brew.

“Sometimes a man gets to thinking when he should be doing. Too much thinking kinda gets in the way in this business.”

Ezra set his half-empty mug down on the ground between his feet and looked ruefully at the state of his hands, absently tearing off a broken nail as he looked to where the rescuers still dug steadily and patiently.

“Vin has the heart and soul of a poet, Chris. Sometimes his is a different reality to ours.”

“Don’t know about that, Ezra. Seeing a recon photo just doesn’t have the same impact as being right in the thick of it, it does it? No, I figure he’s just realised once and for all that all this is no longer a game.”

Ezra picked up his tea again and tiredly rubbed a hand across his face.

“Was it ever?”

Vin shut his eyes and averted his head, quickly using his shoulder to shield the child as a shower of gritty sand and cement dust trickled down between the rubble. Under one hand he kept the kitten subdued, stroking it but keeping his fingers securely around its ribs. For some reason it had become very important to him that he not let go the scrap of fur that clung to him as tenaciously as the girl.

It had been a long time. Discomfort had turned to real pain as angular and unyielding bricks pressed into the soft flesh of his back and thighs and as he endured the increasing agony of a distended bladder he began to wish he had not drunk quite so much beer earlier. The weight of the child on his left arm had sent it numb but he did not have the heart to disturb her and every now and then worked his fingers in and out of a fist to restore some circulation.

“I’m thirsty.”

“I know, sweetheart. Just hold on. Someone’s coming real soon.”

How many times had he already told her that? Noises, scrapings and scratchings, had been drifting through the debris for so long that he was beginning to think that he was imagining them, reading something into the natural shifting and settling of bricks and timber that was not really there. He wondered again about Ezra, and about Chris. Had they been far enough away to escape the collapse. He knew Chris had shouted to him, but the warning had come too late and it was only by good fortune that he had tumbled down the same hole, and into the same cellar that the girl had fallen into, before the tons of bricks fell in on top of them.

He gave silent thanks that he was unaffected by claustrophobia although the density of the darkness and the sensation of being entombed was suffocating in its intensity, and he wondered how many days it was possible to stay alive under such conditions. He had heard stories of people being rescued after days of being trapped under bombed buildings but the creeping horror of what it must be like to die like this settled over him like a shroud. What happened when hope died, when after long hours of lying helpless in the dark the realisation dawned that no one was ever going to come? Did they cry, scream, shout, try to claw their way free until, fingers bloody and torn, they had no more strength left? He squeezed the child in a hug, his voice dropping to a whisper.

“Real soon.”

“Vin?”

The Texan's eyes snapped open although there was no perceptible change in the inky blackness. Had he imagined it? Wishful thinking on his part? Then he realised that the girl was gently shaking him as if to rouse him from sleep.

"You said someone would come," she whispered. She sounded impressed.

"Vin? Can you hear me? Talk to me, damnit!"

Chris?

"Here!" It was barely a croak. "Down here!"

There was a moment of silence followed by a methodical shifting of the masonry above his head and he squinted as a shaft of light pierced the gloom, the bright glare of torch light shrinking his pupils to painful pinpoints. He raised a hand to cover his eyes.

"Close your eyes, honey," he warned, "Don't open them till I tell you it's okay."

"Is this a surprise?" she asked hesitantly.

Tanner gave a short laugh, unable to suppress the broad grin that creased his face.

"The best darn surprise you could wish for, darlin'."

The gap above his head widened and the glow behind his eyelids turned to bright red as light flooded into the small space. The voices were louder now, and between the unfamiliar accents of his rescuers he heard Ezra's Southern accents as sweet and as clear as a bell.

"Is he alright?"

Peering through slits in his eyelids, the Texan looked up into a sea of faces.

"Shoot, Ezra," he croaked hoarsely, "Course I'm alright."

"Then, good gentlemen, might I suggest that we effect this man's immediate emancipation?"

Laughing he grasped the kitten in his hand and lifted the mewling feline to the full extent of his arm and into fresh air.

"Couldn't have put it better myself, Ezra. Now take this here critter and look after it, why don't ya."

Willing hands took not only the kitten from his grasp but he felt movement on his right that signalled the imminent removal of the little girl and for a moment he felt a sense of absolute loss as she released him and he in turn surrendered his hold on her slight body, and then she was gone and he was suddenly alone.

"Come on, pard. Reckon you've been lying down on the job long enough."

Chris face appeared above him and with a lopsided grin, the blond airman leaned down into the hole and clasped forearms with the still trapped bombardier. Vin sighed, tightly holding on to the other man's muscular arm. No. Not alone.

The Texan refused to go to hospital. With a stubborn and unshakable logic he insisted that if he could still walk, then he could make the decision to walk away and he was going to exercise that right come hell or high water.

He had personally thanked every person who had helped dig him out, shaking hands with an enthusiasm and vigour that belied the pain of his bruised and battered body. Flanked by his two companions, he had finally turned, blue eyes darting in every direction, searching through the mass of bodies until he had finally seen her. Slowly he walked forward, hesitant at first, not absolutely sure of his intentions but determined to at least say goodbye to the child with whom he had shared dark and lonely hours in the cellar.

Seeing him, she broke away from the woman and ran towards him, stopping abruptly three feet away as her young face suddenly clouded with doubt. Vin smiled and crouched, in spite of the pain in his legs.

"It's okay, honey. It's me."

His voice, the soft drawl of Texas so familiar to her, erased any uncertainty and she ran forwards him and put her arms around his neck, hugging him fiercely.

"Thank you," she whispered, "You're not a bad man at all are you?"

He shook his head, the words trapped in his throat.

"No," he finally managed, his voice tight, "I reckon I'm not."

He straightened and picked her up, looking to find the woman he had seen with the child immediately before.

"How about we get you back to your mommy?"

The girl's eyes filled with tears as he moved forward to greet the woman.

"This your daughter, ma'am? She's a courageous little tike."

The woman shook her head sadly as she took the girl from him.

"No, I'm her aunt. Sally's mother was killed in an air raid a year ago." She held out her hand, coolly formal. "Thank you, Lieutenant. I'm in your debt for what you did today."

Face drained of colour, Tanner stammered a few words and numbly reached out to shake the woman's hand, then turned and slowly limped away, not once looking back.

Chris tapped Ezra on the arm as they fell into step behind the departing Texan.

"What was all that about?"

The Southerner swung his jacket over his shoulder and raised an eyebrow as he recognised the desolation in the slump of the young airman's shoulders, as if he carried the sins of the world on his shoulders.

“I think our friend Lieutenant Tanner just found out the real price of that trip I mentioned earlier.”