



A BETTER PLAN

Many thanks to my wonderful betas Shari, Sevenstars and Circe. Never could have made it this far without you girl's help. Much appreciated!

The name Chaucer has been borrowed from Kristen.

Warning: This story contains the death of a child. Language. Violence.

Rating: PG-13

Summary: Ezra is having a bad day when he comes into contact with another bunch of southerners and his day is just about to get worse.

By Freyan

As the chilling wind cut into him, the red-coated man dug deeper into his jacket. The sun hung high in an almost blue sky, but there was no warmth in it. He could see the white mist forming from his breath in front of him, and he rubbed his right leg absently, trying to infuse some warmth in it. It was too damn cold for Ezra's way of liking, but he had chosen this patrol voluntarily, even though Vin was already out there somewhere.

So, why exactly was it that he was riding patrol in the middle of the desert, freezing his butt off, when he could be sitting in a nice warm saloon? When he could be fleecing the new arrivals on this morning's stage or having a second go at the ranch hands from yesterday? Ezra rubbed his cold hands together as he thought of the events that had led him out here.

Last night he had played poker against a couple of young, black men, who had told him they had just gotten work out at Henderson's place. They had come to town to enjoy their first pay. Ezra, of course, had welcomed them into the game with open arms, like he did all prospective marks. It had been a friendly game. The two cowhands had been in a good mood that hadn't changed when they started to lose. He had left them enough for a good meal in the hope they would return another day, and they had left in good spirits.

But once they were gone, Nathan, the town's resident healer and another of his compatriots, had made his way over to Ezra's table to let him know in no uncertain terms what he felt about his gambling habits. Nathan viewed Ezra as 'taking advantage of hardworking honest black fellas, relieving them of all their money just so he could claim superiority over them'. He had kept at it until Ezra had finally withdrawn to his own room.

This morning the healer had picked up where he had left off last night, until Ezra had finally had enough and saddled Chaucer. Vin was already out patrolling the eastern ranches, so to avoid company, Ezra had decided to take the western range. He needed some time alone to mull things over. He felt like he was swimming against the tide. Every time he thought he had done something good for the town, trying to get them to accept him, Nathan accused him of being selfish and preying on the citizens. Yes, he had tried to make money when he had arranged the marriages for the working girls from Wickestown, but he was also trying to find a safe place for the girls. He wanted to ensure they wouldn't have to go back to prostituting themselves again. And yes, he was always looking for a bet, often, too often in the healer's opinion, winning it. But he was a gambler by profession. What else was he supposed to do? It wasn't like he was intentionally trying to hurt anyone. It wasn't his fault some people just didn't know when to quit.

Where Nathan's feelings towards him were pretty clear, he wasn't so sure about the others. JD and Vin seemed to genuinely like him. Josiah was always treating him like a lost sheep, urging him to get back on the straight and narrow. Not that he had ever been there, Ezra thought to himself with a small grin. Unlike Nathan's scathing remarks, he always knew the preacher only did it for Ezra's own benefit.

Buck, well, Buck didn't really count, did he? The good-natured gunslinger liked just about anyone, showing a certain preference for the long-legged female variety. It took a lot to anger Buck Wilmington, unless you hurt a woman or one of the seven. Then the fun loving cowboy turned into something hard and dangerous, which wouldn't rest until justice had been served. No, perhaps he shouldn't discount the tall gunslinger after all.

Then there was Chris Larabee, their fearless leader. Well, Ezra would just have to come back to that one, since he still hadn't figured Larabee out. He could be just as good as Ezra at concealing any information he didn't want disclosed. His feelings towards the conman seemed to fall under that category. All Ezra had to go on was the angry "don't run out on me again," Chris had growled the first time Ezra had shown poor judgment. Ezra had come back again, when he probably should have run as fast and as far away as possible. Then there was the fact that Chris hadn't shot him yet. Whether that was enough proof that Chris liked him, Ezra hadn't decided yet. But he could live with that. He wasn't exactly known to embrace friendships. The mere fact that they tolerated him was enough. Once again, this brought him back to the fact that one of the others didn't tolerate him. Six months ago his response would have been a shrug of the shoulders, before packing his bags and moving on to greener pastures. The problem this time was that he didn't want to move on. It scared him to think that he had actually found a place where he wanted to stay. Maybe not forever, but for now at least. This feeling of friendship, the fact that others would back him up without question when he got into trouble, suited him. He was loathe to give it up because of one man. But he also knew Nathan would never leave town first. He had his clinic and Rain to keep him there and Ezra had to admit he didn't really want the healer to go either. He just wanted Nathan to stop putting him down all the time, in front of the others or in front of the townsfolk. It always made him feel oh so small. He wanted to do what was right, but Nathan had to realize he couldn't just let go of a whole lifetime of training. It just didn't work that way.

The sound of a gunshot abruptly brought Ezra out of his dark thoughts. Since he had had no specific goal in mind, he had let Chaucer have free rein. The horse had led him near Cutter's Canyon, where he was sure the shot had come from. He quickly turned Chaucer around and kicked him into a gallop. Cutter's Canyon was well-known for its treacherous pass, often hiding an ambush or protecting a band of outlaws. It started out wide, then narrowed down to less than ten feet wide. With sloping tree-covered sides, Cutter's Canyon easily hid both men and horses, before widening out again on the other side.

When he got to the mouth of the canyon, a shadow jumped out in front of Chaucer, causing the horse to rear back. Only Ezra's sharp mind and calm nerves saved the young black man from being shot. Or rather boy, a young boy of no more than ten or eleven years, Ezra figured. The boy had a nasty cut on the side of his head, where fresh blood ran down his collar. He also looked scared to death.

"Please, sir, please, help me. My family..."the boy sobbed, tugging at Ezra's leg.

Ezra quickly dismounted, going over to the frightened boy. "Easy, my young friend," he said, getting a grip on the boy's shoulders and kneeling in front of him. The boy's eyes were huge, showing the whites. In spite of the cold, sweat ran down his forehead in a steady stream. "Take a deep breath and tell me what has befallen you, my friend," the gambler said as he looked at the small cut, which continued to bleed.

"Bad men...they took my family. Ya gotta help me, Sir. Please," the boy said, while pointing in agitation toward the canyon.

"Perhaps you can start by telling me your name, then we can go from there," Ezra said calmly. He led the boy over to a couple of rocks, getting him seated. He had to tell the boy to stay put when he went to get the water to clean the wound and a shirt for bandages. Though the youngster was already up and moving again, his tale coming out in breathless sentences. The gambler quickly tore up his shirt, while grimacing over the prospect of losing another of his fine garments. Then he began cleaning and bandaging the head wound. Not as good as Nathan would have done it, he thought, but it would have to be enough until they got back to town.

Ezra listened intently to the agonizing tale of how young Clay Harris, his parents and two younger sisters, had been on their way to Eagle Bend. The father had just gotten work as a cook at one of the ranches. But as the family had entered the canyon, riders had spilled out from the mouth, shooting into the air, before stopping the wagon. Young Clay had fallen off their mule when it panicked, hitting his head on a rock, but he hadn't passed out. He had stayed silent when one of the men came over and kicked him. The outlaws had left him alone then, figuring he was dead. Clay estimated there to be about fifteen men in total. They took the family captive, the whole time spitting and yelling at them, calling them darkies, black bastards, niggers and other derogatory names. Clay had waited until they had left, before getting up and running out of the canyon. That was when the gambler had arrived.

"Please, sir, help me get my family back. They will kill them, I just know it," Clay sobbed.

"I shall endeavor to bring all the ladies and your father safely back to you, young Master Harris. But first we need to come up with a plan. I am afraid I will be no match for fifteen men, no matter how proficient a shot I happen to be," Ezra said, his mind already working out several possibilities. He might not be the perfect peacekeeper, but he was a master of plans.

"You ever gonna ease up on that boy, Nate?" Josiah asked as the black healer joined him at his table in the saloon. It was just after noon and the rush had yet to set in. Only a few drifters and the regular drunks, who never seemed to leave the saloon, could be counted.

Nathan took a sip of his beer before looking at Sanchez. "Damn peacock ain't got no right to take them boys' hard earned money. They finally have a chance of making a life on their own without being under the white man's foot. Then that damn gambler comes along and cheats them outta their last savings. Probably can't stand to see a black man with money."

"Ain't the way I see it, Nate," Josiah countered, cracking his fingers as he continued." Those boys didn't seem to mind playing with him last night, even when they lost. Ezra doesn't exactly hide his profession as a gambler. They all know what kind of competition they're up against before they sit down at that table. And we both know brother Ezra doesn't need to cheat to win money from those green horns."

"I still say he should leave them boys alone and go rob someone who can afford it. You might not care if he takes their last cent, Josiah, but I do," Nathan grumbled before taking another sip of his beer.

Sanchez was just about to say something more in defense of his absent friend, but a pointed look from Nathan, telling him the conversation was finished, made Josiah close his mouth again. Instead he just shook his head sadly, before mirroring Nathan's moves with his own beer.

They had been sitting quietly together for another twenty minutes when two young, black men made their way over to the peacekeeper's table. Nathan recognized them as the players Ezra had entertained the night before.

"Excuse me, Mr. Jackson?" the youngest one said. He held his dusty, brown hat nervously, twisting it around at the brim.

"Yeah, that's me. What can I do for ya fellows? One of ya's sick?" Nathan questioned, leaning forward in his chair, looking them both up and down. They didn't appear sick, so he relaxed back in his seat again.

"No, no...we...eh...we was just wondering...yer one of them peacekeepers, right? One of the Seven?" asked the other one, who was a couple of years older than the first. He looked just as nervous as his friend, but neither of them appeared to be angry or upset.

Nathan couldn't figure out what was wrong, but he bet it came down to a certain Ezra P. Standish.

"Yeah, that's right," he said slowly.

"And that southern gambler fellow, Mr. Standish, he is too, right?"

"What's Ezra done now? I'll wring his scrawny neck if he's cheating again," Nathan said scathingly, ignoring the disapproving frown Josiah sent him. Nathan just knew it had something to do with that gambler.

"Now, hold on, Mr. Jackson. Mr. Standish wasn't cheating, at least not as far as we could tell. If he was, well, we probably deserved it. We just wanted to know if ya had seen him, is all."

"Why?" Josiah asked in a friendly voice. This time it was his turn to look pointedly at Nathan, who chose to ignore him.

"He said he'd be around, so's we could continue our poker game today. Done cleaned us out yesterday, but we got a new man with us today and some more money," the first ranch hand said. He gestured towards a table in the corner, where another one was sitting watching three beers.

"Heck, if that gambler cleaned ya out yesterday, then why do ya wanna play with him again today?" Nathan asked bewildered.

"Hell, we knew what we were getting into, when we sat down at his table, Mr. Jackson," the oldest one laughed. "Ain't exactly like he hides it or anything, with all that fancy clothes a his. So's we knew we would probably walk away broke. But ya see, Mr Jackson, it ain't that often a bunch of black men like us gets a chance ta sit down at the same table as a southern gentleman, like Mr. Standish. Sitting there on equal terms with him, trying ta figger out what he's saying with them fancy words a his, seeing him making them cards dance like they belong in his fingers, listening to him tell tales about riverboats and big cities like New Orleans and San Francisco, it all makes it worth getting cleaned out. Ain't like it wouldn't be used on whores and beer instead, anyway. Figger this at least gives us something we can remember afterwards. He never once treated us like we didn't belong there. Even let us keep enough money for a decent meal. With our new man today, I figger we stand a much better chance at winning now," he said with a smile and a wink. Josiah let out a bark of laughter and Nathan couldn't help twitch his lips at the young men's good humor.

"You mind telling him we're looking for 'im if ya see 'im?" the young man asked.

"We'll tell him, won't we, Nathan?" Josiah asked, bringing his hand down onto Nathan's shoulder, in a harder than necessary clap. The two men nodded their thanks, before making their way back to their friend and their beer.

“Seems to me you might have spoiled those boys’ fun for the evening, my friend,” Josiah said. “Don’t think Ezra will be back soon. Even if he was, I don’t think he would be much inclined to go up against your wrath a second time, brother. Then again, you do know what is best for those young men, don’t you?” he finished with a wink.

“Oh, shut up, Josiah. I’ll go find him and bring his sorry ass back here.”

“You might even want to throw an apology in there somewhere along the way, Nate,” Josiah said helpfully. There was no doubt he was enjoying this.

“Don’t push it, preacher,” Nathan grumbled as he got up and left the table.

The preacher just linked his fingers, and with a contented sigh, pushed them out with a loud cracking noise.

“Now, do you remember the plan, young Master Harris?” Ezra asked. They had been over it twice already, but it was important it all went well. Both of their lives depended on Clay being able to play his part correctly.

Ezra listened intently as the boy repeated the plan, detailing what he was supposed to do, and how he was supposed to act. He had calmed down considerably since their initial meeting, and Ezra had enough faith in him to put his own life at risk.

“Yes, that will be the basics of it. I am sure everything will be fine,” Ezra said, although he had begun to doubt his own plan at some points. Especially the part where he rode alone into the enemy’s camp, facing off against fifteen men with nothing but his smart wit and a few guns. At least it would get the boy out of here and back to Four Corners. Ezra could well imagine what the miscreants intended to do to the poor women. He didn’t want the boy there, in case it was already too late.

Ezra had decided to play on the outlaws’ obvious dislike of Negroes, hoping that meant they would have a certain fondness for southerners. Or at least, of someone sharing the same views on black men, as Ezra would be clearly demonstrating. In fact, he would be hanging young Master Harris in a few short moments.

Ezra had spent the last twenty minutes making a harness for the child. It was fitted with two loops, one to go around his chest and the other to go around his neck. Every measurement had to be exact, when Ezra hung him. The loop around the boy’s neck would have to look tight without being so. Instead all the weight would be centered round the boy’s chest. His thick winter coat would hide the rope going around his chest, but only if it was done from a distance. They had already tried it out several times. Ezra had to use all of his talents to get the frightened boy into the contraption that first time. It took a lot of faith from the child to let a stranger put a noose around his neck, no matter what the

gambler had promised. Now Ezra just hoped the outlaws wouldn't come out to investigate too closely or decide to shoot the body.

He had taken the bandage off Clay's head again, seeing as he couldn't have anything giving away the fact that they had spent some time together. The wound had already stopped bleeding, so he wasn't worried about it. He just hoped the boy could make it back to Four Corners alone and in time. He wasn't looking forward to spending too much time amongst the outlaws. He didn't know how long he could stall them from doing what they wanted to with the women. He was very much counting on his friends to come to the rescue, which was another thing that made him feel uneasy about this whole plan. He had never before in his life relied on someone else to help him out of one of his scrapes. It frightened him, once again showing him how attached he had grown to the other six peacekeepers.

Nathan tiredly rubbed his cold hands together trying to infuse some warmth into them. He was beginning to think the gambler was more trouble than he, or even the black cowhands, were worth. He had been searching for more than an hour now. Just as he rode out of town, he had met Vin returning from his patrol. The tracker had told him Ezra hadn't been on the east side of town or in the vicinity, so Nathan figured the gambler had gone west to get some peace and quiet. There weren't any farmsteads for miles in that direction, only empty desert and Cutter's Canyon. He hoped Ezra wasn't foolish enough to ride in there, but you never knew. The gambler was unpredictable at the best of times. Nathan could never figure out what went on in that thick southern skull of his. He had figured one thing out, though. He knew Ezra wasn't as thick-skinned as he let on. The southerner actually hid quite a fragile heart and Nathan knew he had wounded Ezra more than once with his barbs. But the healer just couldn't help himself. He knew Ezra could be better than what he was now; knew the gambler could do great things with all those talents of his. It tore at Nathan seeing them wasted on gambling and tricks.

He was a few miles from the canyon, when he heard a gunshot breaking the silence. Since the air was completely still, the sound reached far and wide. Nathan spurred his horse on, hoping feverishly that his gambling friend hadn't just been shot because he had chased him from town. As he got closer Nathan decided to ride onto the ridge of the canyon, instead of into it. He didn't want to find himself caught in an ambush. With a good overview of the mouth of the canyon, he wouldn't be giving himself away.

What he saw made his blood freeze.

Ezra led Clay behind Chaucer on a tight rope. The boy's hands were bound in front of him, but the rope Ezra was holding went around the young boy's neck. The gambler led him to

a tree halfway into the shaded part of the canyon. While it was close enough for the guards to see most of what was happening, the shadows would also hide Clay, giving him a chance to get away undetected later on. Ezra just hoped he was making enough noise to get the attention of the guards that he knew had to be placed near the throat of the canyon.

“Damn darkie,” he shouted scathingly. “How dare you address a gentleman with such familiarity? Fifteen years ago you would have been stripped and flogged for this...this insolence,” Ezra yelled, his fist making angry motions in the air. Once under the tree, he dismounted Chaucer and pulled hard at the rope, causing the boy to fall down on his hands and knees. Ezra winced at the rough treatment he had to give him, but he knew his act had to be convincing. As his end of the rope was thrown almost absently over a sturdy branch on the tree, Ezra continued his tirade.

“I never doubted this was how things would go, once you vermin no longer had any masters to teach you proper respect.” The end of the rope was once again secured around the saddle horn. Then Ezra grabbed Chaucer’s reins and started walking backwards, pulling him away from the tree tightening the rope while pulling the young man upwards.

“This should teach you darkies a thing or two,” he said out loud before dropping his voice to whisper a few words to Clay. “Remember the plan, Master Harris. Relax your body and everything will be fine.” He didn’t wait for a reply, but kept pulling Chaucer forward, feeling the horse slow down slightly as more weight came onto the rope. Clay was slowly lifted from the ground, struggling slightly before becoming still. Ezra silently applauded the young man’s performance. It was so good the gambler actually started to worry that he hadn’t made the harness correctly. A small twitch from Clay laid his fears to rest as he let go of the breath he’d been holding.

Ezra waited another minute before he untied his end of the rope from Chaucer. Still keeping the line taut, he tied it around the base of the tree. Almost as an afterthought he brought out his gun and fired a couple of bullets into the still body, seeing it give a few jerks. Hopefully that would make the outlaws think twice about doing the same thing. The effect of their bullets would be somewhat different from the one his blanks produced. He just hoped someone was watching this.

His prayers were answered as he started his way deeper into the canyon. Two men came forward, obviously having been ensconced in the rocks somewhere. “Hold up there, Mister,” a big hirsute man said. His weather-beaten face was almost hidden beneath a big, bushy, black beard and an old black Stetson. The other one, a younger man with a crooked nose and flaming red hair, wore a pair of confederate trousers a size too large. He looked at Ezra with approval.

“Mind telling us why you just hung that fellow back there?” the hirsute man asked, still pointing his gun at Ezra’s chest.

“Why, certainly, gentlemen, though I have no intention of apologizing,” Ezra said, checking out his fingernails, while sounding slightly bored. “I happened to have just left that backwater town of Four Corners a few miles back. I was intent on finding somewhere more

civilized, when that...that darkie had the audacity to approach me. He even had the nerve to lay his filthy paws on me, begging me to find his family or some such nonsense. It sounded like some other good citizens had already had the wisdom to dispose of them. It is just too bad they did such a shabby job," Ezra said disgustedly as he absently brushed some dirt from his jacket, shivering, apparently at the memory of the "darkie" touching him.

"Yeah, well, we figured he was dead the way he fell off that mule. Guess we were wrong," the redhead said, then ducked his head as the black-bearded man stared angrily at him. Yet the slip was enough for Ezra.

"Ah, so it was you who did most of the work for me. Well, I do thank you, gentlemen. But, perhaps you could do me one more favor?"

"And what would that be?" the older man said sourly.

"This little...problem took somewhat longer than I had intended, therefore I seem to be left without any decent place to rest for the night. Perhaps you gentlemen wouldn't mind sharing your accommodations with me?"

"Sure, pard. Don't see why not. Seems as though you're like us. Ya might even be allowed in on the fun," the redhead said again with a twinkle in his eye. His partner looked both suspicious and a bit angry.

Ezra shuddered at the thought of being anything like the men before him, but wisely kept that thought to himself, instead he said, "And what kind of fun might that be?"

"Well, we still got that darkie woman and her kids. Thought we might have some fun with them afore we killed them. Been awhile since me and the boys have had some female company, if you know what I mean. Even a darkie will do for that," the redhead said with a sick glint in his eyes.

"Ah, yes, I see what you mean. Well, that certainly sounds like a joyful evening," Ezra said with a smile and what he hoped was a lecherous look on his face. Inwardly he cringed at the thought of that poor woman and her children at the hands of these men. He just hoped the festivities hadn't started yet, and that he would be able to hold them at bay until his friends showed up. Ezra turned his horse towards the canyon, following the men in front of him.

Nathan had made his way up on the brim of the canyon, when he spotted Ezra. The gambler was plainly visible in his red jacket. Nathan was just about to yell down at Ezra when he saw the prisoner he was towing. Not knowing what was going on, he remained silent. But he couldn't help getting angry at the way Ezra was leading the boy by a rope around his neck. When Ezra stopped in front of a tree, the healer watched in shock as his supposed friend threw the rope over a branch and proceeded to string the boy up. Nathan

drew his gun, but movement on the other side of the canyon made him hesitate. He saw two other men watching the proceedings. If he shot the gambler, he knew he would reveal himself. There would also be a good chance that he would get himself killed. Anyway, Ezra was too far away from Nathan, for him to be sure he could kill the gambler.

Anger and hate filled him as he watched the boy swing in the tree. The southern bastard would pay for this. All his suspicions about the gambler were suddenly justified. But he was surprised at the sadness that filled his heart and the couple of tears he had to wipe from his face. Somewhere deep down, he had hoped he was wrong about the man. That Ezra wasn't really what Nathan had perceived him to be. If he was honest with himself, he knew that was why he was always on the younger man's back. He just wanted Ezra to show the good side Nathan had caught glimpses of here and there. All that had changed now. Now he had seen Ezra for who the gambler really was. Still, it was a shock. He had never believed Ezra capable of this brutality. The unbelievable hatred that Nathan had heard from the gambler's mouth as he unscrupulously hung the boy, then shot him afterwards.

Nathan was torn between riding into the canyon and cutting down the body, or going back to town to get the others. In the end he decided to go back. He couldn't be sure he wouldn't be watched in the canyon and he had no intentions of getting killed before he had seen to the death of his former friend. He angrily kicked his horse into a gallop and made his way back to town.

Clay waited almost twenty minutes before sliding out the knife he had hid up his sleeve and cutting the bonds around his hands. He then used it to cut the rope which held him suspended above the ground. He had been somewhat apprehensive about Mister Standish's plan. A hanging never sounded good to a black boy, but the gambler had assured him he would be fine. They had tested the ropes several times, making sure they were just the right lengths. They didn't want him to come to any harm, but they also needed to make sure the rope around his neck wasn't so loose, the bad men would see it was a hoax, as Mister Standish had called it. When the gambler had started giving Clay some pointers on how he should act throughout his hanging, it had calmed the boy somewhat, and he had actually started to look forward to it. The older man had an easy grin and a way about him, which set the boy's frayed nerves and racing heart at ease.

After Clay cut the rope, he had fallen to the ground with a bump. Then he quickly removed the ropes from around himself. Sally the mule, whom the gambler had tracked down before they had started their little charade, was hidden behind some rocks just on the other side. Clay easily swung onto her back, heading for Four Corners, while trying to kick some more speed into the slow beast. Now, all he had to do was find Mister Larabee and everything would be okay. Ezra had said so, and Clay believed the older man.

Nathan stopped his sweaty horse in front of the saloon and dismounted. He was no longer tired, adrenaline had him on a high. He pushed his way through the batwings angrily, striding over towards the gunslingers' table. All of them were there, with the exception of Josiah, who was keeping watch at the jail. They looked up with alarm at Nathan's determined stride.

"We need to ride," he said in a clipped voice.

"What's going on?" Larabee asked, as he calmly pushed back his chair and got up. "Something wrong with Ezra?"

"Yeah, something's wrong with Ezra!" Nathan snapped. "He's a rabid dog and needs to be put down now!"

"Whoa, hold on there, pard," Buck Wilmington said, looking confused. "Why don't you sit down for a spell and tell us all about it?"

"All right, but ya ain't gonna like it," Nathan said with a disgusted sigh. He sat down in the chair Buck pulled over.

"Involving Ezra, there's a good chance of that," Buck agreed, a roguish grin softening his words. There was a serious look in his eyes, though, letting Nathan know he had the man's full attention. Looking at the others, he could see the same held true for them, so he began his tale.

"No, I don't believe you!" JD exclaimed after Nathan finished. "It can't have been Ezra. He wouldn't do something like that."

"I ain't lying, JD. I saw what I saw, and I'm damn sure I saw Ezra hang that boy, then shoot him afterwards like a dog," Nathan hissed, his temper rising again. He could see he had drawn the attention of most of the crowd, but he didn't care.

"If it really was Ezra, he must have had a reason for it," Vin said. "Ain't in him to just hang a man like that."

"That's what I thought, Vin, but how do ya explain what I saw down in that canyon, huh?"

"What do you think, Chris?" Buck asked as he looked at his black-clad friend. Chris had stayed silent up till now.

"Dunno. Can't explain what Nathan saw, but I agree with Vin. Ain't like Standish to do something like that. Don't think he has it in him to commit cold-blooded murder, or to kill a child."

"Iffen ya ain't gonna help me, I'll bring him in myself," Nathan said angrily and pushed away from the table.

“Whoa, easy there, pard. Didn’t say that. It’s just that we like having all the facts before passing judgment,” Buck attempted to placate the riled healer.

“We’ll go with you and bring him in, Nathan. Alive, so that he can stand trial for what he’s done,” Chris said, as they all got up. Nathan nodded, but he was still too angry to respond. He just hoped the bastard would be hung here, so he could have a chance to dance on the southerner’s grave.

Ezra slowly rode into the camp, attended by his two new companions. He could see the fire in the middle with a pot of something simmering on it. Another pot with coffee sat at the edge. The fire was surrounded by bedrolls, a few of which held a couple of sleeping men. Others sat around the fire or were goading and harassing the terrified prisoners, who were tied to a tree nearby. He had to hold back a gasp as he saw the father’s body swinging in a tree nearby. He quickly let the mask fall into place, knowing he couldn’t let his feelings show. But on the inside he was simmering with rage over the meaningless death of the poor man. They would pay for this, he vowed, knowing the women had been forced to watch the death of their father and husband. Right now Ezra had to play at being their friend. A fellow southerner sharing their perverse pleasure at seeing black people suffer.

Jessup, the young redhead, had told him all about the other men in the camp. Each one was worse than the other. They were a mishmash of old soldiers, cowhands and simple criminals, all led by a former plantation owner, by the name of Morgan. Ezra had never heard of him before, but that really didn’t say much. The only thing these men seemed to have in common was a southern heritage and a deep hatred for all black people.

They all stopped in front of the line of tethered horses, Ezra quickly dismounting and binding Chaucer’s reins to the line. Not that it would be necessary. The horse never went anywhere without him. He turned around to see a stocky man approaching them. He sported a well-groomed black beard and wore expensive, if worn clothes. Ezra surmised this man to be Morgan. The former plantation owner exuded an air of power and a hunger for control. Morgan quickly talked to his men, casting suspicious glances at Ezra until he had heard what Jessup had to say.

Turning to Ezra, he spoke, “Well, well, Mr. Standish. My man here just told me how you hung a black man in the canyon. Would you care to enlighten me as to why?” His voice was friendly, but there was a glint of madness in his eyes, that told Ezra the man was not to be taken lightly.

“As I already informed young Jessup and Mr. Craven here,” Ezra said with a sweeping motion of his hand towards his two companions,” the boy had the audacity to run out in front of my horse and spook him. He then proceeded to put his filthy paws on my leg. I mean, can you believe it, my good sir? He dared to touch me without permission, all the while yammering some nonsense about his family and how I was supposed to help him. Of

course I quickly explained to him his rightful place and how I had absolutely no intention of helping him. When he would not listen to reason, well, I had to demonstrate to him the error of his ways. So I hung him. What else could I do?" Ezra asked in a honeyed voice, using his accent for all it was worth.

Morgan cocked his head and looked straight at him. The way he was scrutinizing Ezra made the gambler nervous, but he put his poker face to good use. He was, after all, his mother's son. Suddenly Morgan's face lit up with a smile. He reached out his hand, grabbing Ezra's, and giving it a firm shake.

"Nothing else, Mister Standish. You could have done nothing else. Those black bastards need to be shown their place. I am just sorry we did such a poor job in the first place, leaving you with all the trouble. But, alas, let me apologize for my poor manners. I am Jack Morgan, and I seem to be in charge of this little band of Southerners. Unfortunately, some of them are a bit uncouth. I could definitely use some civilized company and you seem to fit the standard. Young Jessup told me you need a place to stay the night, feel free to make yourself at home here. Jessup can take care of your horse for you, before he continues his guard duty. I can even promise you a bit of entertainment tonight," Morgan said, slapping Ezra on the back, as he led him back to the fire. With his last words, Morgan gestured towards the prisoners, who looked at him with terror in their eyes. Ezra noted with relief that all three were still wearing all of their clothes. They seemed to be almost in one piece, though they were each sporting some nasty bruises. Apparently the men hadn't started the real fun yet.

"Ah, the boy's family, I take it? I can see you had the pleasure of helping one of them out of this world, as well," Ezra said, as he gestured towards the dead father. "I, myself, prefer the company of a white gentlewoman, but I believe these will suffice if nothing else is available. Though it has been too long since I have had that pleasure, it has been even longer since I had the pleasure of meeting a fellow gentleman, such as yourself. I would certainly enjoy lingering in your company tonight. Perhaps you wouldn't be adverse to a good game of cards first?" he asked with hope in his voice, producing his ever present deck of cards, trying to stall for time.

Morgan grinned at him as they settled down in front of the fire. "Eat, my friend, and then we shall play cards. I must apologize for the lack of brandy and cigars, but I do hope you will bear with me. I am sure the boys won't mind delaying the other entertainment for a while."

"Ahh, too bad about the cigars, but I do believe I can help with the brandy," Ezra said, pulling out his silver flask. He handed it over to Morgan, who thanked him before he gulped down a healthy portion of the fiery liquid. Morgan gave the flask back to the gambler, who proceeded to take a small swig as well. Ezra took the plate of grub that was given him by one of the men, taking a few tentative bites. It wasn't exactly what he was used to, but it wasn't too bad. If only the company wasn't so terrible. After dinner he quickly produced his cards, seeing as the men were getting restless, casting longing glances at the prisoners.

“Would anyone care to join me for a game of cards?” he offered, flicking the cards from one hand to the other. Morgan’s intimidating gaze quickly recruited three of the others. With four others out on sentry duty, two in each end of the narrow canyon, and four asleep by the fire, that only left three more to guard the prisoners. Ezra just hoped they would wait for their buddies to return.

As they played, Morgan talked about his old life in the South, his plantation, the slaves he had had and how he had lost it all after the war. Ezra made the appropriate sounds at the appropriate places, but otherwise let the man ramble on. He quickly found that Morgan’s hate and ruthlessness were matched only by his greed. He let the man win a few rounds before turning the tables. He also found that the main goal of Morgan’s small band of criminals wasn’t killing blacks. Acting as simple highwaymen, they robbed stagecoaches and anyone else they could ambush. Morgan sounded proud when he told how half of the money they got went into the bank, until they had enough to buy a new plantation. This one would be in Mexico, which Morgan would run like he had the old one. Peons, not much different from slaves, would be doing all the work, while Morgan and his men shared the profit.

The other three players joined in, bragging about how they had stopped the small family and hung the father. They had been a bit disappointed at the lack of valuables, but were sure they could make up for it with the next unlucky wagon that came through the canyon.

As darkness fell, Ezra hoped his friends would get there soon. He knew he couldn’t keep the men’s attention much longer. They were all looking at the prisoners lecherously now. Only the fear of Morgan kept the three players in the game, and even the mad leader was growing weary of it. Suddenly the two sentries from the western mouth, Jessup and his hirsute partner, came galloping into the camp. Ezra’s heart beat wildly as he recognized the lump slung over one of the saddles. It was Clay Harris. Craven grabbed the boy and slung him down in front of Morgan, who had stood up. The rough handling produced a pained cry, proving the boy to be still alive. Ezra stood up as well, wiping his sweaty hands on his trousers, desperately trying to come up with a backup plan.

“What is the meaning of this spectacle?” Morgan raged and kicked the downed boy who was sobbing.

“It’s the boy, sir. The boy he was supposed to have hung. We went to set his body afire, figgering it would make a nice bonfire. But when we got there, he was gone and the rope had been cut. We figgered he couldn’t have gone far, so we tracked him. Found him riding that mule a his. Was on his way to Four Corners, sir. Found this as well,” the sentry said, and threw a length of rope into Morgan’s hands. Ezra cringed at the sight. Anyone could easily see the two loops he had made, it didn’t take a genius to figure out the boy hadn’t been hung at all. The gambler was struggling to come up with a good cover story, when Morgan swung around, planting a hard fist in his face. The conman fell to the ground, clutching his bleeding nose.

“Do you take me for a fool, Standish?!” Morgan yelled, sending a swift kick into Ezra’s stomach, forcing the air from his lungs. The gambler was sure he could hear a couple of ribs crack under the onslaught.

"I assure you, sir," Ezra gasped, trying desperately to get control over the situation, "I have no idea what happened. I hung that boy, I swear on my sainted mother's grave." But Morgan was far from satisfied, pulling the gambler up by the arm, he dragged Ezra in front of the terrified boy, who still lay cowering on the ground. His mother and sisters were screaming, but a few kicks from the men silenced them.

"Then you won't mind shooting this little runt, Mr. Standish," Morgan said. Gone was the yelling, replaced by a cold, calculating voice. He quickly took Ezra's gun, putting it in the hands of the con man, aiming it at the boy. Then he drew his own gun, pointing it at Ezra's head. "I suggest you make your decision, Mr. Standish. I do not have all night."

Ezra felt the gun slide in his hand from the sweat accumulating in his palms. This was not the way it was supposed to go. He looked frantically at the gun, then at the terrified child, who was looking at him with wide eyes, silently pleading with him not to do it. In the background he could hear the wails of the boy's mother and sisters. Ezra knew a bullet from his gun would kill the boy, since he had exchanged his blanks for real ones after the fake shooting. There was no way he could do this. He knew he was forfeiting his own life, but he could never kill an innocent child like this.

"I...I can't. Do what you want with me, but let them go," he said, dropping his gun.

"You yellow-bellied snake," Morgan raged. "If you can't get rid of this scum, I will," he said, firing a single bullet into Clay Harris' head, ending his short life. Then he kicked the body into the fire, watching with satisfaction as the flames licked around the boy, sending the smell of burnt flesh out over the camp. The mother and children were screaming without cease now, totally ignoring the men who were kicking them, trying to get them to shut up.

Ezra promptly fell to his knees and threw up. He was shocked to the core at the brutal treatment of the child and chastised himself for not coming up with a better plan. He hardly felt the kicks the guards laid into his body.

"That's enough. We want him conscious. After all, it would be a shame if he missed his own hanging." Morgan had retrieved the rope Ezra had used earlier, unfolding it, except for the last noose. He hoisted the swaying gambler up again and got his two guards to hold him, while he bound Ezra's hands behind his back. They led the gambler over to Chaucer, almost throwing his body up onto the horse's bare back. They then led him to a nearby tree, tossing the rope over one of the branches. The rope was shortened, forcing his head up. Then they tied it to the base of the tree, much like Ezra had done earlier that day to Clay. But this time there was no extra loop to take the pressure away from his neck.

Nathan, Chris and the others arrived in time to see Ezra being hoisted on to his horse and led to the tree. They had heard a gunshot, but didn't know the cause of it. They had surrounded the canyon on two sides, with Nathan and Josiah moving in from the mouth.

They could hear the anguished cries of the women and smell the burnt flesh. Chris had quickly spotted the small, burnt body in the fire, cursing to himself and damning the camp as he realized what it was. He quickly squashed down the images that arose of his own burnt family. He looked over to see Vin's pale face a few meters away. The tracker gave him a short nod, indicating he was ready. Buck and JD were positioned on the other side. Chris could just about make out the outline of Wilmington. A short wave of the tall man's hat showed they were in position as well.

Chris looked down into the camp, hoping Josiah and Nathan would hurry. Ezra was almost ready to be strung up. Although he didn't know what role the gambler played in all this, he didn't want to see Ezra swing before he had at least heard the man's story. If it wasn't satisfying, he would be the one pulling the lever and hanging the gambler himself. But until then, he wanted the man alive. He was still one of his men, hell, he was still his friend. While he couldn't come up with an explanation for what Nathan had seen, he steadfastly refused to believe that Ezra had killed the boy in cold blood. Even harder to believe was that the gambler was responsible for the small body in the fire. Ezra loved children as much as he loved animals. One only had to look at the relationship he had with Chaucer to understand how much that was. No, there had to be a reasonable explanation for this and Chris aimed to find out what it was. He was certain, though, that it would be an interesting tale.

Finally Josiah and Nathan appeared in the narrow entrance of the canyon, opening fire against the outlaws. It was easier than Chris would have believed since the guards at this end were gone, enabling them to sneak all the way into the canyon. Vin and Chris quickly took out the three men guarding the prisoners, while Nathan and Josiah concentrated on the sentries. Buck and JD shot Morgan and one of the other men nearest him.

Ezra sighed with relief as he heard gunshots. He didn't know how his friends had found him without Clay's directions, but he blessed lady luck for giving him yet another chance. Morgan was the first to fall, clutching his arm fiercely. His remaining men were no longer concerned with the hanging, but only with keeping their own lives. They scrambled to safety under the cover of rocks and fallen logs, behind trees and even behind the bodies of their fallen comrades.

Ezra quietly commanded Chaucer to stay still. He knew the horse would obey him, but the gambler didn't like being out in the open like this, with no protection at all. Even if no one was shooting at him there was still the chance of a stray bullet hitting him. But with the rope still around his neck, he didn't really have much of a choice.

Ezra could hear Chris' Peacemaker and Vin's mare's leg echo through the chaotic camp. A knife caught in the throat of one of the outlaws alerted him to Nathan's presence as well. He knew the rest would be around there somewhere too.

Nathan came into view, staring at him with an unnerving smile. "Nathan, just the gentleman I was looking for. Perhaps you wouldn't mind using one of those marvelous knives of yours to cut me down," Ezra said with a half-smile, wondering why Nathan was looking at him like that. His smile faltered a second later as Nathan replied.

"Actually, Ezra, I would. I won't hang ya myself, but if something happens during the fight I won't cry many tears over ya worthless body," he hissed and turned away.

"What...Nathan... where are...?" But the healer had already left, leaving a bewildered and frightened Ezra behind. Before the gambler had time to think about Nathan's strange behavior a bullet slammed into his left leg. It took all his concentration to keep Chaucer from moving forward under the sudden pressure of his legs. A motion from the corner of his eye alerted him to another danger.

Morgan.

The man had bound his arm with a dirty rag and was now staring at Ezra with a mad look in his eyes.

"You...you are responsible for this," he said in a low voice, his good arm pointing across the camp where his men were being subdued. "Too bad you won't be alive to enjoy it," the stocky man said with a cold smile that sent chills up Ezra's spine. Morgan moved forward, grabbed Chaucer's reins and started pulling. But the horse refused to move, Morgan's actions being counteracted by those of his master on his back. Ezra had to use all his concentration and willpower on getting his horse to stay still without losing consciousness from the pain shooting through his leg. He didn't have time to look or call out for his friends. Suddenly Morgan let go of the reins and pulled his gun.

"Don't need the horse to move voluntarily," he said viciously and pointed the gun at Chaucer's broad chest.

"NO!" Ezra cried. "He'll go, just let him go." With that he commanded Chaucer forward. The horse obeyed his rider, but stopped as he felt Ezra being pulled backwards. Ezra once again urged him forward, so he kept going, even though the gambler slid further off his back.

Ezra felt the rope tightening around his neck and his mind started to panic. But he knew he had to get Chaucer to keep moving. He couldn't let his faithful friend die for something in which the end result would still be the same. Somewhere in his mind Ezra kept screaming for the others, wondering why they weren't helping him? Why had Nathan abandoned him? Then he slid over the horse's rump, finding himself swinging freely in the cold still air, the rope effectively cutting off his air supply. He could vaguely hear Morgan's insane laughter, but everything was blackening out as he desperately tried to get some air into his starving lungs. It wasn't working. He knew he would be dead in a moment, the last thing on his mind the picture of Nathan's retreating back, as he refused to help him.

Blackness threatened to envelop him one last time, when he suddenly found himself falling towards the ground. He landed in a heap, agonizing pain shooting through his leg, but the

rope was still cutting into his neck. He still couldn't breathe. Then a hand found its way to his neck and quickly loosened the rope. At first Ezra started to panic. He couldn't get all the air his starved lungs craved and he started to hyperventilate. Slowly his body relaxed, getting used to the supply of air and letting his brain take over again. Ezra's vision cleared and he could see Nathan kneeling in front of him with a concerned look on his face. But as soon as he saw Ezra staring at him, Nathan's features became angry and he backed away, leaving Ezra to his pain once again.

"Naghh..." Ezra tried, then went into a coughing fit that nearly tore his lungs out and burned painfully in his throat. He realized he couldn't speak. His throat was too abused to produce any sound right now. God, how everything hurt. Now that air once again reached all his extremities he could feel the pain in his leg coming back in full force as well as the bruises from his earlier beating which weren't too happy about his sudden collision with the ground either. And still he wondered what was going on with Nathan.

Nathan had left Ezra on Chaucer with the full intention of letting him swing if something happened. He had seen the body in the fire and the man dangling in the nearby tree. The picture of the boy being hung and the abusive words coming from Ezra's mouth kept playing over and over again in his mind. He had turned his back on the gambler and proceeded to help the others take out the rest of the outlaws. A shot from behind had made him turn around again, but the perpetrator had been taken out by a shot from either Buck or JD. That was when he had seen Ezra urging Chaucer forward, until he was hanging by his neck, effectively killing himself. Seeing how Ezra was willingly giving up his own life for his horse made him realize the gambler couldn't have been the one responsible for the body in the fire. His friend couldn't do that kind of thing. Once that word, 'friend', had entered his mind, he knew he couldn't let Ezra die. Not like this. Then he heard the mad laughter coming from the man who had tried to hang Ezra. Nathan knew instinctively that this was the man responsible for all of this depravity. Maybe he was even the one leading Ezra into this sick world. Ezra would be punished for his sins, but not by this madman.

Nathan shot Morgan, and then ran over and cut the rope holding the swinging gambler. Ezra dropped like a stone, but Nathan could see he still couldn't breathe. The healer forced his hand into the tight space between the gambler's neck and the rope, loosening it. Nathan looked at the struggling man, feeling sympathy for him, but when Ezra looked back at him he felt all the rage and anger slam into him once again. He got up and walked away, leaving the man with his own demons.

Ezra didn't know how long he had been lying on the ground, before he saw Vin and Josiah kneeling next to him.

"Oh, Lord, son. What happened to you?" Josiah asked as he started untying Ezra's hands and removing the rope around his neck.

“NATHAN, Ezra’s hurt,” Vin called out before he put his hands on the still bleeding wound on Ezra’s leg. Ezra whimpered in pain, and once again his throat constricted. He momentarily panicked as his abused throat refused to let the air in. Josiah pinned him firmly to the ground, speaking soothing words. “Easy, Ezra, it’s all right. Relax, son.”

“Nathan, where the hell are ya?” Vin yelled again. The angry words caused Chris to look up from his work of rounding up the last remaining prisoners. He saw Nathan with Buck, trying to soothe the terrified woman and her children. Then he looked at Vin and Josiah and saw the battered form of their friend being held between the two men. He knew Nathan was angry with Ezra, probably ignoring them on purpose. Chris would not stand by, though, and watch Ezra suffering any more than was necessary.

“Nathan, get your butt over to Ezra now,” he said in a deadly tone, brooking no arguments. Still, Nathan was about to protest, until he saw the look in the gunslinger’s eyes. He realized he would be escorted over there at gunpoint, if he didn’t go voluntarily. Nathan angrily released a frightened child into both her mother’s and Buck’s care, before going back to the Southerner. Some of his anger disappeared as he took a good look at his former friend.

Ezra was black and blue, bleeding at the nose and mouth, his throat swollen and bruised from the rope and his leg still bleeding. He could see the pain in Ezra’s eyes and his healer’s instincts kicked in.

“JD, get my bag, and start boiling some water,” he said to the youth, who had helped Chris round up the prisoners. In a fit of deliberate cruelty and self righteousness, he decided not to give the gambler any painkillers before he started. “I need to get the bullet out first, then check out his other injuries.”

For the next hour Nathan worked on Ezra’s body, removing the bullet from the leg and bandaging it, wrapping his broken ribs and cleaning up his cuts and bruises. He knew he was still taking out some of his anger and frustration on the man, as he ran his hands expertly, but rather roughly over Ezra’s body, eliciting a pained moan from the man underneath his fingers.

“Aren’t you being a bit rough on ‘im, Nathan?” Vin asked softly from his place beside the gambler, where he was holding the man’s hand.

“I can’t help him hurting, Vin,” Nathan replied. “Seems like they did a number on him. Broke a couple of ribs and gave him a few bruises. Leg’s gonna be alright, though. Bullet didn’t hit any major veins. Throat’s gonna be bruised and swollen for some time as well. He won’t be able to talk until the swelling goes down,” he said with a certain satisfaction. “Now, excuse me, I need to go see to the womenfolk.”

“Ya ain’t gona give him something for the pain?” Vin asked, bewildered. He had thought Nathan had held back on his usual noxious brew while he dug out the bullet, because Ezra was too weak to tolerate it. Now he wasn’t so sure. Nathan seemed a bit too happy about Ezra’s suffering.

"I haven't got all the necessary ingredients with me right now. Until we get back, I can't make my tea. He'll just have to wait until then," Nathan said. For a moment he seemed to waver indecisively, looking down at his patient. Then he turned around and walked back to the women, whom Buck seemed to be handling just fine. Vin looked at the healer's retreating back and shook his head. His eyes met Josiah's sad ones over Ezra's suffering body.

"Seems to me brother Nathan has a few demons that brother Ezra is going to pay for."

"Meaning ya don't believe him," Vin said. Josiah didn't say anything, just grabbed Ezra's hand harder, when the gambler moaned.

"How is he?" Chris asked as he joined the two men. The prisoners had all been tied up and JD was now keeping a close eye on them. The gunslinger knelt down to put a hand on the younger man's forehead, feeling the heat rise off him.

"Been beat up pretty good. Got two busted ribs, a bullet to the leg and a sore throat. He won't be able to talk, but Nate reckon's he'll be fine with some rest. Says he doesn't have any more of his tea, though, so Ez'll have to suffer until we get 'im back home," Vin said darkly and stood up, releasing his hold on the gambler's hand. As Ezra started to moan, Chris quickly picked up the freed hand, and the southerner quieted back down again. In spite of the seriousness of the situation, the men couldn't help but smile at the gambler's reaction. This was just more proof that they were breaking through the enigmatic man's defenses.

"I'm gonna go get the wagon," Vin stated. The family's wagon had been left in a corner of the camp, the mules still tied to it. He brought it back and the three men got Ezra into it, placing him on the madras's the family had. They used their own bedrolls to prop him up and Vin crawled inside to make Ezra as comfortable as possible, letting his friend use his lap as a pillow. The two shocked children were placed in front of Nathan and Buck on their horses. The mother was seated outside, next to JD, who held the reins of the wagon. None of the womenfolk had said anything yet, all still too shocked at what had happened. Chris had bundled up the boy's badly burned body in a couple of blankets and tied it behind his horse. The father's body had been placed behind Josiah's saddle.

The ride home felt like an eternity for Ezra. The pain in his leg and his throat were so great he silently wished for one of Nathan's dreadful concoctions. He usually hated the stuff, but it was in situations like these he really learned to appreciate the healer's knowledge of healing plants. But Nathan hadn't seen to him since he was placed in the wagon. Vin quietly told him Nathan didn't have anything to make a potion with right now, since he had run out of some of the herbs. Ezra just nodded, then wished he hadn't. Even that small motion seemed to set his body on fire. Though his companion tried to shield him as much as possible from the potholes in the road, Ezra felt every little bump jarring through his body. One rather nasty bump had him screaming out in pain, making Larabee stop the

wagon and order Nathan to take another look at him. Still the healer just said he had to ride it out. Nathan's behavior puzzled Ezra. Surely he couldn't still be mad at him for gambling with the black ranch hands. It wasn't like it was the first time they had come to blows over his gambling. Nathan had always calmed down the next day, never treating him like this before. The healer never ignored him when he was hurt, not even when he stole the ten thousand dollars. Ezra figured it had to have to do with Clay's death, but he wasn't sure why the healer was taking it out on him. Maybe Nathan had realized it was Ezra's failed plan that had gotten the boy killed. However, the constant pain kept Ezra from thinking too hard on it. Instead he had to use much of his reserve to try not to throw up.

Back in Four Corners, Buck and Chris carefully carried Ezra into Nathan's clinic. Josiah took the women to Mrs. Potter and Mrs. Travis, hoping they could ease their trauma, since both women knew what it was like to lose a husband to violence. Vin went to unhitch the mules from the wagon and take care of the horses, while JD led the prisoners over to the jail. Once Chris and Buck had helped Ezra unto the cot, Nathan had assured them he could manage by himself. The two gunslingers had then taken off to help JD, and to inform the undertaker of his new customers.

Ezra was in agony as he lay on the small cot in the clinic. His leg burned, although that particular pain had eased a bit, especially if he didn't move at all. The worst pain of all was in his throat. Each breath felt like he was trying to swallow a sack of dust. His throat was completely dry, while the swelling made it difficult to breathe, producing small wheezing sounds. He could see Nathan standing by his small table, where all his medicine books lay, apparently pondering something. Ezra wished the healer would brew up some of his bad tasting tea. He hadn't realized how much good those teas did, until he was actually denied them. He missed their soothing, relaxing effect. He had never before known the healer not to have a full supply of his ever-present herbs with him when he rode out. Especially if there was any chance they would end up in a shootout. That puzzled the gambler. But he suspected it might have something to do with the healer's black mood and deplorable treatment of him. Here in the clinic, Ezra just hoped Nathan would find some mercy for him. He didn't fancy the healer re-bandaging his leg without giving him something to numb the terrible pain.

Ezra moved a bit on the cot, trying to get more comfortable, but he gave up when a mind-numbing pain shot through his leg again. In frustration he slammed his hand against the bedding, trying to draw Nathan's attention. When Nathan finally turned around, Ezra put all the begging he could into the look he sent the healer.

Nathan had followed Chris and Buck up to his clinic, although he would rather have gone with Josiah and the women. Physically, the womenfolk would be fine. Mentally, they had suffered a great trauma. Right now Josiah and rest would be the best remedy for them.

After Chris and Buck had left, Nathan had taken a few minutes to compose himself. Staring unseeingly down at his medical books, he tried to remember why in the hell he wanted to help people. Right now, all he wanted to do was strangle the person who needed his help most. So far he had done his best to stay away from Ezra, even refusing to make his pain-relieving tea. All the while he told his conscience the gambler deserved everything he got. After all, Ezra had brought all this on himself. Nathan had bandaged his leg and cleaned his wounds. The healer had just told one little white lie to the others. There was no way in hell he would ride anywhere with them without an ample supply of medicine and bandages.

Nathan had trouble reconciling his former friend with the man he had seen today. He hoped to God there was a reasonable explanation for the gambler's behavior, but he doubted it strongly. How would Ezra be able to explain hanging a young man, shooting and then burning him? He just couldn't fathom the absolute cruelty he had witnessed.

He was pulled out of his dark thoughts when Ezra moaned and slapped a hand down on the cot. A pair of pain-filled green eyes stared at him, eyes begging for Nathan to take the pain away. Nathan wondered how the man could kill a black boy one moment and then expect help from another black man the next. It almost made him sick to think how the gambler had him fooled for so long. Still he couldn't withhold the tea any longer. Even if his conscience wasn't killing him for letting a man suffer, Chris and Josiah would be back at some point. They would start asking questions if their friend were still in pain.

Nathan took a deep breath, then started pulling out the ingredients he needed. As images of the cruel hanging and the burnt body resurfaced, he deliberately made the tea weaker than usual and even fouler tasting. It wouldn't harm Ezra, but it would taste like hell, only taking the edge off his pain.

"Drink this," Nathan said, and helped the younger man in the bed into a sitting position. Ezra took one careful sip, then screwed up his face in distaste. If he had been able to talk, Nathan knew he wouldn't have heard the end of it. Thankfully Ezra could not. "All of it, Ezra," he ordered harshly, pressing the cup to the con man's lips once again. Ezra took another small swallow, before turning his head away, refusing to drink anymore. "All right, have it your way, but it's gonna hurt when I clean and re-bandage your leg," he said in a hard cold voice. Ezra didn't answer, just looked wistfully out the window, pain still etched in his face. Nathan almost felt sorry for him, remembering how different things had been between them just the other day. Then he shook off those feelings and went to get his equipment. No need to waste any compassion or guilt on that good for nothing gambler. When he had finished his task, he dealt Ezra a last blow as he removed his deck of cards from his jacket. Ezra tried to grab for them, but was still too weak from pain and exhaustion to react fast enough. "Won't be needing these right now," Nathan said, enjoying the look of desolation on Ezra's face.

Ezra had almost thrown up when he tasted Nathan's tea. Never in his life had he tasted anything so foul. The liquid burned in his throat and even the smell was nauseating. When Nathan urged him to drink some more, he took another tentative sip and then turned his head away. He couldn't get any more down without fearing it would come straight back up again. Nathan's teas never tasted very good, but this was just awful. He would rather stand the pain than be subjected to that again.

All the time the healer worked on his leg, Ezra kept his eyes averted, staring out the window and into the darkness. He couldn't bear seeing those accusing eyes again. When Nathan finally finished inflicting his agonizing chore on Ezra, the gambler had wanted to reach out for his ever-present deck of cards. He needed something to keep his mind occupied, besides the pain and the guilt. But Nathan had snatched his cards away from him before Ezra could reach them. Losing his beloved cards almost made him cry. In the end he just shut his eyes and tried to fall asleep. Usually Nathan's potion would have done the trick by now, but Ezra figured rest was another thing Nathan didn't think he deserved. Ezra could only agree with him, knowing Clay's mother and sisters would get no rest this night either. The gambler kept his eyes on the darkness as he listened to Nathan moving about while cleaning up. Eventually he settled down at his table, bringing his oil-lamp with him. It took almost an hour before Ezra succumbed to his exhaustion and fell asleep.

It was a couple of minutes past midnight before everything was calm in town and Chris was able to enter the small clinic. Although the other gunslingers were eager to know how Ezra was and what had happened, he had sent them all to bed. All that is, except for Josiah, who was still with the women. Chris figured Ezra needed some rest and the others barging into the clinic wouldn't allow for that. He found Nathan sitting in his chair, reading in one of his medical books. The younger man joined him as Chris went over to look at the sleeping patient.

"How is he?" he asked, noticing the pale skin and that the pain, although not as pronounced as earlier, was still etched in Ezra's facial features.

"He's gonna be fine. I cleaned and re-banded his leg, then gave him something for the pain. He should be able to walk to his own hanging," Nathan said disgustedly.

Chris looked at the healer, then shook his head silently. Nathan was in one of his self-righteous moods right now, and unable or unwilling to see what Chris and the others saw--that never in a million years could Ezra hurt a child the way the Harris boy had been hurt. Ezra was a con man, a cheat, and someone, who more often than not, brought trouble down on the seven because of his gambling habit and his arrogant attitude. Chris had often had the urge to just shoot the irritating man. When the one-time father had seen the boy in the fire, he had been filled with anger and hate. Images of another fire and another

small boy burnt forced to the surface of his mind. But the anger had never been directed at the conman, who was about to be hanged. Chris had known instinctively that what Nathan had seen had to be one of Ezra's cons. That con had now gone terribly wrong and was about to be the death of the man.

As they took care of the prisoners, both JD and Buck had expressed their doubts about the gambler's guilt. And Chris knew Vin felt the same way. Josiah thought of Ezra as a stray lamb, one that needed guidance back to its fold, back to its rightful place in society. Even if it hadn't been for that, Chris knew Josiah would never believe Ezra had killed the Harris boy. All they could do now was wait. Wait for the swelling around Ezra's throat to go down, so he could tell them what had really happened, or for Mrs. Harris to come back to her senses. As it was, she was simply too grief stricken to communicate anything right now.

It was late morning the next day, when Ezra finally came around again. The gambler had developed a slight fever overnight, and Chris had spent the hours cooling him down with a cloth. The gunslinger now sat reading the Clarion. Once he realized the patient was awake and had turned his head to look at him, Chris laid down the paper focusing his attention on Ezra.

"Want some water?" he asked, then filled a cup before Ezra could nod his reply. The leader carefully helped him to sit up and slowly swallow the cool liquid. Chris noticed how the gambler started out by taking a small, tentative sip, before giving in to the soothing water. Ezra's throat was most likely still bothering him, he figured.

"Here, Nathan told me to give you this when you woke up," Chris said and motioned towards the kettle which held one of Nathan's teas. He didn't like the way Ezra suddenly turned green and started shaking his head, until the pain made him stop.

"Dammit, Ezra, don't be such a stubborn ass. It'll take the pain away, and help with the swelling." Ezra just clamped his mouth shut and turned his head away. He knew the obstinate gambler wasn't exactly fond of Nathan's concoctions, hell, none of them were, but he had never seen him outright refuse it. Bitch about it, yes, but he always drank it in the end. But not this time. Chris decided to let him be. He didn't know what was going on, and until Ezra could talk again he would just have to wait. Although waiting was one thing he was never very good at doing.

Once Ezra was placed back against the pillows, he looked around the room. A frown marred his face, which was soon replaced by a wince, as the bruises protested.

"JD and Vin are watching the town and the prisoners. Buck's sleeping and Josiah is probably with the Harris family. Nathan has gone to get us some breakfast," Chris answered the gambler's unvoiced question. Just as he finished, Nathan came in, bearing a tray with a plate, a cup and a bowl. The plate was filled with eggs, bacon and beans, while the bowl held a thin broth, obviously meant for the gambler.

"Here ya go, Chris," Nathan said and handed the plate and the cup of coffee to the gunslinger. He lifted the bowl off the tray and sat the tray on the floor, before handing Ezra the bowl. Ezra refused to take it, and Nathan set it down on the small table next to the bed.

“Suit yourself. If ya ain’t wantin’ ta eat, I ain’t gonna force ya,” he said harshly. “Going to go over to the undertaker and get those funerals taken care of,” he said to Chris as he walked out, the door slamming behind him. Chris gritted his teeth, hoping the healer would soon get back to his senses. Ezra just bowed his head and looked down at his hands, no doubt wishing he had a deck of cards with him. Chris wondered what had happened to them. He would see to it that Ezra got one as soon as possible.

“Stop being so damn stubborn, Ezra,” Chris said. “Won’t help you get better if you keep refusing to eat. What’s the matter with you?” He took a long look at the slumped form and the downcast eyes. He and could almost feel the guilt emanating from the man. Damn! Why hadn’t he picked up on that sooner?

“Ain’t your fault the boy died, Ezra,” he said quietly, causing the gambler to look up with a shocked look on his face, before the mask slammed back. “None of us think that. Don’t know what exactly happened, but I suspect it will be an interesting tale.” Ezra just gave an ungentlemanly snort, then winced and waved his hand at the closed door. “Yeah, well, Nathan does seem to have put his ass in a beehive, but he’ll come around, Ezra. Trust me.”

He was rewarded with a small smile from the gambler. Even more rewarding, Ezra reached out for the bowl with the cooling broth. He sniffed it tentatively, before bringing a small spoonful to his lips, sipping gently. Chris put it down to Ezra’s throat still hurting, but he had a feeling Nathan and his concoctions might have played a part in the gambler’s cautious manners. He would have to have a talk with the healer later. He wouldn’t tolerate this kind of behavior from the stubborn man.

After Ezra had finished, he put the bowl down on the floor. He had to admit he had been somewhat hungry, but he was afraid Nathan had done something with it again. Chris’ insistence that he should eat, along with the man’s faith in Ezra’s innocence, had prompted the gambler to at least try it. After checking it out, Ezra had deemed it edible and finished almost all of it. Hearing from the gunslinger that he, as well as JD, Buck, Vin and Josiah, all still had faith in him, that they never believed he had done anything wrong, boosted Ezra’s spirit. He remained sad that Clay had died, but perhaps Chris was right and it wasn’t his fault. At least, although traumatized, the mother and the daughters had made it out alive.

Ezra looked over at Chris, who was sitting on the hard chair next to the bed. He had finished eating as well and had gone back to reading the newspaper. Downright deplorable company, Ezra thought, and wished JD or even Buck were here as well. They would entertain him with some of their jokes or stories. While his throat still hurt, even more after having used it for eating, his leg was also starting to act up again. He wished he had his deck of cards, so he could focus on something else. He tried to shift in the bed to find a better position, eliciting a groan of pain and causing Chris to look up from his paper.

"You still hurting?" he asked softly. "You want some of Nathan's tea?"

Ezra contemplated trying the odious tea again, but decided not to venture it. He had just had something to eat, and didn't look forward to throwing it all up again. The gambler just wished he still had his cards with him. Damn Nathan! He shook his head, causing Chris to frown at him, but fortunately the gunslinger decided not to press the issue.

A short time later Buck and Vin made their appearance in the small clinic. JD was still watching the prisoners. Buck would go relieve him later, so he could come over when Vin wanted to head out on patrol. They talked for a bit, mostly making jokes about Ezra, now that he couldn't talk back. In between the lines Ezra could read their concern and support. He didn't show it, but he appreciated it immensely, nonetheless. After they had gone, JD came over, followed by Nathan. The black man still refused to talk to him, only telling Chris rather loudly about how he had arranged the funeral of young Clay Harris and his father. This brought the guilt back to Ezra, placing a dark mood over the clinic. A shroud that wasn't broken until the door burst open and Josiah stepped through, escorting Mrs. Harris inside.

"Josiah, what are you doing?" Nathan exclaimed, thinking the preacher had lost his marbles. Why on earth would he want to show the shocked woman her son's killer, so soon after his death?

"Mrs. Harris would like to see Ezra. Hope you are up for some company, son," Josiah replied. Then he escorted the frail woman over to the chair JD had just vacated. Nathan was about to protest as he looked at the woman with tears running down her cheeks. He couldn't believe Josiah would let her do this. But the first words out of the grieving widow's mouth stilled his protest.

"I...I came to thank you, Mr. Standish. If it hadn't been for you, I know...I know what would have happened to my little girls and myself. I know how you tried to save my son at your own expense, and I am so sorry it ended like this. But if you hadn't come, I would not only have lost my husband and son, but my two little girls as well. I will be forever thankful to you," she said, then broke down sobbing. Ezra reached out, patting her back gently, embarrassed about the display in front of him. He was unsure what to do to help the grieving woman. Josiah gave him a toothy smile, before taking the crying woman into his arms. When she had entered the clinic, the rest of the men had quietly left. Except for Nathan, who now looked like someone had just slapped him.

"Would someone mind explaining to me what's going on? I'm sorry to be so blunt, ma'am, but I... I saw Ezra hang your son." At that statement Ezra's green eyes flew up to meet the healer's brown ones. Nathan could see a mixture of surprise, understanding and sadness there, before Ezra averted his eyes. Mrs. Harris took the handkerchief offered by Josiah, drying her eyes, before looking at Nathan.

"I don't understand what you are talking about, Mr. Jackson," she sniffed through her tears. "My son was not hung, but shot. I thought he had been killed when they first attacked the wagon. They took us to their camp and tied us up. Those men treated us like animals, all the while shouting obscene things to me and my girls. And then...and then they hung poor

George. Strung him up like he was nothing, just an animal to get rid of..." It took her a couple of minutes to get herself back under control. She smiled tearfully as Josiah patted her back and whispered soothing words to her. When she continued, it was in a stronger voice than before, determined to get through it. "After...well, then Mr. Standish showed up and they started playing cards, leaving us alone. But then some of the guards came back, dragging my poor boy with them. They started shouting and hitting Mr. Standish, before ordering him to shoot my son. He wouldn't, so that terrible man did it before he kicked my boy into the fire. Then they tied up Mr. Standish and dragged him over to his horse, so they could hang him. And they would have, had you all not showed up. I owe you everything."

Nathan knew that if he bit any harder on his cheek, blood would soon flow. But dammit, he should have known. He should have known it was all a goddamn ruse created by the goddamn conman. He should have known his friend would never do something like that. He should have known...hell, all the others knew Ezra was no cold-blooded killer. Why the hell hadn't he seen it himself? He didn't realize he had tensed up completely, until Josiah started escorting the woman out of the clinic.

"Come on, Mrs. Harris. Let's get you back to your girls. I am sure they would like to see their mother right now." The crying woman nodded, thanked the gambler a few more times, then let Josiah lead her out.

The closing of the door spurred Nathan into action. He started getting the ingredients together for one of his concoctions. One that would not only relieve the pain Ezra was feeling, but help ease the swelling as well. This time he added plenty of honey and some lemon drops, making sure it would taste even better than the ones he usually served. In all the time it took for him to get it ready, he never once turned around to look at his friend. He could feel Ezra's eyes on his back. When he finally came over with the tea, Ezra looked at him with a mixture of amusement and sadness. Nathan couldn't think what the hell was funny about all this, but he did have an idea about the sadness, and he felt ashamed. He gently helped prop up the gambler, so he could hold the tea.

"Here, Ezra, this will help with the pain and the swelling," he said. Ezra looked at it questioningly causing Nathan to give a nervous laugh. "I promise it tastes all right, Ezra. If ya want, I'll even drink some of it first myself." Ezra scrutinized him for a moment, then shook his head slightly and brought the tea to his lips. His face softened after the first taste, apparently happy with the lemon and honey. Nathan resolved to keep that in mind the next time the gambler needed his help.

Ezra tried to stop halfway through it. It was hell on his sore throat, trying to swallow like that, but Nathan forced him to keep going. "All of it, Ezra," he admonished, and Ezra reluctantly drank the rest. "Good, now get some rest. I'll be back in half an hour to change the bandages again." Ezra nodded, his eyes already starting to close. Just before he succumbed to sleep, a deck of cards was pressed into his hand, bringing a soft smile to his face.

Sitting in front of the saloon, Ezra groaned as he saw Nathan striding towards him. It had been six days since Ezra had almost been hung. Five days since he had realized why Nathan had been so angry with him. Ever since then, the healer had been his constant shadow. Making healing teas, fluffing his pillows, hell, even helping him getting dressed. Until Ezra had threatened to beat him with his crutches, not so much in words as in gesture, since he still couldn't talk very well. The swelling had come down considerably and he was able to hold short--very short—conversations. Too much talk and his throat became parched. He would start coughing, followed soon after by wheezing, something a gentleman would never do.

At first Ezra had been saddened by what the healer had thought of him. After mulling it over for a while, he had come to the conclusion that if he had been presented with the same scenario as Nathan, he would have thought the same thing. Not if it involved the other six, but Ezra had never been like the others. So it was understandable that Nathan could believe it about him, even though the others didn't. In the end he had just put it down to a plan working a bit too well and then again, not at all. He still felt guilty about young Clay's death, although no one else seemed to blame him, not even the boy's family. Josiah and Buck had escorted them to Eagle Bend after the funerals. The rancher, who had first hired Clay's father, agreed to take the rest of the family in after hearing what had happened to them. As the woman could cook as well as her husband had been able to, he was just as pleased with that arrangement.

"Hey Ezra", Nathan said, as he approached. "Mind if I join you for a spell?"

"It's a free country, Mr. Jackson," Ezra replied. There was no malice in his voice, just tiredness. He only wanted to be alone. Nathan looked at him for a moment, then sat down in the chair beside him.

"Gotta talk to ya, Ezra. Got some things I need ta say," Nathan stated, but didn't look up from where he was nervously pulling at his fingers.

"If it is about this misunderstanding, Mr. Jackson, I assure you, I understand perfectly. It was as much my own fault. I should have come up with a better plan. One that wouldn't end up with young Master Harris getting killed."

"Weren't anything wrong with yer plan, Ezra. Apart from the fact that ya almost got yer fool self killed. Just bad luck, is all. Ya couldn't have known those bastards would go back, trying to set the body on fire. Ya managed to save the rest of the family, which is more than anyone could expect from a lone man against fifteen others. I don't think I could have done it myself."

"Surely, Mr. Jackson, with the right plan..."

"Maybe, but the problem is I probably wouldn't have come up with the right plan. Likelier I'd have rushed in and got myself killed along with the womenfolk as well. Don't think I've ever said this, Ezra, but I really appreciate that sharp mind of yours. Not always what ya

do with it, mind ya, but I do appreciate it nonetheless. Just as I appreciate the man behind it.” Nathan finally looked up, catching Ezra’s eyes and chuckling a bit at the stunned look on the gambler’s face.

“I...I um...Thank you, Mr. Jackson...I...” the conman stuttered.

“I’m real sorry that I mistrusted you this time, and I swear that won’t happen again. Guess I just had some trouble, after seeing what happened. I’m a man who believes what he sees. This time what I saw was wrong, and I jumped to conclusions. I’m sorry. I can’t promise I won’t yell at ya again, but no more smelly, bad tasting tea when yer hurt. I’m downright ashamed about that. Ain’t no way for a healer to behave. Chris gave me a good tongue-lashing about that when he found out,” the healer said with a self-deprecating smile.

“But what I wanted to say,” Nathan continued before Ezra would get a chance to interrupt him, “is that I was the only one, Ezra. None of the others believed you could have killed that boy. I know this ain’t exactly the kind of town yer used to, but it has got something the others haven’t got. Real friends, Ezra. Know that might not be enough to make ya stay, but I just wanted ya to know that.”

“Thank you, Mr. Jackson. I appreciate it. I must admit I am finding more and more things appealing about this quaint little town,” Ezra said hoarsely, then sniffed, much to his own horror. Luckily, Nathan didn’t seem to notice, or maybe he just chose not to. In any case, Ezra managed to blow his nose, before tucking away his handkerchief, without any comments from the healer.

“You interested in a game of poker, Ezra?” Nathan asked, getting up from his chair.” Know about a couple of black cowhands and a black healer who would be interested in losing some of their money to ya.”

“I would be delighted, Mr. Jackson,” Ezra laughed. Nathan might not stop complaining about him, but at least he had a small respite now. And he would even be able to make money on it. Maybe the plan hadn’t been so bad after all.

The End
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