The Clod and the Pebble

by Tipper

Summary

Sequel to Cornerstone. Ezra's still hurting, Vin's wracked with guilt and Evelyn Starr is still in town.

Notes

Disclaimer: MGM, Walter Mirisch and Trilogy are the owners of M7. No money is being made and no infringement intended. William Blake's poems are somewhere around two hundred years old—I think they're safe to use. ;)
Chapters: Six.
Notes: Vin's still talking more than normal. That's just the way it is. And, I got a little carried away with Blake. My apologies.
The Clod

The Clod and the Pebble

"Love seeketh not itself to please,
Nor for itself hath any care,
But for another gives its ease,
And builds a Heaven in Hell's despair."

So sung a little Clod of Clay
Trodden with the cattle's feet,
But a Pebble of the brook
Warbled out these metres meet:

"Love seeketh only self to please
To bind another to its delight
Joys in another's loss of ease
And builds a Hell in Heaven's despite."

Ezra shut the book after reading that, his mind wandering. His mother had bought him this book of poetry many years ago, a strange gift, but as he'd grown, he'd understood the intent. She'd meant him to learn from it. Well, he had. He'd been trodden on enough since he'd been here. Time to be the man she wanted him to be and move on...

Pain stabbed up his torso and he grimaced, pressing a hand to his side.

...As soon as he was well enough to go.

"There, you see?" Vin pointed down at the saloon front as Ezra stepped off the boardwalk towards the restaurant. "He's got a hitch in his step, see? And he's holding his side. See that?"

Nathan pursed his lips, looking askance at the tracker. "Yeah, I see," he said slowly. "He was shot not too long ago, Vin, at close range. You know as well as I that those kind of wounds take a long time to heal, if they ever do. He's lucky to be alive."

"Yeah, but he shouldn't be walking around so much. He took part in that shoot out the other day, Nathan. What if he'd been hit again?"

Nathan frowned, wishing he'd been told exactly what had occurred that night Childes was killed. Chris, Vin and Ezra all knew, but none had talked about it. Ezra had almost died because of it, and then he had almost left.

Looking down at the gambler as he moved slowly across to the restaurant, it occurred to Nathan that the gambler still might. Yeah, Ezra had taken part in that shoot out, but he hadn't just jumped into it like he normally did. He didn't even pull his gun until he saw someone get in behind JD; he'd just watched for most of it. Almost as if the gambler didn't want to help. The man on the street below was not the same man they had all gotten used to. And neither was Vin. The tracker was nervous and uncertain—he was acting almost as excitable as JD.

The healer took in a deep breath. "Then Ezra would've been hit again. Maybe died this time. But, then, any one of us could have been hit and killed, Vin. You know that—better than most, I thought."
Vin shook his head. "No, that's not what I meant, Nathan. Ezra's still hurting. What if it slows him getting to his gun? What if the wound reopens when he's twisting to shoot at someone else? He's not on the same level with us. He shouldn't be allowed to fight until he's healthy again."

"Vin—"

"We should take his guns. Maybe even confine him to his room. Keep him...keep him safe." The tracker rubbed the back of his neck with his right hand.

"Ezra would never let you take his guns or lock him up."

Vin snorted, but nodded reluctantly that he knew.

Nathan shook his head and leaned over the banister on the balcony, turning his head to the west to look at the sunset. The sky was soft, shimmering in the distance in bands of gold and white. His eyes looked at the silhouette of a woman standing near the edge of town, looking out at the same scene. After a moment, she turned, and lamplight from the boarding house lit up her face.

"I noticed your friend Evelyn was still here," Nathan noted quietly, recognizing the newcomer.

Vin had taken to looking at his feet now that Ezra had gone into the restaurant. At Nathan's words, he looked up and followed his friend's gaze to the road below. Seeing the older woman standing there, he nodded.

"Been nearly two weeks now, hasn't it?" Nathan asked, "Long time to be just visiting."

"I wouldn't know," Vin said. "She hasn't really spoken to me since that first day. We had dinner, but she's been pretty aloof since then."

Nathan's eyebrows perked up, "Seriously? But I thought she was your friend?"

"She is…was family. Something's happened to her, though, since her daughter died four years ago. In her letters, she always seemed fine, but this is the first time I've actually seen her since then. Guess you can hide things behind words that you can't in person."

"True enough," Nathan nodded. He looked out of town in the same direction as she was looking. "Seems almost as if she were waiting for someone," he noted.

Vin shrugged.

"She going back to Las Vegas soon?"

"She doesn't live in Vegas anymore. Moved to Taos. They were forwarding my letters to her. I'd wondered why it used to take her so long to get back to me. Not sure why she didn't tell me before." He shrugged again, "Makes sense though. Who could continue making a living in a place where your only kin was raped and then killed herself."

Nathan closed his eyes for a moment, not liking to think how much it reminded him of his own past. When he opened them again, Evelyn was walking slowly back into town along the boardwalks. Vin was looking back over at the restaurant again.

"So what does she do now, then?"

"Huh?" Vin looked across at Nathan again.

"Evelyn."
"Oh, lives off her savings, I think. She also mentioned something about being a housekeeper part time."

"And her husband? Thought you said she was married?"

Vin's jaw tensed. "Not in the picture," he said darkly. Nathan bowed his head, suddenly thinking that a change of subject was sorely needed.

They stood in silence a bit longer, until Vin turned his gaze back to the restaurant. They were lighting the lamps in front of the hotel, shedding needed light on the darkening street.

"Vin...."

"Yeah?"

"What happened that night?"

"Which?"

Nathan just gave him a look. Vin sighed.

"Chris didn't told you?"

"No. Josiah tried to threaten it out of him one night, but he said it was between you and Ezra."

"Josiah threatened?" Vin smiled. "I wonder who'd win that fight?"

"Josiah." Nathan said. "But don't change the subject."

The smile fell from Vin's face, and he looked out at the sunset.

"It's not something I..." the tracker lowered his eyes, looking down at his hands gripping the banister. "I suppose you have to know sometime. It was me, Nathan. I...," he shook his head, unable to continue.

"You...what?" Nathan prompted after a moment.

"I..." Vin sighed. "I let Childes shoot Ezra."

Nathan frowned. "No," he said, "that's not possible. You wouldn't have done that. You may think you did, but..." He trailed off, because Vin had turned his head and was staring at him nakedly. Nathan swallowed. "I don't believe it."

Vin smiled sadly. "My mind was filled with something else. I hesitated because I thought Ezra might have lied to me about...about something terrible. I had Childes. I just didn't...." He looked up at the darkening sky, at Venus brilliantly winking down at him. "In a split second of hesitation, I betrayed him, something I didn't know I could do, and every day I try to figure out how to take it back."

Nathan shook his head. No, it can't be true.

"I was standing right there, Nate. But it was Chris who took Childes down," Vin finished. "Not me."

Nathan's eyes flickered along the street below at those words, unsure what to look at. He didn't know what to say.
Vin bent forward, like an old man. "I don't know what to do. He doesn't trust me anymore. I don't think he trusts any of us anymore. And I don't know how to fix it." The fingers on the banister gripped so tightly, that they had gone white.

Nathan closed his eyes, trying to let that sink in, and then opened them again. Vin was still bent over, not looking at him, clearly waiting.

Nathan frowned. "So."

"Yeah."

The healer frowned, shivering a little as a gust of winter air brushed across the balcony. For the first time he could remember, Nathan felt doubt about Vin. It was a horrible thing to feel.

"Can I ask why?" he asked after a while. "Why you hesitated?"

"Evelyn. She wrote and told me that Ezra was one of the gamblers that had bet on how many men could bed her daughter before LuAnn passed out, or died. She was so certain in her letter, so sure it was him, and the description she gave me was so close...." He shook his head, "I didn't know what to believe. If it was true. And so I hesitated. I didn't trust Ezra's word enough that he wasn't involved." His jaw clenched, looking almost as if he were going to be ill.

Nathan looked down at the ground, not sure what to say.

"How could I have doubted him, Nathan?" Vin asked softly. "How could I take the word of a woman I hadn't seen in over ten years over that of one of my closest friends?"

Nathan shrugged, not understanding it himself. "She must have been very important to you," he offered weakly.

Vin shrugged, then nodded.

They stood in silence a little longer, until Nathan drew in a deep breath. "So what are you going to do?" he asked quietly

"I thought on leaving. Chris sure as hell don't want me here anymore."

"I saw he was avoiding you. Doesn't mean he—"

"No. He doesn't trust me. When we were on that wagon train, after what happened with Charlotte, he told me he needed to know that I would be there. I said I would. The night Childes was killed, I wasn't. He knows that. Betray one, betray us all, I guess. And he's right. Ezra knows it. I know it. Now you know it too."

Nathan didn't know what to think, so he just stood there.

"Problem is, I can't leave. Not until...until Ezra is healed. Not until I know he doesn't need to be watched out for anymore. Then I'll go."

Nathan felt cold. "Could be awhile."

"I know. But I ain't going to make the same mistake again, Nathan. I'm not letting anyone hurt him again, not while I'm around."

"Hmm," Nathan shook his head.

"What?"
"Nothing, just thinking—what if he leaves first?"

Vin shook his head. "Then I'll go with him."

Nathan gave a faint smile at that answer, and felt a little warmth returning to his bones. "It's a big responsibility to take on."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning, you try to hen Ezra, it could end up killing you."

Vin gave a short laugh. "Yeah, well, then I guess I'll just have to die."

In the background, the sun disappeared below the horizon, and some of Nathan's doubt disappeared with it. Unfortunately, anxiety grew in its place.

Down below, Evelyn Starr climbed the steps of the restaurant and went inside.

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"May I join you, Mr. Standish?"

The fork halfway to his mouth, Ezra couldn't help looking a bit startled at the sight of Evelyn Starr standing in front of his table. Then he smiled, placed the fork down and closed the book he'd been reading.

"Of course, Mrs. Starr. Please." He waved at the empty chair opposite.

"Miss Starr, please, Mr. Standish. I am no longer married. Starr is my maiden name."

"Ah, my apologies."

She nodded in thanks, and sat down. Ezra indicated to the waiter, but she forestalled him with a shake of her head.

"I'm not joining you for repast, Mr. Standish. I just wanted to ask you some questions."

Ezra's brow creased slightly, but as with everything lately, he hid any concern or worry behind his smile. He'd been hiding everything behind his smile lately. Anger, misery, pain—he'd smile through it all until he could leave this town. He wouldn't trust anyone with his emotions again.

"Of course. Whatever I can tell you," he told her.

She inclined her head in thanks. "You said you knew LuAnn, sir, and what happened to her. May I ask how?"

"Easy to answer, madam. Las Vegas is a well-known town, and your saloon in particular was my favorite place to visit. This was, in part, because your daughter was a joy to speak with on the nights that she tended your bar. Very intelligent and quick witted."

A tiny smile flickered across Evelyn's face, but then it stilled again.

"And as to what happened to her?" she asked.

"Ah, well, that is less easy. I was in Taos not too long after the affair, where I met a fellow professional by the name of Cornish Tom. An Englishman with pale blond hair and dark brown eyes. You may have known him?"
"Yes, I knew him. His accent and the fact that he liked to wear yellow made him stick out like a canary."

Ezra smiled again, nodding in agreement. "Yes, well, when I met him, he was just coming from your town. He told me not only about what had happened, but that a quite large group of gamblers in your saloon had chosen to..." He hesitated. "...to make a sport of it." His face tensed at the edges, the only outward sign of his disgust at the news. "Cornish Tom swore to me he hadn't been involved, but he also had done nothing to stop it."

"Would you have?"

"A pointed question, Madam." Ezra frowned slightly—he'd been wondering about that himself. "And one I do not know the answer to. I can tell you that, had it happened now, yes. I would have stopped it."

"But not then?"

Ezra opened his mouth, then shut it. His left hand fingered the fork, and shook his head.

"I would like to think so. But, honestly, I don't know."

The sides of her eyes narrowed. "So what has changed?"

He gave a shrug. "I have found that intervening can have its benefits, even if they may be short lived."

"Benefits," she shook her head, "that seems a cold way to put it, Mr. Standish, especially when talking about lives."

"Yes, well, experience has taught that it is a world of harms and benefits, Madam. One must weigh them constantly to determine the best outcome."

She didn't answer, just leaned back in her chair. "So, did Cornish Tom tell you who else was there that night?"

"He knew a few names yes. He did not mention anyone sharing my name being there, however."

She nodded, not looking at him. "May I ask whom he mentioned?"

Ezra leaned forward. "For what purpose?"

She glanced at him again, then away. "So that I do not make any more mistakes, Mr. Standish. I would like to see these men brought to justice."

His features darkened. "I see." He did not speak again.

After a few moments, she frowned finally and stared directly into his eyes. "You're not going to tell me," she stated quietly.

"No."

She nodded, then sighed. "Well, for what it was worth, thank you for at least answering some of my questions." She stood, arranged her shoulders and nodded once more at him. "Good night, Mr. Standish."

"Miss Starr." He picked up his fork again, holding it tightly in his hand as she left the room as
quietly as she arrived.

Ezra let the fork fall from his fingers and his other hand covered up his eyes. The image of finding Cornish Tom dead two days later in an alley in Taos suddenly hit him. He'd thought it was a robbery, as had the marshal. The ache in his side seemed to throb more intensely, and for a moment he lost his sight, his left hand gripping the edge of the rough lace tablecloth like a lifeline. When the blackness cleared, he found himself looking across at Josiah. The preacher was watching him carefully, his blue eyes bright.

"Mr. Sanchez," he said, his voice husky, his right hand coming to rest on the table. His left let go the cloth.

"I saw you through the window," the preacher replied. "Your hand covering your face. You all right?"

Ezra looked down at his hand, surprised. "I only had my hand there for a moment, Mr. Sanchez. I'm surprised—"

"You sat stock still for almost ten minutes, Ezra," Josiah hissed, leaning forward. "I was afraid to touch you. Didn't you notice me come in? Or hear me call your name?"

For once, Ezra couldn't find his smile. "Ten...ten minutes?"

"Yup. Vin went to get Nathan."

"Vin was here too?"

"Came in a couple of minutes after I did."

Ezra shook his head, "Yes, well, perhaps I just need some more rest. If you will excuse me." He stood, and staggered slightly.

Josiah was instantly there at his arm, taking his weight. It was then that Ezra noticed that the whole restaurant was quiet, watching him. Steeling his jaw, he shook off Josiah's arm, and smiled brightly.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, my apologies for making such a scene. It won't happen again." He even managed a slight bow, and, standing perfectly straight, pulled some cash out of his pocket and laid it on the table. Then he strode purposefully out of the room as if there were nothing wrong, ignoring Josiah's attempt to stop him.

Nathan and Vin met them at the front doors of the restaurant, Nathan gripping his small doctor's bag. Ezra grinned at both of them, laughing slightly.

"Good Lord, you two look much too worried for such a lovely spring evening. I hope that whatever has called you out isn't too serious." Stepping past them both, he looked left and right across the street then crossed over to the saloon.

"I'm really beginning to hate that smile of his," Josiah sneered standing next to Vin and Nathan on the restaurant's boardwalk. Then he glared at Vin, "And I'm sick of you and Chris not talking to us."

"I'll second that," Buck said, jumping up onto the boardwalk, JD close on his heels. Nathan shot him a questioning look, and Buck stuck his chin out at Vin. "We saw you two running over here. Thought we should know what is going on. Now we're here, I think you should tell us what is
"Really going on."

"We have a right, don't you think?" JD demanded, his tone angry. "One minute everything is fine, and then, all of a sudden, I'm wondering who the hell you and Ezra are. You're nervous as hell, and Ezra's acting like he did the first time we met him, except worse. Like he don't care at all anymore."

"And he almost left, don't forget," Josiah reminded them. "That idiocy about a saloon in San Francisco. I warn you now, had he gone, I would have gone with him. I wouldn't have let him leave in that condition without someone to protect him."

It was a surprising statement; but then again, it wasn't. Josiah's attachment to Ezra had only grown over the last few months, despite the younger man's clear dislike for it. Nathan's eyes fell to the boardwalk. The other three looked at Vin.

"They're right, Vin," Chris's voice called from the shadows. He was leaning on a post, lighting a cheroot. Shaking out the match, he nodded at the tracker. "Tell them the truth. I'll go make sure that fool of a gambler is all right." Stepping off the boardwalk, the black-clad man ghosted across the street.

Nathan glanced at Vin, tilted his head towards the tavern, and Vin nodded. He'd be fine. Nathan grimaced and stepped off the boardwalk, following Chris.
Ezra had gone straight to his room, his thoughts moving too quickly for him to face anyone downstairs. Inez had tried to say something, but he'd just brushed past her. She backed away, not chasing him.

When Chris entered a moment later and looked to her, she looked pointedly up the stairs. Chris gave her a nod and headed for the stairs.

Chris opened the door to the small bedroom, mildly surprised to have found the door slightly ajar. Ezra had gotten into the habit of shutting and locking it ever since that time when Li Pong was here.

He found the gambler sitting on the edge of the bed, his hands covering his face.

"You all right?"

Ezra jumped, his hands falling from his face. He looked up at Chris with wide eyes.

"I didn't hear you come in," he said, his tone nervous, and looked at the door. "Didn't I lock it?"

"No."

"What is wrong with me?" Ezra said with obvious confusion, looking back down at the floor. "And I was doing so well," he muttered. "So well."

"Well with what?" Chris asked quietly, shutting the door behind him and locking it. He'd heard someone coming down the hallway behind him and wanted a minute alone with Ezra first.

Ezra gave no indication that he heard the question, just flexed his fingers and exhaled slowly. Then he looked at Chris, a slight smile at the edge of his lips. Chris just raised an eyebrow.

"So, why are you here?" Ezra asked lightly. "I don't recall inviting you."

"You're not well."

Ezra's smile broadened, and he chuckled. His hands moved to grip the cool quilt of the bed. "This may come as a surprise, Chris, but I think I was shot recently."

Chris's jaw tensed in annoyance. "I know. But it's hurting you more tonight than it was."

"Possibly it was before, yes. However, I seem to be better now. I think I should probably just get some rest. If you wouldn't mind...?" He looked over at the door then back at Chris, his smile bright. "There is something I need to work out. I promise I'll go see Nathan in the morning. I appreciate the concern, but it's really nothing."

The gunslinger shook his head. "That smile may look easy, but I figure it's taking you a hell of a lot of work to maintain. You're very good, Ezra, but we know you too damn well."

The gambler's smile faltered, until he simply pressed his lips into a straight line. Turning away from Chris, he stared down at the floor.

"I'd like you to leave," he said softly.
Chris shook his head. "No."

Ezra frowned deeply, but continued to look at the floor. When he didn't say anything else after a while, Chris crossed over to the chair by the window and sat down. Leaning forward on his knees, he clasped his hands and watched the other man's face. Ezra's expression remained tight, his brow furrowed and his jaw tensing and relaxing. Ezra was also unconsciously pressed an arm against his wounded side.

Eventually, Chris sighed, tired of the tension. "Look, speaking of Nathan, I should tell you, he is probably standing just...." He raised a hand to point to the door.

"Evelyn Starr brought Vin up for a while, is that right?" Ezra interrupted, turning back to him.

"What?" Chris replied, genuinely surprised at the change in conversation.

"Miss Starr. He told me she was a good woman, an honest...woman, which is also how I remember she used to run her saloon. He speaks of her almost like he would Nettie Wells—salt of the earth, as they say. And Miss Starr's daughter really was clever, was clearly brought up well, despite what I heard about her father. A little like Casey, except more certain of herself."

Chris tilted his head, confused by the sudden interest in Evelyn Starr.

"Ezra," he said, "if you're trying to explain Vin's behavior the night Childes shot you by using Evelyn, I think—"

"I wasn't in that town, Chris," Ezra said quickly, interrupting him again.

"What?"

"Las Vegas. I wasn't there." Ezra put a hand to his forehead, shutting his eyes.

Chris frowned. "Ezra—"

"I wasn't there the night Evelyn Starr's daughter was raped," the gambler continued. He swallowed and shook his head. "But I had been there the day before."

Chris pursed his lips. "You saying you lied?" he said, his voice low.

"No, I did not, damn it!" Ezra shouted, looking straight at Chris and betraying a real emotion for the first time since that night. "I wasn't there when it happened! The pickings were slim; the town tedious. Too many gamblers and not enough money. So I left to ride the turquoise trail up to Taos."

Chris's eye narrowed. Ezra turned away again.

"But Miss Starr, she thinks I was. I can still see it in her eyes. She remembers that I was there around that time, even if I wasn't actually there on the night her daughter...." He grimaced, and didn't continue.

"Well," Chris said quietly, "she doesn't seem inclined to do anything about it."

"No. I think Vin just confused her for a while. Made her question herself."

"He only told her the truth. Are you so sure she hasn't accepted it?"

"I think she has formed an image in her mind, Chris. Nothing will shake her belief in its reality."
Her daughter killed herself because of what happened that night. Evelyn Starr is determined to find justice."

"So, what makes you think that her justice includes you still?"

"She's still here."

"True. But, then, she and Vin have a history."

"And she approached me in the restaurant tonight."

Chris nodded slowly, understanding. Ezra would have finally had the chance to "read" the woman, as he put it.

"She hates me, Chris. I could almost taste it, it was so strong in her."

Chris looked down at the floor where Ezra was staring, then up at the younger man's face. Ezra was sweating slightly—a sheen of moisture covering his face—and he looked almost green beneath the tanned skin.

"Ezra, look, I'm not sure where you're going with this, but we know she's wrong. You know that, right? Don't matter what she thinks. We know."

Ezra didn't reply. Chris frowned. He wasn't sure Ezra had even heard him.

"Ezra?"

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He heard Chris talking, but all Ezra could think about was Cornish Tom's face when they'd found him in that alley, and the faces of all the other gamblers he had known that had been there, and where they were now. Could she really have done what he was thinking? Was her hatred that strong? He couldn't see her as a killer. She was filled with hatred and misery, but could she have actually killed Tom? And the others? He couldn't see the gun in her hand.

But it could have been in someone else's hand. Someone whom she trusted, who trusted her.

Ezra shook his head—the pain must be confusing him. Seeing things that weren't there. He was jumping to conclusions. That had to be it. He was getting this all wrong.

But they were all dead, weren't they? That was a big coincidence. And she had a power to her, he'd felt it himself. He could see her talking someone into helping her, someone who knew his way around a gun, maybe even someone who had gone after guilty people before, perhaps as a living...

…like a bounty hunter....

A natural choice, and she had only asked him to do it again. And he nearly did, even if he didn't pull the trigger.

No. No, that wasn't right. That wasn't him. He would never kill anyone in cold blood.

Would he?

Oh God, his side was killing him. When did it get so hot in here?

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"Ezra?" Chris stepped forward as the man's greenish pallor went suddenly white.
"I must be wrong," Ezra gasped suddenly. "Please, Chris, tell me I'm wrong."

The gunslinger arched an eyebrow, moving to stand in front of the gambler.

"Wrong about what?" he asked.

"See, I was trying to remember how many there were. Cornish Tom. I wonder if he was the first? It makes sense......" Ezra shook his head, his speech coming more quickly. "And there was JJ Thompson. Manny Keys and Robert Stakes. Aces Martin. Dan Mason. King-sly Sam. Orange Mel." He frowned, staring out the window towards the hotel. "All of them, gone."

"Ezra, you lost me. Who are you talking about?"

"I didn't particularly like them. And in my profession, it's not like its an uncommon end. But all of them? And Tom, he was a good man. No, boy, really not much more than a boy." He gave a small smile, "Shame about his clothes. Really did like yellow a little too much. Made him stick out. Made him memorable. He used to talk about how pretty Cornwall was, how much he hoped to go back there and build himself a home on a freehold of his own."

"Ezra, you're not making sense."

"He didn't deserve to die, Chris." Ezra shivered violently all of a sudden, and Chris reached for the door.

"I'm getting Nathan."

"No!" Ezra grabbed Chris's arm, his eyes bright, "Wait! Vin was a bounty hunter, remember? Killed people, guilty people, people with prices on their heads, people he was hired to kill. Don't you see? That is what he does. What if—" He stopped suddenly, his breath catching in a hitch. Shutting his eyes, he suddenly doubled over with a faint moan. Chris acted fast, just stopping him from falling forward to the floor. He placed Ezra back onto the bed, seeing the pinched look on the man's face.

"Hold on, Ezra," he hissed. As soon as he was sure Ezra wouldn't roll over and fall off, he went to the door and unlocked it. Nathan had been leaning on the hallway wall opposite, waiting nervously. At Chris's nod, he came in and took over, pressing a hand to the side of Ezra's face.

"Damn it," Nathan whispered. "I needed him awake to tell me what was wrong. What happened?"

"I don't know. He started muttering madly, then, suddenly, he just fell over."

"Like he fainted?"

"Yeah."

Nathan had opened Ezra's shirt by this time, and was busily cutting away the bandage around his waist. There was some spotted blood on the cloth, but otherwise it looked clean. He gently pressed his hands against the area around the wound, and frowned to find it hard to the touch, swollen. He looked up at Chris with dark eyes.

"Get Inez to bring us some hot water, and have someone fetch Stephen and Belinda Greene. Tell him I need some shephard's purse, or ratany if they don't have any, and some echinacea and desert willow. I think I have everything else I need here." He pulled some poultice makers from his small bag, a bottle of alcohol, a spool of thread, and started unwrapping some fresh bandage, breaking it
with his teeth. Chris nodded and headed out of the door, looking to yell for Inez.

Evelyn looked out of her hotel window to the window she knew was Ezra's room. From her suite, she had a perfect view of the street, the front of the saloon and of his window. She could just make out the shadows of movement behind the cloth blind, and she wondered what was happening. Someone had run out of the saloon a few minutes earlier, calling to where she had been watching those "friends" of Vin giving him what looked like a tongue lashing about something. Then all had run to the saloon, and, presumably up to that gambler's room. Her eyes glanced down again, seeing a rather tall blond man and a woman run across the street with some jars filled with herbs. Looked like the apothecary and his wife – she'd met them earlier. Had only nice things to say about Ezra Standish. Conned like the rest, like Vin.

Her eyes narrowed.

"What is it?" a gruff voice asked from behind her.

"Seems the gambler is still hurt."

"So?"

"So, they're all in his room. You're not going to be able to get to him tonight."

"Yeah, well, I'm tired anyway. Long ride down from the north to get here."

She nodded, turning to look at him. A man with salt and pepper hair lay on her bed, an arm slung across his bristled face, covering his eyes. Road dust and dirt was visible on his clothes, and his boots were caked with mud where they hung off the edge of the bed.

"How many will this one be, then, Tam?"

The man sighed, lifting the arm up to look up at the low timbered ceiling of the hotel room. His eyes were dark blue, lined with red. Lines of age circled them, much as they did Evelyn's.

"I don't know, Lyn. Thirteen, I think."

"Thirteen." She rubbed her forehead with her hand, "There are still so many more. Sometimes I don't think we'll ever get them all."

Tam shifted so he could look at her. "We'll get them all. I made you that promise. Though, I have to admit, I kinda thought we'd be done by now. You haven't called on me for almost a year now. I thought we'd gotten them all."

Evelyn frowned, turning back to the window. "No. I just lost track of them. This one, for example, changed his name. Kept the same first name though. Tried to tell me there were others with the same name, but I remember him too well."

"You're sure he was one of them."

"Of course."

"Then I'll kill him."

"Yes..." she repeated the words, and looked down. "Although Vin doesn't think so."

The man on the bed stiffened, and he sat up. "What?"
"Vin. He's here too. Didn't I tell you?" she asked innocently.

"Tanner?"

"I don't want you to hurt him, Tam. Please." She was looking at him, her eyes pleading.

"After what that foul boy did to me?" the man hissed. "He'll be lucky if I just hurt him." He sneered, standing up and limping over to the window to join her. She glanced down at his leg, knowing exactly why he had that limp and who had given it to him.

"Tam, he's not the issue here. I don't want you hurting him. If you do, I'll turn you in, understand?"

"Turn me in?" His eyes flashed dangerously. "For what?"

She swallowed. "You know what," she said. Evelyn gave a slight squeal as he gripped her arm in his. Her mouth trembled as he leaned in, his face getting within inches of hers.

"What I did...do...is all your idea, Lyn. You're the one that finds them, not me. You turn me in, I turn you in as well."

"Who do you think they'll believe," she snarled, meeting his gaze despite her fear. "We're not married anymore, Tam. Everyone thinks we hate each other. Why would I work with you?"

"Because LuAnn was both of ours, both our daughter. Everything I did, I did for her and you. They'll hear that."

She shook her head, and gave a small smile. "They don't hang women, Tam. Remember that."

He stared at her a moment longer, then loosed her arm. He walked back to the bed, ignoring her as she got her breathing back under control and straightened out her skirts. When she felt calm enough, she looked at his hunched back.

"Promise me you'll leave Vin alone. Promise me."

Tam didn't answer right away. Instead he looked over at the rifle resting against the chair in the room. "Where is he, exactly? So I know where not to go."

"He...um..." she looked back to the window opposite. "He's friends with the gambler. I told you, he doesn't think Ezra Standish was there. He's been fooled, like everyone else here. Can't see the snake for all the grass."

Tam frowned, and exhaled heavily through his nose.

"And what if your precious Vin gets in the way?" he asked gruffly.

"He...he won't. That's why I'm still here. I'll find a way to distract him. Get him away from the gambler."

"And if you fail, what's more important to you?" Tam turned to face her, his face plain. Evelyn shut her eyes.

"It won't come to that."

"But what if it does?"

"Damn it, Tam! It won't!"
The older man looked at her, his blue eyes black in the shadowed room. Evelyn sank into the plush chair by the window and touched her face with a shaking hand.

"Fine. Then you just tell me when."

She nodded, and looked over at the gambler's window again. The movement inside seemed less frantic, more deliberate.

"Tomorrow night. I'll ask Vin to dinner again," she said. "Eight o'clock."
The next morning dawned cool and bright, the winter chill still keeping its hold on the air. Vin barely noticed the cold as he walked down the stairs into the main saloon, wiping a tired hand across his eyes.

"Nathan says he's going to be bedridden for a couple of days," he said softly, finding Buck, JD and Chris sitting near a front table, drinking coffee. "He's says we're lucky, so far." He sniffed, and settled himself against a post, looking east at the sunrise.

"Josiah still up there?" Buck asked.

"Yeah. Plans to be there for a while, I think."

"Good."

"Nathan going to get some rest?" Chris asked.

"Yeah. He should be down in a minute."

The gunslinger nodded.

"We, uh, we had some time to think, Vin," JD said, standing up to face the tracker. "And we're sorry."

Vin blinked, confused. "huh?"

"We yelled at you a bit hard, last night," Buck explained. "Thing is, I think we were just reacting to the fact that...that anyone of us might've done the same. We all have had moments of hesitation. Doesn't matter if it's Ezra, or you, or Josiah, or anyone of us who is being questioned. Doubt's a powerful thing. It weren't your fault that it grabbed you at the wrong moment."

Vin nodded, not sure he deserved their apologies, but grateful nonetheless.

"Just don't do it again, Tanner," Buck stated.

"I won't." Vin looked over his shoulder towards the stairs to Ezra's room, "And I'll prove that to him as well."

"How?" Chris asked levelly.

"I don't know, but I'll find a way. He's not going to get rid of me until I do, either."

Chris snorted and looked away. Vin frowned.

"Believe what you want, Chris," he said quietly. "I'll make up for this."

The gunslinger continued to frown, then he shrugged.

"I never said you wouldn't. I just wanted to know how."

"Chris's the one who got us to see your side, Vin," Buck interrupted. "Probably cause he knows about doubt better than any of us."

Vin's brow creased slightly, surprised, but then he smiled. He looked at Chris.
"This mean you're going to stop avoiding me?"

Chris gave him a sharp look. "What are you talking about? I never avoided you."

"Yeah, sure."

"I don't avoid people, Vin. They mostly seem to want to avoid me."

Vin smiled. "Yeah, well, you do kind of smell sometimes."

Chris's look got darker. "I wouldn't talk, buffalo hunter."

"Just saying, black is not a cool color. In the heat, with all that sweat...."

"Dangerous ground, Tanner."

"Friendly advice, I call it."

"Cut off some of that mop of yours, then we'll talk."

Vin grinned, one hand reaching up to push the hair off his shoulder. "At least I put soap to it every once and a while."

Chris suddenly jumped to his feet, putting his hand to his gun, and Vin matched him. The entire saloon tensed up, some even jumping under the tables, though Buck and JD just leaned back in their chairs, both smiling slightly. Vin and Chris glared at each other for a moment, until a tiny perk of a smile twitched at the edge of Vin's mouth.

Chris arched one eyebrow.

That was all it took. The tracker started laughing, and both Buck and JD joined him. Chris just smiled, walking around the table to pat the tracker on the shoulder.

"It'll work out," he said quietly, his voice low so only Vin could hear. "And, for what it's worth, I'm sorry."

Vin stopped laughing long enough to wipe a tear from his eye, and he looked up at Chris. Straightening, he nodded.

"Thanks Chris. But it weren't you."

"Could have been. Easily. Hindsight is a bitch, but at least it can teach you a little."

Vin nodded, most of his mirth gone. "I know."

"Hey," Nathan stood atop the balcony, looking down on them. "I miss something?"

"No." Vin's smile fell as he looked up at the healer. "How is he?"

"Asleep. Will be, probably, for a few more hours. If you want to take over for Josiah around lunchtime, Ezra should be waking about then, and probably thirsty."

"Ez waking up around noon? Maybe things really are getting back to normal around here," Buck laughed.
"Vin?"

The tracker looked up from where he was dunking his head in a bucket, the long hair covered in soap. He spat, and pushed the hair away from his face, and blushed. Evelyn stood in the doorway to the bathhouse, smiling slightly at seeing him without his shirt on and dripping wet. At least he had his trousers on.

"Evelyn, please! You shouldn't be here when I—"

"I seen it all before, boy, when you were a whole lot smaller. Don't mind me."

Vin continued to blush, and grabbed a towel to wipe off his face and cover up his chest slightly. Evelyn couldn't resist a slight chuckle.

"Still shyer than a mouse, ain't you? Well, I won't keep you. I just wanted to ask if you wanted to have dinner with me tonight."

Vin smiled, pleased, then it fell as he thought of Ezra.

"Lyn, I would, but there's someone I'm needing to look after."

"Can't you get someone else to do it?"

"He's my responsibility, ma'am."

"I understand. It's just—I plan on leaving on the morning stage. As it's my last night here, I thought you'd want to." She shrugged. "But that's all right. If you're too busy, I guess I'll just eat alone again." She sighed heavily.

Vin grimaced, guilt warring with guilt. Evelyn turned to leave.

"Evelyn, wait," Vin sighed, and smiled as she turned to him again. "Of course I'll have dinner with you. I'll have someone else look after Ezra. What time?"

"Eight?"

"Fine. I'll see you then."

Evelyn smiled brightly, then chuckled. "Don't forget to get behind the ears, son," she called as she closed the bathhouse door behind her.

Vin smiled, shook his head, and dunked his head back in the bucket. Grabbing the soap, he vigorously rubbed behind his ears.

A couple of hours later, when the sun was hitting noon, Ezra finally opened his eyes. He felt oddly light-headed and disoriented, but at least the pressure on his abdomen had disappeared. He blinked a few times, trying to remember what exactly had happened, but his mind was a jumble.

"Hey," a voice called softly to his right.

Ezra frowned, and tilted his head to look towards the voice. Vin sat in his rocking chair next to the bed, one of Ezra's books of poetry on his lap. The tracker stood up, laying the book to one side, and leaned over the bed.

"You awake?"
"Apparently," Ezra croaked, and grunted as his breath caught in his dry throat. Vin grabbed the glass next to the bed and offered him water. Ezra drank it slowly, but his eyes remained locked on Vin.

"Better?" the tracker asked, taking the glass away.

The gambler didn't answer, but his eyes narrowed as bits and pieces of his last thoughts floated into his skull.

"I was just reading a book of yours I found on the side table, called..." Vin turned and, picking up the book again, looked at the spine. "Songs of Innocence and of Experience by William Blake." He looked at Ezra, then flipped to one of the pages. "I saw this one, and it sort of made me think of...what's been happening." He looked down at the brightly drawn page, then swallowed and began to read.

"The Poison Tree.

I was angry with my friend.
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe,
I told it not, my wrath did grow."

He glanced at Ezra, still seeing the narrowed, suspicious eyes. Swallowing, he continued.

"And I watered it with my fears,
Night and morning with my tears.
And I sunned it with smiles...,"

He glanced at Ezra again.

"And with soft, deceitful wiles."

Ezra remained quiet. Vin tried not to be discouraged and pressed on. He'd memorized this, he wasn't stopping now.

"And it grew both day and night,
Till it bore an apple bright.
And my foe beheld it shine,
And he knew that it was mine.

And into my garden stole,
When the night had veil'd the pole,
In the morning glad I see,
My foe outstretched beneath the tree."

He looked up, and saw Ezra had frowned slightly, watching Vin carefully. Vin tried not to betray his nervousness. Please let him have understood the poem's meaning correctly, he thought to himself. It was one thing to be able to read these now after all of Mary's teachings, but understanding was another.

Ezra shut his eyes and turned his head away.

"Ezra?" Vin prompted, putting the book down again.

"Was that a warning, Vin?"
"A warning? Lord no, Ezra! Don't you get it? I'm not letting that happen to us. You need to talk to me. That's my point. I need you to stop treating me like the enemy."

Ezra didn't say anything.

The tracker frowned and sat back down on the chair. So much for poetry.

"Did you read any others in there?" Ezra asked after a moment.

Vin looked up, surprised. He thought the gambler had fallen back asleep.

"Yeah. All of them. Didn't get everything, but I think I understood most."

"Did you read the Tyger?"

"Uh, I...."

Ezra smiled, but his expression remained cold. "Read it to me, will you?"

Vin frowned, but if he kept Ezra talking…. He dutifully found the poem and started to read, struggling a little with the words.

"Tyger, Tyger burning bright
In the forest of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame they fearful symmetry."

He frowned, looking up. He had a bad feeling about this.

"Keep going," Ezra encouraged, his eyes oddly bright. Vin sighed and continued.

"In what distant deeps or skies
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand dare seize the fire?

And what shoulder, and what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart,
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand? And what dread feet?"

Vin shut the book. "You know, Ez, I think that's enough, I—"

"What the hammer?" Ezra said then, looking up at the ceiling. "What the chain?
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? What dread grasp,
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

When the stars threw down their spears,
And water'd heaven with their tears,
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the lamb make thee?"

Ezra turned to fix icy green eyes on Vin, his stare causing the tracker to tense up. The gambler's look was one of derision when he finished.
"Tyger, Tyger, burning bright,
In the forest of the night,
What immortal hand or eye,
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry."

Ezra stared at Vin a little longer, then turned his head away again.

Vin's eyes fell to the book in his lap. Is that really what Ezra thought of him? He shook his head, hoping it was just the man's pain talking.

"I'm sorry Ezra," he said finally, standing. "I'll be outside if you need me."

"I'd rather that you weren't."

Vin froze, not missing the finality in the other man's tone. He didn't know where the anger and coldness had come from, and something told him he didn't want to know. Ezra had at least been pretending to get along with him the last few weeks, and Vin had hoped to wear him down. He had hoped then could at least talk about what had happened, which had been his hope when he read that first poem. What had changed?

He moved to Ezra's trunk and lay the book down on top of it, wishing he had never picked it up.
Tyger Tyger Burning Bright

The day moved slowly, the seconds on the clock seeming to slow down with each shift. Vin could have sworn that, twice, the sun had moved backwards in its course, fooling him into thinking it was later and then laughing at him. The others were no longer watching him, or censuring him, but it didn’t matter to him as much as Ezra. The gambler had explicitly asked the others that Vin not be allowed anywhere near him, and had spoken to Josiah again about leaving soon. When the preacher said that he would travel with him, the gambler had laughed and tried to convince him it was unnecessary. Vin had heard that laugh from the floor of the saloon, missing it already.

It was absurd.

Apparently, both Chris and Josiah had tried to talk to Ezra about Vin, after the gambler had asked for him to be kept away, but the gambler shook them both off with a smile, as was his wont. He didn't explain, he just asked that they respect his wishes for once. And that damn smile of his remained firmly in place the whole time, as if he were discussing the weather.

And how could they say no, after Nathan had made them promise not to excite or bother Ezra too much.

So Vin sat in the saloon all day, nursing a bottle of red-eye and telling himself that whatever it was, it would blow over. They'd work it out. He'd work it out. Somehow.

When the sun finally fell below the horizon, the tracker was thankful. He looked up at the clock, saw that it was nearing 7:30, and got up to head towards the hotel. He hoped Evelyn wouldn't mind if he were early.

____________________________

Tam jumped almost a foot when someone knocked on the door, and he glanced fearfully towards the bedroom. Evelyn stuck her head out, her eyes wide, and she shook her head at her former husband.

Walking to the door, she rubbed her hands on her skirts and, without opening the door, called out to ask who it was.

"Vin. I'm sorry I'm early, Evelyn. I hope you don't mind."

Evelyn put her hand to her forehead, and sighed.

"No, of course not. Could you just give me a moment? I just want to...uh...finish fixing my hair."

"Yeah, sure."

Evelyn looked up at the ceiling, then over at Tam. The older man grimaced, pulling the cigar out of his mouth. He raised an eyebrow, silently asking her what he should do.

She looked around quickly, then focused on the window of her bedroom. It led to the hotel's balcony. Motioning him to follow, she strode to the bedroom. Tam put out the cigar, shouldered his bag on his shoulder, and went after her.

She opened the window and looked out at the moonlit street. Seeing nothing moving, she opened it wider and backed away. Tam dropped his bag through the window, then climbed out onto the wooden balcony. Keeping low, he got to the edge, then, after making sure no one was looking, dropped his bag over and shimmied down the post.
Evelyn heaved a sigh, closed the window, pushed some stray hairs into place, and walked back into the main room. Glancing around, she saw the cigar and frowned. Picking it up distastefully by its middle, she walked to another window.

Vin knocked again, more loudly, causing her to jump and drop it.

"Lyn, I can come back," he called through the door.

She put a hand to her chest, to calm her breathing, then bent down to pick the cigar up again.

"No, no, Vin. It's fine. I'll be there in a second."

Reaching the window, she opened it a touch, threw out the cigar, and then shut it. Affecting a wide smile, she walked to the door and let the tracker in.

Vin smiled at Evelyn's appearance—she'd done her hair into a handsome but severe bun and had donned a colorful but prim dress. It was very her.

"Let me just get my shawl," she said, opening the door wide to allow him entry, and then retreating to the bedroom.

Vin walked inside, glancing around the room, knowing it fairly well. Ironically, it was the same room Stutz had stayed in, when they'd found the ten thousand dollars—Ezra's face when he'd found it! Vin almost laughed as he looked towards the small wardrobe.

And just as suddenly, his smile fell as he recognized the stench of cigar smoke, the brand that made it all too familiar. Frowning, he walked towards the small side window, noticing something smoldering on the floor. As he reached it and bent down, Evelyn walked back into the room.

"The carpet is burning here," he said quietly.

Evelyn froze.

"Looks like someone dropped a cigar. Or, at least, that's what it smells like." He watched her carefully as her gaze shifted between the carpet and him—like a thief whose hand had been caught in the till.

She suddenly laughed nervously under the examination. "Ha, yes, well, you've found me out, boy. I suppose someone of your skill wouldn't miss that. I've taken up the habit, I'm afraid."

Vin's gaze narrowed, and he stood up to face her. She continued to smile, but it was far more tense than before. Frowning, he looked more carefully around the room. He perked an eyebrow, and walked to the sideboard near the door, where a bottle of tequila sat on a tray with one glass. He picked up the bottle and glanced at the label.

"Tequila?" He looked back at her. "You hate tequila."

"A lot of things have changed about me, Vin Tanner. Had you been around, you might have learned that. Of course, had you been around, a lot of things might not have happened." She arched an eyebrow. Vin's jaw tensed.

"Where is he, Evelyn?"

She tried to look confused, and her smile widened. "What?"
"You didn't have cigar smell on your clothes before. You do now. And tequila makes you ill."

She shrugged.

"But he loved both those things. I remember you complaining to me about them over and over again. I remember the way he beat you when you broke his tequila bottles. And I still have cigar burns on my arms and legs. Do you think I would forget?"

"Vin...."

"He beat LuAnn and you as well. He nearly killed me twice before I ran...."

"You've got it wrong, Vin. Please."

"Where is he?"

"Tam is not here! How could you even imagine that I would let him come near me again?" Her eyes began to shift, and she backed away from the tracker.

"Tell me Evelyn!"

She put her hand to cover her mouth, and shook her head. Vin frowned, watching her closely as she backed up into the bedroom, her eyes flying around the room as if looking for an escape. Vin followed her, then followed her gaze as she stared too long out the front window to the saloon beyond. His heart stopped for an instant as he realized whose window she had looked at.

Pulling the mare's leg from its holster, he took off running.

"No, Vin!" She screamed, going after him.

In the saloon, a brawl had broken out and seemed in full swing by the time the tracker reached the road outside of it. Vin ran around to the back in order to avoid it.

Nathan was jolted awake from the nap he'd been taking in Ezra's rocking chair when the brawl broke out downstairs. Glancing at Ezra, who still had his eyes closed, he got up and walked to the door. Opening it, he listened for a minute to the ruckus. Glancing once more back at the gambler to make sure he was all right, he sighed and pulled out his gun and went to try and stop the fight.

As soon as Nathan was gone, Ezra opened his eyes, awake despite himself. Shifting up onto his elbows, he stared at the trunk against the far wall with the book by Blake on it. The man's poems had been running through his head all day, especially the Songs of Experience, and he'd been growing more and more despondent. When he heard the door open again, he slid back under the covers and shut his eyes.

Tam smiled in the shadows of the hallway as Nathan sped by him oblivious to Tam's presence, thinking that the ten dollars he'd offered those cowboys had been very well spent. Quietly, he pulled the long hunting knife from his belt and inched towards the gambler's door.

He hesitated for a moment when his hand touched the handle. He didn't want to kill this man, any more than he'd wanted to kill the others. Each one had been a little easier than that first – the boy in the yellow coat had without question been the worst – but it had been such a long time since he'd murdered the last. He could turn away, leave her to her madness alone, but then his jaw steeled as he thought of LuAnn. He'd made a promise.
These gamblers deserved to die. All of them.

His hand tightened on the knife and he opened the door. Thankfully, this gambler was sleeping—if he did this fast enough, there shouldn’t be much noise. Bending over the bed, he lowered the knife to the gambler's throat, lamplight flashing on the bright blade.

As soon as the cold metal touched his throat, the gambler's eyes flew open. With a yell, he reached up and grabbed Tam's arm, preventing the knife from slicing any deeper. Surprised by the speed, Tam staggered, falling into the bed, a movement the gambler used to pull the knife arm away from his throat. Before Tam knew what was happening, the gambler managed to slam his fist into his jaw.

Stunned, Tam fell backwards, landing partly on the bed near the gambler's feet, and the gambler pulled himself up and to the other side of the bed. The moment he was on his feet, though, the injuries Evelyn had told Tam about became evident as the gambler suddenly doubled over, his long nightshirt catching slightly in the sheets.

Tam jumped to his feet, rubbing his jaw and sliding across the bed. The gambler tried to get away, but only fell to his side on the ground, rolling away as Tam stabbed down where he had fallen. Scrambling to his bare feet, the gambler tried to get to his nightstand, where his guns were. Tam was ready for that—he grabbed the gambler's shoulder from behind and threw him sideways. His prey landed badly against the edge of the bed, specks of blood appearing on the nightshirt. With a groan, the gambler pressed his hand to his now bleeding side, and tried to get back to his feet, only to stumble and fall again.

Standing now in front of the dresser, Tam shook his head and gripped the knife more tightly.

"You're done," Tam told him. "One way or another, you die now."

Ezra stared up at the stranger in his room, utterly confused. He could hear the sounds of the brawl downstairs, understanding unhappily where the others were and why he was alone in this. His body shook as he slid down to the floor, his strength gone.

"Who are you?" he gasped.

The stranger frowned, not answering, and took a step closer.

Using the last of his energy, Ezra launched himself forward into the other man's legs, bowling the stranger backwards into the dresser and down onto the floor with him. Rolling off of him, Ezra got to his feet and tried to reach the door. Tam grabbed his foot, bringing Ezra to the ground harshly, knocking the wind out of him. Ezra rolled onto his side, hand pressed to the bandages, and shut his eyes in pain. His world reduced itself to stars and blackness and sound.

He felt the stranger kneel down next to his head, and a cold hand pressed against his temple, holding his throbbing skull against the ground. A moment later, cold steel was once more at his throat, and Ezra tried to steel himself against his now certain death.

"Drop it, Tam!"

Ezra's eyes opened at Vin's wonderful shout. He could tell Vin was panting slightly, as if he'd just been running. He tried to see him, but all he could see was the stranger's face barely a foot from his own, the ugly features twisted into a sneer.

"I see that arm tense up to cut his throat," Vin continued, "and you won't have a head any longer, get it?"
The stranger—Tam?—just continued to stared at Vin with hate filled eyes and the knife didn't move.

"Tanner," he hissed.

"Yeah. Tanner. Drop it, you ugly son of bitch. Believe me, I have no trouble with the idea of killing you."

The stranger stared a while longer, then, wonderfully for Ezra, he dropped the knife.

Ezra blinked, his world returning. The pain and panic started to fade, but he didn't try to get up. He was shaking too hard.

"Back away from him," Vin said slowly. "Ezra, you all right?"

Ezra swallowed, feeling the fine cut along his neck as he did so. "Vin?"

"Yeah, you all right?"

His position afforded him a perfect view of the underside his bed—he really needed to have someone clean under there. A lot of dust. And was that a sock?

"I don't know. Did someone just tried to kill me?" he asked, feeling a little bit confused now.

"Yeah. But I got him."

"Thank you. Most kind." Ezra closed his eyes again and took a deep breath. The pain flared again to life at the movement, and he gritted his teeth.

"Help him up," Vin ordered, and Ezra heard the mare's leg rattle. Vin must have used it for emphasis. "Tam" reached down and pulled Ezra up to his feet and Ezra finally saw Vin for the first time. The tracker's usually stoic countenance in these sorts of stand-offs clearly wavered slightly at the amount of blood staining the front of Ezra's nightshirt, which Ezra felt oddly glad for.

"Set him on the bed," Vin ordered then.

Tam did as he was told, putting Ezra on the bed and Ezra instantly curled up. When the older man straightened up again and looked back at Vin, he gave a smug smile.

"I can't let you do this, Vin," a woman said quietly from behind Vin. "I'm sorry." Ezra recognized the voice, but he couldn't see clearly who it was. He could, though, clearly hear the sound of a hammer being pulled back on a gun—likely currently pressed against Vin's head based on the way Vin was now standing.


"You don't understand, Vin. That man on the bed, he has you fooled. He was there, I know it. I remember as if it were yesterday. Ezra Simpson he called himself then. I even remember him talking about his mother Maude to LuAnn."

Vin just frowned. "You're wrong, Evelyn."

"I'm not, Vin. I'm not. You are. You put your trust in a gambler, a cheat; can't you see that?"

"I don't merely trust Ezra, Evelyn. I know him. You have the wrong man. Whatever you
remember is flawed."

"Then you are softer than I thought you were, my boy. Taken in by the likes of him. Never thought it possible. I taught you better than that."

*I taught you better than that.* She sounded just like Maude.

Ezra pressed harder against the bandages on his side, and somehow managed to push himself up into a sitting position on the bed. He was able to see Evelyn clearly now, standing right behind Vin, a colt pressed to his friend's ear. She was still talking, calling Vin a disappointment, a sinner, each word an obvious verbal dagger to his heart. Meeting Vin's gaze, he looked for something that might suggest a plan, but while Vin was still pointing his Mare's Leg at Tam, his attention was clearly on the woman standing behind him.

When she finally stopped her haranguing, Vin sighed. Then he lifted his chin.

"And I thought you were better than this, ma'am."

"What?" Evelyn snarled, pressing the gun harder so Vin's had to tilt his head.

"You would kill a man in cold blood," Vin replied quietly. "That is evil, Evelyn, no matter how you look at it."

A tear ran down Evelyn's face, and she shook her head. "No, you don't understand. They deserved to die, Vin, for what they did. It's what justice calls for. I'm only doing what the law won't. Surely you know what I'm talking about. You, of all people, must know."

Vin frowned, catching only one thing. "What do you mean, 'they'?"

"The other gamblers who were around that week," Ezra said miserably. "She killed them all. At least eight that I can think of. Many of them not guilty." He glared at the woman, not caring who she was to Vin right now. "Cornish Tom was just a kid, a good kid," he said accusingly. She gave no indication to have heard.

Vin's brow furrowed.

"No," he said. "Evelyn?"

"They were all there," she repeated, as if it was a mantra.

"I figured it out after she talked to me yesterday, though I didn't want to believe it at first." Ezra grimaced. "For a while, I didn't think it possible, that she couldn't have killed them by herself. But then I reasoned she might have had help." He looked down at the ground. "For a while, I thought...I thought because of what happened between you and me that night with Childes, that maybe you ...." He stopped, shutting his mouth into a firm line.

Vin's jaw dropped, and he looked away from Ezra to Tam. "You thought I could be like him? A stone-cold killer?"

Ezra glanced at Tam, who was standing next to the dresser, staring at Vin with unmitigated hatred. Then closed his eyes, his pain beginning to overwhelm him again.

"I was thinking of your previous profession, Vin, not you. I was...I was not thinking clearly."

"I ain't never killed anyone in cold blood, Ezra. How could you think I would?"
"I know," Ezra whispered. "I made a mistake. I'm sorry." He despaired at the sound of the brawl downstairs still going on in full force. A shot was fired, probably Chris or JD. "I was wrong."

Vin opened his mouth as if to snap a reply when, suddenly, he stopped. And then, oddly, he huffed a tiny, sad laugh. It puzzled Ezra for a second, until realization dawned—he'd just done the same thing to Vin, that Vin had done three weeks ago to Ezra.

"It happens," Vin said, as if reading his mind. Ezra smiled slightly.

"I guess it does."

Another gunshot went off from down below, and a man's voice boomed out, shouting for quiet—the sounds of the brawl faded suddenly.

"Enough!" Tam snapped. "We don't have time for this, Lyn. What are you planning on doing? That darkie healer could be back up here any minute."

"I..." Evelyn faltered, then shook her head. "Pick up the knife and finish the gambler. Then we'll take Vin with us. Leave him somewhere out in the desert, too far from anyone to come after us before we're long gone."

"I'm not going with you," Vin stated firmly. "And Tam takes one step towards Ezra, he's dead." He still hadn't lowered the mare's leg.

"Vin, come on, don't do this," she begged. "Not over a low-life like him. I don't want to have to hurt you."

"And I'm not letting you hurt him."

"Vin--"

"Lyn, make up your mind," Tam ordered. "If you shoot him now, they may not hear it while they're still—"

"They'll hear it," Vin promised. "And they'll come after you. Trust me."

Evelyn looked at Tam, then lowered her head in submission. Slowly she brought the gun away from Vin's head. The tracker nodded, feeling her take the gun away, then jumped forward before she could slam the butt of the colt against the back of his head. Ezra got to his feet as Vin spun around to face her, watching as Evelyn tried to regain her balance after failing to knock the tracker out, her mouth a little "o" of astonishment that Vin had anticipated her idea so easily. Then she gave a small cry of terror as she saw the Winchester now pointed at her heart. Behind him, Tam grabbed for Ezra's Remington on the dresser.

"Vin! Behind you!" Ezra called out, throwing himself bodily at the older man, only to be quickly shoved into the dresser, knocking more things off of it—including his colt. He fell to the ground, grabbing the cold as he did so.

Vin fired the mare's leg at almost the same time, and Ezra shuffled out of the way as Tam fell sideways into the dresser, the gun falling listlessly from bleeding fingers, the older man screaming in pain.

And another shot rang out.

Vin cried out, the mare's leg slipping to the floor as he grabbed his now bleeding arm. Evelyn was crying as she pointed her now smoking colt at him, both hands wrapped around the small weapon,
shaking. Still crying, she then pointed it at Ezra.

Ezra pointed his own colt at her, aimed at her head.

For an instant, they just stared at each other.

Stalemate.

She, because she'd never killed anyone before.

He, because he couldn't fire at a woman.

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In the corner now between the dresser and the wall, Tam opened his eyes and looked up at Vin who stood gripping his bleeding arm only a few feet away. The mare's leg was on the floor, too far away to help break the stand-off between Ezra and Evelyn.

The Remington was just inches from Tam's hand.
Downstairs, the whole room was still. As one, heads looked up, the sounds of so many shots being fired at the same time as loud as a cannon blast echoing in their ears.

Josiah shoved the man in front of him aside and reached the stairs just seconds behind Chris. The gunslinger took them two at a time, reaching the top in seconds that felt like years. Nathan and Buck were right behind, and JD yelled an order for everyone in the saloon to clear out as fast as they could.

As Chris reached Ezra's door, he nearly collided with Evelyn Starr as she walked calmly out. Her stare was glassy, and he didn't even have time to think before she fainted dead away in his arms. Josiah pushed past them into the room, staring in horror at the scene.

"My God..." he whispered.

A stranger was pressed into the corner between the dresser and the wall, a bullet hole dead center in his forehead. The older man's blue eyes had rolled back in his head, as if he were looking up at the bullet, and his mouth gaped open as if in a last gasp. In the older man's hand, Ezra's Remington smoked.

Vin was on the floor in the middle of the room, blood spreading slowly out from beneath him and even more staining his sleeve from a wound on one arm.

Ezra was slumped against the dresser, blood staining the front of his nightshirt, panting. His eyes were open, but he didn't seem to be seeing anything other than Vin lying in front of him. In his hand, his colt also smoked. Josiah glanced vaguely around the rest of the room, and saw that another bullet had drilled a hole in the wall over the bed.

Nathan shoved Josiah forward and got around him to the man on the floor. As he touched Vin, the tracker gasped and groaned. The healer gave a small smile, and rolled him over, finding a deep gouge in the man's thigh bleeding steadily, but no hole.

"Nathan?" Chris called from the hallway.

"The bullet just grazed him," Nathan said. "His arm, though, has a bullet still lodged inside the muscle—it's going to keep him laid up for a long time." The healer looked at Josiah. "Help me get him up," the healer ordered. Josiah just nodded. Gently they lifted Vin up and placed him on one side of the bed.

"Press some of Ezra's sheets against that leg, and find something to tie off that arm," Nathan said. Josiah nodded again, and, grabbing a chunk of Vin's shirt, quickly tore off a strip.

Chris had handed Evelyn to Buck, who had thrown the woman over his shoulder. He knelt down next to Ezra as Nathan lifted the nightshirt to see the sluggishly bleeding wound, grimacing at the sight.

"How is he?" Chris asked. Josiah stopped what he was doing to watch Nathan's answer.

The healer shook his head, not happy. Looking up, he spotted JD in the hallway.

"Get me Belinda and Stephen again. I'm going to need more hemostats, and something to still infection."
"Huh?"

"Just repeat that. They'll know."

JD nodded and took off. Nathan looked at Chris next.

"Alcohol. Boiling water."

Chris stood and strode out of the room. Buck got the next look.

"Buck, after you drop her off, think you could get me some bandages and my tools from the clinic? You know which ones."

Buck nodded, and, patting the still unconscious woman on her rear, headed off for the jail and then Nathan's clinic.

The healer sighed, wiped his forehead with his arm and looked over at Josiah. The preacher was whispering a prayer as he pressed the sheets down hard on Vin's leg, ignoring the younger man's groan at the obvious pain.

With a sigh, Nathan got his arms under Ezra's shoulders and, with a little coaxing to the barely there gambler, got Ezra up and onto the other side of the bed. Ezra's eyes closed and he was out for the count as Nathan once more lifted the shirt to see the wound.

"They going to be okay?" Josiah asked, looking over at Ezra then down again at Vin.

"Well, right now, they're doing better than him," Nathan replied, glancing over at the stranger, "whoever he is."

Josiah looked at the swarthy man, then up at the bullet hole in the wall above the headboard. "I'm just glad Ezra's aim was better than his. Looks like the stranger's aim went high, probably because Ezra got him first."

Nathan frowned. "Then who shot Vin?"

Josiah's face darkened, remembering the glint of metal in the woman's hand right before she fainted and dropped the colt to the ground.

"Evelyn Starr."

Ezra frowned, grimacing at the sunlight bombarding his face. Didn't he remember to close the shade last night?

Someone groaned next to him, and he frowned even more deeply.

Summoning up some energy from somewhere, he cracked open his eyes and blinked a few times to clear them. He found Josiah sitting in the rocking chair opposite, asleep, and he appeared to be holding Blake's poems in his lap. But the groan hadn't come from the big man – he was snoring soundly.

Rolling his head the other way, Ezra found himself staring at the side of Vin's head, the tracker lying on the bed next to him. Ezra's eyelids fluttered a few more times, and he tried to see more clearly.

Yep. It was Vin. Bandages were swathed around the man's thigh, and speckles of blood peeked
through at a point on his arm.

As if aware of the scrutiny, Ezra watched as the tracker’s eyes opened slightly, then shut again. A moment later, they opened again, revealing tired gray eyes that looked as confused as he was.

For some reason, this made Ezra smile.

Vin frowned, clearly not appreciating the smile, and he tried to move. He hissed in pain as the bandages shifted.

"I wouldn't move," Ezra whispered.

Vin sneered at him. Ezra smiled more brightly.

The tracker shut his eyes in annoyance. Then his eyes opened again, wide. He was obviously remembering what had happened. Ezra had remembered himself by now. He didn't hide his concern as Vin met his gaze again.

"You okay?" Ezra asked softly.

"No," the other whispered back. Vin looked up at the ceiling, and his face crumpled.

"I'm so sorry, Ezra," he said. "For everything. I didn't know, and I should never have doubted--"

"It happens," Ezra interrupted, repeating what Vin had said last night. "And I’m sorry too, for doubting you."

Vin bit his lip at that, his face was still wracked with unhappiness. "So now what?"

Ezra sighed and looked up at the ceiling.

"Youth of delight," he whispered, "come hither, And see the opening morn, Image of truth new born. Doubt is fled, & clouds of reason, Dark disputes & artful teasing. Folly is an endless maze, Tangled roots perplex her ways, How many have fallen there! They stumble all night over bones of the dead, And feel they know not what but care, And wish to lead others when they should be led."

Vin's face relaxed a little at the recitation, and Ezra smiled slightly.

"The Voice of the Ancient Bard," Josiah noted quietly from his chair, awake now.

"Speaking to the Clod and the Pebble," Ezra said, closing his eyes again. In moments, he was asleep again. Vin frowned and looked at Josiah.

"Did he just call me a clod?"

Josiah grinned. "It was a compliment."

"Twelve men, that man Tam killed." Buck shook his head, "That's no small number."
"I'm just happy I wasn't the thirteenth," Ezra replied, reaching for another card across the saloon table. He arched an eyebrow as he looked over his hand.

"Seriously, how many of them do you think were actually involved?"

"I don't know," the gambler replied, taking a sip of some whiskey. "When I left, there were probably only about six professional gamblers still hanging around, including my young friend Tom whom I seriously doubt was involved. He used to turn green at the sight of violence."

"Could anyone have come into town after you left?"

"Maybe. But seven more in a matter of hours? Doubtful. And, when she named names in front of the judge, I can tell you that, to my recollection, at least half of those names had moved on. The image of what happened must have just festered in her mind like a disease, spreading to encompass anyone who had been in the area at that time," he shrugged.

"Poor woman," Buck said, finally. Ezra glanced up at him in surprise.

"Poor woman? She was a murderer, Buck. She nearly killed me!"

"I know," the ladies' man replied. "And she's gone off to prison for it. But I still feel sorry for her. Weren't her fault, not really. Her mind was clearly just not all there."

"And the men she killed?"

Buck lowered his eyes. Ezra shook his head and looked back at his cards.

"Pick up or discard," he said. Buck nodded and picked up a new card, only to put it right back down on the discard pile.

"Vin seems to be doing better about it all since he came back from taking her to the prison," Buck said then.

Ezra shrugged again, picking up Buck's discard and putting a different card down. "He's nothing if not resilient, our Mr. Tanner."

"Yeah. Went with her the whole way, even with that arm of his still healing. He's a good man."

"He felt guilty, Mr. Wilmington. That's all."

Buck shook his head. "You really do have a dark way of looking at things sometimes, Ez."

"Merely experience talking, Buck."

"Yeah, well, sometimes I think you need a little more innocence back in your life."

Ezra smiled at that, impressed at Buck's astuteness. Sometimes Buck really surprised him. A moment later, the smile turned into a grin as Buck discarded another card which the gambler quickly picked up. The ladies' man grimaced.

Just then, the doors to the saloon swung upon and Vin limped in, brushing trail dust from his clothes. Seeing them sitting at the high table, the tracker walked over and sat himself down in one of the loose chairs, propping his hurt leg up on the nearby railing.

"Good ride?" Buck asked, looking at the card Ezra had put down and frowning. He hesitated a little as he took a new card rather than choosing the gambler's discarded one. Ezra smiled at him
again, looking much too smug.

"Peso liked it," Vin replied, brushing off some more dust and watching as Buck slowly discarded the card he'd picked up.

"And yourself?" Ezra asked, taking a new card himself.

"Yup."

Ezra gave a small smile, discarding. "That was not an answer, Mr. Tanner. That was an affirmative."

"Yup."

Ezra shook his head and gave an exasperated sigh. He looked back at Buck, who was staring intently at his cards. Then he stared down at the card Ezra had discarded.

"Anytime, Mr. Wilmington."

"In a minute, Ezra. Hold your horses."

Rolling his eyes, Ezra looked over at Vin, who was pretending not to be looking at him out of the corner of his eye.

"Something you want?" he asked. Vin's smile broadened slightly.

"Nope."

"You are lying, Mr. Tanner. And Mr. Wilmington, you are taking much too long. Really, just make a decision. It's not that hard."

"Ezra, calm down!" Buck growled. "Can't rush these things."

"Not lying," Vin said, scratching at his beard.

"Is it just me, or has Vin's vocabulary skills diminished since he stopped having to wear that sling?" Ezra asked Buck. "Almost like magic."

"Stop rushing me, Ezra," Buck snapped back.

Ezra's eyebrows shot up, amused. "But I didn't say—"

"I heard it inside all them other words. You ain't interested in Vin's vocab, just my cards."

Ezra grinned and shook his head. "You are sorely mistaken, my friend. I am interested in both."

"I was just thinking," Vin said slowly, "how interesting it was to see Inez walking about with that new arrival, Mr. Chasten. Good looking guy, that one. She was holding his arm, I noticed."

Ezra's smile froze, and he looked straight at Vin. "What?"

"They're over by the livery. I think I heard him say something about going for a ride?"

Ezra's fingers crushed the cards slightly, and he stared daggers at Vin. Then he looked at Buck. His jaw steeled. Vin's wicked smile had grown.

"Buck, make your decision," the gambler hissed.
Buck gave a huge sigh, and he finally picked up the discarded card and lay another down.

"There!" he said proudly.

Ezra slammed his cards down.

"Gin!" he announced angrily, then stood up and stared down at Vin's hat. "Which livery?"

"Yosemite's. Might even catch 'em before—"

Suddenly, gunshots broke out outside, and someone screamed. It sounded like Inez. Ezra was out of the door like a shot, his Remington clearing the holster in a blur of motion. Vin ran out not too far behind, covering him.

Buck stood more slowly, sighing and pulling his own gun. He grimaced at Ezra's perfect gin hand, and at all the dust Vin had left on and around the table. The sound of a mare's leg and a Remington firing together outside, joined by a peacemaker and several other familiar weapons actually made Buck smile slightly.

It was good to have things back to normal.

End

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