

Buddy and Joe in the El Dorado Gold Rush



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A long road to El Dorado

The sun hung in the sky like a rusty lead ball, burning the sand into a glow that cursed all life. The horses snorted, sweat dripped into the dust, and every step stirred up a cloud that licked your tongue dry. Buddy chewed on a piece of leather because there was nothing else left. Joe drank the last swig from his canteen like a gentleman tasting fine wine. But it was only warm water, already tasting of tin.

"If we ride like this for another two hours," Joe muttered, pushing his hat further down over his face, "we'll end up in hell. And there certainly won't be a saloon there."

Buddy didn't answer. He wasn't one for many words. His stomach rumbled, and he thought more about beans and bacon than the devil. What drove him wasn't gold, not fame, or a woman. Only hunger. And the desire to finally sit somewhere where the sun wasn't stinging his face.

The road, if you could call it that, was just a wide strip of beaten desert. To the left, a few rocks that looked like granite teeth. To the right, nothing but endless emptiness stretching to the horizon. And in this emptiness, Buddy kept seeing mirages that looked like oases, but were just hot steam. Joe called them "Fata Morganas." Buddy called them "damn false promises."

"I'm telling you, buddy," Joe began again, "El Dorado will be our fortune. There's gold there, more gold than you can imagine in your wildest dreams. We'll grab a few claims, outsmart the fools, play a few rounds of cards, and hey presto—we're rich. Then you can have your beans fried in silver pans, served by a pretty waitress."

Buddy spat a dry piece of leather dust into the sand. "I don't need a silver pan. I just need beans. And bacon."

Joe grinned, even though his lips burned from the salt and sweat. "See, that's why we make a good team. You think about food, I think about money. And in the end, we're both full."

The horses slowed, their flanks glistening with sweat, and the grinding of their hooves was the only sound in the cursed silence. Buddy glanced over at Joe. The boy still looked fresh, as if he'd just stepped out of a bath. Only his eyes—light blue as ice—betrayed that he, too, was at his limit. Buddy knew Joe would

keep riding, even if he was about to fall over. That's how he was: always faster, always smarter, always with a trick up his sleeve.

"Tell me, Joe," Buddy finally grumbled, "do you have any idea where this El Dorado is? Or are we just riding because you like the name?"

Joe grinned wider. "A little of both. But don't worry. I heard something. Gold. Lots of gold. And where there's gold, there are saloons. And where there are saloons, there are beans. So: double the motivation."

Buddy twisted his mouth. "If there are no beans, there's going to be trouble."

They rode on, hour after hour, until the sun hung like a dagger at their backs. The dust settled like a film on their skin and clothes. Buddy felt like he was swallowing sand with every breath. Joe whistled a tune that wasn't a song, more a sound, to fill the silence.

Finally, something appeared on the horizon that looked different from a mirage. A cluster of wooden roofs, chimneys, and clouds of dust. Buddy blinked. Joe straightened in the saddle.

"Do you see that?" he asked in an excited voice. "That must be El Dorado!"

Buddy narrowed his eyes. The buildings looked like crooked wooden teeth boring into the desert. Smoke rose, and that was a good sign. Where there was smoke, there was fire. And where there was fire, you could heat a pan.

"Maybe," he grumbled. "Or maybe just a trap."

Joe laughed. "You see traps everywhere. I see opportunities. So, friend, let's see if El Dorado wants us. And if there's anything to eat."

The horses mustered their last strength as the sun sank lower. Shadows stretched across the desert, and suddenly the town was there—no longer a speck in the distance, but a reality of boards, signs, and rattling doors. A sign hung above the saloon, creaking in the wind. A few grimy figures crouched on the porches, staring at the newcomers. Their eyes gleamed like those of vultures sniffing out new prey.

Joe rode proudly and upright, as if he already owned half the town. Buddy just looked at the sign above the saloon. He couldn't read the letters very well, but that didn't matter to him. As long as there was a stove inside.

As they turned onto the main street, the air was heavy with dust, sweat, and the smell of old alcohol. Dogs were barking, a drunk was lying in the dirt, a few children were running barefoot through the dust. It wasn't paradise, more like a gathering of losers waiting for a miracle.

Joe smiled. "See, buddy? Gold or no gold—this is the place for us."

Buddy stared at the saloon door. It swung gently in the wind. Behind it, he hoped, lay a pan of beans. And if not, then at least a table to rest his fists on.

Main Street wasn't a place you welcomed with open arms. It was a maw that would swallow you whole if you weren't careful. Buddy sensed it immediately. The eyes of the people standing around—miners with crusty hands, women with faces as tired as the dust, gamblers with card fingers—all stared at the two of them like carrion birds sniffing out two new carcasses.

Joe grinned anyway, as if it were a parade in his honor. "Nice neighborhood," he said, taking off his hat as if to be polite. No reaction, except for a child sticking dirty fingers up his nose.

Buddy glanced at the saloon. The sign creaked again, the paint half gone, the letters a mere shadow. He could already smell it: old beer, sour whiskey, sweat, maybe a bit of vomit. And yet it was like an invitation. The smell of life, however miserable.

"We're going in there," Buddy said in his deep voice that sounded more like a growl.

Joe raised an eyebrow. "You don't want to check the surroundings first? Maybe there's something more interesting? A bank we can relieve, or a claim we can take over?"

Buddy shook his head. "Eat. Eat first."

Joe mock-sighed, but he followed. It was always like that. Buddy followed his gut, Joe followed his instincts. In the end, they both ended up somewhere where there was trouble.

They tied the horses to a rotten post. One of the villagers, a man with sunken cheeks and a hat that must have once belonged to someone else, approached. His voice was so scratchy, as if he had been smoking stones.

"Strangers," he said, "strangers are not welcome here for long. Unless you have gold in your pockets."

Joe tilted his head. "Gold? Of course. We always have gold with us. But we don't talk about it, we show it. Maybe later. Maybe in a round of cards."

The man blinked and tried to peer through her pockets. Buddy took a step closer, and suddenly the guy backed away. You could see in Buddy's eyes that he wasn't a fan of long discussions.

"We'll play cards later," Buddy said calmly. "Now saloon."

They continued walking, leaving the man gaping at the dusty ground. The saloon door cast a shadow that swayed toward them. Joe pushed it open, and they entered.

Inside, it was as expected: a room filled with smoke, voices, and clinking glasses. A piano tinkled, but the notes were off-key, as if the strings were drunk. The tables were occupied by men holding cards, tipping bottles, or simply sitting there as if they had long since lost hope.

A red-haired woman stood behind the counter, wiping a glass that would never be clean and scrutinizing the two newcomers with eyes sharper than any knife.

"Two cowboys," she said without greeting. "And I bet you're hungry."

Buddy nodded immediately. "Beans. With bacon."

The woman raised her eyebrows slightly. "Bacon is expensive."

Joe flashed a broad smile. "We are too."

A few men turned their heads, looking at the two, and Buddy felt the tension in the room like a string being taut. In a city like this, every stranger was a threat, or an opportunity. And opportunities here were usually decided with fists or Colts.

The woman behind the counter—presumably the bartender, perhaps the owner—half-turned and called into the kitchen: "Two portions of beans! And fill the pan, or one of them will eat my counter."

Buddy nodded contentedly. For him, the world was right, even if his stomach wasn't. Joe, on the other hand, kept his eyes alert. He saw the glances

following them, the men's slow counting, the hands discreetly moving toward their belts.

"Nice city," Joe murmured, sitting down at the bar. "Smells of gold. And trouble."

Buddy sat down next to him, the wooden bench creaking under his weight. "As long as there are beans, I don't care about anything else."

A man with a black beard sitting next to them laughed hoarsely. "Then you've landed in the right hole. El Dorado: there's more trouble than gold here. But at least there are beans. Sometimes."

Buddy looked at him, slowly, as if testing whether the guy was a problem or just a mouth. Joe grinned, raised his glass, which had just been placed in front of him, and said, "To beans and trouble. Both keep life exciting."

The piano stopped briefly, then continued playing. A card fell to the floor, a bottle was uncorked, a dog barked outside. Everything continued as if two new faces meant nothing. But everyone knew: two new faces meant everything.

Joe leaned back and spoke quietly, audible only to Buddy: "I'm telling you, buddy. Tonight's going to be interesting. And not just because of the beans."

Buddy grumbled. "Hopefully they keep their promises."

The chairs in the saloon squeaked as if nervous. Every man sitting at a table seemed to have a reason to scrutinize the two newcomers. And every reason smelled of gold or trouble.

The bartender set down two glasses of whiskey without asking her name. Her gaze was hard, but not unfriendly—more like a woman who knew she had to survive in a city full of predators. She poured Buddy a glass, as if she were waiting for it to break beneath his fingers.

"On the house," she said briefly.

Joe raised his glass. "I like houses that give something." He took a sip, not flinching, even though the whiskey tasted like diluted kerosene. Buddy picked up his glass, sniffed it, and put it down again.

"Later," he murmured.

The men at the next table laughed quietly. One of them, a thin guy with teeth like a broken piano, leaned forward. "Well, what do we have here? Two heroes who think they can just walk in and demand beans like hell doesn't exist."

Joe turned to him with a smile. "Heroes? Nope. Heroes die young. We prefer to live. And beans aren't a luxury, they're a basic human right."

The laughter grew louder, but it wasn't friendly. It was the laughter of men just waiting for someone to throw up their hand so the Colts could speak.

Buddy didn't move. He sat there like a rock, enduring everything. Joe knew that was his trick: stay calm until someone was stupid enough to disturb the peace. Then the rock exploded, and shards flew into people's faces.

The bartender placed two plates on the counter. Clouds of steam rose, the smell of beans and bacon spreading like a promise. Buddy immediately grabbed something, his eyes shining for the first time that day. Joe waited until the plates were properly lined up, then casually took a bite.

"Guys," he said between bites, "if you're going to stare at us, at least do it in time. Otherwise we'll get digestive problems."

A few of the men twisted their mouths. The thin one with the bad teeth narrowed his eyes. "You have a cheeky tongue. Let's see if you have quick hands, too."

Joe grinned broadly, his white teeth flashing in the dim light. "Don't ask about my tongue. Ask about my Colt."

The laughter died down. The room was suddenly silent, only the piano continued to tinkle nervously until that, too, stopped. All eyes turned to Joe. Buddy continued eating undeterred, as if none of it bothered him.

The bartender stood up straight, her hands on the bar. "No shooting in my bar," she said sharply. "Not while I'm standing here. If you want to fight, get out. If you want to shoot, get out. But my floor stays clean."

The gap-toothed man growled, but he didn't move. He knew that in this town, the bartender had more power than the sheriff. And Buddy was still sitting there, shoveling beans into his mouth as if the world were a hunk of bones.

Joe took another bite, chewed slowly, and then said, "See? We're peaceful. We're just eating. And if you're lucky, we'll invite you over if there's anything left over."

A few men actually laughed this time, albeit nervously. The ice wasn't broken, just cracked. But sometimes that was enough to get through a night.

Buddy put down his fork and spoke for the first time in minutes: "Well cooked."

The bartender nodded as if she had gained a silent respect.

"There's more out there," she said. "But there's also trouble out there. The Baron doesn't want strangers staying here too long."

Joe leaned back, a twinkle in his light blue eyes. "The Baron? Sounds like someone worth meeting. We're good guests. We liven up the city."

Buddy chewed. "And hungry."

The bartender curled her lips, half smile, half mockery. "Then let him feed you all before he shoots you."

The door slammed open as if the wind had chased it. But it wasn't wind, it was boots. Three men entered, boastful, wide-legged, each with a face that reeked of trouble. Their spurs clinked, their hands close to their Colts. The saloon fell silent almost instantly, except for the sound of a glass dripping from a table somewhere.

Buddy was still shoveling beans. Joe grinned as if he'd been waiting for this very moment.

"Looks like we have company," he murmured, the words as light as dust in the light.

The three men surveyed the room as if it belonged to them. Perhaps it did. The middle man, a man with a scar across his forehead, stepped forward. His voice sounded like a rusty saw.

"The Baron says no strangers without permission. You two look strange to me."

Joe slowly put down the spoon and turned on the barstool so he was looking directly at the men. His light blue eyes flashed like ice that could crack at any moment.

"Then you should tell the Baron," he replied gently, "that we only eat beans here. And as far as I know, beans have never offended anyone."

Laughter, harsh and cutting, came from the other two. The scar, however, didn't laugh. He stepped closer, placed his hand on Buddy's plate, and pushed it aside.

Buddy slowly looked up. His jaw was grinding as if he had pebbles between his teeth. The smell of bacon still lingered in the air, but now it tasted like trouble.

"Don't do that again," Buddy said calmly, almost kindly.

The room held its breath. No one moved, no one spoke. Only Joe downed his whiskey in one gulp and placed the glass on the table with a *Click* on the counter.

"My friend is sensitive when it comes to food," he explained, tilting his hat slightly as if enjoying the whole thing as a play. "And I can assure you: you don't want to see what happens when he gets hungry."

The scar stared at Buddy, his hand still half on the table, half on his Colt. It was a test. Buddy passed it by not getting up. He just sat there, heavy as a mountain, his eyes deep like pits into which many had fallen.

"The Baron wants to know who you are," the man finally growled.

Joe grinned. "Tell him we're just two travelers. Names are just empty words. But if he invites us, we'll gladly tell him a story."

The other two henchmen pursed their lips. One spat on the ground. "Stories cost money here. Either gold. Or blood."

Buddy slowly reached for his plate again. "Then they should taste beans." He ate another bite as if all were right with the world.

The scar growled, but he pulled his hand back. Apparently, he still had enough sense to know that now wasn't the right moment. They could intimidate the stranger, yes. But they also sensed the tension that Buddy left hanging in the air.

"See you around," he finally said, turned around, and stomped out. The other two followed. The door slammed shut, and the saloon breathed an audible sigh of relief.

Joe turned back to his plate as if nothing had happened. "See, buddy? We're already famous. Before we even paid for the first drink."

Buddy just grumbled. He chewed and chewed.

The bartender looked at the two, her eyes filled with something that wavered between respect and concern. "You should know," she said quietly, "anyone who messes with the Baron won't last long."

Joe grinned. "Then we should probably live very fast."

Buddy looked at him, his gaze heavy. "Or very full."

Outside, a dog barked again, and somewhere a hammer struck metal. El Dorado continued to breathe, but it was a breath filled with dust and greed. Buddy and Joe sat in the middle of it, two strangers searching for something as simple as beans—and stumbled straight into a net that ran much deeper than they realized.

The beans had long since been eaten, the plates scraped clean as if Buddy had hollowed them out with a spade. The saloon filled with voices, laughter, curses, and the clinking of glasses. But beneath the noise was something else: a murmur, a restlessness as tangible as the dust in the air.

Joe sipped his second whiskey as if it were water. Buddy had the glass in front of him, untouched. He didn't like whiskey. He wanted bacon.

At the next table, four men were playing cards. Dirty hands, dirtier looks. One of them, an old prospector with a gray beard and skin like tanned leather, spoke quietly, almost in a whisper. But Buddy heard every word. He always heard everything when it came to survival.

"...the Baron takes everything. Whoever finds gold loses it faster than he can count. People disappear. Nights when screams come from the mines."

Another laughed maliciously. "Fairy tales for children. The Baron pays well. Anyone who complains is just too weak."

The old man shook his head, his fingers trembling as he placed a card on the table. "Too weak? I saw them drag men out who never came back. As if the mines themselves had eaten them."

Joe leaned a little closer to Buddy. "Do you hear that? That's music to my ears. Trouble and gold in one sentence."

Buddy chewed on an invisible morsel. "Sounds like hunger. And death."

Joe grinned. "Everything sounds hungry to you."

The bartender approached and placed a bottle on the counter. "Anything else?" she asked, but her expression was serious. "Or would you rather know what you've gotten yourself into?"

Joe raised his head and looked at her with a twinkle in his eye. "We love stories. Especially those meant to warn us."

She leaned forward, her voice barely louder than the clinking of glasses. "The Baron controls everything. The claims, the mines, the sheriff. Whoever finds gold loses it. Whoever rebels disappears. You're not the first strangers here. And you won't be the last. But if you want to survive longer than a week, stay away from him."

Joe laughed softly, a sound like a razor blade. "Keep them away? Doesn't sound like our style."

Buddy just grumbled. He looked at the woman, long and serious. "Who are you?"

She stood up straight, her red hair glittering in the lamplight. "I'm the one who pours the whiskey and wipes up the mess. That's all you need to know. Call me Mary."

Joe raised his glass. "To Mary."

The men at the card table glanced at them. The old man with the gray beard pulled something from his pocket—a folded card, dirty, crumpled. He placed it briefly on the table, as if to examine it. Joe saw it immediately, his eyes flashing.

"Buddy," he whispered, "there's a map there. Of the mines. I bet my whiskey the key to the gold is on it."

Buddy stared at the map, then at the old man. "Leave him alone. For now."

But Joe couldn't help himself. He slid off his stool and walked slowly over to the table. His smile was as innocent as that of a child sneaking candy.

"Evening, gentlemen," he said, tipping his hat. "I couldn't help but admire your beautiful piece of paper. Is it art? Or just a treasure map?"

The cards paused. Four men looked at him, their gazes as cold as steel.

"Get back in your seat, stranger," one growled. "Or you're playing here, and the stakes are high."

Joe grinned even wider. "High is good. I like it high."

Buddy sighed heavily. He knew what was coming. It always did. Joe smelled trouble like other people smell flowers.

The bartender shook her head barely noticeably, as if to say: *Stop it. Not yet.*

But it was too late. Joe simply sat down, reaching for the cards as if he were one of them. His fingers were quick, supple, and he shuffled the deck before anyone could protest.

"So," he said casually, "how about we play? Maybe for beans. Maybe for gold. Maybe for stories."

The air was heavy, every breath sticky. Buddy stayed at the bar, but his eyes followed every movement. He knew: Joe's quick hands were a blessing. And a curse.

The cards shuffled beneath Joe's fingers like birds in flight. He smiled, not too broadly, but enough for everyone at the table to know: The guy wasn't afraid. Fear is bad for gambling. Fear smells like cold sweat, and cold sweat will make you poor or dead.

"Texas Hold'em?" Joe asked innocently. "Or would you prefer something simple? Looks like your friend has been playing here for a while." He nodded at the old miner with the gray beard.

The old man just grumbled, his eyes glued to the menu half-tucked under a glass of beer. His fingers trembled, as if he knew every glance from Joe was too much.

"We're playing for gold," said one of the other men, a fellow with a crooked chin and a gun that gleamed as if it had been freshly oiled. "And whoever bluffs pays double."

Joe grinned. "Perfect. I love it when bluffing is taken seriously."

Buddy, still at the bar, scooped the rest of the beans into his mouth with a spoon. He chewed slowly, like a man who knew something was about to explode. The bartender, Mary, polished a glass that had long since been clean. Her eyes followed every movement at the table.

The first round began. Joe was dealt two cards. He looked at them, raised an eyebrow, then placed them face down on the table. "Come on, gentlemen. Let's show how serious we are."

The players threw coins, nuggets, even a ring into the middle. Joe simply put in a button he'd pulled off his jacket. "A small bet to warm up."

Laughter. But it was evil laughter.

"This isn't a circus," growled the man with the crooked chin.

"Yes," Joe said dryly. "Except the clowns can shoot."

The laughter stopped. Hands jerked toward his belt. Buddy put the plate aside and slowly stood up. There was no sound, just a weight that creaked the floorboards. Everyone in the saloon felt it, and for a moment, time seemed to thicken.

Joe continued playing as if nothing had happened. "All right, I'll raise." He pulled a coin from his pocket, turned it over in his fingers, and suddenly it wasn't one coin, but two. No one saw him do it. But everyone saw they were there.

"Tricks," one hissed. "You're fooling us."

Joe smiled sweetly. "Of course. That's what the game is all about. Whoever's honest loses."

The gun popped out of its holster a bit. Buddy stepped closer, his shadow falling across the table.

"Let your hand fall," he said quietly. It wasn't an order, not a shout. Just a statement that weighed more heavily than any law.

The man with the crooked chin froze. His gaze wandered from Buddy to Joe, then back again. Then he slowly lowered his hand.

Mary slammed the glass down on the counter. "Enough," she said sharply. "Not in my shop. If you want to play, play. If you want to kill, get out."

Silence. Only breathing, heavy, strained.

The old man with the gray beard raised his trembling fingers and pushed the crumpled map closer to him. "No one touches it," he murmured. "The mine belongs to me. Mine alone. The Baron has already taken too much."

Joe leaned forward, his eyes flashing. "And where exactly is this mine?"

The old man stared at him as if he were crazy. "I won't tell anyone. Not you. Not him. Not anyone."

Joe grinned. "Then it'll remain a secret. But secrets are like whiskey—they run out eventually."

The men at the table growled, the card game dissolved into tension. Joe leaned back, raised his hands. "All right, all right. No rush. We have time."

Mary stepped closer and placed her hand on his shoulder. "You don't have time," she whispered. "Not here. Not when the Baron already knows you're in town."

Joe turned his head and grinned at her. "Then we should visit him soon. I don't like it when someone gets impatient."

Buddy stood there like a bulwark, his fists loose, but everyone knew how quickly they could harden. The players remained silent, their guns holstered, their cards on the table. It was a draw—for now.

But the faint crackling in the air hadn't disappeared. It had simply been postponed. Until later.

Night fell over El Dorado like a dirty blanket. Not a single star shone brightly, only a milky moon that looked as if it had drunk too much whiskey. The streets

were quiet, but not empty. Shadows moved, silently, like hungry dogs waiting for a signal.

Buddy and Joe stepped out of the saloon, which was still filled with voices. The piano tinkles again, halfheartedly, like a heartbeat about to stop. The door creaked shut behind them, and suddenly the air outside was heavier.

Joe took a deep breath and grinned. "Do you smell that, Buddy?"

Buddy grumbled. "Dust. Sweat. Trouble."

"Exactly," said Joe. "A perfect blend. I like El Dorado."

They walked slowly down the road. Their horses were still tied up, pawing restlessly. Buddy placed a soothing hand on his horse's mane. The horse was tired, just like him. But tiredness meant nothing here. Tiredness made you vulnerable.

Something moved at the other end of the street. Two figures, too far away to make out faces, but close enough to know they were being watched.

Joe stopped, placing his hands loosely on his belt as if it were just a pose. "Fans," he murmured. "We're already famous."

Buddy just looked at her, motionless. "Henchman."

The figures stopped, then turned and disappeared into an alley. Not a word, not a shot, only the sound of boots in the dust.

Joe grinned wider. "See, they already know we're trouble."

"Or they'll get him," said Buddy.

They untied their horses and led them to an old shed on the outskirts of town. There they found a place to sleep—or at least to wait. The wooden walls let the wind through, the mattresses were as hard as stones. But it was better than the road.

Joe lay down, his hat pulled low over his face. "You know, Buddy," he murmured, "I think the Baron has everyone here on the hook. But maybe—just maybe—we're the fish with teeth."

Buddy sat down on a stack of crates, arms crossed. "Fish don't eat beans."

Joe laughed softly, his body shaking under the blanket. "True. But we're not fish. We're... what, exactly?"

Buddy thought for a long time. "Hungry."

The laughter died down, and silence fell over the shed. Only outside, a dog barked again, drawn out and lonely. Footsteps echoed on the planks of the main street, voices whispered, and somewhere metal clanged.

Joe soon fell asleep, peacefully, like someone relying on his luck. Buddy stayed awake, his eyes fixed on the shadows moving beneath the moon.

He knew El Dorado wasn't a place where one could sleep peacefully for long. And the Baron—whoever he was—had surely already decided what to do with two strangers demanding beans as if they owned the world.

Buddy reached into his pocket and pulled out a piece of bacon he had secretly snagged. He bit into it, chewed slowly, and thought: *There'll be trouble tomorrow. But at least I've got something in my stomach.*

The night passed, heavy and stubborn, like a hangover that wouldn't go away. And somewhere, in a house made of better wood, a man in a fine suit, called the Baron, sat listening to a report. Two new strangers were in El Dorado.

The hunt had begun.

Saloon with a crooked piano

The morning in El Dorado wasn't a fresh awakening, but another hangover looming over the city. The sun crept slowly over the rooftops, and the dust that had seemed like smoke yesterday now lay like a wet blanket over everything. Dogs slept in the shade, men lay in the gutters, women carried water in buckets as if it were gold.

Buddy and Joe rode slowly along the main road, their horses tired, and themselves tired too. But there was a vigilance in their eyes that couldn't be slept off. If you sleep here, you lose.

"The Baron has the city firmly in his grip," Joe murmured, gazing over the houses. "But every net has a hole. We just have to find the right one."

Buddy growled in agreement, but his gaze was already fixed on the saloon sign again. The wood creaked in the wind, the letters were barely legible, and yet it was like a magnet. Food. Drink. Trouble. All in one place.

They tied the horses and went in.

Inside, things looked no better than the previous evening. The light slanted through dirty windows, dust dancing in the rays. The piano tinkled, the notes off-key, the keys yellow with dirt. The pianist was a man with drooping eyelids and fingers that trembled as if they had never known an hour's rest. Nevertheless, he played, and the melody crept through the room like a lame dog.

Mary was standing at the bar again. She saw her coming, as if she'd been expecting her. Her red hair was tied back in a bun, her sleeves rolled up. Her eyes were as clear as whiskey left open too long: strong, but with a hint of bitterness.

"You're still here," she said, without a smile. "I would have thought the Baron would have had you chased away by now."

Joe took off his hat and bowed slightly. "The Baron must be waking up. We're early risers."

Buddy just nodded and sat down on the same stool as yesterday. The counter creaked as if in protest.

Mary put down two glasses. "Breakfast?"

"Beans," Buddy said immediately.

"Whiskey," said Joe.

She laughed softly, a tone that was more mockery than joy. "That's exactly what I expected."

While Mary disappeared to fill Buddy's plate, Joe looked around. The saloon was full of figures who had more shadows than lives. A few prospectors, a few gamblers, two mercenaries who looked like they'd been waiting outside all night. And the piano, on and on, ever more crooked.

"See, Buddy," Joe murmured, "that's the heartbeat of the city. As long as the piano plays, El Dorado lives. Crooked, but alive."

Buddy grumbled, pushing his hat further down over his face. "Sounds like a cat dying."

"Exactly," grinned Joe. "But she's dying slowly."

Mary put down Buddy's plate—steaming beans, this time without bacon. Buddy looked at her as if she'd slapped him.

"Bacon costs extra," she said dryly.

Buddy chewed his air, then began to eat. He wasn't a man who debated for long when food was in front of him.

Joe raised his glass and toasted the pianist. "Play louder, my friend. Maybe then the Baron will hear we're still here."

The pianist only looked at him briefly, his eyelids barely lifting. But the melody did indeed become a little stronger. It remained off-key, though.

A man at the next table, wearing a gray vest and a yellow tooth in his mouth, leaned over. "You're the new guys, huh? You already caused trouble last night."

Joe grinned. "We don't cause trouble. Trouble finds us."

"Then he'll find you sooner than you'd like," the man growled. "The Baron doesn't like strangers. And he likes them playing cards even less."

Buddy continued eating, unfazed. Joe drank as if the whole thing were a joke. But they both knew: the piano wasn't just playing out of tune, it was playing omens. And the melody sounded like trouble.

The piano stumbled across the keys as if it had drunk too much whiskey itself. The pianist didn't look up, his fingers wandering on, a melody that sounded like a limping horse.

Joe sipped his glass, watching the reflections in the cheap alcohol. Buddy scooped beans as if trying to break through the wall of his plate. The atmosphere in the room was heavy, like smoke that wouldn't dissipate.

At the next table, a man suddenly stood up. Tall, lanky, his face full of red veins, his nose broken, his shirt soaked with whiskey stains. He swayed, steadying himself with one hand on the table. His voice was loud, too loud for the room.

"You," he called, referring to Joe. "I saw you yesterday. Cards. Big talk. Stranger. Do you know what we do with strangers?"

Joe turned slowly and put down his glass. He smiled, but his eyes were cool. "I bet you're inviting her. To play. To drink. To talk."

The laughter of the onlookers was harsh, but not friendly. The drunk approached, his steps unsteady, but his gaze filled with hatred. "We'll make them pay. With gold. Or with blood."

Buddy put down his spoon. He didn't look up; he was still chewing. But the sound of his jaw alone made a few men nervously look down at the floor.

Joe slowly rose, pulling his hat down over his face. "Well, friend," he said calmly, "I've got neither. Just charm. And you get that for free."

The drunk growled, clenched his fist. His hand jerked, a blow, half-aimed, half-drunk. Joe stepped aside, as if just making room. The fist struck empty air, the man stumbled, taking a chair with him.

The piano fell silent for a moment, as if even the keys were watching intently.

Joe grinned. "Bad swing. Try again, but this time with both feet on the ground."

The man gasped and pulled his fist back. Before he could strike again, a heavy hand landed on his shoulder. Buddy.

Slowly, inexorably, like a rock starting to roll. The drunk turned around, looked into Buddy's eyes. For a moment, it was silent, except for breathing.

"Sit down," Buddy said quietly.

It wasn't an order. It was fate.

The man lowered his fist. His shoulders sank with it. He stumbled back, falling half onto the chair, half onto the floor. No one laughed. No one wanted to laugh.

The piano began playing again. More crooked than ever.

Mary placed another glass in front of Joe. "This is on the house," she said, her voice dry. "Less trouble, more whiskey."

Joe raised his glass and toasted her. "To you, Mary. The only one here who knows how to treat guests."

Buddy picked up the spoon again as if nothing had happened. "Beans get cold."

The men in the saloon looked at the two of them. Some with respect, some with hatred, some with a thirst for proof. But no one moved. Not yet.

Outside, a door creaked, voices grew louder. Footsteps, heavy, purposeful. El Dorado was alive, but it was a life sitting on a powder keg. And Buddy & Joe were the two sparks that couldn't be extinguished.

This time, the saloon door opened not abruptly, but slowly, deliberately. Footsteps echoed, heavy, like metal falling on wood. Three men entered, and everyone in the room immediately knew whose dogs they were.

Henchmen. The Baron didn't have to say anything—he sent his shadows ahead.

They had the look of men who hadn't cared about their own souls for too long. Dusty coats, dirty boots, Colts that gleamed like new coins. The first, a broad-shouldered man with a scar that split his lip, let his eyes wander around the room. They settled on Buddy and Joe, like a hand finding a target.

The piano continued to play, but the notes stumbled and grew quieter. The pianist lowered his head as if wishing to disappear into the ground.

Mary placed a glass under the counter. She stopped polishing; she waited.

"There they are," said the man with the crack. His voice was deep, dry. "Exactly as described."

Joe half-turned on his stool, a smile on his face. "Described? Do you have fans, Mary? Or is there a poet here who can put our faces into words?"

The room remained silent. No one laughed.

The second henchman stepped forward, slimmer, with a face like a rat that'd eaten too much cheese. "The Baron wants to know why you're here."

Joe raised his glass. "Simple. We eat beans, drink whiskey, and listen to a crooked piano. Do we need permission for that?"

Buddy chewed the last spoonful of beans. He put the spoon down, slowly, as if passing judgment.

"We're hungry," he said. "That's all."

The third man, a burly mercenary with eyes as empty as the bottom of a bottle, growled. "The Baron says: No stranger stays here without his permission."

Joe grinned broadly. "Then we should ask him. Right? We're polite. We like to be invited."

The men exchanged brief glances. It wasn't a dialogue, more like a silent signal. One nodded, barely visible.

Mary crossed her arms and stood behind the bar as if it were her shield. "In my saloon, there are no orders from the Baron," she said sharply. "In here, my rules apply. Anyone who wants to shoot gets kicked out. Anyone who threatens pays double."

The henchmen didn't bat an eyelid. But the air became heavy, their fingers twitched. Everyone knew: one wrong word, and the piano would never play again.

Joe raised his hand in a placating gesture. "Don't worry, gentlemen. We're guests. We just want to talk. Perhaps tomorrow at the Baron's, if he's up for it. Today we're just thirsty."

The man with the cleft leaned forward, so close that Joe could smell his breath—whiskey, tobacco, rot. "Then drink quickly. Because your throats will be dry tomorrow."

He stood up, gave a sign, and the three men left the saloon as quietly as they had come.

The piano started again, stumbling over the same off-key melody as if nothing had happened. But everyone in the room knew that something had happened. That something was coming.

Buddy picked up his spoon again and scraped the food clean. "You smell like trouble."

Joe grinned. "Perfect. I like the smell."

Mary looked at her, her eyes hard. "You don't understand how deep he runs. The Baron isn't just a man. He's the city."

Joe downed the rest of his glass and put it down. "Then it's time to get to know the city."

The sun was high as they left the saloon. Outside, the light was bright, as harsh as a slap in the face. The dust clung to their boots, the street was full of voices, whispers, and glances. Everyone in El Dorado knew who they were. Strangers. And strangers were always guilty here.

Buddy pulled his hat down further over his face. He was fed up, at least for the moment. Joe, on the other hand, seemed charged, like a cat that had just seen a mouse. His eyes flashed, his grin narrowed.

"The henchmen confirmed it," he murmured. "The Baron knows we're here. The question is: what do we do with it?"

Buddy shrugged. "Eat. Sleep."

Joe laughed dryly. "Of course. You think with your gut. I think with my cards. Together, they make a plan."

People on the street stared at them, some with suspicion, some with hope, some with the empty greed that always lingers in cities of gold. A boy with torn trousers ran by, stopped briefly, stared at Joe, and whispered, "Watch out. They're coming for you." Then he disappeared as quickly as he had come.

Joe nodded after him. "Even the kids know."

Buddy grumbled. "Kids know everything."

They walked slowly down the street, past a blacksmith whose hammer sounded dully on glowing iron, past a general store whose window displayed more dust than merchandise. In front of the bank stood two men with rifles, pretending to be guards. In reality, they looked like paid losers.

Joe stopped and looked at the bank for a long time. "That's where the gold is. Or at least what the Baron doesn't have in his pocket."

"Not now," said Buddy.

"Of course not now," grinned Joe. "But soon. Maybe."

They continued on their way, out of the main street and into a narrow alley where the shadows were deeper. There they stopped, leaning against a wall that smelled of urine and old smoke.

"Listen, Buddy," Joe began more seriously. "The Baron isn't just a crook. He's the crook who pays the other crooks. If you find a claim here, it's not yours. If you win a dollar, it'll soon be gone. If you catch your breath, it's only because the Baron allows it."

Buddy looked at him for a long time, mentally chewing on the words as if they were bones. "Then we'll take it from him."

Joe laughed loudly, a sound that echoed in the alley. "That's what I like about you. No big plans, no speeches. Just: *Let's take it from him.*"

A man suddenly stepped out of the shadows, small, gaunt, with constantly twitching eyes. He raised his hands in a calming gesture. "Don't be alarmed, friends. I heard you're new. I also heard the Baron already has his eye on you."

Joe tilted his head. "And who are you? The choir repeating the sermon?"

The man laughed nervously. "Call me Sam. I'm... someone who sees things. And sometimes hears things. And I heard: The Baron is having you brought in tonight."

Buddy tensed slightly. "Who sent you?"

"No one," Sam whispered hastily. "I'm just helping where I can. You should be careful. He doesn't play fair. He has men everywhere. Even Mary might be under his thumb."

Joe grinned. "Mary? I don't think so. She's got more fire than the entire saloon."

Sam shrugged. "Maybe. But you don't trust anyone here. Not even your own shadow."

He stepped back into the darkness, disappearing as quickly as he had come.

Joe nudged the wall with his fist. "See, buddy? That's the sound of El Dorado. Whispers, threats, rumors. And somewhere behind it all, a fat guy in a suit directing everything."

Buddy growled. "The sound of bacon is enough for me."

Joe laughed again, this time shorter, harder. "One day, Buddy, you'll realize that gold and beans are the same thing. Just a different color."

The sun slowly set, the shadows grew. El Dorado didn't seem like a city full of hope. It seemed like a cage, and they were the new birds inside. Birds with fists. And a damn fast Colt.

The sun was bloodying the roofs of El Dorado as the two stepped back into the saloon. It still smelled of old smoke, sweat, and the whiskey that Mary poured generously, but never for nothing. The piano played again, stumbling over the same crooked keys as if it were about to break apart for good at any moment.

The pianist was sweating, his fingers trembling more than they had in the morning. Every note was a scratch in the ear, but no one complained. The piano was more than music. It was proof that the city wasn't dead yet.

Buddy went back to the counter as if it were his place. Mary, without asking, placed a plate in front of him—this time dry bread with some beans, no bacon. Buddy looked at her as if it were a personal insult.

"Bacon is still expensive," she said sharply before he could say anything.

He chewed anyway. Food was food.

Joe, however, didn't immediately stop. He let his gaze wander around the room, like a gambler counting his cards before sitting down. He noticed the glances—many glances. Too many. Everyone in the saloon was waiting. For what, no one knew exactly. But it hung in the air, as heavy as the dusty light that fell through the windows.

Then a man appeared whom no one had seen before. Tall, clean-shaven, black hat, neat suit—a stranger among strangers. He didn't seem like a prospector, not a mercenary. More like a gambler, but one who knew when to change his cards. His footsteps sounded too loud on the wood.

He walked straight towards Joe.

"You're the one with the quick tongue," he said, his voice smooth as oil. "They say you made an impression at the card table yesterday."

Joe grinned and bowed slightly. "A lot of things are said about me. Not everything is true."

"Perhaps," said the stranger. "But I want to know one thing: whether your hand is faster than your mouth."

Silence. The piano stumbled, then fell silent. The pianist withdrew his hands, as if he wanted nothing to do with this scene.

Joe tilted his head, his gaze wandering over the man. "You mean a duel?"

The stranger nodded slowly. "A quick one. Outside the door. Just to test it. No insults. No blood, if you're lucky."

Buddy put down the bread. "No duel." His voice was deep, like thunder rolling through the room.

But Joe smiled. "Maybe so. A little exercise before dinner never hurts."

Mary stepped in, her hands slapping the bar. "Not here! I'm sick of you men thinking you have to prove to each other who's faster. My saloon isn't a graveyard."

The stranger grinned thinly. "Then outside. Two steps from the door. I just want to see it. And the city wants it too."

And indeed, the city listened. Everyone in the saloon held their breath. Even the cards at the next table lay still, as if they had realized they had nothing more to say.

Joe pulled his hat down over his face. His light blue eyes flashed like ice in the lamplight. "All right. Two steps to the door. But if you lose, you owe me a bottle of whiskey."

The stranger nodded. "And if you lose, your story here is over."

Mary shook her head, curling her lips. "You're both idiots."

Buddy slowly stood up. His chair creaked, and the men nearby instinctively stepped back. He looked at Joe, his gaze heavy but not pleading. "Don't be silly."

Joe grinned. "Nonsense is my profession."

They walked to the door. The saloon moved with them, like a wave that had to follow. The piano remained silent. Only the boots on the floorboards made any sound.

Outside, the setting sun waited, the street empty. Two men, two shadows, a city as audience.

Buddy stood in the doorway, his arms crossed. His gaze was hard. Mary stood behind him, her face tense.

Joe stepped out and turned to the stranger, who pushed back his coat and hovered his hand over his Colt.

It was quiet. So quiet that even the wind held its breath.

The street lay silent under the setting sun. Dust hung in the air like smoke, the shadows grew long and distorted. Joe stood there casually, his hands relaxed, as if he weren't in a duel, but in a conversation.

The stranger stared at him, his fingers just above his Colt. His gaze was hard, but something twitched in his eyes. Perhaps doubt. Perhaps fear.

Buddy stood in the doorway, motionless. A rock that saw everything, weighed everything. Mary stood beside him, her lips tight, her hands clenched into fists.

The crowd behind the windows and on the porches held its breath. Even the dogs fell silent.

"Two steps," the stranger said hoarsely. "Then pull."

Joe grinned. "Don't stress. I'll wait for you."

They took their steps. Dust swirled beneath their boots. Then—silence.

The stranger's hand twitched. Quickly, practiced. But not quickly enough.

Joe's Colt was out before the other man's movement was even completed. A shot rang out, dry and clear. The stranger's hat flew off, a clean cut through the fabric.

The man stared. His gun was still half-holstered. His face turned pale, sweat beaded.

Joe blew smoke from the muzzle as if it were a circus trick. "Your hat lost. You can bury it."

Laughter erupted. Nervous at first, then louder, harder. The spectators, who had just been trembling, now laughed as if they had won.

The stranger stared at Joe, his hand trembling. Then he put the Colt back in his pocket and picked up his hat from the ground, dirty and riddled with holes. He said nothing, turned around, and walked away. Each step was harder than the last.

Joe lowered his gun and turned to the crowd. "Is that it? I was hoping someone would play a second round."

Buddy grumbled. "Enough."

Mary stepped forward, her voice sharp as a knife. "You idiot. Do you know what you just did? You challenged the Baron. Publicly."

Joe grinned. "Me? I just shot a hat. Nothing more."

Buddy looked at him seriously. "That's enough."

The crowd slowly dispersed, but the whispers remained. Every step, every word, traveled through the city like sparks. El Dorado had seen something: Joe, moving faster than his shadow. And Buddy, standing silently by, like a judge.

They returned to the saloon. The piano began playing again, nervously, more off-key than ever. But this time it sounded as if it were accompanying the footsteps of two men who had a city against them—and the Baron along with them.

Mary wordlessly placed a new glass in front of Joe. He drank and sat down as if nothing had happened. Buddy sat down next to him, reached for the last piece of bread, and chewed slowly.

"So?" Joe asked with a grin. "Was I fast enough?"

Buddy looked at him for a long moment. "You're an idiot."

Joe laughed. "That's enough for me."

Night crept over El Dorado again, and with it came the whispers. The duel had ignited the town like a fire. Everyone was talking about it. Everyone had seen it.

Everyone told it a little differently—but in every version, Joe had been faster than the stranger.

The saloon had become quieter. The players were shuffling cards, but they kept looking toward the door. The piano had stopped playing. The pianist was gone, or drunk, or both. Mary stood behind the bar, her shoulders tense, her eyes darker than before.

"You're crazy," she said quietly. "The Baron doesn't tolerate strangers being the center of attention. And you..." She looked at Joe as if she wanted to throw the truth in his face. "You just put yourself on every one of his lists."

Joe grinned and downed the whiskey. "I've never liked lists. But if I'm going to be on one, I'll be at the top."

Buddy ate the last of the beans and pushed his plate away. "We're sleeping."

Mary shook her head. "You can sleep when you're dead. They'll come tonight. Not all at once. First scouts. Then dogs. Tomorrow, perhaps the Baron himself."

Joe leaned back, his hands clasped behind his head. "Then we'll just sleep lightly. And when they come, they'll wake us up."

Buddy stood up, his boots heavy on the ground. He nodded to Mary, slowly, almost as if in respect. "Thank you."

They went out, down the street. The windows were dark, the shadows vivid. Every footstep sounded louder than it was. Their horses were waiting at the shed where they had spent the previous night.

Inside, it smelled of dust and cold wood. Buddy lay down on the floor, heavy and immobile as a stone. Joe sat down against the wall, his Colt resting loosely on his knees.

"You know, Buddy," he whispered, "the piano today... it was more crooked than ever. I swear, the notes were laughing at me."

Buddy closed his eyes. "Sounded like beans without bacon."

Joe grinned in the darkness. "Then I'll play my own song tomorrow."

There was a rustling sound outside. Footsteps. Shadows. Two figures crept through the alley and stopped in front of the shed. A whisper, then a brief clang of metal.

Joe raised his Colt, calmly, without haste. Buddy opened one eye. "Henchman."

"Exactly," Joe murmured. "The first wave."

The footsteps moved away again. Still.

The two remained silent, the darkness breathing with them. El Dorado wasn't a place where one truly slept. It was a place where one waited. And the night was only the beginning.

Beans on credit

Morning crept over El Dorado as if night had swallowed the sun and reluctantly spat it back out. It wasn't a new day; it was the same old day, just with more dust.

Buddy and Joe pushed their way down the main street. Their boots left tracks in the sand, which the wind immediately erased. They were still strangers. And strangers had no friends here.

"We need money," Joe said. His voice was alert, but his face betrayed tiredness. "Without money, no whiskey, no cards, no future."

Buddy grumbled. "Beans."

"Yeah, beans too," Joe sighed. "But Mary'll soon shut down for us if we don't pay."

They turned back into the saloon. Inside, as always, it smelled of cold smoke and tired bodies. The piano stood still, its lid open like a mouth that must remain silent. The pianist was not there. Perhaps he lay drunk in the dust, perhaps dead, perhaps both.

Mary stood at the counter. She didn't look surprised, pleased, or angry. Just tired. Her eyes said: *You two are a problem, but one I know.*

"Here again?" she asked.

Buddy nodded. "Beans."

Joe smiled charmingly. "And a whiskey with that, if that's not too much trouble."

Mary crossed her arms. "Do you have any money?"

Silence.

Buddy looked at Joe. Joe looked at Mary. No one saw any coins on the counter.

"Let's just say," Joe began, "we're running low on cash right now. But we're reliable. You'll get your money. Soon."

Mary laughed, dryly and harshly. "Reliable? You're two strangers. Yesterday you almost started a gunfight. Today you're standing here without a penny. What will you be tomorrow?"

Buddy said, "Hungry."

Mary looked at him for a long time. Then she shook her head. "This isn't an orphanage. If you want beans, you pay. If you don't, you don't."

Joe leaned forward, his light blue eyes sparkling. "Loan. One time. You'll get it back. I promise."

Mary curled her lips. "Promises are cheaper than dust here."

A man at the next table, the one with yesterday's yellow teeth, laughed. "Don't give them anything, Mary. They'll disappear soon. Or the Baron will get them. Either way, don't collect debts."

Joe turned around, his smile remaining, but taking on a harder edge. "And if we stay? What then?"

The man grinned crookedly. "Then you're dead. And dead people don't pay either."

Buddy now stood, heavy and immobile. His shadow fell across the man's table. The man stopped grinning.

Mary sighed, reached under the counter, and pulled out a pan. She placed it on the stove and tossed in beans, slowly, reluctantly. "Once. But that's the last time. After that, you pay. Either with money... or with blood."

Joe grinned broadly. "That's fair. We offer both."

Buddy sat back down, satisfied. "Beans."

The piano suddenly began to play. No one was sitting on the stool, yet the off-key notes rang out as if the city itself had decided to continue playing the song.

Joe listened, his smile thinning. "Do you hear that, Buddy? Even the piano is laughing at us."

Buddy chewed. "Sounds like beans."

The plate was empty, faster than Mary could clear the bowl. Buddy was still chewing, as if something was stuck in his teeth and he couldn't get rid of it.

Joe put his feet up on a chair, glass in hand, and looked at the men playing cards. Three prospectors, dirty fingernails, sweaty shirts, coins and nuggets in the middle of the table. Their laughter was rude, but not honest.

"There," Joe said quietly. "There's our breakfast for tomorrow."

Buddy grumbled. "There's trouble."

"Trouble and gold go together," grinned Joe. "Always."

He stood up and strolled over to the table. "Gentlemen," he said amiably, "I see you're in a good mood. May I join you?"

The miners glanced at him briefly. One spat on the ground. "Sit down if you can pay."

Joe pulled a coin from his pocket—the last one he had—and dropped it on the table. "Enough to start with."

They laughed, but they let him play.

Buddy watched the whole thing from the counter. He pushed the empty plate back to Mary. "More beans."

Mary shook her head. "Pay first."

Buddy sighed.

At the table, Joe shuffled skillfully. Too skillfully. The cards slid through his fingers as if they'd been waiting for him for a long time. The miners didn't notice. Not yet.

The first round was small. Joe lost intentionally. In the second round, he brought in a nugget. Lost again. The prospectors laughed and got louder.

Then came the third round. Joe's eyes flashed as he picked up the cards. Two aces. Perfect.

He sat up. "All in."

The men grinned and threw their nuggets and coins into the middle. The pot grew. Buddy saw it from afar and grumbled softly.

Joe laid his cards on the table, slowly, with relish. "Two aces."

The miners stared. One growled and slammed his fist on the table. Another drew his hand to his belt.

Joe raised his hands in a placating gesture. "Hey, hey. Fair play. See for yourself."

But the miners' smiles had disappeared. "Too fair," one hissed. "Too smooth."

Buddy stood there now, heavy, like a shadow swallowing everything. He walked slowly to the table, each step a weight that made the floor creak.

"No trouble," he said quietly.

The men looked up. His look was enough.

Joe grinned, pulling the coins and nuggets toward him. "Thank you, gentlemen. It was a pleasure. Perhaps again tomorrow."

Mary crossed her arms, watching the whole thing with cold eyes. "You're not making any friends here."

Joe turned to her, his pockets clinking with cash. "Friends are overrated. But beans... they're priceless."

Buddy nodded contentedly. "Bacon too."

And so they sat back at the bar as if nothing had happened. But outside, on the street, no one remained oblivious to what had happened. The prospectors cursed, the voices grew louder, and somewhere far away, in the Baron's house, he was already being told about the two strangers who not only drew faster but also had the luck of the cards.

El Dorado heard every whisper. And El Dorado never forgot.

Night was creeping through the streets again as Buddy and Joe left the saloon. Behind them, the piano thumped, crooked, defiant, as if to say: *You're not finished yet.*

They stepped outside, money in their pockets, dust on their boots. Buddy was thinking about the next bowl of beans. Joe was thinking about the next job. Neither of them thought about the three miners running after them.

"Hey, stranger!" someone shouted, his voice rough. "You've betrayed us!"

Joe half-turned, a grin fixed on his face. "Cheated? I was just playing cards. You were just bad."

The second prospector growled and drew a knife. "No one beats us here. Not without blood."

Buddy took a step forward. His shoulders filled the street. "Put the knife away."

"Or what?" the man hissed.

Buddy just looked at him. Slowly. Difficultly. The prospector hesitated—but the hatred in his eyes remained.

Joe laughed softly, tipping his hat lower. "Boys, we can solve this like adults. You admit you were unlucky, and we'll drink to that."

"No way!" yelled the third. "Here, everyone pays for their victory. Today, it's you!"

He charged forward. Joe dodged, gracefully as always. The prospector stumbled and fell into the dust. Buddy's fist slammed into the second one, the one with the knife. A dull thud, bone on bone, and the man flew backward against a wall. The knife clattered into the sand.

The first prospector jumped at Buddy. Buddy barely moved, just twisted his arm and sent him crashing to the ground.

Meanwhile, Joe lightly kicked the third one in the shin, grinned, and whispered, "That was stupid."

A quick punch with the fist, and that one too fell.

Dust swirled, curses echoed. The miners crawled in the dirt, their faces red, their pride shattered.

Buddy sat up, breathing heavily but evenly. "Enough."

Joe dusted off his jacket and grinned. "See, guys? We could have just drunk."

The prospectors cursed, spat, and crawled away, back into the shadows. They weren't defeated—just humiliated. And that was worse.

Buddy looked at Joe. "Now everyone knows."

Joe nodded. "Exactly. And that's good. If the Baron wants to see us, he should know who he's dealing with."

"He's coming," Buddy murmured.

"Then let him come," grinned Joe. "But hopefully he'll bring something to eat."

The wind swept through the street, carrying the whispers. El Dorado had a new story: two strangers who not only won cards, but also fought. And every story in El Dorado ended up with the Baron.

The night was black and thick as oil. No stars, only the moon, a pale eye that watched more than helped. Buddy lay on the ground, heavy, almost asleep. Joe sat against the wall, his Colt loosely in his hand, his grin hidden somewhere in the darkness.

"Do you hear that?" whispered Joe.

Buddy opened one eye. "Footsteps."

Dust crunched outside. More than one. Maybe five. Maybe more. Voices, quiet, but not quiet enough. The metallic clang of weapons.

"They're coming," Buddy said calmly.

Joe grinned, tipping his hat lower. "Of course. A prospector with wounded pride. And when pride bleeds, he calls in reinforcements."

The shed door creaked as if it were about to break. A shadow fell through the cracks. Then a bang—someone kicked the wood.

"Get out, you bastards!" a voice shouted. "The Baron wants to see you!"

Joe didn't answer immediately. He yawned loudly, as if he'd just had the most comfortable sleep. "Can't you wait until breakfast? We're late risers."

Laughter outside, harsh, angry. Then a second blow against the door. The wood splintered.

Buddy slowly stood up, his silhouette heavy, like a tree that doesn't fall. "Enough."

"Not yet," Joe grinned. He jumped up, moving as smoothly as a cat. In the darkness, he pulled a loose board from the floor. Behind it lay dust, but also a rusty nail. Joe picked it up, turning it between his fingers. "Improvisation. My favorite weapon."

The door crashed and burst open. Three men stormed in, Colts in their hands. Behind them, more shadows, armed with clubs.

Buddy stepped forward. His fist hit the first man like a hammer. The man flew back, crashed into the doorframe, and lay there groaning.

The second man raised his gun – Joe was faster. No shot, just the rusty nail he threw. It hit the hand holding the Colt. A scream, the gun clattered to the ground.

The third jumped on Buddy, hitting him with a single blow. Buddy barely moved, then grabbed the man and threw him against the wall. Dust rained down from the beams.

Outside, the others screamed. Two more rushed in. Joe dodged, kicked one in the stomach, and followed up with his fist. Buddy grabbed the second, ripped the club from his hand, and sent him to sleep with a single blow.

The hut shook, dust swirled. Fists, curses, splinters of wood.

Then it was quiet. Only the groaning of the men on the ground.

Buddy breathed heavily and sat back down. "Beans burnt."

Joe laughed softly, wiping the sweat from his brow. "If we survive, I'll give you a pan full of beans tomorrow. With bacon. Word of honor."

Outside, footsteps receded. The remaining men fled, cursing, vowing revenge.

Joe looked at Buddy, his grin returning. "Now they know we don't just play cards."

Buddy lay back down. "Sleep."

"In the middle of the war?" asked Joe.

"Always," Buddy murmured, closing his eyes.

The night dragged on, heavy, full of shadows. And somewhere, in a house with better walls, the Baron heard of the fight. His henchmen had fallen. The game had changed.

The sun rose early, too early, and shone on El Dorado as if it wanted to burn everything. The dust lay heavy over the road, people's gazes even heavier. Everyone knew what had happened during the night. Everyone had heard it.

Buddy and Joe walked slowly down the main street. Their boots kicked up dust, but the dust settled immediately. No footstep left a mark. Nothing stayed put in El Dorado for long.

"Do you see the faces?" Joe asked quietly. "Some of them want to see us hanged. Some of them want to celebrate us. And they all want to know if we can overthrow the Baron."

Buddy grumbled. "Beans."

"Exactly," grinned Joe. "And beans are what unites them all: hunger. Some for food, some for gold, some for blood."

Two prospectors stood in front of the general store. Their lips were chapped, their eyes black. They stared at Buddy & Joe, full of hatred, but they didn't move. The memory of the night was too fresh.

"Still a score to settle," Joe muttered.

"Bills fill you up," Buddy replied.

Women whispered at the well. An old man with a gray beard looked at them, nodding slightly, as if to say: *Good this way*. A boy ran after them, shouted: "You are heroes!" – and immediately disappeared into a side alley.

Joe laughed. "Heroes. Imagine that, buddy."

"Heroes die."

"Sure. But first they eat beans."

They re-entered the saloon. Mary stood behind the bar, more tired than ever. The piano wasn't playing; the pianist lay asleep on the stool, his head pressed against the keys. Every note that came out of his nose was more off-key than the melody itself.

Mary looked at them hard. "You have to leave. Today. Otherwise the Baron will get serious."

Joe raised his hat. "The Baron is always serious."

"More this time," she said quietly. "You beat his men. You injured his face, even when he wasn't there. He won't forgive that."

Buddy sat down on the same stool as always. "Beans."

Mary slammed her hand on the counter. "Don't you get it? This isn't a game anymore!"

Joe grinned. "For us, it was never a game. We just play cards. The rest is fate."

The men in the saloon glanced at them. Some with respect, others with pure hatred. It was a mixture that could explode at any minute.

Mary finally placed a plate of beans in front of Buddy. Without bacon. "The last ones you'll get from me if you don't pay."

Buddy began to eat, slowly, with relish. "Good."

Joe took a swig from Mary's whiskey bottle, which she hadn't actually left out for him. "So, Buddy," he muttered, "it seems we're either the hope of the city now... or its downfall."

Buddy chewed. "Doom tastes like beans."

Outside, a dog barked. Footsteps echoed on the planks of the street. Lots of footsteps. Buddy and Joe both knew: It was only a matter of time before the Baron himself shuffled the cards.

The afternoon burned like a cigarette lingering too long in the corner of your mouth. El Dorado glowed in the dust, and the city reeked of trouble.

Buddy and Joe were still sitting in the saloon when the door opened and two men came in. Not mercenaries, not prospectors—merchants, perhaps, too clean for the filth here. Their vests were starched, their hats almost new. Strangers, but not as strange as Buddy and Joe.

They walked straight towards the two of them.

"They say," began the first, thin and with a well-groomed mustache, "you're lucky at gambling. They also say you have... nerve."

Joe grinned. "People say a lot. What do you say?"

The second, broader, with a face that seemed too smooth, leaned forward. "We're offering you a chance. Tonight. A game. Big stakes. Gold. More than you've ever seen."

Buddy looked up from his plate. "Beans?"

The men laughed briefly, nervously. "Gold. With gold you can buy all the beans you want."

Joe tilted his head, his eyes flashing. "And who's inviting us?"

The answer came without hesitation: "Friends. Businessmen. Certainly not enemies."

Mary froze behind the counter. Her eyes narrowed. "Friends? There are no friends in El Dorado. Only traps."

The two men glanced at her, icy cold, then back at Joe. "Come tonight to the old barn on the edge of town. That's where the game is. Anyone who wants to win is welcome."

They turned around and left the saloon as smoothly as they had entered.

Joe watched them go and grinned. "See, Buddy? We already have an invitation."

Mary approached, her voice sharp as a dagger. "Don't go there. Everyone who played in that barn is gone. This isn't a game. This is the Baron."

Buddy chewed. "Beans?"

"No beans," Mary snapped. "Just blood."

Joe took a sip of whiskey as if it were water. "Maybe. Maybe gold. We'll see."

Buddy growled deeply, his gaze heavy. "Trap."

Joe nodded slowly, his grin still intact. "Of course. But you know what, buddy? Sometimes you have to fall into the trap. Because the cheese tastes better than the bread."

Mary slammed her hand on the counter. "You're crazy."

Joe stood up and put on his hat. "No. We're gamblers. And tonight we're playing against the Baron."

Buddy also stood, heavy and immobile. "And then beans."

Mary watched them leave the saloon. Her eyes said she might see them for the last time.

Outside, the sun was setting, the shadows were growing. The old barn waited. And El Dorado held its breath.

Night lay thick over El Dorado, the moon looking like a silver coin someone had thrown into the dirt. The old barn on the outskirts of town stood black against the sky, its beams crooked, its roof full of holes. It was no place for games. It was a place for traps.

Buddy and Joe stood in front of it. Joe grinned. "Looks inviting, doesn't it?"

Buddy grumbled. "Smells like death."

"Everything stinks of death here," said Joe, pushing his hat further down over his face. "But sometimes there's only a deck of cards between death and winning."

They entered.

Inside, a handful of men sat at a table. Lamps cast yellow light over cards, coins, and a small chest that shone far too brightly. Gold, neatly stacked, as if screaming: *Take me*.

"There you are," said one who was too smooth to be real. He pointed to chairs. "Sit down. Play."

Joe sat down immediately, his bright blue eyes flashing. Buddy remained standing, like a shadow behind him.

"What are we playing for?" asked Joe.

"Gold," said the man. "Or life."

The cards flew. Too fast, too cleanly. Someone had practiced. Someone was trying to cheat. Joe saw it immediately, but he played along. He smiled as if he had everything under control.

He lost the first round. Intentionally. He lost the second round as well. The men grinned, greedily, confidently.

Buddy didn't move. He stood there, arms crossed, his eyes heavy.

The third round arrived. Joe shuffled as if he'd reinvented the deck. Suddenly he had aces, suddenly he was grinning wider.

"I'll bet everything," he said.

The men laughed and placed gold in the middle. More gold than Buddy had ever seen on a table.

Joe laid down his cards. "Four aces."

Silence.

Then a curse. One of the men jumped up and pulled out his Colt.

Buddy moved like a falling rock. His fist slammed into the man's jaw, and the Colt flew. Joe jumped up and swatted at another man with the edge of the table. The lamp tipped over, the light flickered, and dust swirled.

The barn filled with curses, blows, and splintering wood. One by one, the men fell to the ground—some from Joe's fast fists, which seemed more like dances, others from Buddy's blows, which sounded like hammer blows.

In the end they lay there: groaning, defeated, the gold scattered in the dust.

Joe wiped the sweat from his forehead and grinned. "No fair play, buddy."

Buddy picked up a coin from the floor and turned it over in his fingers. "Gold doesn't taste good."

"But beans, yes," laughed Joe. "And we'll buy a barrel of them tomorrow."

They left the barn, the wind howling through the holes in the roof. Behind them lay men who knew they had lost—and that they had to report.

Whether they wanted it or not, the Baron would find out everything.

Card trick and Colt

The morning after the barn smelled of dust and cold iron. El Dorado was a town that swallowed rumors faster than it baked bread, and yet the whispers from last night lingered. Everyone knew something had happened in the old barn. Everyone knew men had crawled home bleeding. And everyone knew two strangers hadn't died when they should have.

Buddy and Joe walked down Main Street, walking slowly as if it belonged to them. People stared. Some nodded respectfully, others spat in the dust. The children whispered, the elderly shook their heads.

"See, Buddy," said Joe, "we're famous. And after just three days."

Buddy grumbled. "Hungry."

"Of course," Joe grinned. "You're always hungry. But today you're history, too. We're the men who went in and out of the barn."

They turned into the saloon. The light was dim, the smoke from last night still hung in the air. Mary stood behind the bar, her eyes tired but more alert than before.

"You're crazy," she said without greeting.

Joe grinned. "Many people have said that. But crazy men live longer."

"Or shorter," she hissed.

Buddy sat down at the counter, heavy as ever. "Beans."

Mary looked at him for a long time, then placed a plate in front of him. This time, even with some bacon. "Enjoy it," she said. "It might be your last breakfast."

Buddy chewed. "Good."

Meanwhile, Joe turned to the card table. Four men sat there, their faces closed, their hands nervous. Coins clinked in the middle.

Joe stroked his chin and grinned. "Gentlemen. Do you have room for a friend?"

One looked up, thin, scarred, his eyes cold. "We don't play with strangers."

"Then you're in luck," said Joe, sitting down without being asked. "Because I'm no longer a stranger. I'm Joe."

He placed a coin on the table—his last of the night, a shining lie in a sea of debt. "Bet."

The men glanced at him, shuffling their cards across the table. One hissed, "We heard you're not playing fair."

Joe grinned broadly. "I play so fair that even God would have to cheat to win."

The cards flew, the game began. Buddy continued chewing as if it had nothing to do with him. Mary wiped the counter, but her eyes were glued to Joe.

The air in the saloon was heavy. Everyone knew: This wasn't a simple game. This was the beginning of something that couldn't be paid for in beans or whiskey.

The cards thudded onto the table. Four men, four faces that knew more dust than skin. Joe joined in, grinning, playing as if he were in his living room.

The thin man with the scar leaned forward, his eyes cold as a pool of snakes. "You were swindling."

Joe raised his eyebrows innocently. "Marked? Me? I'm just a simple gambler who kisses the cards before drawing them."

The second man, fat, with a sweaty shirt, growled, "No one is that lucky. Not in El Dorado. Here, luck eats men like you for breakfast."

Buddy shoved another spoonful of beans into his mouth, chewed, and said nothing. Mary watched the whole thing from the counter, her lips tight, her hands pressed firmly to the wood.

Joe laid his cards on the table—a pair of kings. "Luck or skill. Take your pick."

The thin man slammed his fist on the table, the coins jumping. "This is cheating!" His hand jerked toward his belt.

Silence. Everyone in the saloon was watching now.

Joe remained relaxed, leaning back, the grin still on his face. "If I cheated, friend, you wouldn't even realize you'd already lost."

That was the spark. The men at the table straightened, their hands twitching over their Colts.

Buddy put down his spoon, slowly, heavily. His gaze finally moved up from his plate, directly to the players.

"Don't." Just one word. Deep, like thunder that drowns out everything.

The men hesitated, their eyes flickering toward Buddy. He didn't move, but his shadow seemed to grow larger, heavier, as if he alone could smother the air in the room.

Joe grinned. "Listen to my friend. He's right. One more game. Whoever loses buys the other a round. Fair and square."

The thin man growled. "Or we end this now."

Joe placed his hands openly on the table, slowly, without haste. "Then pull. But be sure you're faster than your own shadow. And believe me, I know a man who is faster."

The air vibrated. The next breath could be a gunshot.

Mary stepped forward, her voice cutting through the silence. "If you shoot, you'll all die. Not just those two. The Baron will find out, and he'll shut the place down. Is that what you want?"

No one answered. But no one drew. Not yet.

Buddy reached for the glass and drank it down in one gulp. Then he put it down so hard the table shook. "Play."

And they continued playing. But everyone knew: the next trick wouldn't be decided by cards.

The cards lay heavy on the table, as if they were more than paper. Every eye was glued to them, every hand trembled just above the Colt. The thin man with the scar had had enough of gambling. He ripped the revolver from its holster, quickly, but not quickly enough.

Joe was still sitting relaxed, his grin tight. He flicked a card from the stack, letting it fly across the table like a knife. It hit the thin man right in the face. Just a piece of cardboard, but enough to make him blink.

At that moment, the first shot rang out. The bullet pierced the wall, sending dust flying.

Joe was already on his feet, his Colt out, lightning fast. He didn't aim at the man—he shot the glass off the table, shattering into a thousand pieces. "Hit," he grinned.

The fat guy jumped up, about to attack Joe from the side. Then Buddy came. A fist, heavy as an anvil, hit him in the stomach. The fat guy collapsed like a sack of stones.

Mary didn't scream, she just ducked behind the bar, her eyes hard. The rest of the saloon backed away, everyone wanting to get away from the powder keg.

The thin man shook his head, the card still stuck to his cheek as if it had mocked him. He roared, raised his Colt again – and then Joe was there, ripping the gun from his hand, twisting it, and slamming it against his skull. The man slumped, blood dripping onto the cards.

A third player, who had been silent until then, also drew. This time, Buddy was faster. No gun, no trickery. Just a hand that grabbed the man and hurled him against the edge of the table. Wood splintered, the coins scattered, the game was over.

Joe breathed heavily, wiping the sweat from his forehead. "So much for fair play."

Buddy picked up a coin from the floor and pocketed it. "Beans."

The saloon was silent, only the panting groans of the men on the floor filled the room. Mary stepped back out, her eyes flashing. "You're mad. There's no turning back now."

Joe grinned and put the Colt back in his holster. "There's never a turning back. Only the next leaf."

Buddy sat back down and reached for a new plate of beans as if nothing had happened.

But everyone knew: This game wasn't over. It had only just begun.

The table was nothing but a pile of splinters. Cards and coins lay in the dust, like the remnants of a dream that never was one. But the men weren't finished. Two of them crawled to their feet, their Colts still clutched, their faces contorted with rage.

Joe grinned and pulled a deck of cards from his breast pocket, which he'd never let out of his sight. "Want another game?" he asked.

The answer came in the form of two drawn Colts.

Joe flicked one card to the left, one to the right. The white surfaces flashed in the lamplight, drawing the men's gaze away for a split second. Enough.

Buddy stepped forward. A punch to the left, a punch to the right. Two dull thuds, as if sacks of bones had fallen to the ground.

The cards sailed on, landing in the dust. One of the men gasped for air, wheezing, before lying still. The other held his face, blood seeping between his fingers.

Joe put the deck back as if it were just a game. "Card trick," he said crisply.

Mary watched the whole thing from the bar, her eyes filled with anger and fear. "You're turning the saloon into a battlefield."

Buddy reached for a chair and sat down, heavily, unperturbed. "Sturdier than the table."

Joe also sat down, pushing the splinters aside with his boot. "You know, Mary," he said, "the world is a game. Some people play cards, some people play Colts. We play both."

The men on the ground groaned, spit blood, but they were alive. For the moment. The rest of the saloon had long since retreated, pressed against the walls as if trying to become invisible.

Buddy reached for a coin lying among the shards. "More beans."

"Always beans," Joe laughed quietly. "One day you'll sell gold for beans."

Buddy chewed invisibly, his gaze heavy. "Gold doesn't taste good."

Joe nodded, raised a glass of whiskey, and drained it. "That's why I drink."

The air was full of dust, splinters, and silence. And yet it was clear to everyone: the game had long since outgrown the saloon. The Baron now had an open challenge.

And Buddy and Joe had just raised the stakes.

The last cards had fallen, but the men hadn't. Two crawled back to their feet, staggering, grabbing chairs, bottles, anything that could still be considered a weapon.

Buddy stood up slowly. No flinching, no hurry. He seemed tired from chewing, not from fighting. But when he raised his fists, the room suddenly felt smaller.

The first one charged him, a bottle in his hand. Buddy caught the momentum with his stomach, barely flinching, and delivered a sledgehammer-like fist into his face. A dull crash, and the man fell backward, the bottle shattering into a thousand pieces.

The second man tried to approach from the side, a chair over his head. Buddy half-turned, grabbed the chair in mid-motion, and ripped it from the man's hands. With a single blow, he broke the wood across his back.

Dust swirled, screams, coughing.

Joe leaned against the wall, grinned, and clapped quietly. "And everyone always says I'm the fast one."

Buddy didn't look at him. He reached for the third man, who was crawling and trying to escape from the saloon, grabbed him by the collar, and pulled him back like a sack. A blow to the back of the head and the man lay still.

The guests, pressed against the walls, stared, holding their breath. Mary stood behind the bar, her fingers clutching a glass as if she were about to break it.

"You're mad," she said, her voice filled with anger. "You're making everything worse."

Joe grinned, took the glass from her hand, and drank it down. "Worse? Mary, worse is normal here. We're just louder."

Buddy sat back down as if nothing had happened. He reached for the leftovers on his plate and spooned some beans, unbothered by the blood and dust on the floor.

"Beans," he murmured, contentedly.

"And fists," grinned Joe. "The perfect mix."

The men on the ground groaned, but no one dared to get up again. The saloon was silent. Only the wood creaked, the piano tinkled by itself, as if it had laughed.

And outside, on the street, shadows gathered. You didn't have to look to know that the Baron already knew.

The dust still hung in the air, the blood glistened on the floor like spilled red wine. The men groaned, crawled, and spat out teeth, but no one dared even look at Buddy or Joe.

Mary emerged from behind the counter. Her face was pale, her hands tense, as if she were holding herself back to keep from screaming.

"Are you finally listening to me?" Her voice cut sharper than any knife. "The Baron won't laugh. He won't admire you. He will destroy you."

Joe picked up a card from the floor and turned it over between his fingers as if it were a toy. "Destroy it? Mary, we just got here."

"That's precisely the problem," she snarled. "You have no place here. No roots. No friends. Only enemies. Every blow, every card, every shot—all of it writes you deeper into his book. And the Baron keeps better records than a banker."

Buddy spooned the last beans from his plate. He chewed slowly, heavily. "Well cooked."

Mary almost ripped the spoon out of his hand. "Don't you get it? It's not about beans! It's about your life. You're not immortal. The Baron is bigger, deeper, tougher than you."

Buddy looked at her, wordless, his eyes dark and calm. Then he put down his spoon. "Then we'll eat faster."

Joe laughed dryly and put the card back on the table. "Mary, listen: We may be fools, we may be soldiers of fortune, we may just be a couple of idiots. But we won't be intimidated. Not by a man in a suit hiding behind others."

She stared at him, her gaze filled with anger and fear at the same time. "You're playing with fire. And if you burn, you'll take the city with you."

In the silence that followed, only the cracking of wood and the clinking of a glass somewhere in the distance could be heard. Outside, voices gathered, quiet, like a chorus of shadows.

Buddy stood up and grabbed his hat. "Sleep."

Joe nodded and took the last sip from Mary's bottle. "Tomorrow we'll see if the Baron really comes. Maybe he just wants to play cards."

Mary's answer was harsh: "He doesn't play. He commands. And whoever disobeys dies."

Buddy and Joe went out, heavy, loud, like men who knew the night would not remain quiet.

Night hung over El Dorado like a wet rag. No wind, no dogs, only whispers behind closed windows. Buddy and Joe were standing in front of their shed again when the footsteps came. Heavy, steady. No prospectors, no drunken gamblers. Official footsteps.

A man stepped into the moonlight. Dressed in black, clean, too clean for this city. A top hat on his head, white gloves on his hands. He didn't look like a fighter. He looked like a messenger from another world.

"Buddy. Joe," he said, his voice smooth as oil. "The Baron sent me."

Joe grinned. "The great Baron finally has the courage to invite us? I'm touched."

The man remained impassive. "The Baron expects you at his house tomorrow at noon. You come alone. Without weapons. Without tricks."

Buddy crossed his arms, his shadow looming large over the stranger. "And if not?"

"Then," the messenger said calmly, "there is no tomorrow for you. Not in El Dorado. Not anywhere."

Joe tilted his head, his light blue eyes flashing. "Sounds like an offer we can't refuse."

"It's not an offer," the man said. "It's a fact."

He turned around, as smoothly as if he weren't made of flesh and bone, but of mechanics. His footsteps faded into the dust, and the night was silent again.

Buddy took a deep breath. "Trap."

Joe grinned and put the Colt back in his holster. "Of course. But sometimes the trap is the only gateway to the next room."

"Or in the last," Buddy muttered.

"Maybe," Joe laughed quietly. "But tomorrow we'll play. And not just with cards this time."

The moon hung cold over El Dorado, and the town held its breath. The next game would take place not in the saloon, but in the Baron's house.

The Baron in his Sunday best

Morning came slowly, as if it didn't want to look. El Dorado lay silent, too silent. Doors remained closed, shutters half-closed, children disappeared into the shadows. Everyone knew something was happening today. Everyone knew the Baron wanted to see them.

Buddy and Joe walked down the main street. Dust clung to their boots, the sun burned, but the chill came from the way people looked. No one spoke to them. No one laughed. Just eyes following them.

"Nice parade," murmured Joe. "Two fools on their way to the king."

Buddy grumbled. "Beans?"

"If he offers us some, we should be suspicious," Joe grinned. "Poison doesn't taste so good."

The Baron's house stood at the end of the street. Not large, not magnificent, but too tidy. A white-painted building, freshly painted window frames, a roof without holes—that alone made it suspicious in El Dorado. It was like a clean tooth in a rotten mouth.

Two men in black vests stood in front of the door, rifles in their hands, their eyes fixed. They didn't look like people, but like pieces of furniture capable of killing.

"We're expected," said Joe, as if it were a joke.

The men opened the door without answering.

Inside, it didn't smell of dust or sweat, but of perfume and polished wood. The floor gleamed, the walls were brightly painted. It was as if they had left El Dorado and entered a strange world.

And there he sat: the Baron.

Not tall, not broad, not ugly. A man in a Sunday suit, immaculate. Black cloth, white vest, a collar as sharp as a blade. His hands rested folded on the table in front of him, clean, soft, without calluses. He looked as if he had never touched a shovel, never held a Colt. And yet he was more dangerous than anyone they had ever met.

"Buddy. Joe," he said without looking up. His voice was soft, smooth, a knife that doesn't clink but cuts. "Sit down."

Joe grinned, pulled up a chair, and slumped down. "Nice suit. Holiday?"

The Baron looked up. His eyes were cold, gray, without light. "Every day is a holiday, if you own it."

Buddy stopped, his arms crossed, his shadow heavy.

"I eat standing up," he muttered.

The Baron smiled thinly. "They say you're fast. They say you're strong. They say you're foolish. All at once. Fascinating."

Joe laid the cards he never put down on the table. "We're playing for truth? Or for gold?"

The Baron slowly shook his head. "I'm not playing. I decide."

Silence.

The air in this room was clean, but heavier than any saloon fight.

The Baron leaned back and folded his hands. His movements were small, controlled, unhurried. He seemed like someone who possessed time.

"You're new," he began, "and yet the town talks only of you. Of fists in the saloon. Of fast Colts. Of cards that win too often."

Joe grinned, putting his feet up on the table as if trying to scratch the shiny surface. "People say a lot about us. Mostly it's true. Sometimes it's not."

The Baron ignored the grin. "I don't tolerate coincidences in El Dorado. Every coin that falls, falls because I want it to. Every shot that hits, hits because I allow it. You played without asking me. You won without paying me. I don't like that."

Buddy was still standing against the wall, motionless, a rock in the shadows. "Then eat beans," he grumbled.

The Baron raised his eyebrows slightly, almost amused. "Your friend speaks little. But he says a lot. Hunger is honest. And hunger can be satisfied."

He reached into a drawer, pulled out a bag, and threw it on the table. Coins clinked, gold glittered. "Here. A beginning. You can stay. Work for me. Fight for me. Play for me. And you'll be rich. Richer than you can dream."

Joe dropped the cards onto the bag. "Or?"

"Or," the Baron said quietly, "you leave the city. Immediately. And you never come back. Then you'll live. Maybe."

Silence.

Mary's voice wasn't there to warn them. No piano played. No dust stirred. Only the Baron and his gray eyes, looking at Buddy and Joe as if they were pieces on a board he alone controlled.

Joe grinned. "And if we don't go and don't serve?"

The Baron smiled thinly. "Then you die. Slowly. Piece by piece. First your reputation, then your flesh, then your shadow."

Buddy took a deep, heavy breath. "Beans," he said.

Joe laughed and leaned back. "I think he's serious, Buddy."

The Baron nodded slightly. "I always mean what I say. That's why I sit here while others lie outside in the dust."

The air grew thicker. Every breath felt heavy. Every look a dagger.

Joe continued to slide the cards over the bag of gold as if they were worthless. He grinned, but the grin had teeth.

"A nice offer," he said quietly. "Working for you. Living under you. Getting rich. It all sounds good. But you know what? I have a problem."

The Baron raised a barely visible eyebrow. "And that would be?"

Joe leaned forward, his light blue eyes flashing. "I don't work for men who are cleaner than their own city. A suit in El Dorado? That's like a halo in hell. Fake. Artificial. And suspicious."

Buddy stood silently, his arms crossed. He said nothing, but his shadow filled the corner of the room, heavy as a mountain.

The Baron barely moved. His fingers simply stroked the table, slowly and evenly. "You don't know who you're talking to."

"Oh yes," said Joe. "With a man who thinks he owns El Dorado. But ownership is like a card game. You hold the cards until someone moves faster."

A twitch passed across the Baron's face. Not anger, not rage—just a shadow of coldness running through his eyes.

"Quick," he repeated quietly. "Quick is short. Short is finite."

Buddy took a deep breath, the sound rumbling like thunder. "We eat, we sleep. Tomorrow too."

Joe grinned. "See, Baron? Even my friend doesn't believe in your demise. And he believes in almost nothing except beans."

The air was heavy, like just before a thunderstorm. The men at the door gripped their rifles tighter, their fingers twitching, but the Baron only raised his hand slightly. A sign. Calm.

"You're more foolish than I thought," he said calmly. "But foolish men are useful. Sometimes as tools. Sometimes as warnings."

Joe leaned back and laid his cards on the table. "Then decide quickly, before you know it and we're the warning to you."

The Baron smiled thinly, a smile without warmth. "Go now. I'll decide tomorrow. And when I decide, someone always dies."

Buddy turned around, heavy and unmoved. Joe followed, his hat pulled low, his grin narrow.

As they left the house, the air outside was cooler but heavier. The city didn't know it was standing on the edge of a precipice.

The door closed behind them like a coffin lid. Buddy and Joe stood in the sun again, but it didn't feel any warmer.

The street was empty, silent, but behind the windows, shadows moved. Eyes. Everyone knew they had been with the Baron. Everyone waited for the sign whether they lived or died.

Joe pulled his hat down further over his face and grinned narrowly. "We're still alive, Buddy. That's almost a victory."

Buddy grumbled. "Beans."

"Later," said Joe. "First comes the part where the town talks about us like we're already dead."

An old man stood by the well, his eyes filled with dust and fear. He spat into the water and looked at Buddy and Joe. "You've entered his house. No one will get out alive."

Joe grinned. "We do. You see."

The old man shook his head. "Then you're marked. He's letting you go so everyone can see whose neck he'll break tomorrow."

Two prospectors leaned against a wall, their faces scarred, their eyes cold. One muttered, "This is the beginning of the end." The other just nodded.

Buddy and Joe continued walking, eyes clinging to them like dust. Not another word. Just footsteps on the dry wood of the porch.

Mary stood in front of the saloon, her arms crossed, her gaze hard. "So he didn't have you shot right away," she said.

Joe grinned. "He wanted us to taste what it's like to be on the menu."

"He wants to hunt you down," Mary snarled. "And the city will be watching."

Buddy walked past her, heavily, wordlessly, straight to the counter. "Beans."

Mary slapped her hand against the wood. "Don't you understand anything? Every plate, every minute you sit here is an invitation to death."

Joe picked up a glass from the bar and poured himself some whiskey. "Then let Death take a seat. I'll drink faster."

The patrons in the saloon stared as if they were sitting on the edge of a precipice. No one dared to say anything.

Mary whispered, more to herself, "You bring the storm with you. And no one in El Dorado will be spared."

Buddy chewed slowly, the wood cracking somewhere in the background, as if the building itself was afraid.

Outside, footsteps echoed again. Regular. Heavy. Too many at once. The city held its breath.

The footsteps outside grew louder, rhythmic, like drumming on boards. Everyone in the saloon heard it. Everyone knew what it meant.

The door swung open. Four men entered. Dressed in black, as if cut from the same mold. Broad shoulders, hard faces, Colts low on their belts. They didn't speak. They just stood there, their eyes scanning the room.

The guests lowered their gazes and ducked down. No one wanted to get in the way.

Joe raised his glass and drank slowly, as if he owned the time. "Finally," he grinned. "The Baron is sending his waiters."

Buddy continued chewing. He didn't even lift his head.

The tallest of them took a step forward. His voice was rough, colorless. "The Baron says: You are tolerated. Today. Not tomorrow."

Joe put down the glass and slowly pushed it across the counter. "Tolerated. That sounds almost polite. Did he get the dictionary out especially?"

A growl went through the men. One put his hand on his Colt.

Buddy put down the spoon. Slowly. Heavily. The table creaked under his weight. The man with his hand on his Colt pulled it back.

"A message," said the tallest. "Do you hear it?"

Joe nodded, his grin thin. "Loud and clear. But you know what? We'll write back. With lead pencils."

The men didn't bat an eyelid. They turned around and left the saloon as calmly as they had entered.

Silence remained. Only the cracking of wood and Buddy's chewing.

Mary stepped closer, her voice a whisper: "That wasn't a threat. That was a promise."

Joe poured himself another whiskey. "Then let's drink while we're still invited."

Buddy swallowed and wiped his mouth. "All the beans."

The Baron's men were gone, but they left behind something heavier than bullets: silence.

No one spoke in the saloon. The patrons looked at their glasses, at the ground, at their hands. No one wanted to look at Buddy or Joe. No one wanted to be seen looking at them.

Mary was still standing behind the counter. Her fingers trembled slightly, but her voice was firm: "You have to go. Tonight. If you stay, you'll drag us all down with you."

Joe grinned, tilted his glass, and let the whiskey burn. "Mary, you're talking like we set the city on fire. But all we did was push a few men."

"Pushing?" Her voice was sharper than glass. "You know exactly what you did. You challenged him. The only man no one here is challenging."

Buddy put down his spoon. Heavily. "None—yet."

At the next table, a prospector stood up, thin, with a face full of wrinkles and fear. "You're killing us all. The Baron won't hit you. He'll hit us. The city. The children. The old men. Everyone will pay for what you're doing here."

Others nodded. The whispering grew into a murmur. A few went to the door and disappeared. The saloon was no longer a place for spectators.

Joe watched the prospector go, grinning thinly. "People love us, Buddy."

"No," said Buddy. "They're afraid of us."

And outside the saloon, the street was filling up. No henchmen this time, just people. Men, women, children. Eyes glowing with worry, with anger, with that mixture of hope and fear that can always tip over.

Mary approached quietly: "Go. Go now. While you still can. You've seen the Baron. You've heard his threat. That's all you need. Leave the city alone."

Buddy stood up, slowly, heavily, and pulled his hat down over his face. "Eat. Sleep. Continue tomorrow."

Joe grinned, but his grin was narrower than usual. "Mary, we're not leaving. Not yet. Sometimes you have to stay, even if it's stupid. Especially if it's stupid."

Mary shook her head in despair. "Then you'll tear the city to pieces. And he'll use you to do it."

The footsteps outside grew louder. The crowd waited.

The crowd outside the saloon fell silent as a lone man walked down the street. Not a henchman, not a gunman. A boy. Barely sixteen, skinny as a stick, his eyes wide open.

He was carrying something in his arms. A box, roughly constructed, heavy for his thin shoulders. He gasped as he stopped, right in front of the saloon.

"The Baron..." His voice broke. "The Baron sent this."

He put the box down. Nails squeaked, the wood stank of fresh blood.

Nobody moved.

Joe stepped forward, his grin thin this time, without joy. He bent down and opened the lid.

Inside were cards. Playing cards. Complete, neatly sorted, clean. But every sheet was splattered with blood. Some were still damp.

Buddy looked inside, his face motionless, heavy.

Joe held up an ace, dripping red. "An invitation."

The boy ran away as if he had delivered the devil himself.

The crowd recoiled as if the box were spewing fire. Women whispered, men cursed. One spat into the dust and muttered, "Now we're all damned."

Mary stood in the doorway, pale, her hands clenched into fists. "He's playing with you. And with all of us."

Joe put the ace back in the box and closed the lid. "Then we'll play along."

Buddy lifted the box as if it were light. "Heavy. But portable."

The crowd continued to retreat. No one wanted to stand in their way.

"Tomorrow," murmured Joe, "the next round begins."

Buddy nodded. "And then beans."

Night fell over El Dorado. And for the first time, everyone in the city felt as if the Baron was laughing—invisibly, coldly, through every wall.

Miner with bloody knuckles

The morning began with screams down by the river. El Dorado awoke not to bells or singing, but to curses, coughs, and the pounding of fists on flesh.

The miners had clashed again. Two dozen men, who saw more dust than gold, were fighting in the mud. Knuckles burst, teeth flew, blood dripped into the water, which had long since become too murky to be clear.

Buddy and Joe stood on the sidelines, watching the spectacle.

"The boys have less gold than we do," grinned Joe. "But they're fighting like they've found a treasure."

Buddy grumbled. "Hungry."

"Of course," said Joe. "You're always hungry. But look at her. This is hunger with fists."

A man with a torn shirt crashed to the ground, another jumped on him, hammering his face with his knuckles until they bled. No one stopped them. It was as if they had invented beatings to avoid thinking about the Baron.

A prospector noticed Buddy and Joe and spat blood into the dust. "There they are," he growled. "The strangers who make everything worse."

Joe raised his hat and grinned. "We're not making anything worse. We're just drinking whiskey and eating beans."

"Whiskey!" Another laughed hoarsely, his gums bloody. "You've got it good. All we have is dust and blood."

The beating didn't stop. Men continued to hit, one fell into the water, and resurfaced bleeding. Women on the shore screamed, children retreated.

Buddy took a step closer. "Stop."

Nobody listened.

So he grabbed the first one who came near him—a shaggy miner with a broken tooth—and lifted him as if he were a sack of flour. Then he threw him back into the crowd. Bodies clashed, and the fight paused for a moment.

Joe laughed. "Sometimes you're like a bell, Buddy. One ring and everyone stops."

"Not yet," Buddy grumbled.

And he was right. The prospectors stood up again, their eyes red, their knuckles bruised. But this time their gaze was directed at Buddy and Joe. No longer against each other—but together against the strangers.

The crowd hesitated only briefly. Then they charged. Men with chapped lips, hands covered in mud, eyes that showed more hatred than reason.

Joe took a step back, half-drawing his Colt, but leaving it in the holster. "Too many, buddy. A bullet isn't enough for that. This is a day of punches."

Buddy stood still. A prospector ran toward him, screaming, swinging. Buddy let him come, then struck. A single fist. The man flew into the dust, blood and teeth trailing behind him.

Two others grabbed Joe. They tried to pull him to the ground, but he grinned, jerked his head back, and slammed his forehead down. Crack, scream, both let go. Joe kicked one in the knee, and the man collapsed like a rotten branch.

The river roared as if trying to drown out the screams.

Fists pounded, knuckles continued to burst. Mud splashed, blood mixed with dirt.

Buddy grabbed one, spun it high above his head, and threw it into the crowd. Bodies tumbled over one another, screams drowned out by the rain of blows.

Joe grabbed a rusty shovel lying in the mud. He swung it not like a weapon, but like a card player slamming a trump card down on the table. A blow to the back of an attacker, and the man fell as if he'd been struck down.

"You're all drunk on dust," Joe shouted, still grinning. "And we're the cat!"

A prospector jumped on him, grabbing his shirt. Joe pulled him off, rolled him into the water, held his head under briefly until he kicked, then let him go.

Meanwhile, Buddy grabbed two men at once—one by each arm. He slammed their skulls together. A dull sound, like two stones hitting each other. Both collapsed.

But it didn't stop. Always new faces, always new fists. It wasn't a fight, it was a wave of sweat, blood, and rage.

Mary wasn't there, no one was there to shout or warn. Only the prospectors and the two of them, who suddenly found themselves alone against an entire army.

Joe spat blood into the mud and grinned wider. "Buddy, this isn't a game anymore. This is work."

Buddy knocked down the next one. "Work makes you hungry."

And so they fought on, amidst the dirt, against men who had nothing left but bloody knuckles and a hatred that was greater than their hunger.

The ground almost shook beneath their pounding boots. Twenty men against two, and each of them had more rage in their bodies than an entire saloon full of drunks.

Joe ducked a blow, but still felt the fist in his throat. He coughed, spat blood into the dust, and laughed hoarsely. "Hit, buddy. But I'm still standing."

Buddy had three hanging on him at once. One on each arm, the third on his back. He growled deeply, tensed his muscles, and shook like a bear. Two flew, the third stayed stuck. Buddy grabbed him by the collar and threw him into the water with a single heave. The splash drowned out his scream.

But the crowd moved closer, faster, like a pack that had finally smelled blood.

A prospector punched Joe in the face, splitting his lip. Joe staggered, caught himself, grabbed a rock as he fell, and struck. The prospector fell into the mud with a broken nose.

"Too many, Buddy!" Joe gasped.

"Two hands. Enough," Buddy grumbled.

But even he faltered. Fists rained down on him, knuckles slammed, kicks landed. Buddy staggered, growled, grabbed the nearest one, and headbutted him to the ground.

The water in the river turned red, the screams mingled with laughter that was more madness than joy.

Joe was grabbed from behind and pushed to the ground. Mud pressed into his face. He gasped for air, tasting blood and dirt. A knee pressed down on his back. "Now it's your turn, stranger!" someone hissed.

Joe gasped, still feeling the Colt in his holster. But he didn't draw it. Instead, he grabbed the mud and threw it in the man's face. The man roared, let go, and Joe rolled free, laughing hoarsely. "Dust strikes faster than lead."

Buddy roared, a deep tone that stopped even the prospectors in their tracks. He ripped a beam from a dilapidated shed standing beside the river. A piece of raw wood, thick, heavy, and sharp-edged. He swung it, and three men fell to the ground at once.

For a moment, the fight paused. Only heavy, rattling breaths.

But then new ones sprang up again, bloody, battered, but unwilling to give up. It was as if the miners no longer had any brains, only fists.

Joe wiped the blood from his lip and grinned crookedly. "Buddy... this isn't work anymore. This is war."

Buddy lifted the beam. "Then we'll fight hungry."

And the next wave hit them.

The fight was a grinding grind. Fists, knuckles, teeth—everything flew, everything crashed. Joe felt the blood on his tongue, Buddy tasted the dust in his throat.

Then – a shot.

Just one. Dry, hard. It ripped through the noise like a knife through fabric. Everyone paused.

The smoke rose, thin, from a revolver in the hand of a man hardly anyone here took seriously anymore: the sheriff. Gray, tired, with a face that had more wrinkles than lines. He stood at the edge, his weapon still raised.

"Enough," he said. Not loudly, not roaring. But it was a word that hit home.

The miners stepped back, breathing heavily, bloody, but they listened. Not out of respect—out of fatigue.

Joe wiped the mud from his face, spat out blood, and grinned crookedly. "The sheriff who doesn't whistle. But he can still shoot."

Buddy grumbled, the beam still in his hand. "Late."

"Always," muttered the sheriff. He holstered his revolver and stepped closer. His gaze swept over the men lying in the mud, over Buddy and Joe, standing like rocks amidst the chaos. "You bring more blood than gold to this town."

A prospector laughed bitterly and spat a tooth into the dust. "There was never gold here. Only dust. Only him—" He paused, as if he'd said too much, and looked around hastily.

Joe grinned. "Just him? You mean the Baron. Sure."

The sheriff lowered his hat, his eyes tired. "You've made your point. But you have to understand: every drop of blood here belongs to him in the end. You're just new drops in the river."

Buddy dropped the beam, heavy and dull. "Hungry."

"Then eat," the sheriff said tonelessly. "Eat while you can."

The miners began to retreat. No one looked Buddy or Joe in the eye. Some limped, some clutched broken arms, others continued to spit blood. But they went.

The river rushed, red and murky. Buddy and Joe were left behind, their knuckles as bloody as the miners'.

Joe laughed dryly. "See, Buddy? Even the sheriff knows we're not bringing order around here. We're just another chaos."

Buddy wiped the dust from his face. "Chaos is satisfying."

The dust slowly settled. The screams had died down, leaving only the coughing and wheezing of the miners. The river carried away the blood, but it didn't clean it up.

Buddy sat down on an overturned cart, heavy as if he carried the entire weight of the city on his shoulders. His knuckles were raw and bloody, but he didn't look. He never looked.

Joe stood beside him, his lip split, his shirt torn. He laughed hoarsely, spitting a red thread into the dust. "We look like we traded the saloon for a quarry."

Buddy reached for a can of beans that someone had dropped in the dirt. He opened it with his bare fingers and ate straight out. "Filled."

Joe shook his head and grinned crookedly. "You're the only person who values beans over blood."

The miners crawled slowly away. Some clutched their ribs, others staggered; none were proud. Their knuckles were red and bruised, but it was their eyes that betrayed that they had already lost before the first blow fell.

At the edge of the crowd stood a man in a black vest. He didn't fight, he didn't speak. He just watched. His eyes were cold, his face impassive.

"The Baron is sending his shadows," Joe murmured. "He must have seen it."

Buddy chewed. "We'll see."

The man in black turned around and walked slowly back into the city. Not a word. But his footsteps sounded like a report.

Joe sighed, wiping the sweat from his brow. "That wasn't our fight, Buddy. But now he's ours. Every prospector thinks we beat him. And every prospector will tell the Baron."

Buddy swallowed and looked into the river. "River takes blood. Gives it back."

Joe nodded. "Yes. And the Baron knows how to collect it."

The sun was high, the dust shimmered. Buddy continued eating, Joe grinned thinly. But both knew: the fight hadn't solved anything. It had only shown how rotten everything in El Dorado had already become.

The way back to El Dorado wasn't a march, but a limp. Joe held his side, but still laughed. Buddy walked straight, heavily, with bloody fists, as if he'd been pulling a plow through the dust.

The city saw them coming. Shutters slammed shut, doors closed. Children were hastily pulled into the house. There was no cheering, no respect—it was fear.

"Look at this," Joe grinned crookedly. "Yesterday heroes, today plague."

Buddy grumbled. "Hungry."

"You'll devour your way through the entire Bible of Sins," Joe laughed, spitting out blood and wiping his mouth. "And at the end they'll write that we brought about the end."

Mary was waiting at the saloon. She stood outside, hands on her hips, her gaze hard. When she saw the two of them, she sucked in a sharp breath. "You look like death on leave."

"It wasn't a vacation," grinned Joe. "Just a little dance with a few prospectors."

"Little dance?" Mary's eyes sparkled. "Half the town's already talking about it. You've made enemies of the prospectors. They're men who have nothing left but their fists. And now they have you in their heads. Do you know what that means?"

Buddy sat down on the saloon steps, heavy and immobile. "Beans."

Mary shook her head. "Beans won't get you out this time. You've given the Baron the perfect fodder. He'll say, 'Look, the foreigners are beating our men to death.' And the city will believe him."

Joe laughed dryly, but his grin was narrower than usual. "Then we have a reputation. And reputations die slower than men."

"You're crazy," Mary said quietly, almost tiredly. "The Baron doesn't even have to kill you. You're killing yourselves. And the city along with it."

Silence reigned inside the saloon. The men at the tables didn't look up, no one wanted to meet their eyes.

Buddy looked at his fists, red, open, heavy. "Miners have bloody knuckles. Now me too."

"Yes," murmured Mary. "And they'll hate you for it, not him."

The sun set, the dust darkened. El Dorado retreated, like a city that knew it stood on the brink of something greater—something that could no longer be stopped.

Night fell swiftly upon El Dorado, as if in a hurry to cover the dust and blood. But it covered nothing. Voices whispered in every house, fear gnawed in every alley.

The next morning, the Baron called the prospectors together. Not in his house, not in the saloon—but in the square in front of the bank. Where everyone could see.

Buddy and Joe stood on the sidelines, watching. Mary was beside them, arms crossed, eyes cold. "Now he's making it official," she murmured.

The miners arrived, limping, with swollen faces, bandaged hands, and scabbed knuckles. Each of them bore the marks of the night. And each of them wore the gaze of a man whose anger had been implanted like a nail.

Then the Baron stepped out of the bench. Not loudly, not pompously. Just in a suit, as sleek as yesterday, cleaner than the entire square put together. He raised his hands slightly. Not a word, and yet everything fell silent.

"You suffered," he said, quietly, but everyone heard. "You shed blood. But not for gold. Not for labor. For two strangers who think they can rule you."

The miners murmured, quietly, angrily.

The Baron nodded, almost sympathetically. "I tell you: This is not your blood. It is their blood. They bear the guilt. And they will pay the guilt."

A murmur went through the crowd. Heads turned, eyes fell on Buddy and Joe.

Joe grinned narrowly. "There you go, Buddy. He did the trick. He formed our grave out of her ankles."

Buddy stood motionless, arms crossed. "Beans?"

Mary whispered, "You don't understand—he gave you to the city. From today on, you are no longer players. From today on, you are the problem."

The miners clenched their fists, their eyes dark. Bloody knuckles rose like the banners of an army.

The Baron lowered his hands and smiled thinly. "You know what to do."

And he turned around and went back into the bank as if he had only done a small thing.

What remained was a city full of men with open wounds and closed hearts.

Buddy slowly chewed on a bean he'd found in his pocket. "Now they want us."

Joe grinned, wiping the blood from his lip. "Then let them come. We have ankles too."

The Sheriff Who Doesn't Whistle

The sheriff sat on the porch of his office, his feet propped up on a rickety railing, his hat pulled low over his face. A bottle of whiskey beside him, half empty, half forgotten.

Buddy and Joe stood before him, dust still in their clothes, blood in their fists.

"You fired a shot yesterday," Joe began, grinning crookedly. "And suddenly they all stopped. I almost thought you were a real sheriff."

The man raised his head slowly, as if he regretted every movement. His eyes were tired, red-veined, his beard gray. "I'm sheriff. On paper."

Buddy crossed his arms, his shadow falling across the wooden steps. "Paper burns."

The sheriff nodded. "And the town's burning with it. That's why I'm not blowing my whistle. That's why I'm keeping my mouth shut."

Joe laughed hoarsely. "So you're the only sheriff in the West who doesn't blow his whistle. No melody, no signal. Just a shot when it's too late."

"One shot is enough," muttered the sheriff, reaching for the bottle, drinking, and wiping his mouth. "But I usually skip it."

Buddy took a step closer. "Why?"

The sheriff looked at him for a long time, as if he were considering whether he even knew the truth anymore. "Because I don't have the power here. The Baron does. I wear the star, he wears the city. Do you understand?"

Joe nodded and sat down on the railing, the cards playing through his fingers again. "So you're just the man who stops the clock when it suits the Baron."

"I am the man," said the sheriff, "who survives as long as he doesn't whistle."

Silence.

The sun beat down on the boards, a dog barked somewhere in the distance, then fell silent again.

Buddy looked at the sheriff for a long moment, his face impassive. Then he growled, "Coward."

The sheriff didn't flinch. He just looked back into the distance, past them, as if Buddy and Joe were just shadows that would soon vanish.

Joe made the cards dance, one after the other, the clapping against his palm the only sound in the hot air. "Tell me, Sheriff... what do you actually do all day? Drink, sleep, wait? Or practice not whistling?"

The sheriff reached for the bottle and turned it over in his hand. "I'll wait for the town to die. Then I won't have to do anything."

Buddy crossed his arms, his gaze heavy. "You let men die."

"I'll keep the town alive," muttered the sheriff. "By doing nothing. Those who move fall faster."

Joe laughed and spat in the dust. "That's your big philosophy? Stay still while the Baron breaks everyone's backs?"

The sheriff slowly raised his head. For a moment, something flashed in his eyes. Not courage. Anger. Old, stale, but still there. "You talk like you understand the town. But you're just a stranger. Strangers talk a lot. And they die faster."

Buddy took a step forward, the porch board creaking under his weight. "We're not dying."

"Not yet," the sheriff replied quietly.

Joe grinned, pushing the cards away. "You know, Sheriff... I like men who drink and keep quiet. But I like them more when they talk. So—what do you know? About him. About the Baron."

The sheriff remained silent, drank, and wiped his mouth. Then he leaned forward, his voice barely more than a rasp. "I know he doesn't just want to kill you. He wants to use you. First you, then the city, then everything that eats and breathes dust. You're just the next story he writes. And I'm too old to read along."

Joe nodded slowly, his grin vanishing for a moment. "So you know more. But you don't whistle."

"I'm not whistling," said the sheriff. "Because no one's listening anymore."

Buddy stood motionless, but his fists clenched. "We're listening."

The sheriff looked at him, tired, as if he knew that this was worse than anything else.

The silence was heavy as lead when suddenly footsteps echoed across the dusty square. Hasty, messy, full of panic. A man stumbled in front of the office, almost falling on the steps.

A prospector. His shirt torn, his face bloody, his knuckles open like raw wounds. He gasped, coughed up dust and blood, and stared at the sheriff as if he were the last rock in a raging river.

"Sheriff!" he wheezed. "They... they took him... the Baron's men... they just took him."

The sheriff remained seated, bottle in hand. He looked at the man, his face expressionless.

"Who?" asked Joe, his grin gone.

"My brother," the miner blurted out. "We were just mining... he said he... that he couldn't pay anymore. So they took him away. Just like that. In front of everyone. He's not alive anymore. I know it. I know it!"

Buddy clenched his fists, the dust crunching beneath his boots. "Baron."

The prospector turned to the sheriff again, pleading, desperate. "Do something! You're the sheriff! Do something!"

The sheriff drank slowly and put down the bottle. "I'm not doing anything."

The prospector stared at him as if he'd been punched in the face. "Nothing? My brother—"

"Your brother is Dust," the sheriff interrupted, quietly, almost tonelessly. "And no one can hear Dust whistle."

Joe took a sharp breath and shook his head. "Holy hell... you're the first man I've seen who died before they even buried him."

Buddy took a step forward, his voice a growl. "Coward."

The sheriff didn't flinch. Only the fingers of his left hand drummed briefly on the wood. A sign that he had heard the scream, even though he remained silent.

The miner collapsed, crying into the dust, his knuckles still bleeding. No one moved.

Joe looked at the sheriff. "And you're surprised no one's listening anymore? Maybe because you don't play music anymore."

The sheriff didn't answer. Only the bottle lifted again, slowly, as if it had become heavier.

Joe crouched down next to the weeping prospector and patted him on the shoulder. "Get up, friend. That man over there won't help you. He's too busy doing nothing."

The sheriff stared into space as if he hadn't heard the words.

Buddy approached, slowly, heavily. His shadow fell over the sheriff, settling like a dark blanket over the table and the bottle. Buddy spoke softly, but it sounded like thunder: "Why?"

No movement.

Joe ran the cards over his hand, flicked one onto the wood, right in front of the sheriff. "Why?" he repeated. "Because you're afraid? Or because you've long since become part of the Baron?"

The bottle stopped halfway at the sheriff's mouth. His fingers twitched. Then he put it down. "You don't understand," he muttered. "There's no law in this town. Only his word. I don't blow my whistle because no one will come if they hear it."

"And if we come?" Joe grinned narrowly, his light blue eyes flashing.

"Then you'll die," said the sheriff. "Like all those who thought they were faster. This earth is full of such men."

Buddy clenched his fists. The cracking of his joints was louder than any whistle. "We're not dying. Not yet."

The sheriff looked at him, long and tired, but this time without evasion. "You're fools. But fools die the loudest. The Baron loves that. That's why he lets you breathe."

Joe laughed dryly. "So we're his entertainment."

"His tool," the sheriff corrected. "Your blood will bind the town more closely to him. Every drop makes him stronger."

Buddy leaned forward, so close the sheriff could feel his breath. "You know everything. But you're silent."

"Silence is the only thing that keeps me alive," said the sheriff. "You want me to whistle? Then I'll die first. And then you."

Joe slapped the next card down on the wood. "Maybe it's better this way. A sheriff who doesn't blow his whistle is already dead."

For a moment, something flickered in the sheriff's eyes. No courage, no will—just a residue of guilt he couldn't bury.

The cards lay scattered on the table, whiskey stains mingling with the dust. Joe looked at the sheriff, his grin narrow, his eyes bright. "You know, old man... sometimes a silence speaks louder than a gunshot. But sometimes it also reveals where the body lies."

The sheriff raised the bottle and drank deeply, so deeply that you'd think he was trying to drown the words. Then he put it down, heavy and muffled. "There are bodies everywhere. Just don't step on them yet."

Buddy crossed his arms. "Where?"

The sheriff laughed hoarsely, a sound that was more pain than humor. "In the ground. In the shafts. Under every damn plank in this town. If you think you're going to strike gold, you're going to strike bones."

Joe tilted his head, his fingers fiddling with a map. "Bones. Under the shafts. That sounds like a mystery, Sheriff."

The man shrugged, wearily. "No secret. Just dust that never rests. Sometimes you can still hear it screaming when the men are digging at night."

Mary, who had been standing in the doorway and had remained silent until now, took a sharp breath. "Damn... you mean the shafts no one is allowed to enter."

The sheriff looked at her briefly, but quickly looked away. "I don't mean anything. I'm just talking drunk. Forget what I said."

Joe grinned wider. "Too late. I'm not forgetting anything that sounds like a card trick. So, buddy, what do we learn? The Baron has more than gold in the ground."

Buddy nodded slowly. "Beans don't grow in shafts."

"But corpses, yes," added Joe, laughing dryly.

The sheriff reached for the bottle, this time with trembling hands. "Go," he muttered. "Go before you dig too deep. Some shafts won't spit you out."

Joe stood up and tipped his hat. "Some cards aren't either. But we'll play anyway."

They stepped out onto the porch. The sun beat down on their faces, the dust clung to their skin like sweat. Behind them came the sound of the bottle gurgling, then silence. The sheriff drowned in silence again.

Joe lowered his hat and grinned crookedly. "The man talks like a tomb. But that's exactly where he slipped up."

Buddy stopped and looked across the street, which was empty as if after a storm. "Shaft."

"Exactly," Joe nodded. "A shaft no one is allowed to enter. And where no one drills, buddy, that's usually where the best game lies."

Mary followed them out, arms crossed, her brow furrowed. "You don't understand. These shafts are off-limits. For years. Everyone knows. No one talks about it. And especially not the sheriff."

Joe grinned. "Taboo is just another word for treasure."

Mary stepped in front of him, her gaze sharp. "Or for grave."

Buddy slowly pulled a can of beans from his pocket, as if weighing the conversation with food. "Grab is filling?"

"No, Buddy," sighed Mary. "The grave kills."

Joe laughed hoarsely and flicked a card into the dust. "We'll die eventually anyway. But sometimes it's worth checking out what the earth has swallowed up."

They continued walking, their boots creaking in the wood, then crunching in the dust. El Dorado seemed empty, too empty. Eyes were glued to the windows, but no one dared to venture out.

Mary shook her head. "You're playing a game that's long been lost. The Baron writes the rules, and you're falling right into his traps."

Joe grinned. "Maybe. But sometimes the one who steps on the traps first wins."

Buddy opened the can of beans and started eating as they walked. "Hungry."

"Always," Joe nodded. "But now I'm also curious."

The sun was setting, and El Dorado lay in its shadow again, like a dog under a beating. Buddy and Joe sat on the steps of the saloon, Mary beside them, silent, her eyes on the distance.

The city breathed heavily. Doors remained closed, shutters firmly shut. The only sound was the dust rustling across the planks.

Then a boy came along. Barefoot, skinny, his skin burned by the sun. He didn't run, he crept. In his hand, he held a crumpled piece of paper. He stopped in front of Buddy, not daring to look up.

"The sheriff... he told me to deliver this. Just you."

Joe took the piece of paper and unfolded it. A few words, scrawled, full of shaky lines:

"Don't whistle. Just listen. Deep shaft. North of the river."

Below a line, like a cross, crooked, messy.

Joe grinned, his lips still bloody, but his eyes bright. "See, Buddy? Even the man who doesn't whistle sings sometimes."

Buddy chewed the last of the beans and threw the empty can into the dust. "Shaft."

Mary reached for the note, her hands shaking. "You're crazy. This is a trap. He's sending you straight into the Baron's mouth."

Joe let the card flutter back into the dust, stood up, and lowered his hat. "Then let the mouth see if we taste good."

Buddy stood up, heavy, unmoving. "Hungry."

The three stood in the evening light, the dust glowed red, and somewhere in the background a dog howled.

El Dorado was silent. But beneath the silence lurked the echo of the shafts.

Pan, bacon, fist storm

The fire crackled at the river's edge. The evening was silent, only the chirping of crickets and the sizzling of fat in the pan. Buddy crouched in front of it, a mountain of shoulders, the pan held like a shrine. Beans bubbled, bacon browned, the smell hung heavy in the air.

Joe lay on his back in the dust, his hat pulled low over his face, a map in his hand, turning it boredly between his fingers. "You know, Buddy," he murmured, "sometimes I think you love the pan more than me."

Buddy stirred without looking up. "Pan doesn't lie."

Joe grinned. "Me neither. Most of the time."

The bacon crackled, fat splattered, and Buddy spun the discs as if they were in a duel. His face remained serious, almost reverent.

"You cut the bacon extra thick again," said Joe.

"Fat makes you thin," grumbled Buddy.

The night fell deeper. Smoke rose, the smell drifting further across the river, into the darkness. And right there, something moved. Footsteps. Several.

Joe half-sat up, blinking into the darkness. "I hope those aren't bears. They have even less sense of humor than you."

The shadows became clearer. Men. Four, five, hard to count. Their boots pounded hard on the ground, their faces rough and hungry.

"Well, look at that," grinned Joe, "the vultures have smelled a rat."

One of the men approached, his shirt open, a knife at his belt. His gaze was glued to the pan. "Evening, stranger. Smells good. Looks like too much for two."

Buddy looked at him and continued stirring. "One pan's enough for me."

The man laughed hoarsely. "Then all that's left for you, little one," he pointed at Joe, "is the bones."

Joe yawned and played with the map. "You're right. Bones are worth something, too. Especially when they're yours."

The laughter died down. The men approached. The fire crackled. The fat sizzled. And the air became heavy, like before a thunderstorm.

Buddy put the pan aside. Carefully, almost tenderly. Then he stood up.

Joe sat up straight, grinning broadly. "Now it's dessert, Buddy."

The first one leaped forward, his eyes greedily fixed on the pan. He didn't get far. Buddy stepped toward him, his fist like a battering ram. A dull thud, the man lifted off, half-spun in the air, and crashed backward into the dust.

The others paused briefly. Joe stood up, shook off the dust, and grinned. "Now you see: Bacon is expensive."

Two men attacked Joe at the same time. One grabbed him from behind, the other punched him forward. Joe ducked, kicked the man in front in the stomach, and grabbed the man behind him by the arm and threw him over his shoulder. Both lay in the dust, groaning.

Meanwhile, Buddy had the next one by the throat. He picked it up as if it were an empty sack and hurled it into the river. The splash silenced the crickets.

The man with the knife finally drew his blade. The fire reflected coldly in the steel. "You're dead, strangers," he growled.

Joe grinned and pulled not a gun, but a card from his pocket. He flicked it directly into the man's face. The man blinked in surprise—just long enough for Buddy to be standing in front of him. A fist like a sledgehammer struck his chin, and the knife flew in a high arc into the grass.

"I told you," said Joe, "cards sometimes beat knives."

The fight continued. Fists cracked, dust flew, bones cracked. One of the guys tried to jump on Buddy's back, but Buddy simply turned around like he was a wall, and the man bounced off, falling into the dirt like a wet sack.

Joe laughed, even though blood dripped from his lip. "Buddy, I don't think those guys wanted anything to eat. They just wanted to learn to fly."

Buddy knocked another one down and grumbled. "Bad flying."

The fire crackled, the pan continued to sizzle as if it didn't belong to this world. The beans and bacon smelled as if nothing had happened.

Finally, all five men lay in the dust. Gasping, bloody, but on the ground. None dared to get up.

Joe wiped his hands on his trousers and pulled his hat down over his face. "And now, gentlemen, comes the best part of the evening: We're eating. You're not."

Buddy picked up the pan again, sat down, and began to eat quietly, while the men groaned around him.

"Pan warm," he murmured.

Joe grinned broadly and grabbed a piece of bacon. "And fair."

The silence after the fistfight was almost louder than the fight itself. Only the sizzle in the pan, a few groans in the dust, and Joe's dry laughter.

"See, buddy? Most fights are like beans—they blow it up a lot, but in the end, all that's left is hot air."

Buddy chewed slowly, his spoon full of beans and bacon, as if there were nothing more important in the world. "Warm."

Joe grabbed a piece of bacon, took a bite, and wiped the blood from his lip. "Tastes better when you fight for it."

The men on the ground barely moved. One groaned, one coughed, one whimpered. But one—the one with the knife—crawled away on all fours. Slowly, crawling, but purposefully.

Joe saw it and grinned. "There goes the stagecoach. Bet he's right at the Baron's?"

Buddy didn't look and continued eating. "It's good to go."

"Of course he should," Joe nodded, chewing thoughtfully. "That's the joke. We let him go, he tells us what he saw, and suddenly the Baron has another story to nail to our heads."

Buddy licked the spoon. "Baron hears everything."

"Yes," grinned Joe, "but this time he'll also hear that we cook better than his dogs."

The man disappeared into the darkness, leaving only the crackling of the fire and the smell of grease.

Mary later came along the path, arms crossed, scowling. "You've started another fire," she said.

Joe laughed. "No, Mary. We were just cooking."

"And beat five men to death," she shot back. "You're no better than him. You're his mirrors. The more you beat him, the bigger his shadow becomes."

Buddy continued chewing. "Bacon good."

Mary shook her head, sat down next to Joe, and stared into the fire. "You don't understand. You're not against him. You're part of his game. And he'll burn you, as sure as these flames."

Joe grinned and raised his glass of water. "Then let's drink to that, Mary. To the Baron. To his game. And to the next round."

The fire had almost burned down, the bacon just a residue of fat at the bottom of the pan. Buddy ate the last of the beans, chewing slowly and silently. Joe lay back in the dust, his hat down, playing cards in his hand.

There was a cracking sound in the undergrowth. No boots this time, no hasty steps. Slow, cautious.

Joe straightened up without losing his grin. "If that's someone hungry again, Buddy, then we should charge admission."

Two men stepped into the firelight. Diggers, dirty, with calloused hands, faces etched with dust. No weapons drawn, no fists raised—only eyes that spoke louder than words.

"We saw what you did," one of them began, his voice hoarse. "With those five guys."

Joe turned a card between his fingers. "It was just dinner."

The other prospector stepped closer, looked at the pan, then at Buddy. "That wasn't dinner. That was a message. To him."

Buddy raised his head slowly, still chewing. "To whom?"

"To the Baron," the prospector said quietly, almost reverently. "He hears everything that happens here. Even the beans you eat."

Joe grinned broadly. "Then I hope he was hungry. We cook better than his chefs."

The men looked at each other nervously. The first continued: "You don't understand. You're in the middle of his game. Every blow, every pan, every drop of grease—he twists it to his liking. The city thinks you're strong. But they'll think you're dangerous. And that'll finish him off."

Buddy put down the pan and wiped his mouth. "Miners talk a lot."

"We talk because we still can," hissed the second. "Many don't talk anymore."

Joe laughed dryly. "Well then, talk faster before the Baron collects your tongues."

The prospectors looked at them as if they wanted to say more—then a distant horse whinny was heard. Both flinched as if they had heard death itself. Without another word, they disappeared back into the darkness, as quickly as they had come.

Joe grinned and looked into the fire. "Interesting guests today, Buddy. First fist fodder, now dust whisperer."

Buddy picked up the pan again. "The pan stays."

The fire smoldered, nothing but red embers. Buddy leaned back, full, heavy, the pan empty. Joe threw cards into the fire, one by one, watching them flare up and disappear.

Then one heard horses. Not a random trot, not a lone rider. Several of them. Heavy, steady, like a drumming approaching.

Joe spat in the dust and grinned narrowly. "There you go, buddy. Dessert's coming."

Buddy stood up, wiped his hands on his pants, and grabbed the heavy pan handle. "Hungry."

The shadows stepped into the light. Seven men this time. No prospectors. No dust-faced men. Real thugs—the kind who don't ask, just take.

The leader stepped forward, his face hard as leather. "You beat five of my men into the dust. The Baron wants a sign. Tonight. With your blood."

Joe clapped his hands as if he'd witnessed a trick. "Now that's timing. Right on time for a digestive walk."

The men drew their Colts, the fire reflected in the barrels.

Buddy growled. "The pan stays clean."

Joe nodded, his hands relaxed at his sides. "Then let's make music."

The first shot rang out, tearing through the night. Joe jumped to the side, rolled, grabbed a rock, and threw it so fast that the gunman lost his balance. Buddy charged forward, the pan like a shield, the first Colt clanging against it, and the thug roared.

The embers sparked, the fire cast harsh shadows. Fists, iron, gunshots, dust—everything swirled in a chaotic dance.

Joe laughed hoarsely as he kneed an opponent in the stomach. "Told you, buddy—beans make you strong."

Buddy hit with the pan. The dull thud echoed through the camp like a bell, and a man fell to the ground, unconscious.

The air smelled of gunpowder, grease, and blood.

And somewhere out there, in the darkness behind the horses, Joe knew that the Baron might already be listening—or grinning.

The dust rose like a second night. Screams mingled with gunfire, the fire flickered, casting swift shadows, making faces look like masks.

Buddy slammed the pan down, the handle almost splintering, but the man in front of him fell, motionless. Blood on the metal, grease on the wood, it looked like a second plate.

Joe ducked under a bullet, felt the wind on his temple, grabbed the gunman's arm, and twisted it until bones cracked. The gun fell, and Joe kicked it into the fire. It hissed, sparks flew.

"Your Colts are too hot," he grinned as his opponent fell to the ground screaming.

Another rushed Buddy, a knife raised high. Buddy grabbed him by the throat, lifting him as easily as a cat grabs a mouse. A single blow—fist to face—and the knife fell, and the man with it.

Joe took a blow to the ribs, gasped, but laughed nonetheless. "Damn, buddy, there are more men than beans in a pan."

Buddy grumbled and kicked his attacker in the leg, which snapped like dry wood. "All the beans."

Three men remained, their Colts still in their hands. They hesitated. The fire reflected in their eyes, and they saw that this was no easy task.

Joe wiped the blood from his lip and stepped forward slowly, his hands loose. "You can walk now. Or fly. Your choice."

One hissed: "The Baron wants you dead."

"Then he should come himself," laughed Joe, "maybe I'll bring him some bacon."

Buddy lifted the pan, still bloody, still heavy. The men backed away, one turned, ran, the others followed. Dust swirled, horses neighed, then the night was empty again.

Only groans in the dust, the crackling of embers, the hissing of metal that was still hot.

Joe slumped down, gasped, grabbed a scrap of bacon, and took a bite. "Now that's what I call fast food."

Buddy sat down slowly and placed the pan on his knees. "Pan stays."

The embers died down, the smoke hung heavy in a circle around the camp. Men groaned in the dust, horses neighed in the distance, then all was silent.

Buddy wiped the pan clean, slowly, deliberately, as if it were holier than any weapon. He sat down, weighed down, and ate the last bits, oblivious to the bodies around him.

Joe sat next to him, covered in blood, grinning narrowly, chewing a piece of bacon as if it were a cigar. "You know, Buddy, I think the Baron shared his dinner with us tonight. Only he hasn't written the bill yet."

Buddy nodded, chewed, and grumbled. "The bill is coming."

Mary stepped out of the darkness, arms crossed, her gaze sharp. "You've awakened half the West. He'll know. He already knows. And he'll hunt you until there's nothing left of you."

Joe laughed dryly, spitting a clot of blood into the dust. "Let them come. We have beans."

Mary's voice cut coldly. "You have no beans left. All you have is blood. And that's exactly what he wants."

Buddy put the pan aside and looked into the fire. "The pan stays."

The night breathed heavily, the crackling of the embers sounded like distant footsteps. The moon moved across the sky, pale and indifferent.

Joe looked up, his grin faint. "You know, Buddy... sometimes I think the moon is laughing with the Baron. Every time we're full, he looks down and thinks: They're about to throw it up again."

Buddy didn't answer. He stared into the fire as if he knew the next thunderstorm was already waiting.

Ban on entry and back door

The morning smelled of dust and ash. Buddy and Joe rode slowly into town, their horses tired, their eyes red from the long night's fighting.

El Dorado was quiet. Too quiet. Doors closed, shutters half-closed. The only sound was the squeaking of a rusty sign in the wind.

Joe grinned narrowly. "You know, buddy, sometimes a city feels like a church. Except no one prays here. They're just waiting for the devil to walk through the door."

Buddy grumbled, rubbing his knuckles, which were still red and swollen. "I'm not a devil."

"Depends on who you ask," Joe muttered.

They rode to the saloon and dismounted. The door was open, but the music had stopped. No cards, no clinking of glasses, just a few men sitting silently at the bar. When Buddy and Joe entered, heads turned. No smiles. Just staring eyes.

Mary stood behind the counter. Her gaze met hers immediately, firm, hard. "You shouldn't be here."

Joe tipped his hat and sat down at the bar as if he owned the world. "And I thought, Mary, your door is open to everyone. Even to men who are hungry and thirsty."

"Not anymore," she said. "Not after last night."

Buddy stopped, tall and motionless. "Thirst."

Mary shook her head. "You're banned from the house. Not by me. By the city."

Silence. A man in the background coughed, someone laughed briefly, nervously, and immediately fell silent again.

Joe grinned, his teeth flashing white. "Ban from the premises. For both of us. Almost sounds like a compliment."

"It's a judgment," Mary murmured. "You're not welcome. Not here, not anywhere. Leave while you still have a choice."

Buddy looked at her for a long time, then turned to the door. "Back door?"

Mary's gaze hardened even more. "Maybe. But not today. Today you're just poison."

Joe turned the barstool with his heel and sat down broadly as if he'd never been uninvited. "You know, Mary," he said, "I've had a lot of doors shut in my face. But never by a woman who once poured me whiskey when I didn't have a penny in my pocket."

Mary's hands lay still on the counter, but her eyes were sharper than any glass. "Times are changing. Now you have not only cents, but also blood in your pockets. And that's more than I can handle here."

Buddy stood next to Joe, tall and immobile, like a wall that wouldn't move. "Thirst."

Mary's lips pressed together. "If I pour you a drink, half the town will fall on me. If I don't, you'll fall on me. Either way, I lose."

Joe grinned, picked up a glass from the bar, and twirled it between his fingers. "Then let's take the middle path. I'll pour myself."

A murmur went through the room. Men at the table turned their heads, growled quietly, and one banged his fist on wood.

"You should go," one said, his voice like a knife. "You'll only bring trouble, and we already have enough."

Joe raised his glass, his grin sharp. "I usually bring trouble, yes. But I also bring entertainment."

Buddy reached into his pocket and placed a silver coin on the counter. Heavy, shiny, like a judgment. "Drink."

Mary looked at the coin, then into Buddy's eyes. For a moment, there was silence. Then she reached behind her and placed the bottle on the counter. "Just one."

Joe laughed. "One is better than none. And better than a shot in the back."

The men in the room moved closer. They didn't like it. They didn't like Buddy or Joe. But no one made the first move. Not yet.

The glass filled. The whiskey smelled of dust, smoke, and guilt.

Joe raised it and toasted the room. "To El Dorado. The only city that kicks you out before you've truly arrived."

The glass was half empty when it happened. No warning signal, no conversation—just a punch coming from the gloom.

He hit Joe on the side of his jaw, knocking him over with the stool. The glass shattered, and whiskey splattered across the floor.

"Get out!" the man yelled, his knuckles red, his eyes glazed over. "Nobody wants you here!"

Silence for a heartbeat. Then the creaking of chairs, the scraping of boots. Other men rose, muscles tensed, hands already on their Colts or bottles.

Joe was still lying on the ground, laughing hoarsely and spitting blood. "Finally," he grinned, "I thought this was going to be a quiet evening."

Buddy turned around, slowly, as if giving the room one last chance. But when a second man stepped forward, fist raised, his patience ran out.

Buddy grabbed him by the shirt, lifted him up like a sack of grain, and hurled him against the table. The wood cracked, glasses flew, and one of the men fell to the floor with him.

"Enough!" Mary shouted from behind the counter, but her voice was drowned out by the commotion.

Joe got up and wiped his mouth. "I heard there was a ban on entering the premises, Mary. But no one banned any spanking."

A chair crashed, another punch ripped through the air. Men yelled, the clinking of glass mingled with the dull thud of flesh on flesh.

Buddy stood like a wall amidst the chaos, every movement of his arms a judgment. Anyone who came too close was thrown back—into chairs, onto the floor, into other men.

Joe grinned, ducked, punched, kicked, laughed. "You know, Buddy," he shouted over the noise, "being grounded almost feels cozy."

Buddy growled, grabbed the next guy, and hurled him across the bar. Bottles clinked, and Mary ducked. "Back door," he grumbled.

Mary's eyes flashed, furious and panicked. "You're bringing my whole house down!"

"Better a back door than no house," Joe muttered as he slammed his next opponent's head onto the counter.

The shards of glass crunched under boots, the clinking of bottles was an orchestra of glass and rage. Men screamed, one lay unconscious between the tables, another staggered into the corner with a bleeding nose.

Mary ducked behind the counter and grabbed Buddy as best she could. "You have to get out! Now! Back door—now, before the whole place collapses!"

Buddy grabbed a man by the belt and hurled him across the room, landing in a pile of chairs. Then he slowly turned to Mary. "Still thirsty."

"You can be thirsty outside," she hissed. "You won't be able to drink anything here if you destroy everything!"

Joe appeared next to her, grinning, blood on his lip. "You know, Mary, he only drinks from full glasses. And right now, all these are about to shatter."

She grabbed his arm and pulled him down before a bottle shattered over their heads. "Back door! Or I'll shoot myself!"

Joe blinked and grinned wider. "You never would."

"Try it," she hissed.

A chair crashed, sending Buddy sending the next one sprawling to the floor. He looked at Mary, then at Joe. His face remained motionless, but he nodded slowly. "Back door."

Joe shrugged. "Fine. But only because you're threatening us, Mary. Not because we're banned from the premises."

She pushed them through the aisle, between barrels and crates. Behind them, the saloon continued to roar, men screamed, one shot wildly into the air, glass rained down.

The back door creaked as Mary pushed it open. Outside – only dust, moonlight, and the smell of whiskey.

"Go," she whispered sharply. "And don't come back. Not again."

Buddy stepped out, heavy and immobile. Joe followed, but paused briefly in the doorway. He grinned, bright and crooked. "You know, Mary—sometimes the back door is better than the front entrance. Less crowd, more honesty."

Then he pulled his hat down over his face and disappeared into the night.

The door closed behind them, dull, hard, definitive. The noise inside sounded as if the whole house were losing its breath.

Outside, silence reigned. Only the rustling of dust in the wind, the squeaking of a loose sign. The moon hung pale over the street, indifferent, as if it had never been a part of this world.

Buddy stopped, his fists still red from the fight. "Thirst."

Joe grinned narrowly, rubbing his jaw. "Thirst? We just drank a whole barrel of trouble. And the Baron's already sent us the bill."

At the end of the street, something moved. Two men, maybe three. No hurry, no weapons raised—they just stood there, like statues. One lit a cigarette, the red dot flickering in the darkness.

"Do you see that, Buddy?" Joe nodded in her direction. "That's no coincidence. They're not there for smoking. They're there so everyone can see they're there."

Buddy growled softly. "Baron."

"Exactly," said Joe. "He already heard what happened inside. Probably even before the first bottle flew. And now he's making us feel that the city is no longer our stage. It's his."

The men at the end of the street didn't move. They didn't have to. Their mere presence was like a seal, a stamp: strangers, not welcome.

Joe pulled his hat down further over his face. "You know, Buddy, sometimes I think we're not fighting men at all. We're fighting eyes. All these eyes everywhere. And they all belong to him."

Buddy shrugged his shoulders heavily and looked at his fists. "You can't hit your eyes."

Joe grinned thinly. "Then we'll just blind them."

The wind carried dust across the street, covering her boots, as if even the stones wanted to say: You're in the wrong place.

Buddy grumbled. "Back door bad."

"No, Buddy," Joe muttered, "back doors are sometimes the beginning of stories. But ours here... it won't end with a drink. It will end with blood."

The street lay empty, like a dried-up river. No laughter, no footsteps, no barking dogs. Only the men at the end of the alley, motionless, like stakes driven into the ground.

Buddy and Joe walked slowly, their boots kicking up dust. No one passed them. Doors were closed, shutters rattled in the wind. But behind them: eyes. Always eyes.

Joe gave a small grin. "You know, buddy... I swear, the whole city is behind boards, staring at us. Like rats waiting for the cat to get tired."

Buddy grumbled. "Tomcat isn't sleeping."

"Not today," Joe nodded. "But someday. And they're hoping the Baron is the cat who never sleeps."

A window opened briefly. A child peered out, was immediately pulled back. The mother's hand, quick, firm, full of fear.

Buddy paused briefly and looked. His face motionless, only his fists twitched slightly. "Kid."

Joe nodded and spat in the dust. "Yes. Even the little ones learn here that we're the bad guys. Nice fairy tale the Baron is writing there."

They continued walking. A dog scurried out of an alley, growled, stopped, and stared at them before disappearing again.

The men at the end of the street still didn't move. One dropped his cigarette, stubbed it out, and looked at them. A brief nod—not as a greeting, but as a judgment.

Joe briefly raised two fingers to his hat, a fake smile. "Evening, guys. Glad you're waiting for us. Save us the walk."

Buddy growled, his voice deep. "They're not talking."

"You don't have to," said Joe. "Your job isn't to talk. Your job is to stand. So we know we're being watched."

The night crept closer. The moon slipped behind clouds, the road grew darker, narrower. El Dorado no longer breathed – it lurked.

Joe pulled his coat tighter, still grinning, but his gaze was hard. "Buddy, I think we're not guests anymore. We're hunted."

Buddy looked at him, slowly, heavily. "Hunted people eat too."

Joe laughed dryly. "Then let's hope the Baron has an appetite."

The street seemed to narrow the further they went. Doors remained closed, windows remained dark, but the gazes behind them were sharper than knives.

The hard-faced men finally moved. Not quickly, not loudly—they simply stepped aside, as if to say: *Go. But only go out.*

Joe laughed hoarsely and slapped Buddy on the arm. "See? Even their guards are polite. They won't let us in, but they'll let us out. El Dorado is a town full of gentlemen."

Buddy growled. "Gentlemen are weak."

"Or cowardly," muttered Joe.

They left the street. A door creaked behind them, then silence again. It was as if the city had taken a deep breath and then spat them out.

Mary's voice still echoed in their heads: *Not coming back. Not anymore.*

They moved on, out into the open country, where the dust was deeper and the moon colored the earth silver.

Joe looked back, his grin thin. "Banned from the premises, buddy. And without a proper breakfast. I feel cheated."

Buddy snorted, heavily and deeply. "Back door is enough."

The men on the outskirts of town were still standing there, unmoving, as if they had put down roots. Buddy and Joe turned their backs on them.

Before them lay the vastness, dark, full of shadows. Shadows that were not empty.

Joe lowered his hat, his voice barely above a whisper. "Then outside, Buddy. In the shade. Where the trains run that no one sees."

Buddy grumbled. "Hungry."

And they disappeared into the darkness, while behind them El Dorado locked the doors for good.

Shadow features

The night was quiet, only the wind pushed dust across the plain. Buddy and Joe walked in silence, the moon had disappeared behind clouds, the world lay gray, without edges.

Then came a sound. Deep, distant, like thunder that refused to roll. A rattling, rhythmic, heavy, as if iron were striking iron.

Joe stopped and lowered his hat. "Do you hear that, Buddy?"

Buddy nodded slowly. "Train."

"Yes," Joe murmured. "But none listed on timetables. No lights, no whistles. Just wheels rolling as if they were buried in the ground."

The sound came closer. First like a distant echo, then louder, heavier, until the dust vibrated. And suddenly it was there: a train, black, without lights, without windows. It didn't run on tracks, at least not visibly. It glided across the plain like a shadow that had taken shape.

Buddy stood still, motionless, his fists at his sides. Joe grinned narrowly, but his eyes were bright and alert. "There we go. The Shadow Train. People in town are talking about it like a ghost. And now it's driving right past us."

The train roared, dull, without sparks, without smoke. Only the vibration in the ground, the throb in the chest.

Joe whispered, as if he didn't want to disturb the noise: "You see, Buddy... this isn't a normal train. This is a transport. But not of goods. Of debt. Of blood. Maybe of souls."

Buddy growled softly. "No bacon."

"No," grinned Joe, "no bacon. Just shadows."

The train rolled by, slowly, as if it were looking them over. No windows, no faces, just darkness. Then it disappeared, just as suddenly as it had come.

The plain was silent again. Only the dust and the emptiness remained.

Buddy grumbled. "Hungry."

Joe grinned and put a map back in his pocket. "Then let's see where the shadows are going. Maybe the Baron has his luggage in there."

The dust settled slowly. It was as if the shadow had torn open the night, leaving behind a piece of darkness that refused to disappear.

Joe was still standing there, hands in his pockets, eyes narrowed. "Now, buddy. We could just keep riding and pretend we didn't see anything. But let's be honest—things like this don't move for no reason."

Buddy hunched his shoulders, heavy as rock. "Trains always run on the ground."

"Exactly," Joe nodded. "And I bet the reason has a face. A fat face with a top hat and too many rings."

He took a step into the dust and looked at the ground. No tracks. No wheel marks. Only deep furrows, as if the ground itself had trembled.

"See, buddy? No train, no tracks, but still tracks. Like an animal no one knows but everyone fears."

Buddy grumbled, walking beside him. "Tracks lead."

"They do," Joe murmured, his grin serious this time. "The question is: where? To the Baron? Or straight into a grave?"

The plain stretched endlessly. They walked, the moon reappeared, casting pale light over the land. The wind blew dust like veils before them, and every creak in the grass sounded like metal.

Joe turned the map over between his fingers. "You know, Buddy, sometimes I feel like we're walking into stories someone else is writing. And the Baron is holding the pen."

Buddy growled. "Break the spring."

Joe laughed dryly. "Exactly. And for that, we need the truth about this train. So let's move on."

They followed the furrows, which deepened as if wheels had ground the earth. And somewhere in the distance, the night still vibrated, as if the shadow train had left its mark not only in the dust, but in the air itself.

The furrows in the ground led them to a depression where the dust hung thicker. There, among withered bushes, sat three men. Their faces were ragged, their faces gray with dirt, their eyes empty.

Joe stopped, raised his hat, and grinned narrowly. "Well, look at that. Passengers."

Buddy grumbled and remained motionless. "Hungry."

The men looked up, slowly, as if their heads weighed more than their bodies. One murmured, "We... we got out."

Joe raised his eyebrow. "Get out? From what?"

"From the train," the man whispered, his voice shaky. "It's going on forever. No lights, no stations. Just darkness. We... we jumped. Or someone pushed us. I don't remember."

Buddy stepped closer, his shadow falling over her. "Trains don't run with doors."

The second man laughed hoarsely, a sound without joy. "No. No doors. Just walls. Black. Hard. You sit inside, hear wheels, feel dust. Then at some point you're out. Without knowing how."

Joe grinned, but his eyes grew sharper. "And who's driving this thing? Who's sitting in front and holding the reins?"

The third man raised his head, his eyes glowing feverishly. "The Baron. Or his shadow. Or something that eats him and spits him back out."

Silence. The wind tore wisps of dust through the valley.

Joe laughed dryly. "Those are lovely tales, gentlemen. But I'll tell you one thing: If the Baron has a train, I want a ticket. First class, please."

Buddy growled deeply. "No ticket. Just a fist."

The men slumped back down, empty, tired, broken. They looked like husks ejected by the shadow train—empty of everything that had once been human.

Joe spat in the dust and turned to Buddy. "See, partner? Even his trains are vomiting people up. And we're still chasing him. We might be the next ones to hit the ground."

Buddy grumbled, his eyes dark. "Not us."

They left the men in the hollow. They no longer spoke, they just breathed like broken bellows.

Joe looked back, his grin narrow. "Nice company. If this is first class, buddy, I don't want to know what economy class looks like."

Buddy grumbled and looked ahead. "Go on."

The furrows in the ground ran across the plain, deeper, harder, as if the wheels of hell itself had plowed the dust.

The wind died down, the night became heavy, silent, like a bell someone had placed over the world. Then that roar came again. First distant, then closer, rhythmic, like an iron heartbeat.

Joe stopped, his hands loosely at his sides. "There he is again."

Buddy growled. "Train."

And there it was. Black, massive, but without contours. No lights, no smoke, no driver in sight. It glided through the night like a shadow made flesh.

Joe stepped closer to the furrows, grinning even though his eyes were sharp. "You know, Buddy, normal men run away when something like this happens. But we... we run toward it."

Buddy grumbled. "Stupid."

"Maybe," Joe laughed dryly. "But curious."

The train of shadows rushed past, so thick that the ground vibrated. Dust whipped up, stones cracked, the air burned. Joe leaned forward as if he could peer inside. But there was nothing—only darkness.

For a moment, he thought he saw faces in them. Empty eyes, pale mouths, like shadows behind black glass. Then the train had moved on, rolling away, disappearing into the night.

Buddy stood still, his fists at his sides. "No move. Demon."

Joe put the card back in his pocket and grinned weakly. "Demon or not, he's going somewhere. And if the Baron's in it, I want to know where he's getting off."

The dust still hung in the air long after the train had disappeared. The furrows in the ground almost glowed, as if they had retained the heat of the shadow.

Joe watched them go, tipped his hat low, and grinned narrowly. "You know, Buddy... the next one out is me."

Buddy turned his head slowly, heavily, like a boulder moving. "Jumping is stupid."

"Maybe," said Joe, "but sometimes you have to be stupid if you want to be smart."

He walked a few steps beside the furrows, kicking the dust. "You see, partner – as long as we're standing outside, we only see shadows. But when I'm on top... then I can see who's driving. Then I can see whether the Baron himself is blowing the locomotive's whistle or whether he's just writing the timetable."

Buddy grumbled, his voice deep. "Train eats."

Joe laughed and spat in the dust. "Then he'll break his teeth on me."

They sat down in the sand and waited. The moon shifted, the night cast long shadows across the plain. No sound except their own breathing.

"You know, Buddy," Joe muttered, "there are two kinds of men: those who wait for the train to hit them. And those who jump on it. I'm the second kind."

Buddy chewed on a dry piece of bread he pulled from his pocket. "Bad bread."

"Sure," grinned Joe, "but maybe there are beans on the train."

Buddy looked at him, motionless, then out into the darkness. "If you jump... I'll jump too."

Joe blinked and grinned wider. "That's what you call friendship. Or madness. Makes no difference."

The wind shifted, dust swirled. Somewhere deep in the night, a faint vibration rang out again, like thunder behind the mountains.

Joe lay back, his hat over his eyes. "Here he comes. Next time he'll be ours."

The night stretched like a rope. Every breath was a knot, every gust of wind a twitch.

Then came the roar. First deep, barely noticeable, then louder, harder, as if the earth itself were losing its heartbeat.

Joe stood, hat low, hands loose. His grin was narrow, his eyes bright. "There he is, Buddy. Our train to nowhere."

Buddy stood up, tall, immobile, his shoulders like bricks. "Stupid."

"Yes," Joe nodded. "But sometimes stupidity is the only way to get to the truth."

The rattling grew louder, the furrows in the ground began to vibrate. The dust jumped, stones trembled, the air cut.

Then it appeared. Black, huge, without light, without whistles. Only the weight of the shadow rolling through the night.

Joe took a step forward and took a deep breath. "Ready?"

Buddy grumbled. "I prefer a pan."

Joe laughed hoarsely. "Then imagine the train is a big pan. And we're the beans."

The shadow train raced closer. No driver, no windows. Just darkness that swallowed everything.

"Now!" Joe screamed, running, jumping. Dust flew, his hands grasped at nothing—and yet found a hold. Metal, cold, hard, alive.

Buddy followed, heavier, more powerful. He grabbed, pulled himself up as if he were climbing a wall.

The roar swallowed their voices. The train sped on, and now they both clung to its side, their fingers clutching shadows like iron.

Joe laughed, the wind tearing the words from his mouth. "See, Buddy? I told you we're going first class!"

Buddy growled, his muscles burning. "Shitty class."

The train thundered on into the night, and for the first time, Buddy & Joe were no longer spectators. They were passengers.

The wind whipped their faces as they pulled themselves up. Metal, or something that felt like it, cold, smooth, but not dead.

Joe pushed himself up first, crawled over the edge, and rolled into the train car. Buddy followed, heavily, a thud of muscle and weight that shook the darkness.

There was no light inside. No seat, no window. Just breathing walls. Black, damp, pulsating, like climbing into the belly of an animal.

Joe stopped and grinned, but the grin was narrow, more of a mask. "Well, Buddy... I told you. First class. Just a little... more organic than I thought."

Buddy growled deeply. "No move. Demon."

They continued cautiously. The ground vibrated, but not like iron on rails. More like a heartbeat. A dull, steady throb that ran through their boots.

Something moved in the darkness. Voices, quiet, whispering, like a choir that didn't know the lyrics. Eyes flashed, then disappeared. Shadows that had no form.

Joe reached into his pocket, pulled out a map, and turned it over between his fingers. The white of the paper shimmered dully. "You know, Buddy... maybe we're not going here. Maybe we've always been going here."

Buddy stood still, his fists clenched. "Get out."

"Can't do it," Joe muttered. "The train will go until someone stops it. And the Baron... he's sitting somewhere in the front. Or the back. Or he's the whole damn train."

A cold draft blew through the carriage, making the shadows dance. For a moment, Joe saw faces—pale, empty faces, stuck to the walls like frameless picture frames.

Then everything was quiet again. Only the pounding remained.

Buddy clenched his fist and punched the wall. It boomed, vibrated, but didn't give in. "Demon."

Joe grinned weakly and tightened his hat. "Then we'll just ride in hell. Let's see if the devil checks tickets."

And the shadow train raced on, through the night, with Buddy and Joe stowing away in a car that smelled more like a grave than a journey.

Buddy and the Window

The train car continued to breathe, dull and damp. The throbbing in the ground rolled like a heartbeat that never seemed to end. Joe played with his map, flashing it in the darkness as if it were a match that never quite caught fire.

"Damn it, Buddy," he muttered, "we're in a moving liver. Or a grave that forgot how to stand still."

Buddy walked ahead in silence. His footsteps sounded dull, almost muffled, as if the ground weren't iron, but flesh. Then he stopped.

Joe blinked and stepped next to him. "What is it?"

Buddy raised his hand and pointed at the wall. There it was. A window. Square, with a frame, as if someone had cut it from a real train and placed it there. The glass was frosted, but behind it, something was moving.

Joe stepped closer, laughing quietly, without joy. "Well, look at that. Our first view. Let's see where we're going."

He wiped the glass. The dust disappeared, and behind it there was no sky, no plain, no rails. Instead: a face. Brief, fleeting, pale. Then it blurred, turned into darkness.

Buddy remained silent, his fists at his sides. "Window wrong."

"Yeah," Joe muttered, "it's wrong. But interesting."

He swiped again, this time more forcefully. Another image appeared. This time it was El Dorado—Main Street, the saloon, Mary behind the bar. Everything was clear, as if the window were looking into another world. Then it dissolved, turned black again.

Joe grinned thinly, his teeth flashing. "See, buddy? The train is showing us something. Not outside. Inside. This isn't a window. It's a mirror. Except it's reflecting our future."

Buddy growled softly. "Window broken."

Joe shook his head. "No. It's exactly the way the Baron wants it. He's building windows where there shouldn't be any. So we can look in. And maybe jump in."

The knocking in the train grew louder. The window flickered, revealing another face—this time the Baron's. Fat, pale, wearing a top hat. He wasn't smiling. He was looking directly at her.

Joe stepped back and cursed. "Well, damn it. Now he knows we're passengers."

Buddy clenched his fist. "Break windows."

Joe nodded slowly. "Maybe. But first, I want to know how many of them are left."

Buddy stood motionless in front of the window. His fist hung in the air, heavy and tense, as if he were about to punch not glass, but a wall of stone.

Joe grinned, but his eyes remained narrowed. "Come on, buddy. Maybe it'll break, maybe it'll open. Maybe the whole damn locomotive will fall apart. But if anyone should test it, it's you."

Buddy growled deeply, swung – and hit.

The fist crashed against the glass. But there was no shattering. No splintering, no breakage. Instead: a dull, fleshy sound, as if he had punched a stomach. The window vibrated, bulging as if it were breathing.

Joe took a step back, laughing hoarsely. "Damn it, partner. That's not a window. That's an eye."

The glass pulsed, glowing briefly. Images flickered within it—faces, streets, shadows. Then a scream. Not a human sound, not an animal. A scream that echoed through the entire carriage, coming from the walls, the floor, the air.

Buddy pulled back his fist and shook it. His face remained impassive. "Window screams."

Joe spat in the dust and grinned narrowly. "Yes. And now the whole platoon knows we're here."

The pounding in the ground grew faster. Like a racing heart. The train car vibrated, dust trickled from the walls.

"You woke it up," Joe muttered, his hand on his gun, even though he knew bullets wouldn't do anything here. "Or let's say you punched it in the eye."

Buddy breathed deeply, slowly, heavily. "Good."

The window flickered again. This time they saw only the Baron. Clear, hard, almost as if he were standing right in front of them. He slowly raised his hand, placed it against the glass—as if he could touch them.

Joe lowered his hat and grinned crookedly. "Ban from the city, and now we're banned from the train."

Buddy raised his fist again. "Window broken."

The window glowed, flickering as if someone had lit a fire inside it. The walls around them began to vibrate, dust fell, and the pounding in the floor turned into a hammering.

Joe instinctively reached for his Colt. He drew, aimed, and chuckled. "I know it's stupid, Buddy. But sometimes a piece of iron in my hand calms me down, even if it doesn't do anything against demons."

Buddy stood motionless in front of the window, his fist still clenched. His breathing was steady, but his eyes were dark.

Then it happened. Shadows shot out of the glass. No hands, no arms, just long strips of darkness, writhing like snakes. They reached out for them, cold, wet, like fog with muscles.

Joe ducked, striking with the Colt as if it were a club. "Damn it, buddy—your window has tentacles!"

Buddy grabbed one of the shadows with his bare hand. He pulled, yanking as if breaking a rope. The thing hissed, splintered, and dissolved into dust.

"Window bad," he grumbled.

Another shadow wrapped itself around Joe's neck. He wheezed, but still laughed hoarsely. "If this is first-class service, then I want my money back." He rammed the Colt into the darkness and pulled the trigger. The shot echoed dully, the echo sounding like a tortured groan. The shadow let go, vanishing.

The window flickered more intensely. Inside was the Baron's face—this time distorted, grinning, as if he were enjoying every blow.

Joe gasped, spat dust, and grinned again. "See, Buddy? Even the windows here are laughing at us."

Buddy raised both fists and slammed them on the glass at the same time. The scream that followed shook the entire train car. The shadows retreated, darkness crept into the corners, and the window went black.

Silence. Only the pounding, heavy, slower, like a heart calming down.

Joe took a deep breath and shook his head. "Good job, partner. You punched that train in the eye. I bet it won't forget that."

Buddy looked at the black glass. "Window dead."

"No," Joe muttered, "Window is just sleeping. And dreams about that train... I don't want to see them."

The train car slowly quieted down. The pounding became more regular again, dust fell from the ceiling as if after an earthquake. Buddy stood, breathing heavily, in front of the dark area where the window had been.

Joe put the Colt back and grinned narrowly. "Well, buddy. You showed the platoon that your fists speak louder than glass. Maybe we should give you a new title: Window Cleaner."

Buddy grumbled, wiping dust from his knuckles. "Window dead."

"Dead, yes," Joe muttered, "but you know how it is with things on this train? Nothing stays dead here."

He was right. Even as he spoke, a new rectangle flickered on the opposite wall. Clear, sharp, with a frame that seemed made of pure iron. Another window.

Joe stepped closer, his eyes narrowed, the card between his fingers. "See? The game continues. Second round."

This time, there was no grimace in the glass, no distorted face. Instead, there was El Dorado. Clearly. The main street, the signs, the lamplight. Men walking across the dusty ground. Women pulling children into the houses. Everything in motion, as if it were real.

Buddy stared, motionless. "Window shows city."

"Exactly," Joe nodded. "And not sometime soon. Now. This isn't a memory. This is a mirror telling us: You're banned from the premises, and yet you're still in."

The saloon door moved in the window. Mary stepped out. Her gaze was hard, her face etched with fatigue. She stood in the middle of the street as if waiting for someone.

Joe grinned, but his grin was strained. "Great. Now the train is even giving us a live feed. First-class television. Only without the remote control."

Mary looked around, then spoke to someone off-screen. The next moment, the Baron stepped into view. Black, heavy, immaculate. His top hat gleamed, his hands were in gloves. He stood next to Mary, and although she couldn't be heard, it was clear: they were talking.

Joe stepped closer and whispered. "Damn it. He's playing with her. And he knows we can see it."

The Baron's face slowly turned. His eyes in the window weren't looking at Mary. They were looking directly at Buddy and Joe.

Buddy clenched his fists. "Window is bad."

Joe spat in the dust and grinned thinly. "Bad, yes. But at least he's honest. He wants to show us that he owns the city. And that we're just guests on his train."

The window flickered, the image distorted, and went black. All that remained was her breathing and the dull throbbing beneath her feet.

Buddy stood close to the glass, his fists already tensed. He was breathing heavily, as if he were about to strike immediately.

"Window broken," he grumbled.

Joe raised his hand and shook his head. "No, partner. Not this time. This isn't an eye staring at us. This is a curtain. And sometimes it's wiser to look behind the curtain before tearing it down."

Buddy growled, his brow furrowed. "Window's lying."

"Of course it's a lie," Joe grinned thinly. "But every lie has a bit of truth in it. And when the Baron shows us his stage, I want to see the show."

The image flickered back on. Mary was standing in the saloon, talking to a man she didn't know—or rather, a man Joe didn't recognize. A stranger, finely dressed, with a bag full of papers.

Joe blinked, his grin freezing. "Look. That's not a thug. That's a writer. Maybe a lawyer. Maybe an accountant. But definitely someone who writes numbers bigger than our fists."

Buddy stepped closer and looked into the glass. "Writer weak."

"Maybe," Joe muttered. "But sometimes men with ink are more dangerous than men with Colts."

The scene changed in the window. The Baron took the bag, opened it, and showed Mary something. Papers, seals, gold. She looked as if she couldn't believe what she was seeing.

Joe snorted, biting his lip. "There it is, Buddy. There's his plan. He's buying the city, piece by piece. No blood, no fists—just numbers. And the people will kneel faster than he slits their throats."

Buddy clenched his fists tighter. "Windows reveal lies."

"No," Joe said quietly, "window shows that we're slow. And that he's faster."

The image flickered, fading. For a moment, all that was visible was the Baron alone in the saloon. He raised his glass as if toasting them.

Joe grinned weakly. "Well, you see, Buddy. He's drinking to us. Maybe we should drink to him, too. Except our glass is empty right now."

The window went out, the wall turned black again.

Silence. Only the train's heartbeat continued to beat, slowly, heavily, as if it were recording everything.

The wall vibrated even before the second window was completely out. A trembling, a twitching, as if the train itself were growing impatient.

Joe lowered his hat and grinned narrowly. "Great. Third round. Let's see what he serves us now."

The glass slowly formed, pulsating. And then it was there: a new window. Clear, reflective, so clean it hurt.

Joe stepped closer, looked inside—and stopped. His grin fell.

They were standing in the glass. Buddy and Joe. Exactly where they were. In this train car, in the shadows, with the same faces, the same movements. No difference.

"Damn," Joe whispered. "That thing is filming us. Or worse—it's thinking for us."

Buddy stared, motionless. His reflection was just as still, only his eyes... they were different. Darker. Deeper. As if they weren't looking back, but looking right through him.

Joe raised a hand and waved. His mirror did the same—only a second slower.

"Do you see that, Buddy?" he whispered. "That's not a mirror. It's an echo."

Buddy clenched his fist, and his mirror did the same, but in the glass, it seemed harder, more brutal. Almost as if the version there was stronger.

Joe laughed hoarsely, but the laughter sounded like a cough. "Imagine, partner—one day we won't be fighting with his bullies, but with ourselves. Only in his version."

The window flickered, and suddenly you saw the Mirror Buddy fist strike. Not at the glass, not at Joe, but into nothingness. But the blow vibrated through the train car, raining dust from the ceiling.

Joe stepped back, drawing his Colt. "That thing is playing with us. It doesn't just show who we are—it shows what we could become. Its puppets."

Buddy breathed heavily. "Windows lie."

"Maybe," murmured Joe, "but sometimes a lie is just tomorrow's truth."

The glass turned black, the reflections disappeared. All that remained was darkness—and the feeling that they weren't alone, even though they were two.

Darkness had swallowed the third window. But the carriage wasn't silent—it was breathing faster, shallower, like a hunted animal.

Joe stood there, Colt in hand, his grin a mere shadow. "You know, buddy... sometimes I think this train isn't going forward. It's running into us. Down, every damn window a cut."

Buddy said nothing. He stood there, tall, immobile, his fists loose, but ready.

"What do we do?" Joe asked quietly. "Do we keep watching until he eats us? Or do we smash everything to pieces until the Baron no longer has any eyes?"

Buddy grumbled. "Windows lie. Windows eat. Windows fear."

Joe blinked. "Scared? Of whom?"

Buddy raised his fist, then slowly lowered it. "From us."

Silence. Only the pounding of the train, dull, heavy, almost like a heart pounding in panic.

Joe looked at him, snorted, then grinned weakly. "Shit, partner. Maybe you're right. Maybe we're the only ones who can scare that damn mirror."

Buddy nodded. "Window broken. Always."

Joe put away his Colt and laughed dryly. "Good. Then you're our window program from now on."

They continued through the carriage. The walls trembled, but no new glass formed. Perhaps the train didn't dare. Perhaps it was just saving its strength for later.

Buddy trudged forward, heavily, unwaveringly. "Window dead. Baron next."

Joe followed him, hat low, map in hand. His grin was back, but harder, sharper. "Exactly, partner. We've seen enough movies. Time to beat up the director."

And so they marched deeper into the train, while outside the night rolled over the plain, and the shadow train raced, without destination, without stopping.

Chalk on the floor

The train car stretched on endlessly. No end in sight, only pounding, only darkness, only breathing walls. Buddy walked in front, heavy, stoic, his footsteps dull like hammer blows. Joe followed, hat low, map in hand, grin thin as a knife.

Then Buddy stopped.

"What now?" asked Joe, stepping next to him – and saw it.

A line. White. Thin, crooked, drawn across the floor of the train car. Chalk. No blood, no dust, no shadow. Chalk, clear as in a school, but here the blackboard was missing.

Joe bent down and rubbed it with his finger. The line remained, stubbornly. "Well, you see, Buddy. Someone was playing at drawing. Except that children's chalk rarely lies around on hellish trains."

Buddy stared at the line, motionless. "Boundary."

"Yeah," Joe muttered, "a damn border. Someone said: This far. No further. Or the other way around—this far is ours, from there on it's his."

He pulled out the card and placed it on the chalk. The paper twitched slightly, as if frightened.

Joe grinned crookedly. "See, partner? Even paper feels uncomfortable. And paper has no other feeling."

The ground vibrated harder as they approached. The pounding intensified, dull, restless, almost like a warning.

"Don't want us to go over," Joe muttered.

Buddy snorted deeply and heavily. "Then go."

He lifted his boot and placed it directly on the chalk line. A crunch, a twitch ran through the floor. The train car shook, the walls groaned.

Joe laughed dryly. "Well, Buddy. You just beat the devil at school."

The boot crunched across the line, and immediately the ground vibrated. Not like metal, not like wood—more like an animal being stepped on.

Joe stepped back, grinning thinly. "See, Buddy. You're not just a window cleaner. Now you're also a line destroyer."

Buddy stood still, his face hard. His gaze was fixed on the line, which didn't disappear. On the contrary – it grew brighter. White light crept out of it, stretching up the wall as if someone had lit a fire in chalk.

Joe blinked, pulled his hat down. "Holy shit... glow-in-the-dark chalk. This isn't school, buddy. This is a pulpit. Someone drew this on purpose. And it's not for kids."

The line expanded. It curved, drew circles, and made patterns on the floor. Like a ritual that came to life on its own.

"Do you see that?" whispered Joe. "That's not a border. It's a spell. And we're standing right in the middle of it now."

Buddy growled, his fists clenched. "Spell broken."

"Maybe so," muttered Joe, "but sometimes when you break a spell, what comes out isn't freedom—it's a beast glad to finally breathe again."

The walls groaned, the carriage swayed slightly. The pounding in the floor became faster, more restless, like a racing heart.

Joe grinned weakly, but his gaze was sharp. "Partner, I'll tell you something: I think there was someone ahead of us on the train. Someone who knew how to use chalk. Maybe a scribe, maybe a priest, maybe a madman. But he left us something. And you just stepped on it."

Buddy breathed heavily. "Good."

The chalk flickered brighter, casting light over their faces. For the first time, the carriage was not black, but white like a chapel—except the chapel stank of iron, dust, and fists.

Joe laughed hoarsely. "Welcome to class, Buddy. I have a feeling the Baron just prepared a lesson for us."

The glow grew stronger. The chalk didn't just creep across the floor, it climbed the walls, drawing circles, symbols Joe didn't recognize—and didn't want to.

Buddy stood in the middle, motionless, his fists loose, his gaze hard.

Joe shook his head and laughed hoarsely. "Partner, I don't know what you just started, but I swear to you: this isn't art class. This is a damn portal."

The lines connected, forming a frame. Rectangular, clear, white-hot. A gate. Beyond it: nothing but darkness.

Buddy grumbled. "Door."

"Yes," Joe nodded. "A door without a house. A door in the middle of a train car that's already a house of the dead. And I bet the Baron is sitting on the other side, rubbing his hands together."

The ground shook, more violently now. It was no longer a heartbeat, but a urging. The train itself pushed them forward, forcing them to the line.

Joe braced himself with his boots and grinned narrowly. "See that, Buddy? He wants us to leave. No choice. He's pushing us through like cattle through a corridor."

Buddy stepped closer, standing in front of the white opening. His face remained hard. "Go."

"Wait a minute," Joe muttered, "if we go through there, we might not get back. That's not a back door. It's a mouth."

Buddy looked at him, his eyes dark and unmoving. "Jump."

Joe laughed dryly and spat in the dust. "You're crazy, partner. But you know what? Crazy is better than standing still."

They stepped across the line simultaneously. The lights flickered, the symbols burned, the carriage groaned. Then they plunged through the opening—and darkness swallowed them like water.

They didn't fall. They stood. Just like that. No fall, no impact—they were there.

Joe blinked and lowered his hat. "Well, that's pretty. We walk through chalk and land back on our feet. Almost like magic. Except I hate magic."

Buddy looked around. His gaze was hard, slow. "Not wagon."

And he was right. It wasn't the same train anymore. The walls were still there, black and damp, but there was space between them, far too much space. The

room seemed like a hall, stretched out infinitely, larger than any carriage could ever be.

Dust lay thick and gray on the ground. Footprints led through it, many of them. Some fresh, some old.

Joe crouched down, running his fingers through the dust. "See, buddy? We're not the first. Others have walked through the chalk here before. And if I had to guess, not all of them made it out again."

Buddy followed a trail with his eyes, deep, wide, like the trail left by boots. It led into the darkness, where there was no end.

Joe grinned dully, without joy. "We might be in the Baron's waiting room right now. You know, a little antechamber to hell. Room for anyone who thinks they can get into his car."

The air was heavy, dry, and tasted of chalk and iron. It smelled not of blood, not of sweat—but of emptiness.

Buddy clenched his fists. "Fighting here."

"Sure," Joe muttered, "but against whom? I don't see any enemies. Only traces. Maybe we're fighting against those we don't even see yet."

They continued, deeper into the room. The pounding was gone. No more heartbeat. Only silence, only dust, only the feeling that something was waiting in the darkness.

Joe spat in the dust, his grin hard. "All right. If this is the anteroom, then I want to know what kind of receptionist that guy is putting us in."

Buddy nodded, his voice deep. "Baron."

They walked deeper into the room, their boots crunching in the dust. Every movement echoed as if the hall were a bell.

Then they saw it.

A hat lay on the floor. Dusty, torn, the leather brittle. Next to it was a pair of boots, still laced but without feet in them.

Joe bent down, picked up the hat, and turned it over in his hands. "Well, look at that. Someone missed the last train. Or they jumped—only without a head."

Buddy remained motionless, his eyes staring at the dust. "Dead."

"Yeah," Joe murmured, "but not as we know it. No bullets, no blood, no knife. Just... gone."

A little further away, metal glittered. A Colt, rusty but with an ivory grip. Joe picked it up and shook his head. "See, partner? This used to be a nice revolver. And now it's rusting, right in the belly of something that doesn't even have water. That kind of thing doesn't just happen."

Buddy continued pedaling, his boot hitting bones. Thin, porous, almost like chalk itself. They shattered under the weight, turning to dust.

Joe looked over and laughed hoarsely. "Great. Even the dead fit in here. Bones like chalk. Maybe that's the deal: you step over the line, you become part of the line."

There were more remains. A pocketknife, a tin can, a belt of cartridges. All old, all dead. But no body. Only things that had remained after the train had collected its debt.

Joe put the knife away and looked at Buddy. "You know, partner, sometimes things tell a story more than people. And these things only say one thing: No one's getting out of here."

Buddy growled deeply, his face hard. "We."

Joe gave a thin grin and shook his head. "Exactly, Buddy. We do. But I'll tell you one thing—if we go out, we'll take the Baron with us. Otherwise, it's pointless."

They continued walking, leaving the remains behind. But the dust swirled, as if the things lying there still wanted to hold them.

They left the dead things behind, trudging deeper into the room. The dust lay thicker, like flour, stirred up with every step.

Buddy walked ahead, his eyes heavy and motionless. Then he stopped and pointed with his chin.

"Track."

Joe stepped beside him and bent down. Boot prints. Fresh. The dust hadn't yet settled, the edges sharp.

Joe grinned narrowly. "Well, you see, partner. We're not alone. There's someone else wandering around here. Maybe he's looking for the exit, too. Maybe he's looking for us."

Buddy growled deeply. "Trap."

"Always," Joe nodded. "But traps are also doors if you kick them right."

They followed the trail. It was restless, zigzagging through the room, as if the man—or woman—had been wandering around in the dark. Sometimes deeply imprinted, sometimes light, almost fleeting.

Then, suddenly, another sign. Chalk. Not on the floor, but on the wall. A line, a cross, drawn roughly, hastily.

Joe stared at it, laughing hoarsely. "See that, buddy? One of us. Someone with chalk. And I bet he drew the first line, too."

Buddy clenched his fists and grumbled. "Alive."

"Yes," murmured Joe, "alive. Or playing with us. The Baron has a sense of humor. Maybe this is his little walking stick."

They continued on, following the trail. The darkness remained thick, but somewhere ahead a sound echoed. A scratching, a grinding, as if someone were drawing chalk on stone.

Joe lowered his hat and grinned thinly. "Well, partner. Now things are getting interesting. Someone's drawing up ahead. And I'll tell you one thing: If he's using chalk to stay alive here, I want to meet him. But not because I like him. But because I want to know how long he's been walking."

Buddy nodded heavily, his voice deep. "Ask. Then hit."

The scratching grew louder the further they went. Dust swirled, the air tasted dry, like burnt paper.

Then they saw him.

A man, gaunt, his face sunken, his hair stringy, his eyes glowing with fever. He knelt on the floor, a piece of chalk in his hand. With quick, nervous movements, he drew lines, circles, symbols. Again and again, faster and faster, as if he wanted to cover the entire room with them.

Joe stopped and grinned slightly. "Well, there you go, buddy. There we have the artist. Our little teacher who loves chalk more than whiskey."

Buddy stood still, motionless. "Crazy."

The man turned his head and looked at her. His eyes were wide, empty, and full at the same time. "You also passed through." His voice sounded scratchy, dry. "The chalk left you."

Joe laughed hoarsely. "Calm? Partner, we jumped. And if you're the chalk playing bouncer here, then I have a few more questions."

The man laughed, high and brittle. "Questions... always questions. Chalk doesn't answer. It protects. It separates. It says: this far, no further. But you... you have stepped."

Buddy took a step closer, his fists loose. "Baron?"

The man nodded slowly, the piece of chalk in his hand like a weapon. "He sees everything. He drives everything. But he fears chalk. White on black. Signs against shadows. That's why I paint. That's why I live."

Joe blinked and grinned crookedly. "Aha. You draw lines, and the Baron keeps his distance. Sounds like a cheap trick. But maybe that's exactly what makes him angry."

The man continued scratching, faster, his fingers white. "He hates order. Lines. Rules. He wants chaos. He wants you to forget where you stand. But as long as there's chalk... there's an outside."

Buddy stood before him, motionless. "Window."

The man laughed again, dryly, hurriedly. "Windows, doors, lines. All the same. Paths. But you're inside now. And there aren't enough chalk for all of you."

Joe stepped next to Buddy and looked at the man for a long moment. "Then tell me, partner... how many lines do you have left? And how many do you need before the Baron eats you anyway?"

The man stared into the darkness, the piece of chalk trembling in his hand. "As many as I can draw... before the chalk breaks."

And in the dust around them, the lines began to glow. White. Faint. But enough to show: the battle for borders had only just begun.

The bartender has an archive

Mary stood alone in the saloon. The night was silent, the lamps casting a dim light on the tables, which smelled of whiskey and blood.

She had locked the door and turned the key twice, as she always did when she knew someone was looking over her shoulder.

Then she went behind the counter, pulled out a bottle, put it down, and pushed the wooden shelves aside. Behind them was no shelf, no storage space for glasses. Behind them lay her secret.

A small room, barely larger than a closet. And inside: books. Stacks of them. Old receipts, yellowed contracts, penciled notes, letters that would have been better burned.

Mary lit a candle and sat on a stool. She flipped through the pages.

The paper smelled of dust, of years, of things no one should know.

Here were names. Lists of men who owed the Baron money. Amounts no one could repay. Houses he had transferred to him, piece by piece, street by street.

Mary's fingers trembled slightly as she ran over the lines. She knew half the names. Men still sitting at the bar. Women still fetching water. Children who looked old before they could walk.

"It's all my fault," she murmured quietly. "All blood on paper."

She pulled out another notebook. Inside were maps. Drawn, inaccurate, but enough to show: The Baron had claims far outside the city. Mines that no one owned anymore—because he had taken them.

Mary snorted and took a sip from the bottle. The fire burned in her throat, but it didn't help the cold in her stomach.

"Damn it," she said. "And the boys are now sitting right in his stomach."

She put the notebooks back neatly, wiped the sweat from her brow. Then she flipped through them again, deeper, further. A single piece of paper fell out. Just one sentence, scrawled but clear:

“The chalk is the only boundary he doesn’t cross.”

Mary stared at the words. She didn't understand them. Not yet. But she knew they were important.

She put the note aside, reached for the bottle and took a long, hard sip.

The candle flickered as if it were afraid. Mary shivered, even though the room was stuffy.

She flipped through the pages faster, wanting to see the sentence about the chalk again, but the paper was sticky, as if it didn't want to be read.

Then she heard it.

A creak. No wind, no wood moving. A footstep. Quiet, cautious, on the floorboards of the saloon.

Mary held her breath. She knew the sound—someone trying to go unnoticed.

She pushed the magazine aside and reached under the counter. There lay her revolver, loaded, ready for years. She pulled it out and slowly cocked the hammer, silently.

One more step. Closer.

Mary extinguished the candle with her fingers, and the smoke rose. Now the room was dark, with only a faint sliver of moonlight slanting through the cracks in the windows.

She listened.

Breath. Short, shallow. Not a drunk who had fallen asleep. Not a drunk who had missed the way home. This was someone who knew why he was here.

"You can go right away," she said quietly, her voice dry as dust. "Or you can stay. Then I'll shoot."

Silence. Only the breath remained.

Then a voice. Deep, hoarse. "You're reading things not meant for your eyes."

Mary's fingers twitched on the trigger. "If they weren't meant for my eyes, he wouldn't have hidden them in my city."

A quiet laugh. No humor, just coldness. "The city belongs to him. The dust belongs to him. Even you belong to him. You're only here because he allows it."

Mary raised her gun and aimed into the darkness. "Then he made the mistake of allowing too much."

A shadow moved. Slowly. A man, hard to recognize. Only the glint of a chain around his neck, briefly caught in the moonlight.

Mary took a deep breath, her finger on the trigger. "Tell me who you are. Or I'll find out the hard way."

The man laughed again, quieter this time. "I'm a debt collector. And you... you've been reading too much."

Mary remained motionless. Only the revolver moved, like an extension of her hand. The muzzle pointed toward where the shadow stood.

"If you're here to scare me," she said dryly, "then you're too late. I haven't been scared in years."

The man took half a step forward. Tall, broad, but not like Buddy. More like a thug living off debt. A chain gleamed around his neck, and from it hung a small medallion. On it was the Baron's mark—a B. Scratched in, roughly, but unmistakable.

"You read his books," he murmured. "And those who read pay double the price."

Mary spat in the dust. "I've already paid. With work, with blood, with nights spent carrying out more corpses than customers. But you know what? Your Baron owes me. And we bartenders collect debts our way."

The man laughed hoarsely. No humor, just mockery. "You're brave. But courage is just another word for stupidity."

Mary audibly cocked the hammer. The click cut through the silence. "Then I'm stupid with six cartridges. And you're brave enough to find out how fast they fly?"

He stopped and looked at her. Even without the light, she felt his gaze. Heavy, cold.

"You're a bottle he hasn't finished yet," he murmured. "But he will. Soon. And everything you've read will turn to dust."

Mary raised the gun harder, her voice hard as iron. "Then I hope he's thirsty. Because I have a hard time coming."

A moment of silence. The pounding of her heart mingled with the darkness.

Then the man stepped back, slowly, almost casually. "Not yet. You may live. For now. The Baron wants to see you sweat a little more."

The door creaked and he disappeared into the night.

Mary exhaled deeply and lowered the gun. She felt her arm tremble—not with fear, but with anger.

She reached for the bottle, took a deep swig, and sat back down in front of her notebooks. "Then I'll just sweat," she muttered. "But I sweat with a loaded Colt."

Mary stared at the door, which had closed again. The man was gone, but his breath still seemed to hang in the air.

She placed the revolver on the table and pulled out the notebooks again. Papers, receipts, IOUs. Every name was a weight, every amount a noose around the city's neck.

She took a sip of whiskey, wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, and then picked up an empty book. Leather-bound, its pages blank.

"If he keeps lists," she murmured, "I keep my own."

She dipped her pen in ink and began to write. Names, dates, places. But unlike in the Baron's books, she also noted who had died when, who had disappeared when, and who was still alive—despite all their debts.

Their register wasn't a cash book. It was a map of resistance.

She wrote quickly, almost feverishly. Each letter cut into the paper as if trying to pierce the leather.

Sometimes she stopped, looked up, listened. Nothing. Just her breath, the dust, the scratching of the pen.

She made lines, crosses, small marks. Chalk, she remembered, chalk was the key. The sentence from the note flickered in her head: *"The chalk is the only boundary he doesn't cross."*

So she drew small chalk circles on the edges of the book. Protection, faint perhaps, but enough that she didn't feel completely exposed.

"If you watch me, Baron," she murmured, "watch me steal your paper power."

The book filled up. Not neatly, not beautifully. But raw, real. One archive against the archive.

She closed it and placed her hand on the leather. Her fingers trembled, but this time not with fear. Rather, with anger, which had become something.

Mary grabbed the revolver, placed it next to the new book, and took another sip. "From now on, we have two archives," she whispered. "Yours—and mine. And mine will survive."

Mary's fingers still rested on the new book. The whiskey burned her stomach, but it kept her head clear. Clear enough for her to look through the old stacks again.

Tucked between yellowed bills and crumpled letters was a small, inconspicuous envelope. No seal, no name. Just a stain of sweat that had eaten deep into the paper.

She ripped it open.

Inside lay a notebook, thin, just a few pages. The writing was scrawled and rushed. No numbers, no demands—just observations.

"The Baron never signs with his own hand." "His men wear the medallion with the B." "The chalk protects. Not for long, but it buys time."

Mary's heart beat faster. Someone had been here. Someone who had seen the same thing she had.

She continued to leaf through.

"I'm writing this in case someone comes after me. The city is already lost, but perhaps someone can survive if they know: Paper can lie. Chalk cannot."

The last few pages were blank. Just a line of chalk, drawn across the paper, as if the writer's hand had broken mid-drawing.

Mary held her breath. Who had he been? A bartender before her? A clerk? One of the prospectors who had seen too much?

She felt the cold on her neck. The thought that others had taken the same path and none had returned made her blood run cold.

But she closed the small notebook and placed it next to her own. Two voices, two registers. And she swore that hers wouldn't end with a broken line.

"I'm not the first," she muttered, "but damn it—I'll be the last to finish it."

She took the chalk stuck to the notebook and rubbed it between her fingers. A white dust remained. She drew a circle around the bottle of whiskey and grinned thinly. "Cheers to you, Baron. Let's see how long you stay out."

Mary leafed through the thin, old notebook once more. The last chalk mark lay like a cut on the paper. A cut that meant: the end.

She closed it and placed it next to her own book. Two voices. But she knew – if the Baron could do one thing, it was find. He found houses, gold, souls. And paper was nothing more to him than dust, which he blew away with a single breath.

Mary drank, wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, and looked around the small room. Here, behind the bar, nothing was safe.

She pulled up the boards and placed both books on the floor. Then she knocked on the floorboards. A dull echo, then another, hollow one. There was space.

Mary took a knife and pried open the wood. Beneath: a small hollow. Not large, but deep enough to fit a bottle or a few pieces of paper.

She gave a thin grin. "Well, Baron. If you can see everything, then you have to look under the floorboards. Have fun with that."

She placed the books inside, covered them with cloth and dust, then pressed the boards back into place. No one would suspect that beneath her feet lay more than wood.

She placed the revolver on top, within easy reach. If he wanted to find her, he'd have a hard time.

She sat back on the stool, picked up the bottle, and drank. Her gaze was hard and dry.

"You keep your books, Baron," she murmured, "and I'll keep mine. Let's see which one lasts longer."

The candle burned down, the smoke drifted upward. And somewhere out in the city, a dog barked—short, harsh, like a sign that the night was far from over.

Mary sat back on the stool. The candle was almost burned down, the wick glowing in the wax like a last cigarette.

She stared at the floorboards. Beneath her lay the new book, the old notebook, the chalk. Her little truth, hidden like an ace up her sleeve.

But what use was an ace if no one played it?

Mary took a sip of whiskey, letting the burn in her throat burn down. "Buddy. Joe," she murmured. "You're out there running through shadows and trains, and I'm sitting here among the dust and bottles. You need what I know. Otherwise, you won't come back."

She put down the bottle and pulled out a pen and paper. No register this time, no book. Just a letter. Short, concise, just enough for two men who preferred to speak with their fists rather than words to understand.

She wrote:

"The Baron buys the city with numbers. But chalk breaks his steps. Don't forget that. – M."

Nothing more. No jewelry, no stories. She knew Buddy didn't read long letters.

She folded the paper and put it in a small envelope. Then she picked up the chalk and drew a symbol on it, crude but clear. A circle with a line. Protection, as best she could.

Mary placed the letter next to the revolver and took a deep breath.

"Now I just need a way to send it to you," she murmured. "Perhaps a messenger. Perhaps the wind. Perhaps Hell itself. But it has to reach you."

She leaned back and closed her eyes for a moment. The silence in the saloon was heavy. But it wasn't empty. It was full of things waiting to be dragged into the light.

Mary opened her eyes again, reached for the bottle, and took another long sip. "Archives are all well and good," she said quietly. "But knowledge is only a weapon if you put it in the right hands."

And outside, far beyond the city, the shadow train continued on, as if it were waiting for just that.

Teeth in the spittoon

The saloon smelled of sweat, dust, and cheap whiskey. Voices boomed, laughter echoed, and chairs scraped across the floor.

Mary stood behind the counter, her hands firmly on the wood, her gaze cold. She knew the night. She knew where it led. Always there.

In the corner, two men were playing cards. One was laughing too loudly, the other was sweating too much. At some point, the laughter stopped. There was only anger.

"You cheated," hissed one of them, the welding man.

"And you lost," grinned the other, laying down the cards.

The first man jumped up, the chair tipped over, and crashed to the floor. Hands grabbed collars, fists grabbed faces. The wood creaked, the saloon vibrated.

Mary reached for the bottle and put it down without looking. "Not on the tables," she murmured. But no one heard.

Fists flew. First two, then four. A glass shattered, whiskey splashed. One laughed, one screamed. Then the first head hit the floor.

A man stood up again, spitting blood. He reached into his mouth and pulled out two teeth. White, smooth, still wet. He clinked them—right into the spittoon on the counter.

Ping.

The guests shouted, laughed, and banged on the tables.

Mary remained silent, looking at the bowl. Teeth between tobacco, between mucus, between saliva.

She took a deep breath. This wasn't fun for her. It was just another evening in a city that had long since rotted away.

A third man intervened, drawing his Colt, merely as a threat. But threats quickly backfire. One grabbed the barrel, and a shot rang out. The bullet pierced the ceiling, sending dust flying.

"Enough," Mary said loudly. Her voice cut through the noise.

Everyone turned their heads, just for a moment.

She reached under the counter and placed her revolver on the wood. Calmly, without trembling. "One more – and the next tooth will come from me."

Silence. Breathless, heavy. Then someone laughed nervously. "The bartender means business."

Mary's gaze remained hard. "I always mean it."

The fists dropped, the Colt disappeared. One man lifted his teeth from the bowl, spat, and laughed in agony.

The night continued, but more slowly. More subdued.

Mary reached for the spittoon, emptied it, and wiped it dry. "Teeth belong in mouths," she murmured. "Not in my bowl."

The air in the saloon hung heavy. Smoke, sweat, tobacco, blood—all together, thick as soup.

Mary wiped the counter with a rag, harshly and mechanically, until the wood gleamed like wet asphalt. The noise had returned, but duller, more controlled. Men laughed, as if trying to forget that someone had just almost died.

Then he stood there.

A man, gaunt, his face as hard as leather. He held the two teeth he had fished out of the shell between his thumb and forefinger. White, with red roots.

"Nice collection you have there," he said. His voice was deep, raspy, with an iron undertone.

Mary raised her eyes and looked at him for a long moment. "Teeth don't belong in my collection. They belong in mouths. But the people here don't know that."

The man grinned crookedly. He had a gap in his teeth himself, a recent split lip. He placed his teeth on the counter. "Perhaps a souvenir. Every war has its trophies."

Mary didn't take it. She just stared. "What war?"

The man looked around, then leaned over the bar. His breath smelled of whiskey and blood. "The war no one sees. The war the Baron won long ago."

Mary's face remained motionless. Only her fingers tightened around the rag. "If he had won, you wouldn't be here. Then there would be no fights, no teeth in my bowl. Then there would be only peace. Dead peace."

The man laughed quietly, dryly. "Maybe that's exactly what he wants. Maybe all this is just theater. So you think you're still alive. While he already has your names in his books."

Mary also leaned forward, her voice sharp. "And where does it say your name?"

His smile froze. For a moment, fear flickered in his eyes. Then he picked up the teeth again and put them in his pocket. "Everywhere," he murmured. "And nowhere."

He turned around and disappeared into the smoke of the saloon as if he had never been there.

Mary stopped, staring at the empty space on the counter. She knew: the man wasn't drunk. He was a messenger. Maybe willingly. Maybe not. But he had spoken like someone who knew the Baron—and had survived.

The saloon continued to buzz with voices, laughter, and the clinking of glasses. But Mary heard none of it. Her eyes were fixed on the door through which the stranger had disappeared.

She put down the rag, reached under the counter, and felt the gun. Cold, familiar.

"Pull together," she shouted into the room, her voice harsh. "Those who vomit clean up after themselves. Those who hit pay double."

A few laughs, a few glances—but no one objected. Mary had paid dearly for this respect, tooth for tooth.

She stepped out the door.

The night was cool, the street empty. Only the creaking of a sign in the wind, the faint yelping of a dog far behind. Dust lay like a gray carpet over everything.

Mary pulled her coat tighter and looked around. Footprints in the dust. Fresh. Boots, heavy, deep prints. They belonged to the man.

She followed them, slowly, the revolver in her hand. Every step echoed, as if the city were emptier than usual.

The tracks led around the corner, past closed shops, past windows behind which no lights were burning.

Mary stopped and listened. There was a noise. A faint scratching, like metal moving over stone.

She stepped closer, cautiously, holding up the gun.

There he stood. The stranger. Against the wall, half in shadow, his teeth in his hand. He pressed them into a crack in the masonry, as if he were hiding them there.

Mary's voice was calm but sharp. "Interesting bank you run there. Teeth instead of gold."

The man turned around, his hand twitching, but he had no weapon. Only those teeth, which now fell to the floor.

"You should have stayed inside," he muttered. "The saloon is safer."

Mary stepped closer, the gun fixed on him. "Nothing's certain. So talk. Who are you? And why do you speak of the Baron like someone who knows him up close?"

The man was breathing heavily, his eyes darting from her to the alley, back. Then he grinned crookedly, but the grin didn't last. "Maybe I'm just another name in his book. Maybe I'm the page he forgot."

Mary's gaze remained cold. "Then remind me."

The man stood against the wall, his hands empty, his eyes flickering. Mary's revolver pierced his chest like a nail.

"You talk or you bleed," she said coldly.

He laughed hoarsely, a sound without joy. "I don't have much blood left. But words... words might cost me more."

Mary took a step closer. "Then pay. With words. Start."

His face twisted, as if he were fighting something in his head. Then he whispered, "The Baron... he doesn't just write names. He erases them too. If he wants, you're gone. Not dead—gone. No grave, no cross, no remains. Just dust. Like chalk being smudged."

Mary's fingers twitched on the trigger. She thought of the bones Buddy and Joe had seen in the dust of the train without knowing it. "And how does he do that?"

The man shook his head, breathing shallowly. "No one knows. Some say he has no hands that write. Only eyes that see. And when he sees you... you're already half gone."

He clutched his chest as if he were running out of breath. "I said too much. He's listening. Always. Even in spittoons and gaps between teeth."

Mary's voice remained hard. "Then you're already finished. So tell me everything. Quickly."

The man looked at her, his eyes wide, full of panic. "He... he was never human." His voice was little more than a croak. "He's always been... a train."

Mary shivered. Her hand remained firmly on the gun, but her stomach tightened.

The man gasped, stumbled back as if invisible hands were grabbing him. "Too much," he whispered. "He's going to erase me now."

Mary stepped forward, grabbed him by the collar, and held him tight. "Not until you tell me how to stop him."

But his eyes glazed over, his mouth opened, but no sound came. He slumped over, dust trickling from his skin as if he were dissolving.

Mary let go of him. Only his boots remained. The rest was dust.

She stood alone in the alley, the gun still in her hand, her breath heavy. "A train," she muttered. "Damn it—you're the train."

The night hadn't even given the man, who had just been able to speak, time to breathe properly. He had collapsed like a piece of paper held over a flame. Only his boots remained, half in the dust, half as if they had made a decision and were now moving on without his body.

Mary knelt beside the spot, pulled her hand away from the dust, and it looked like white tobacco on dark wood. She brought her fingers together and rubbed the white film between her thumb and forefinger. It felt like chalk for a moment—powdery, quiet. Her fingers were full of it, and some of it stuck to her skin like a promise.

She stood up, and in her head everything creaked like the old sign above the saloon. The alley had become empty. Only the lamp over there still flickered, as if it, too, had no desire for the things people do when the whiskey is drunk.

Mary grabbed the envelope, the notebook, the note, everything that had peeped out from the pile. The man had been full of words, half madness, half warning—and he had uttered something that stuck like a notch in his bones: the Baron was more than a man. A trait, a mechanism, something that didn't react to gunshots or threats. Something that devoured words.

She knew what that meant: Buddy and Joe's fists wouldn't be enough. Beans and a pan wouldn't be enough to protect them. If the enemy was in the form of a train, then its landscape was iron and shadows; its methods were speed and swallowing. And yet—people had to know. Not in beautiful sentences, not in long pamphlets. Short, hard, to be found when needed.

She heaved herself back into the saloon. The bottle was still half full. Mary put it back, pulled the new book from its hiding place under the floorboards, and placed the old one on top. Her fingers trembled a little, but only the way a hat trembles before you put it on.

The rough message she'd already written was good enough, but now it needed to be more: a direction, a sign, something two men who didn't want to read would immediately understand. She grabbed the chalk. She rubbed her finger over the paper, turning the small slip of paper in her hand; the words were brief, but now the rest had to be right—the carrier, the way it was hidden.

She folded the paper small, curled her fingers around the corner, and pushed some of the white dust into a spot on the envelope until it looked as if it were dusted with flour. Not because she thought the Baron was reading it—he wasn't reading anything, he was listening—but because dust and chalk were signals; signs understood only by those who worked with dust. A salute to the chalk man. A mark of recognition for someone who was still alive and drawing lines.

Mary would have liked to send someone she trusted 100 percent—a messenger who had no eye for coins. That wasn't available. In this town, everyone was either hungry, bought, or too tired to risk the Baron writing more notes about them. But there was one boy. Little Tom. A stable boy who had more dust than hair and a heart that climbed through fences like a thief but softened with women. He was smart enough not to ask, and fast enough to be gone even longer than a shadow.

"Tom," said Mary, as the boy burst panting through the back door, "come here."

He came, and his eyes flashed because he knew nothing better than assignments and sweets. Mary gave him the paper, placed her fingertips on the small dust-spot symbol. "Just two things: You go to the old quarry north of the river—you know where the tracks used to be? The hooded man sometimes sits there. You give it to him. Don't say a word. If he asks if you've lost your tongue, shake your head twice. And you're not coming back through town. Do you understand?" She spoke quickly, without compassion in her voice. Worry was a rarity; decisions were all that remained.

Tom swallowed. The city was a mother with many hands. He nodded. "And if... if they ask me?" His voice was small, but not stupid.

"Then say you're just delivering lentils for the soup," Mary said calmly. "And run. Run like your life depends on it. Because it does."

She pressed the fold into his hand, rubbed a bit more of the white powder onto it—a fingerprint, a kiss of dust. Then she placed a silver dollar on the table, old and heavy. "For you. Run."

Tom sipped the coin as if it were magic and disappeared into the night. The door closed behind him like a breath. Mary stayed behind, feeling her heart pounding in her chest like a drum.

But that wasn't enough. The Baron had eyes everywhere—she thought—so the message had to be more than just paper. It had to be in several places, so that if one was discovered, another would do its work. She took a second slip of paper, wrote the same sign on it in chalk, then hid it in the bundle of bills delivered daily: in the sack of spirits that would arrive tomorrow. She tucked another into a hoof boot; horses weren't consulted like people, and often information travels more discreetly with them than with birds.

Finally, she turned to the small hole under the floorboards. She placed a third, tiny package there: a pencil note, a bit of chalk, a pen, a few names—everything in case one of them came back and searched right under her feet. It was insurance, nothing more, but it was as solid as steel.

When she was finished, she leaned against the counter, staring into the darkness of the alley where Tom had disappeared. The streets were empty, the shutters closed. The city breathed in its sleep, or pretended to, so as not to hear how quickly it was crumbling.

"If you want to find him," she said into the empty space, "take a book, a piece of chalk, and a boy who can walk." It wasn't a prayer, more of a command—to herself, to Tom, to the wind.

She lit the candle again, rubbed her fingers until the white dust looked almost like a scar. Then she took the revolver, put it back in her apron, and wiped her mouth. The archive beneath the floorboards was no longer just a hiding place. It was a circuit network. And tonight, in a village, in a train of shadows, in a man falling into nothingness—tonight she had set a piece of it in motion.

The only thing left for her was to wait. And waiting was dangerous. But waiting was also what most of them did best at the moment.

She put the candle away, pulled the boards halfway closed, and sat down on a stool. Her gaze wandered toward the street, then to the sky, where a thin strip of moon lay like an open axe. She thought of Buddy, of Joe, of two men in the belly of a train who perhaps didn't yet know that someone had sent them a letter.

The wind picked up the dust and carried it away, over the rooftops, over the tracks, perhaps exactly where Tom, running, hoped to go unnoticed. Mary cursed softly and smiled barely audibly. So much could be done: draw chalk, fold letters, send the boys off. The rest could only be hoped for.

And hope is better than nothing.

Tom ran. Dust flew beneath his boots, his breath slashed his throat. The town remained behind, small, dark, with windows like dead eyes.

The folded piece of paper pressed down in his pocket, small as a truth that couldn't grow any bigger. His hand held it tightly as if it were a heart.

The path led out to the old quarry, where the rails had long since rusted, where only rubble and shadows lay. Mary had told him not to talk. He didn't talk. Only the wheezing of his lungs mattered.

The night was quiet. Too quiet. No dog, no wind, just his footsteps. And then – a sound. Deep, muffled, like iron on iron.

Tom stopped, his heart racing.

In the darkness, far out, he heard it again. *Clang. Clang.* Metal that didn't belong here.

"The train," he whispered, and his voice sounded as if it were lost.

He kept running, faster, as if speed could shake off the sound. But the sound remained. Not closer, not farther away. Just there, like a breath following him.

The quarry loomed into view, gray rocks, moonlight like cold bones. Tom stumbled, caught himself, gasped. Then he saw him: the hooded man. Still, waiting, like a shadow that had forgotten to lie down.

Tom ran toward him, ripped open the bag, and pulled out the envelope. "Mary... said..." He broke off, gasped, and shook his head twice, just as Mary had told him.

The man took the envelope and turned it over in his hand. The white dust on it glittered in the moonlight. "Chalk," he murmured. "Good."

The sound echoed behind Tom. Iron on iron. No train was visible. Only the echo of something not running on rails.

The hooded man looked over Tom's shoulder, then back at the envelope. "She got it," he murmured. "But so did the train."

Tom turned around. Nothing. Just dust, moving as if someone were walking, invisible.

"Go," the hooded man said harshly. "Back to the city. Quickly."

Tom hesitated, his legs heavy. "And... the paper?"

"It's going on," the man growled. "As it should. But if you stay, he'll eat you."

Tom ran. Again. His breath burned, his legs stumbled. Metal on metal echoed behind him, but he didn't look back.

The hooded man remained alone in the quarry, envelope in hand, and the wind stirred up dust as if rails were waking beneath his feet.

The hooded man stood alone in the quarry. The wind blew up plumes of dust, making them dance like thin ghosts. In his hand was the envelope, light, inconspicuous—and heavier than anything he had ever carried.

He tore it open and read the few words. Short, sharp, no embellishments: "*The Baron buys the city with numbers. But chalk breaks his steps. Don't forget that. – M.*"

He nodded slowly. "She understood." His voice was rough, as if he were speaking not to himself, but to the dust itself.

Behind him, the sound echoed again. Metal on metal, deep, threatening. No train in sight, but the echo was there, as if the iron were alive underground.

He knew what it meant. The Shadow Train had picked up the trail.

The hooded man pulled his hood down and tucked the note into his breast pocket, right over his heart. "All right," he muttered. "If the bartender's drawing with chalk, then someone has to take the blame."

He turned and trudged out of the quarry, step by step. Each step heavier, each breath like a bargain.

"Buddy. Joe," he murmured. "I'll find you. Or I'll die trying."

The dust followed him, the wind drove him on. Behind him rumbled the sound of the train, invisible, unstoppable.

He felt it in his back: He wouldn't outsmart the Baron, he wouldn't defeat him. But perhaps he could run even faster than oblivion. Perhaps.

He laughed briefly, dryly, without joy. "If someone can throw teeth into spittoons, then I can put a letter into fists."

And he went, deeper into the night, with the shadow train behind him – and Mary's words as his only weapon.

The claim that must not exist

The train didn't rattle. It was breathing. Buddy heard it in the walls, a deep, slow wheezing, as if the metal itself had lungs.

Joe squatted on a crate, grinning but serious in his eyes. "You know, Buddy," he said, "when a train starts breathing, it's usually not a good sign."

Buddy just grumbled and crossed his arms. "As long as he doesn't fart."

Joe laughed quietly, but the laughter was short-lived. They'd been in here too long. Too many corridors, too many doors that closed by themselves.

They had broken open an old chest, somewhere among the train cars that looked like warehouses. Inside were maps. Drawn, tattered, the ink half-smudged.

Joe spread one out on the ground and smoothed it out. "Look, buddy. All the claims the Baron has here. Shafts, mines, pits. But there—" He tapped a white spot. "There's one marked there that doesn't appear on any other map."

Buddy narrowed his eyes. "Maybe the artist was drunk."

"Or he knew more than everyone else." Joe grinned crookedly. "There's even a name here. 'Claim Null.' Sounds nice, doesn't it?"

Buddy scratched his beard and grumbled. "A claim that doesn't exist. Do you know what that means?"

"That he exists. But no one can know."

Buddy nodded slowly. He took the map and tore off a piece that showed only this claim. "We're keeping this. Maybe it's gold, maybe it's a grave. But it's certainly important."

The train vibrated beneath them as if it had been listening. Joe looked up, his hand on his Colt. "Buddy... I don't think he likes us knowing."

Buddy grumbled again. "Then let him find us first."

Joe held up the card, the paper fluttering slightly in the draft that couldn't possibly exist. The draft was tight, no window, no door to the outside. And yet, something was blowing.

"Claim zero," he muttered. "Zero means nothing. But nothing usually means something. Especially when men like the Baron have their fingers in it."

Buddy grunted, took the card, crumpled it in half, and put the piece with the entry in his pocket. "We got him. Done."

"Done?" Joe laughed dryly. "Buddy, if you steal a dog's bone, you're not 'done.' You've only just begun."

Buddy looked at him, heavy and serious. "I'm hungry. If this claim isn't a bean casserole, then I don't care."

Joe shook his head and grinned crookedly. "You really are as dull as an anvil. But that's exactly what keeps us alive."

The ground beneath them vibrated. First slightly, then more intensely. The crates in the wagon jolted, and a few fell over.

Joe jumped up, his hand on his Colt. "Buddy, the train... he knows."

Buddy stood, clenching his fists. "Should we explain to him that we know, too?"

The walls creaked, metal bent as if it were breathing, groaning. A deep humming sounded through the carriage, dull, vibrating, like an iron heartbeat.

Joe took a step back, grinning crookedly, but the grin was narrow. "I think the train is trying to throw us out."

Buddy slammed his fist against the wall. "Then let him try. But we keep the map."

The train answered. A door slammed open, untouched. Behind it was no corridor, no other carriage—only darkness. Deep, endless.

Joe looked inside, his lips tight. "Buddy... I think the train is showing us what happens when we know too much."

Buddy growled. "Then close the door. We're not mail."

Joe stepped forward and pushed the door shut. It slammed shut with a metallic clang. But the humming continued. And it sounded like the train was laughing.

The door to nothingness had closed, but the humming remained, like a laughter stuck in the stomach. Buddy growled, crossed his arms, while Joe unfolded the map again.

"Claim Zero," Joe said, as if he needed to nail down the name. "The one spot that doesn't exist on any other map."

Buddy nodded. "So we'll look for him. That's it."

Joe raised his eyebrows. "Done," he says. Buddy, we're on a train that opens doors to nowhere. He doesn't play by the rules."

"Then we'll beat the rules into shape."

Joe laughed quietly, but he laughed. "You know, sometimes I think you really are the devil's left hand. Only you don't know what your right hand is doing."

Buddy grumbled. "As long as the right one scoops beans, I don't care."

Then another box fell over. The lid popped open, and inside lay more cards. Dozens of them. All fresh, clean, and dust-free.

Joe leaned over and picked one out. "That can't be happening. These are new cards. Drawn as if they'd just put the ink on."

He spread them out. "Claim Zero" was written on all of them, but each time in a different location. Sometimes in the north, sometimes in the west, sometimes in the middle of the city.

"Shit," Joe muttered. "He's playing with us. He wants us to get lost."

Buddy looked at the cards, picked them up, and tore two or three of them. "Paper lies. Fists don't."

Joe grinned narrowly. "Then tell me how your fist finds a claim."

Buddy pointed to the one card he'd taken first, the piece in his pocket. "The first one. Everything else is a distraction."

Joe looked at him and nodded slowly. "Sometimes you're dumber than a donkey. But sometimes... that's exactly the solution."

They took the first card, ignoring the rest. The train vibrated more violently, as if it weren't accepting it. Doors slammed, metal bent, the floor seemed to sway.

Joe drew his Colt. Buddy clenched his fists.

"Let's go then," Joe murmured. "We're looking for a claim that shouldn't exist."

They stuck to the first card, just like Buddy had said. Everything else was garbage, freshly printed lies.

Joe led the way, his Colt loose but cocked. Buddy trudged behind, heavy as a sledgehammer that never misses.

The train's corridors stretched out. Doors that had just been wooden turned to metal, then back to wood. At one point, they found themselves in the middle of a room that looked like an office: tables, chairs, a lamp that flickered on its own. Files were stacked on the tables.

Joe picked one up and flipped through it. "All names. Lists. Buddy... I think we're standing in the middle of the Baron's archives."

Buddy snorted. "And how is that supposed to help us? I don't know most of them. They're all dust."

"Exactly," Joe murmured. "This is the kind of claim you don't find on maps. No gold, no silver. Just people who have become debt."

Buddy clenched his fists. "If that's his gold, I'll break his neck and steal his safe."

They continued walking. The map in Joe's hand vibrated almost as if it were a compass itself. But every time they turned a gear, they found themselves back where they had started.

"He's playing with us," Joe growled. "Always the same corner, the same lamp, the same damn spittoon."

Buddy kicked the spittoon across the room. "Then we'll change the rules."

He slammed his fist against the wall. Metal gave way like flesh, a crack ran through the panels. Behind it – no wood, no iron, but rock.

Joe stepped closer and looked inside. Dark stone, damp, raw. "Buddy... that's not a wall. It's the beginning of a tunnel."

Buddy nodded. "Claim zero. He doesn't want us there."

The train vibrated furiously, like an animal whose flesh had been cut. Doors slammed, lights burst, dust fell.

Joe grinned slightly. "Well, buddy. Looks like we found the right path."

Buddy growled. "Then we'll fight our way out."

And they pushed through the crack in the metal – into rock, into darkness that didn't exist on a map.

The rock behind the wall was cold and damp. No light, only the glow of the broken lamp, faintly shining through the crack. Buddy pushed through first, his body broad, his fist forward, as if he could punch away the darkness. Joe followed, Colt at the ready, the map still in his other hand.

The tunnel smelled of earth, of sweat, of something older than the train. The ground was uneven, and dust swirled with every step.

"Buddy," whispered Joe, "we're not on the train anymore."

Buddy grumbled. "Screw it. The main thing is we're getting closer."

They went deeper. The walls didn't breathe, but sometimes they heard an echo. Footsteps that weren't theirs. A whisper that sounded like paper being torn.

Joe stopped and brandished his Colt. "Do you hear that?"

Buddy nodded and clenched his fist. "I hear it. But I don't see anything. And what you can't see, you can punch until you do."

They came to an intersection. Three corridors, all dark. The map flickered in Joe's hand as if it itself were afraid. Only one line on it was clear: straight ahead.

"He doesn't want that," Joe muttered. "If a map glows in the dark, it's not showing you the way. It's showing you where you're going."

Buddy just trudged straight ahead. "Mistakes are also doors."

Joe cursed quietly and followed him.

The deeper they went, the louder the echo became. A metallic thud, as if someone was breaking rocks far below. But there was no prospector, no tools. Just the sound.

Then they saw it. A lamp, solitary, in the middle of the corridor. Beneath it was a helmet, old and rusty. And a pile of bones that looked as if they had never belonged to anyone in their lives.

Joe knelt and lifted his helmet. Beneath it lay a piece of paper, crumpled and soaked in blood. Just three words:

"Claim Zero eats."

Joe stared at it, then up at Buddy. "Well, that sounds promising."

Buddy grumbled, clenching his fist tighter. "Then we'll punch him in the stomach."

There was a crash behind them. The crack in the train closed. Iron and stone fused, and the way back was gone.

Joe gave a small grin. "Great. Now we're officially guests."

The passage had become narrower. Fels pressed himself against their shoulders on either side, as if he wanted to crush them. Buddy continued stoically, head down, like an ox pounding through a field. Joe held his Colt high, eyes alert, grinning narrowly.

The ground cracked beneath her boots. Not like stone. More like bone.

"I don't like this," Joe muttered.

"I like beans," Buddy grumbled. "And there aren't any here."

"Then that's doubly bad."

They continued on. Suddenly, the tunnel breathed. Not loudly, not deeply. But noticeably. A gust of air, warm and moist, directly over their heads. Dust trickled like sweat from a forehead.

Joe stopped. "Buddy... this one's alive."

Buddy clenched his fist and punched the wall. The rock gave way as if it were flesh. The blow left a dent from which dust trickled like blood.

"Alive or not," growled Buddy, "everything gets a bruise eventually."

But the tunnel answered. Behind them, the ground cracked, stones broke loose and fell. The passage closed bit by bit. A new path opened before them, dark, crooked, like an open jaw.

Joe breathed sharply. "He's eating us, Buddy. He's doing it right now."

"Then we spit back."

They ran into the new corridor. The floor swayed as if they were walking on boards that had never been nailed down. Walls moved closer, then further apart. At one point, they were sure they were running in circles—until Joe scratched an old matchstick into the wall. When they passed again, the line was gone.

"Shit," Joe muttered. "The claim even erases our tracks."

Buddy snorted and slammed his fist against the wall again. "Then we'll make new ones. Harder."

He tore out a piece of stone and threw it onto the ground. But the ground swallowed it as if nothing had been there.

Joe grinned bitterly. "Buddy, I think we're in the stomach of something hungrier than you."

Buddy growled, louder than ever. "Then give him an Indigestion."

The hallway vibrated like a stomach after too much cheap whiskey. Dust rose, burning his eyes. Buddy trudged on, his shoulders broad, his fists like sledgehammers. Joe limped a bit behind, his Colt loose, his grin tired.

"You know, buddy," he said between steps, "I was hoping El Dorado would be a place with whiskey and women. Instead, we're running through a belly full of dust. Not my dream vacation."

Buddy grumbled. "Then complain to the Baron."

"I will," Joe grinned weakly. "If he listens to me before he eats us."

The corridor opened before them. A room, round, higher than all the others. The walls pulsed. Not like stone, more like flesh, twitching to the rhythm of a heartbeat.

Buddy narrowed his eyes. "That's not a Stollen."

"No," murmured Joe, "that's the heart."

In the middle stood a post. No wood, no iron—a block of black stone, on which numbers were carved. Lists, totals, names. Some scratchy, others almost obliterated.

Joe stepped closer, his eyes tired but alert. He ran his fingers over one of the carved lines. "Debts. Buddy, this is his gold. Every name here is a piece of meat. If someone disappears, it's because they've paid it off here."

Buddy clenched his fists and kicked the stone. Nothing. No splinters, no cracks. Just a dull thump, as if he were hitting bone.

"Damn it," he growled. "Everything has a weak point."

Joe grinned wearily, his eyes half-closed. "Maybe. But this time it's not your shot, Buddy. This time it's something different."

He pulled a piece of chalk from his pocket—he'd kept it discreetly ever since Mary had slipped it to him once, without a word. He drew a circle around the block, his hand shaking slightly, but the line remained.

The floor vibrated, dust fell from the ceiling. The post began to shake, as if it couldn't bear the circle.

Buddy stepped back, his fists still at the ready. "What the hell are you doing?"

Joe gave a crooked, tired grin. "Me? I paint. You hit. Everyone does what they can."

The tremor grew stronger, the room groaned as if it were about to collapse. Buddy stood with his legs wide apart, ready to hold the walls with his bare hands.

"Claim Zero must not exist," Joe muttered. "And that's exactly why we're here."

The stone heart vibrated, cracked lines spread across the surface. Something like dust, but brighter, streamed out, as if the chalk were eroding the deception.

Joe laughed quietly, tiredly but genuinely. "Buddy, I think we just peed in the devil's stomach."

Buddy grumbled. "Then let's see how he digests this."

Midnight in the Shafts

The stone block trembled, cracked lines running across its surface like scars healed too late. Dust rose, white and thick, clinging to skin and teeth.

Buddy stood with his legs wide apart, his fists clenched, his shoulders high. He looked like someone about to strike out against the darkness itself.

Joe was still holding the chalk, his fingers white, his grin crooked and tired. "I think we've stirred something that doesn't like to be awakened."

The floor shook, the corridor behind them collapsed, stones thundered. The ceiling collapsed a bit, and boulders crashed to the floor.

"Buddy," Joe murmured, "this is midnight. When the city sleeps, the mines wake up."

Buddy just grumbled and kicked a boulder that blocked their path. It flew aside as if it were just wood. "Then we'll make an exit."

But the tunnel changed. The passages that had just been there disappeared. New ones opened instead – narrow, deep, black like open mouths.

Joe coughed up dust and grinned weakly. "Looks like someone's inviting us for a midnight stroll."

"Then let's go," growled Buddy.

They entered the first corridor. It was narrower, darker, and damp. Their footsteps echoed, but the echo was wrong. It sounded as if more than two men were walking.

Joe stopped for a moment, listening. "Buddy... do you hear that? Someone's running with us."

Buddy clenched his fists tighter. "Let them come. Then they'll have something to laugh about."

The echo came closer, faster, as if something were catching up with them. But in the darkness, nothing could be seen. Only dust, only shadows.

Then, at the very front, a faint light. Not a warm lamplight. A cold, bluish glow, as if the darkness itself had eyes.

Joe drew his Colt, turning it loosely in his hand. "Well then. Welcome to the night shift."

Buddy growled and stepped forward. "It's time we fight our way through."

The light ahead grew brighter, cold, bluish, like a fire that had never known warmth. Buddy trudged straight ahead, heavily, as if he could convince the ground with weight alone not to give way. Joe crept behind, his Colt loose, his eyes narrowed, tired.

Then they saw her.

Men. Or something that had once been men. Prospectors in tattered shirts, their skin gray, their eyes glowing like the cold light. They wielded no tools, no pickaxes—they swung their empty hands as if they would strike anyway.

"Buddy," Joe muttered, "those aren't alive."

"Then they're dead." Buddy clenched his fists. "And you can beat dead people, too."

One of the ghosts stepped forward, his bones cracking like dry wood. He raised his hand and pointed at Joe. Dust oozed from his fingers, trickling like fine sand.

Joe stepped back, grinning crookedly. "Buddy, I think he wants to give me a free funeral."

Buddy stepped forward, his fist like a battering ram. He punched through the ghost. For a moment, it dissolved, dust scattered—but then the figure contracted again.

"Shit," Buddy growled. "They're getting back up."

"Like shuffling playing cards," Joe muttered. "No matter how you slap them away, they come back."

The figures moved closer, in a circle, ten, twenty, perhaps more. Their footsteps echoed as if they were walking with the shafts themselves.

Joe raised his Colt, aimed, and fired. The shot echoed, the bang harsh. A ghost burst, dust flew—but the shot sounded swallowed, muffled, without echo.

"Not even the gun is laughing here," Joe said wearily. "Buddy... we have to try something else."

Buddy clenched his fists tighter and took a step forward, shoulders broad. "I'll keep trying until they're tired."

Joe grinned thinly. "Then it's going to be a very long evening."

The ghosts came closer, dust billowed, the shafts trembled.

Dust swirled, ghost bodies shattered, then reassembled. Buddy punched and roared, his fists like hammers that tired nothing but his knuckles.

Joe ducked under a blow and jumped back. "Buddy, we could do this until sunrise. Too bad: There's no sun here."

"Then keep hitting." Buddy grumbled, hitting a ghost with a left that would have moved walls. Dust flew, reforming.

Joe looked around, his eyes tired but alert. His gaze settled on the ground. Dust, thick, damp, sticky. Every step left a trail that immediately closed again.

He grinned crookedly. "Buddy, stop breaking everything for the sake of a breath."

Buddy growled. "Why?"

"Because beating them doesn't help. They always get back up."

"And then what?"

Joe bent down and grabbed a piece of chalk from his pocket. He drew a circle on the ground, quickly, with shaky strokes. "We'll lock them down."

The next ghost entered the circle. He didn't come out again. Dust gathered, the figure vibrated, narrowed, and disintegrated.

Joe grinned wearily. "See? Chalk holds more than your fists."

Buddy grumbled, but still punched one. "My fists last longer."

"Maybe," said Joe, "but chalk wins here."

They drew circles, fast, crude, on the floor, on the walls. Each circle caught dust, held it, made the spirits tremble until they trickled to the ground like ash.

The shafts trembled. The claim itself seemed to protest.

Buddy stomped over a trapped ghost that was slowly dissolving. "All right. You with chalk, I'll use my fists. Left and right hand."

Joe gave a tired, crooked grin. "Exactly. And this time we won't just fight. This time we'll write back."

The ghosts screamed, the dust flew. But the chalk held.

The circles glowed dimly, dust buzzing within them like mosquitoes in summer. The ghosts no longer screamed; they dissolved, bit by bit. Only dust remained.

Buddy stepped through one of the circles and huffed. "It was easier to break them."

Joe grinned wearily. "But not as clean. At least now it doesn't stink of dead debt anymore."

But then the tunnel changed. The ground shook, the walls shifted as if they weren't made of stone, but of soft flesh.

"Buddy," Joe muttered, "I think he noticed. We killed his pets."

Buddy clenched his fists. "Let's have more to come."

"No." Joe pointed at the ground. "He wants to herd us. Like cattle."

The shafts narrowed, passages closed, others opened. Only one path remained open—and that led deeper.

Joe put the chalk away, his Colt in his other hand. His grin was thin, almost invisible. "Buddy, this isn't a fight anymore. It's a chess game."

Buddy grumbled. "Then I'm the horse."

"Better than the farmer."

They continued on. The passage was narrow, forcing them to duck. Water dripped everywhere, but it didn't wet them. A clang of iron echoed through the darkness, dull, like a heartbeat.

Joe looked at Buddy, his face gray with dust. "He wants to pull us toward the center. Everything here is coming down to that."

Buddy nodded slowly. "Then we'll go to the middle. And that's where we'll smash his head in."

The tunnel vibrated as if it had been listening.

Joe grinned wearily. "If he even has a skull."

Buddy grumbled. "Then I'll hit him until he gets one."

The passage became narrower, lower. Buddy had to bend down, Joe ducked like a fox. The dust hung heavy in the air, every breath tasted of rust and earth.

"Buddy," Joe murmured, "I think we're on a road others have walked before."

"So?" Buddy grumbled. "Maybe they left us something."

Joe grinned wearily. "Or maybe they're what's left."

They came to a widening. It wasn't a large room, just a niche. Inside: bones, arranged as if someone had stacked them. Skulls with open mouths, rib cages like collapsed tents.

Buddy stepped closer, kicked a skull with the toe of his boot. It rolled and shattered into dust. "Old."

Joe picked something up. A rusty tool, a pickaxe, broken off, the handle half-rotted. "Prospectors. They were trying to dig like this was a real mine."

"And?"

Joe turned the iron in his hand. "And the claim swallowed them."

There were still scratch marks on the walls. Deep grooves, as if men had tried to scratch their way out with their bare fingers. The rock was cracked, but had grown back together.

Joe snorted. "See? No one gets out of here. Not alive."

Buddy grumbled, clenching his fists. "We do."

They continued walking. Bones everywhere, some completely covered in dust, some half covered in dust. A boot, a rusty belt buckle, a hat with a hole in the crown.

Joe lifted his hat and put it on. Crooked, dirty, but he grinned. "Does it suit me?"

Buddy looked at him dryly. "You look like a dead idiot."

"It fits."

They laughed briefly. Dry, harsh, without joy. But it kept the dust away.

Then the corridor descended again. Deeper, narrower, darker. Everything led downward.

Joe looked at Buddy. "We're not just leaving. We're being dragged down."

Buddy grumbled. "Then we'll go with you. But we'll go with our fists."

The corridor suddenly opened, as if the walls had decided to make way. A chamber, round and high, the roof barely visible. In the middle, bones piled up.

Not loose, not scattered—stacked like an altar. Skulls on top, empty, grinning toothlessly.

Buddy stopped, his fists clenched. "That's not a mountain. That's a statement."

Joe approached slowly, his Colt loosely in his hand. "An altar of guilt. Everyone who got dragged into this ended up here."

The air vibrated. No words, but a murmur, like a thousand voices all whispering at once. Dust swirled, forming faces that came and went.

Joe stopped and looked at them. Tired, but awake. "These... they want something."

Buddy growled. "They'll get a fist."

"No." Joe shook his head, grinning thinly. "Buddy, this isn't a beating. This is an account. And we're into it now."

The voices grew louder, a wave that almost shook the bones. The skulls seemed to rattle, as if they were laughing.

Buddy stepped forward and kicked the bone altar. Skulls rolled, dust rose. The murmuring grew louder, becoming a rumble.

"Now they're mad," Joe said, almost laughing, but tiredly. "Good, buddy. We landed on page one of a debt list."

The ground vibrated, deep cracks ran through the rock. From them poured dust, thicker, darker, almost like blood.

Joe raised his Colt, but he knew bullets wouldn't do any good here. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the chalk. His fingers trembled, but he drew on the ground, one line at a time.

"Buddy," he muttered, "your fist won't do this time. In here, only lines count."

Buddy clenched his fists and stepped next to him. "Hurry up, then. Otherwise they'll paint us."

The rumbling grew louder, the chamber bent as if it wanted to swallow them.

Joe knelt on the ground, the chalk scratching across the stone. Lines, circles, symbols. No system, just resistance. His fingers white, the dust mingling with sweat.

The voices screamed now, no longer whispers. Hundreds, thousands, all at once. The skulls rattled, fell from the altar, rolled across the floor like dice.

Buddy stood with his legs wide apart, fists raised. Any bone that came too close was pounded to dust. Any crack that opened was punched until it closed again.

"Hurry up, Joe!" he yelled.

"I'm always in a hurry," Joe panted, grinning crookedly. "Only rarely at the right moment."

The chalk drew the final circle, large, imperfect, crooked. But it held. The floor vibrated, the marble broke off, was swallowed up.

The chamber shook as if she had lost her voice. Cracks gaped, dust billowed, and whole chunks of rock fell from the ceiling.

Buddy looked up and growled. "This thing is collapsing."

Joe put away the chalk, drew his Colt, and grinned wearily. "Finally. A little fresh air."

Buddy roared, pounding on the bone altar with both fists. It crashed, skulls cracked, and dust rose like smoke.

The chamber collapsed. Walls gave way, the ceiling collapsed, the floor sank. Buddy grabbed Joe by the collar and pulled him along. They ran, stumbled, and jumped over gaping cracks.

Behind them the altar collapsed, a final scream echoed, then silence.

They fell through a crack, rolled, and dust knocked the air out of their lungs. When they got back to their feet, they were no longer standing in the claim.

Ahead of them: a new corridor. Dry, quiet. No voices, no skulls. Only darkness, waiting.

Joe coughed and grinned weakly. "Midnight's over, buddy. Now comes the next shift."

Buddy clenched his fists and grumbled. "Then get me some beans."

Three lamps, two lies

The corridor was quiet, almost too quiet. No dust in the air, no murmuring in the walls. Only darkness, waiting like a gambler with cards in hand.

Buddy stood there, breathing heavily, dust on his shoulders, his fists still clenched. "Finally, some peace," he grumbled.

Joe coughed and wiped the dirt from his face. "Quiet," he says. Buddy, if it's quiet in here, that just means something's about to scream."

They continued cautiously. After a few steps, they appeared: three lamps, side by side on the wall. All lit. A yellowish light, flickering, but each different in its own way.

Buddy narrowed his eyes. "Great. Lamps. What does that mean?"

Joe stepped closer and looked at them. The first flickered like candlelight, warm, familiar. The second burned brightly, almost too brightly, white and sharp. The third glowed faintly, reddish, as if it contained embers.

Joe grinned crookedly. "Three lamps. Two lies. It's in the title, buddy."

"And?"

"And that means if we take the wrong one, we'll end up back where we don't want to go. Or we won't end up at all."

Buddy grumbled. "Then we'll just destroy the wrong ones."

He kicked the first lamp. Glass shattered, the light went out. The corridor vibrated slightly, but remained.

Joe looked at him and grinned. "Well, lucky me. One down."

Buddy was already moving to the second one. Joe raised his hand. "Wait. That one burns too cleanly. There's no white light here. Not in living shafts."

"So that's also wrong."

Buddy nodded, swung, and smashed the second lamp to dust. It went out, the corridor vibrated more violently, and dust fell from the ceiling.

"Then there's the third one," muttered Joe.

The reddish glow remained, small, faint, but persistent.

Buddy snorted. "Looks like a ember."

Joe grinned wearily. "Exactly. And an ember doesn't lie. It tells you, 'I'm almost out. But not dead yet.' That fits here."

They continued walking, following the reddish glow. The walls closed behind them, as if to ensure there was no turning back.

The reddish glow flickered faintly, sometimes brighter, sometimes darker. It wasn't a true light. More like a residue that refused to die completely.

Buddy trudged ahead, his eyes narrowed. "If that's supposed to be our guide, it's damn weak."

Joe grinned crookedly, wearily. "Weak means real. Everything that glitters like gold here just wants to eat you. Don't you remember the claim?"

"I remember beans."

They went deeper. The passage narrowed, the light seemed to be testing them. It cast shadows over Buddy, making him larger, more brutal, almost monstrous. Joe saw this and clicked his tongue.

"See, buddy? The light shows us what we are. It makes you even heavier, even firmer. It makes me..."

He broke off. The shimmer reflected in his eyes, and in the red he saw cards, dice, lies. Joe saw himself as a gambler, always one trick more, but always on the verge of losing.

"...it makes me a crook," he muttered.

Buddy grumbled. "You're already a crook. And I'm already heavy. So what does that mean?"

"That it tests us."

The light flickered more intensely. Buddy felt the walls closing in, as if they wanted to crush him because he was strong. Joe felt the darkness whispering, beckoning him, dealing him cards he didn't want to play.

Joe laughed dryly. "Great. It's testing us right where we're weakest."

Buddy growled, bracing his shoulders against the wall. "Then I'll check back." He pushed, shoved, the walls gave way, dust fell.

Joe pulled a match from his pocket, rubbed it against the wall, and lit it. The small light was dim, but real. "Sometimes just lighting a toy is enough to make the cards hide."

The reddish shimmer faded. The corridor opened again.

Buddy trudged on, grumbling. "Passed the test."

Joe grinned wearily. "Well, see you next time."

The corridor opened, and suddenly they found themselves in a chamber larger than anything they had ever seen. The floor was smooth, too smooth, as if polished by footsteps that had never stopped.

Two exits flickered on the wall. On the left, a tunnel, bright, dry, almost friendly. On the right, a wide tunnel with tracks inside that disappeared into darkness.

Joe stopped and grinned crookedly. "Well, buddy. On the left is the invitation, on the right is the trap. Or vice versa. Two doors, two lies."

Buddy took a few steps forward, looking at both paths. "What if it's not a trap? What if there are only two paths?"

"Then we wouldn't be here," Joe muttered. "There are never two ways here. There's only the one he wants to force on us."

Buddy clenched his fists and kicked the ground. Dust flew up. "Then we won't go at all."

Joe laughed dryly, wearily. "Staying here isn't an option either. Don't you see how the walls breathe?"

In fact, the room was slowly shrinking, centimeter by centimeter. There was a pressure in the air, as if the chamber would crush them both if they didn't make a decision soon.

Joe looked around. His gaze fell on the ceiling. Where the reddish light continued to glow faintly, there was a crack. Small, barely visible.

"Buddy," he muttered, "two doors are lying. But the third one is hanging above us."

Buddy followed his gaze and growled. "We're supposed to go through there? It looks like a crack. Not even for a cat."

Joe grinned wearily. "Good thing we're not cats. Pick me up."

Buddy grabbed him and lifted him upward. Joe felt around, found the crack, and pulled out dust and rock with his fingers. A narrow passage opened up, barely wider than a body.

"This is the right way," Joe gasped. "The lies are at the bottom."

The walls pressed closer, the floor vibrated. Buddy braced himself, lifted himself up, and squeezed through the crack.

The two open tunnels flickered as if they were only images that would dissolve in the next moment.

And Buddy and Joe crawled up into the real path.

The crack was narrow. Too narrow for men like Buddy. Joe squeezed through first, shoulders hunched, Colt clutched to his chest. Dust trickled into his face; he blinked, grinning wearily nonetheless.

"See, buddy? Finally, an advantage to not eating so many beans."

Buddy growled behind him, pushing through, inch by inch. The walls groaned as if mocking him.

"If I get stuck," he grumbled, "you pull me out. With your cock or whatever."

Joe laughed briefly, coughing up dust. "Don't worry. I won't sell you to the walls."

They crawled on. The passage narrowed, then widened again, then became so narrow that Buddy could barely breathe. Sweat ran down his face, dust clung to his skin.

Joe slid forward, faster, his voice echoing. "Buddy, you're coming?"

"I'm coming." Buddy's voice was muffled, heavy, as if pressed through rock.

A few more meters. Then the passage narrowed. Too narrow. Buddy got stuck.

He pounded his fists against the walls, which barely gave way. He pushed, gasping, and dust rained down on him.

"Joe!" he yelled.

Silence.

Again, louder: "Joe!"

No echo, no answer.

Buddy pressed his forehead against the stone, growling deeply. He heard his own heart. Only that.

He took a breath, pushed, and strained. The walls groaned, tearing a piece apart. With a roaring thud, he forced himself free, stone shattering, dust flying.

When he came through, the corridor was empty. No Joe. Just darkness.

Buddy grumbled, clenching his fists. "Damn it, kid. You're always running ahead."

He set off, alone, following the dust.

Joe slid through the gap like a game piece that someone had placed on the wrong square. The dust burned his eyes; he blinked, but still grinned wearily.

"Great," he muttered, "now I'm the mouse without the cat. And Buddy is the cat without the mouse."

The passage suddenly opened. Before him was a hole, deep, black, endless. As if someone had forgotten the ground. A faint glow came from below, deceptive, like a promise.

Joe hung on the edge, his fingers in the rock, his Colt pressed to his chest.
"Sure. A hole. Always a hole."

He looked down. The light was warm, almost beautiful. It beckoned, like a deck of fake cards that looked too good to be true.

"Second lie," he muttered. "Nice light, wrong ground."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a coin. An old, dented one he'd once won in a game. He dropped it.

The coin rotated, flashed—and disappeared. No clink, no impact. Nothing.

Joe gave a tired, thin grin. "Well, you see. It's all just smoke and mirrors."

He leaned back, scanning the edge. To the left, a ledge, barely wide, but more stable than the hole. He pushed himself across, crawling along, slowly, like a thief on a roof.

The light remained beneath him, enticing, quiet, false. He ignored it.

After a few meters, the rock opened up again. A new passage. Dark, dry, and quiet.

Joe pulled himself up, stood, and coughed dust. He grinned, tired but genuine.
"Second lie survived. Now I'll only find Buddy."

He drew the Colt and stepped into the hallway.

Buddy trudged down the hall, alone, dust on his shoulders, sweat on his face. Every step echoed heavily, as if the walls were moving with him. He grumbled deeply. "Joe... if you stab me in the back again, you'd better wrap yourself up."

At the same time, Joe continued walking down the other aisle, Colt loose, grin crooked, eyes tired. He muttered, "Buddy, you big bear... if you get stuck, I'll bring beans to your grave."

And then they heard it.

Buddy heard Joe's voice, clear, close, from ahead. "Buddy! This way!" Joe heard Buddy's growl, deep, raspy, from the right. "Joe! Come over here!"

Both stopped.

Buddy clenched his fists and growled. "If that's you, kid, say something only you would say."

The voice from the darkness laughed, but not really. It sounded too smooth, too clean. "Beans are better than gold."

Buddy growled deeper. "That's true. But Joe would have grinned at that."

Joe heard Buddy's voice from the hallway. Heavy, oppressive: "Stop playing and come on."

Joe grinned wearily but coldly. "No, big buddy. The real Buddy would have cursed first, then hit me. You're just dust with a voice."

The voices faded away. Dust fell from the ceiling like ash.

Buddy continued to kick, heavily, his fist forward. "Third lie. Voices without souls." Joe continued walking, Colt in hand. "Third lie. Tongues without teeth."

They ran, separately, but in the same direction.

And somewhere in between, the rock trembled, as if the claim had not liked defeat.

Buddy trudged heavily down the corridor, dust on his shoulders, his fists still clenched. He no longer heard any voices, only his own grumbling. "Little bastard... don't always run ahead of me."

Joe emerged from a side corridor, Colt loose, his grin tired but genuine. "See, buddy. I've been waiting for you."

Buddy looked at him, his eyes narrowed. "Don't lie."

Joe raised his hands and grinned. "Okay. I didn't wait. But at least I'm still here."

They stood facing each other, both covered in dust, both tired. For a moment, there was silence. Then they laughed briefly, dryly, like men who'd swallowed too much dirt.

Behind them, the corridors crumbled, the lies dissolved. The bright tunnel and the tracks vanished like smoke. Only the red glow remained, small, faint, but real.

Joe pointed with his Colt. "That's where it continues."

Buddy grumbled and stomped off. "Then let's go."

"You know, Buddy," Joe muttered, "we've survived three lies now. If the next trick is a bean casserole, I won't believe a word of it."

Buddy grinned for the first time. "Then I'll eat them alone."

They followed the red glow together. Behind them remained only dust.

Whiskey for breakfast

The corridor ended abruptly. No more rock, no more dust, no more darkness. Instead: wooden floorboards. Creaking, dry, with dirt in the cracks.

Buddy stopped, his brow furrowed. "This smells like fraud."

Joe stepped up beside him, grinning tiredly. "Smells like wood, buddy. Like wood and... whiskey."

Sure enough, a saloon stood before them. Doors half-open, lights flickering, voices humming, glasses clinking. Everything was like up in El Dorado—except they were deep underground.

Buddy grumbled. "This isn't real."

"Maybe not." Joe pushed open the door and stepped inside. "But if the whiskey's real, I don't care."

Inside, it looked like a completely normal morning. A few men at the bar, heads heavy, faces gray. A bartender was wiping glasses, her hair glinting red in the light.

She looked up and smiled. "Whiskey for breakfast?"

Joe nodded and sat down at the counter. "Always for me. And double for the fat guy."

Buddy trudged after him, sitting heavily on a chair that creaked beneath him. "I drink beans, not whiskey."

"We'll have beans later," Joe grinned. "Now let's drink."

The bartender set down two glasses. The whiskey was dark, almost black. Joe raised his glass, sniffed it, and grinned. "Smells like the truth. Or like a lie that sells well."

Buddy took his and grumbled. "If it smells like beans, I'll drink it."

They drank. The whiskey burned, too strong, too real. And something flickered briefly in the mirror behind the bar. No men, no bartender. Just the two of them. Alone.

Joe put down his glass and grinned wearily. "Great. Breakfast is served. And we're sitting in an illusion."

Buddy clenched his fist. "If the illusion satisfies, it's good enough."

The whiskey burned down like fire. But it burned too long. Buddy put the glass down and looked at his hands. They were heavy, as if someone had poured lead into his bones.

"Joe," he grumbled, "this stuff is fake."

Joe grinned wearily, but raised his glass anyway. "Everything here is fake, Buddy. But sometimes you drink lies because they taste better than the truth."

He took another sip. His eyes glazed over, the grin remained, but it hung crookedly.

The bartender smiled and put down a bottle. "Another round. You deserve it."

Buddy stared at her, his fists on the counter. "That girl has no feet."

Joe blinked and looked. Sure enough, there was nothing under the counter. No body, no legs. Just dust, billowing like smoke.

Joe laughed, a short, tired laugh. "Well, wonderful. Whiskey from a ghost lady. Now I know why it burns so well."

The men in the background, who had just been drinking, slowly dissolved. First their faces, then their shoulders, then the rest. All that remained was dust on the chairs.

Buddy growled and stood up. His chair tipped over and crashed to the floor. "Enough playing."

The bartender looked at him, her eyes black and empty. "Sit down. Drink. Forget it."

Buddy clenched his fists. "Forgetting isn't for me."

Joe placed his hand on his arm and grinned crookedly, half-dazed. "She's not entirely wrong. Forgetting would sometimes be easier."

"Not for you, Joe." Buddy ripped the glass from his hand and hurled it against the wall. It shattered, and the whiskey evaporated into dust.

The bartender grimaced, her smile cracking. "You have to drink," she hissed. "Otherwise, you'll stay here hungry forever."

Buddy stepped forward, heavy as a sledgehammer. "Then I'd rather stay hungry."

The bartender's smile widened, too wide, too black. Her face burst, becoming dust that rose into the air. Nothing remained behind the bar. Only rock, slowly growing inward, like teeth closing a mouth.

Buddy growled deeply, his fists clenched. "Told you: fraud."

Joe slowly stood up, swaying a little, his grin tired, but still there. "Well... nice betrayal. For a moment, I almost believed it. Whiskey for breakfast, who can say no to that?"

The saloon was gone. No more wood, no more glasses, no more voices. Everything was dust. Only the chairs and tables remained, but they were moving—growing solid, clinging to the feet, trying to hold them.

Buddy kicked a chair away, and it crumbled like dry bread. "Come on, Joe. Time we got out."

Joe raised his Colt, aimed at a table, and fired. Wood splintered, the table fell, and crumbled into dust. "See? It's all just a backdrop."

But the ground vibrated, dust poured from below, enveloping her legs. Heavy, sticky, as if invisible hands were trying to chain her.

Joe grinned crookedly and tugged at his legs. "Great. Breakfast, that's taking a back seat."

Buddy ripped a leg free and stomped. The ground cracked, a hole opened, and dust shot out like smoke.

"He wants to eat us," he grumbled.

"He always wants to eat," Joe murmured. "But this time he choked."

Buddy grabbed Joe's arm and pulled him free. They stumbled forward, away from the counter, away from the center.

The room closed behind them. The saloon disappeared forever. Only darkness remained.

Joe breathed heavily and grinned weakly. "Whiskey was good. But I think I really need beans now."

Buddy grumbled, fists at the ready. "Then we'll find the pan. Even if they serve us ten more lies."

The darkness was thick, sticky, silent. No footsteps but her own, no breath but hers.

Buddy trudged ahead, heavysset, his fists at his sides. "If I ever come into a bar without beans again, I'll chop the barman's head off."

Joe gave a crooked, tired grin. "Buddy, the last one didn't have a host. Just dust with skirts."

"Then just the dust."

They walked on. Minutes, maybe hours. Everything looked the same. Then it stood there. Just like that. A trolley. Old, rusty, its wheels half wedged in the ground. Loaded with chunks of ore, dull, gray.

Joe stopped and tapped his forehead. "Well, look at that. Breakfast was whiskey, lunch is iron."

Buddy stomped closer, placed his hand on the edge. The metal was cold, too cold. "It's not just standing here."

Joe blinked, his tired grin still intact. "Nothing's just standing here. Either she'll leave... or she'll eat us."

They circled the minecart. There was chalk on one side. Old markings, almost smudged. Circles, lines. A remnant of what Joe had drawn earlier.

"Others were here," he murmured. "And they didn't make it."

Buddy grabbed the trolley and braced himself. The thing moved. A jerk, a creak, then it slowly rolled forward.

"Well, it works," he grumbled.

Joe jumped onto the edge, rolled along, and grinned wearily. "First whiskey, now a carriage ride. Buddy, this is almost a vacation."

"Shut up." Buddy climbed up, the cart groaning under his weight.

They rolled deeper, the passage widened. Darkness gave way to a pale glow. And somewhere ahead, iron clanged on iron, like heartbeats.

The trolley jolted, squeaked, and rolled slowly through the corridor. Iron on iron, the sound like a tired heartbeat.

Joe sat on the edge, his legs dangling. "Almost comfortable. If you ignore the darkness."

Buddy sat in the car with his legs wide apart, arms crossed, eyes alert. "Nothing here is comfortable. And if it is, it's only because the wind is about to bite."

The light ahead flickered, sometimes brighter, sometimes dimmer. The corridor widened, the trolley accelerated. Dust drifted along like plumes of smoke behind a steam locomotive.

Then they saw it.

Shadows. First faint, then thicker. Figures walking beside the trolley as if running with it. No faces, no bodies. Just forms moving in time with the wheels.

Joe gave a crooked, tired grin. "Great. Now we have company. And I'm out of whiskey."

Buddy growled, clenching his fists. "Shadows don't drink."

"Maybe they'll fight."

The figures approached, reaching for the cart. Their hands were only dark, but they pulled. The iron creaked, the cart swayed.

Joe drew his Colt and fired. The shot echoed dully, the shadow shattered—but it returned. "See? Nothing works. It's always the same old story."

Buddy stood up, the car groaned. He punched the darkness with his fist. She shuddered, recoiled. For a moment.

"Fists last longer," he grumbled.

The shadows surrounded them, climbing onto the edge, sliding through the ground as if they had no rules.

Joe laughed wearily, crookedly. "Whiskey was easier to bear."

Buddy growled, fists at the ready. "Then we'll just fight our way through the ghost ride."

The cart rattled faster, the iron screeching like a wounded animal. Shadows clung to the edge, stretching out long arms.

One of them reached for Joe, grabbed him by the collar. Cold, wet, heavy. He was dragged to the side, half out of the cart.

Joe still grinned, crooked and desperate. "Great... now I'll get a ticket."

"Not with me," Buddy grumbled. He reached out, grabbed Joe by the arm. With his other fist, he punched the darkness. No flesh, no bone—just resistance that cracked like glass.

The shadow shattered, dust flying. Joe fell back into the cart, coughing, but still grinning. "Thanks, big guy. I wouldn't have known how to pay for it."

The cart lurched, almost tipping over. More shadows rose, perched on the edges like crows.

Buddy hit left, hit right. Each hit made the darkness flutter, recoil—but they kept coming back.

Joe fired twice, the bullets flashing briefly in the darkness. Nothing remained. Only figures.

"It's like whiskey," Joe muttered. "The more you take, the emptier you become."

Buddy grunted, pushing a shadow away with his shoulder. "Then we'll drink them dry."

The minecart raced downhill, the rails reverberating like a barrage. Shadows screamed, Buddy yelled back.

Joe held on tight, his Colt loose, his grin tired. "Come on, big guy. Let's drive hell into the wall."

The trolley raced, faster, faster. The wheels screeched, the rails almost glowed. Shadows clung to it, a dozen, two dozen, like a black tide.

Buddy hit, Joe shot. Each hit gave way to another. It was endless.

Then came the end.

A hole gaped before them. No tunnel, no exit. Just a shaft, open, bottomless. The tracks led directly into it, as if they had never been intended any other way.

"Shit," Joe muttered, grinning crookedly. "Breakfast was free, but the ride is going to cost us our lives."

Buddy yelled, clenching his fists. "Then we'll just jump in!"

The cart thundered over the edge and plunged into the depths. Shadows screamed, pulled, and held on. The impact came like a thunderclap. Iron broke, wood splintered, and dust exploded.

Everything went black.

Joe was the first to come to, coughing, dust in his mouth, his Colt still in his hand. Next to him was Buddy, breathing heavily, his fists bloody from punching the air.

The shadows were gone. Scattered, torn, vanished. Only dust in the air.

Joe grinned, tired and exhausted. "There you go, buddy. Whiskey for breakfast, roller coaster for lunch. All that's missing is dessert."

Buddy slowly sat up, spitting dust. "If there aren't beans for dessert, I'll smash everything to bits."

Joe laughed, a dry sound. "Then let's hope hell can boil."

A new passage lay before them. Dark, silent. But this time without illusion. Only bare rock, waiting.

They stood up, heavy and tired. And moved on.

The train of ore wagons

The dust hadn't quite settled yet. Buddy sat heavily in the rubble, breathing deeply, like a man who had just run into a wall—and the wall had given way.

Joe got up, coughed, and wiped his mouth. "Fine. Breakfast: whiskey. Lunch: train ride into the abyss. Now what?"

Buddy slowly stood up and grumbled. "Now for dinner."

The darkness was silent. Too silent. Until it came.

A sound. Muffled. Heavy. Rhythmic. First far away, then closer. Like a heartbeat. But metallic. Iron on iron. Stomping, hissing.

Joe raised his head, his eyes narrowed. "Buddy... that sounds like work."

Buddy narrowed his eyes, fists at his sides. "That sounds like a train."

And then they saw the light. Deep in the shaft, barely more than a glimmer. But it was coming closer. Two circles, yellowish, dead, yet seeing. Like eyes that never blink.

The floor vibrated, dust fell from the ceiling. Rails they hadn't noticed before glowed faintly beneath the rubble, as if they had always been there.

Joe gave a crooked, tired grin. "A train, buddy. Down here. No tracks, no destination. I'd say: Welcome to the timetable from hell."

The train approached, slower, as if it wanted to inspect them. It was made of trolleys, welded together, rusted, half-fallen apart. And yet it moved. No one drove it. No locomotive. Just iron with a will of its own.

Buddy clenched his fists and growled deeply. "If he stops, we're not getting in."

Joe laughed dryly. "If it holds, we'll be in by now."

The train screamed as it braked. Sparks flew, dust exploded. It came to a stop right in front of them. Doors opened. Empty.

Inviting.

Joe looked at Buddy and grinned wearily. "Well. The ore train. Next stop: nowhere."

The train stood still, but it wasn't silent. It puffed, groaned, and creaked like an old animal that doesn't want to die. Sparks glowed from the joints, dust rose from the wheels.

Buddy stopped, his fists at his sides. "That's not a locomotive. It's a coffin with rails."

Joe gave a crooked, tired grin. "Then we'll just ride first class to the grave."

The doors stood open, black, empty. Behind them, nothing, only darkness. But the darkness breathed.

Buddy grumbled. "We're not getting in."

Joe nodded. "Of course not." Then he felt a pull. Not the train itself – the air. It flowed in, like a maelstrom. Dust swirled, stones rolled.

Joe grabbed his hat and held it tight. "Buddy... the coffin is hungry."

Buddy braced himself, heavy as a rock. But he too felt the pull. It tugged at his boots, at his knees, at his stomach. Slowly, persistently.

"Shit," he grumbled. "That thing wants to suck us in."

Joe laughed dryly, almost hoarsely. "Well, then he's worse than any saloonkeeper I've ever met."

They held on tight, to the walls, to the floor. But the suction grew stronger. Dust rushed into the open doors and disappeared.

"We have two options," Joe gasped. "Either we hold out forever... or we jump voluntarily."

Buddy growled and braced himself harder. "I'm not jumping into a coffin."

Joe grinned wearily. "Then you're jumping at a chance."

The train groaned, a long, deep groan, as if it were growing impatient. The darkness in the carriages pulsed like a heartbeat.

Buddy looked at Joe. Deeply, seriously. "If this is a trap..."

"Then we'll destroy them," said Joe, drawing his Colt.

The train jolted, the pull becoming unbearable. And then both of them released their hands simultaneously – and let themselves be pulled inside.

The train swallowed them. Doors slammed shut, with a sound like a coffin lid. Then darkness.

Joe blinked and grinned wearily. "Well, now we're sitting in the belly of the beast. Hopefully there are window seats."

Buddy stood with his legs wide apart, fists at the ready. "I don't see any windows. Just darkness."

The air smelled of iron, sweat, and old blood. The ground vibrated, heavy and regular.

Then they heard it. Breathing. Not theirs. Slow, shallow, heavy.

Buddy turned his head, his shoulders tensed. "We're not alone."

Joe raised his Colt, his eyes narrowed. "Of course not. A train without passengers would be too kind."

And then they appeared. Rows of figures in the pews they hadn't seen before. Men in old mining clothes, shirts torn, skin gray. Eyes empty. Each held a lump of ore in their lap, as if it were a treasure or a debt.

They didn't stare. They didn't move. They just breathed. Heavy. Evenly.

Joe whistled softly. "Well, Buddy. First class looks different."

Buddy stepped closer and leaned over one of the miners. He didn't move. Only the ore in his lap glowed faintly, as if it were alive.

"They're dead," Buddy grumbled.

"Dead, but on time," Joe muttered. "Bet they've been running for years?"

The figures didn't flinch. But when the train jolted, they all moved simultaneously. Not much. Just a nod. Like puppets.

Buddy clenched his fists. "I don't like this."

Joe grinned wearily. "You never like anything. But this time I agree with you."

The train descended deeper, the pounding louder. And the passengers continued to breathe.

The train plodded on, deeper into the void. Buddy stood with his legs wide apart, his fists at his sides. Joe leaned against the seat, Colt loosely in his hand.

The miners sat silently. Only their breathing. Heavy. Regular.

Then it changed. One breath longer. One breath louder.

Buddy growled deeply. "They're waking up."

Joe gave a crooked, tired grin. "Well, at least we're not alone anymore."

The first one raised his head. Slowly, creaking, like an old hinge. His eyes were empty, black. The lump of ore in his lap glowed brighter, reddish, as if it were drinking blood.

The miner raised his hands, placed them on the ore, and muttered something. No words. Just noise. A scratching, a slurping.

The others followed. One by one. Heads lifted, hands laid on ore. The murmuring grew louder.

Joe blinked, but grinned nonetheless. "Sounds like a prayer. But not to God."

Buddy clenched his fists. "If they stand up, I'll knock them down."

And they stood up. All at once. The benches creaked, the darkness flickered.

The miners clutched their ore as if it were a heart. They entered the tunnel. Slowly, step by step.

Joe raised his Colt and aimed. "Come on, guys. One at a time. I've got time."

Buddy stomped forward, heavy as a battering ram. "Nobody has time. I'll make this quick."

The first miner approached. Buddy struck. His fist struck, the body disintegrated—but the ore remained, rolling, glowing brighter.

Joe shot at the boulder. It exploded, dust rose. The rest collapsed.

Joe grinned wearily. "See, buddy. Not the heads. The hearts."

Buddy growled, clenching his fists. "Then we'll punch hearts."

The dead continued to come, the murmuring louder, the ore glowed red.

The corridor vibrated, the lights on the ceiling flickered as if they were heartbeats. The miners pressed forward, the ore in their hands like burning hearts.

Buddy faced the first one. His fist slammed into the boulder. Dust, splinters, a scream that came not from a mouth, but from the entire air. The body slumped, lifeless, like a sack without bones.

Joe raised his Colt and shot at the nearest lump. A bang, the ore shattered, and the dead man fell. Joe grinned wearily, crookedly. "See, buddy? Two men, one beat. Fist and bullet."

Buddy grumbled, striking again. Two fists, two hearts down. Dust hung thick in the air, burning his eyes.

The dead kept coming. Rows. Entire seats stood up, marching. All with ore in their laps, which glowed the closer they came.

"Shit," Joe muttered, reloading. "We'll never catch up."

"Yes," Buddy grumbled. He beat, left, right, like a blacksmith. Every beat, one heart less. Every beat, the train louder.

The murmuring of the dead became a chorus. Not a word, just a sound, muffled, deep, endless. It vibrated in the ground, in the bones.

Joe fired, the smoke burning his throat. "Buddy, this isn't a ride. This is a fucking church service."

Buddy snorted and smashed three hearts one after the other. "Then I'm the priest."

They fought. Fist, Colt, dust. The train car became a battlefield until not a single seat was empty.

And still shadows stood behind, ready to step forward with their ore.

Joe spat dust and grinned wearily. "It's like beans, buddy. No matter how much you spoon in, the pot won't stop."

Buddy clenched his fists, his shoulders hard. "Then we'll hit until the pot breaks."

Dust lay thick as smoke, the train car shook. Joe coughed and wiped his face with his sleeve. "Buddy... we shoot, hit, and beat—and it still doesn't stop."

Buddy was just pounding a piece of ore into dust. The body fell and disappeared. But a new prospector was already squatting on the same seat, the same piece in his lap.

"Shit," Buddy grumbled. "They'll grow back."

Joe laughed dryly, wearily. "Like weeds. But there's no gardener down here."

Then he noticed. The train itself vibrated to the beat of footsteps, to the beat of hearts. Each new prospector arrived as the pounding grew louder. They didn't create themselves—the train spat them out.

Joe looked up, his eyes narrowed, his grin thin. "Buddy. We don't hit men. We hit the iron."

Buddy looked at him and snorted. "Iron can also be broken."

The train groaned, deeper, louder, as if it had been listening. The light on the walls glowed red, like embers.

Joe stopped firing at the miners. He aimed at the rails that ran through the car, glowing and alive. The shot cracked, sparks flew, the ground trembled. A miner who had just gotten up immediately fell back, the ore in his lap extinguished.

Joe grinned crookedly. "See. That's the umbilical cord."

Buddy kicked, stomped, and hit the metal struts. Iron splintered, sparks flew. More and more miners fell, unable to move.

"All right," Buddy grumbled, his fists bloody, "then we'll beat the whole platoon."

The carriage shook more violently. The pounding turned into thunder. Dust rained from the ceiling as if the train were trying to crush it.

Joe grinned, coughed, and raised his Colt. "Then we'll just derail. First class."

The wagon shook, the miners screamed, the iron pounded like a heart beating too fast.

Joe aimed at the rail and fired. Bullets cracked, sparks flew. The metal splintered and cracked. A crack ran through the floor.

Buddy hit it with his fist, again, again. Each blow a thunderous crash, each blow a piece of iron less. Blood mingled with dust.

"Hit faster!" shouted Joe.

"I'll hit you as fast as I can!" Buddy grumbled.

The train screeched, high-pitched and shrill, as if it were experiencing pain for the first time. The walls warped, the car swayed. Miners fell, the ore in their hands extinguished.

Joe laughed hoarsely, grinning tiredly. "See, buddy? Even Eisen has a gut shot."

Buddy kicked, stomped, and punched. Finally, the rail broke, sparks flying like fireworks. The car tilted, jerked, and tipped.

"Hold on!" Joe yelled.

The world tilted sideways. The train derailed, crashing into the wall of the shaft. Iron splintered, carriages shattered, dust filled everything. Voices screamed, then were swallowed up.

Silence.

Joe lay in the rubble, coughing, spitting dust. He grinned anyway. "First class, buddy. With breakfast, lunch, and a derailment."

Buddy lifted himself heavily from the rubble, his fists bloody, his eyes hard. "And still no beans."

They stood, swaying, breathing. Behind them lay only rubble. In front of them, a new corridor, black and empty.

Joe put away his Colt and grinned crookedly. "Then we'll keep walking. Maybe hell has a kitchen."

Buddy grumbled. "And if not, I'll build one."

And they went. Dust at their backs, darkness ahead.

One man, one post, five men

The dust hadn't quite settled yet when the next oddity appeared. The corridor widened, the floor flat, almost too flat, as if someone had specially smoothed it.

In the middle stood a post. Raw wood, splintered but solid. Tied to it: a man. Emaciated, drenched in sweat, his eyes empty, but awake.

Surrounding them were five men. Or something that looked like them. They stood in a semicircle, silent, motionless, arms at their sides.

Buddy stopped and clenched his fists. "Great. A play."

Joe stepped up next to him, grinning crookedly. "One man at the post, five guys around him. Buddy, that sounds like the beginning of a bad joke."

The five didn't move. No muscles, no breathing. Only silence.

The bound man raised his head and looked at her. His voice was hoarse, like sand in his throat. "Help me... or help them. It makes no difference."

Buddy stomped closer, heavy as a battering ram. "What does that mean?"

The five men raised their heads simultaneously. Their faces were blank, smooth, as if someone had erased their features. No eyes, no mouths. Just skin.

Joe whistled softly. "See, buddy. No joke. Just an invitation to the dance."

Buddy growled, fists at the ready. "Then we dance."

The bound man suddenly laughed, dry, short, crazy. "One against five. Or five against one. It's always the same."

The five of them moved. Slowly at first, then simultaneously, as if pulled by the same invisible hand. Every step was the same. Every head turned at the same angle.

Joe clicked his tongue and grinned crookedly. "Well, this will be fun. One hit, five echoes."

Buddy stepped forward, fists raised. "Then we'll smash the Echo."

He swung and struck the first man in line. His fist struck hard, like a punch against flesh—but at the same moment, all five staggered. Simultaneously.

Joe whistled softly. "See, buddy. 100 percent hit rate. But problem: They get up five times."

Indeed, the figures stood up simultaneously, at the same speed, with the same movement. No difference.

Buddy growled, muttering deeply. "Then I'll just hit you five times."

He struck again. Left. Right. Every blow hit everyone. They fell, they stood up, they came back.

Joe leaned against the post, grinning wearily. "You could keep hitting here forever, big guy. It's almost like eating beans. You shovel, the pot stays full."

Buddy turned to him, panting, his fists red. "Then tell me how we get the pot empty."

Joe nodded at the man at the post. "Maybe he's the cook."

The prisoner laughed again, raggedly, madly. "You aren't five. You are one. One who can't decide."

Joe raised an eyebrow. "Buddy... you just punched the same man five times."

Buddy growled and stepped back. The five of them stopped, all at once.

Joe drew his Colt and aimed at the post. "Then I'll ask who's really tied up here."

Joe held the Colt loosely, but aimed directly at the man at the post. "So, friend. If those five are just echoes, then you're the voice. And voices can be turned down."

Buddy stomped closer, his fists still warm from the punches. "Or turn it off completely."

The prisoner raised his head and grinned crookedly—a grin that didn't suit a man who was tied up. "Go on. Pull the trigger. Let's see if you dare."

At the same moment, the five of them moved. Not a step forward, not an attack. They all raised their hands simultaneously, as if to stop Joe from shooting.

Joe whistled softly. "See, buddy. They don't like it when I lift my finger."

Buddy grumbled. "Then he's the cook. And the five are just his cutlery."

The man laughed hoarsely. "You don't understand anything. I'm not tied down. I'm holding the post, not the other way around. Without me, everything falls apart."

Joe raised his eyebrow and gave a thin grin. "Then let go. We'll see if we can handle it."

The five of them flinched simultaneously, as if the word had pierced them. One stepped forward, all stepped forward.

Buddy stanced himself, fists at the ready. "No more talking. If he starts cooking, we'll smash the stove."

Joe shrugged, keeping his Colt pointed at the prisoner. "What if the stove explodes?"

"Then we finally have beans."

The prisoner continued to laugh, but his grin flickered briefly, as if Buddy had hit a nerve.

Buddy stomped toward the post, heavy, his shoulders like brick walls. Joe still pointed the Colt at the prisoner, but his grin was thin. "Come on, big guy. Break the table. Let's see if the chairs fall with it."

The prisoner pulled back his lips, a smile that was too wide. "You don't understand what you're touching."

"Understanding is for scholars," Buddy grumbled. "I prefer hitting."

He swung his fist against the wood. The blow reverberated through the shaft, splintering the post.

At the same moment, the five men screamed—the same sound, five throats, one voice. They rushed forward in unison, their arms like blades.

Joe fired two shots. Both hit, both had no effect. The bodies twitched, but they still stood.

"Great," Joe murmured. "Tap the post and they'll dance."

Buddy hit again, harder this time. The post cracked, wood chips flew. The prisoner flinched—not in pain, but in pleasure. He laughed, his head thrown back. "Yes! Keep hitting! Tear it all down!"

The five charged simultaneously, a single attack, in five directions. Buddy caught two with his fists, like walls crashing down. Joe dodged the others, rolled across the ground, and fired again.

The shot shattered in the darkness, sparking off the wall. The figures twitched, blurred, and stood up again.

Joe gasped, grinning crookedly. "Buddy... we're hitting mirrors here. But the mirror is the post."

Buddy stepped back, fists raised, eyes narrowed. "Then we'll smash this thing in half. And if the whole cave falls with it, fine."

The prisoner continued to laugh, his voice now sounding like five voices at once. "Hit me, and you hit yourself."

Buddy growled. "Then hold on tight."

They stopped hitting. Not because they wanted to, but because their arms hurt, and Buddy realized that punches alone wouldn't solve the problem. The fist made noise, but it didn't stop. Joe was breathing heavily, the Colt hanging loosely in his hand, as if he were too tired to hold it properly.

"Okay," said Joe, a flicker in his voice like a lamp about to go out. "We're smart. We're stupid. Sometimes we're both. Now let's try both and see which one wins."

Buddy huffed, wiping his forehead with the back of his hand. Dust and blood clung to his knuckles. "What do you suggest? I throw dirt. You come up with a plan?" He half-grinned; that was his word for agreement on things that interested him less than the next pan of beans.

Joe stood in front of the post, turning the Colt in his hand like a man playing with coins. He looked at the bound man, then at the five. "They're in sync," he murmured. "Mirror images, like you said. And mirrors have a back. If we find out what's holding the back, we'll tear the image down." He spoke slowly because he was thinking. When he spoke quietly, he thought better.

Buddy lifted his foot, kicked the dust, and drew a line—with his heel, roughly, like someone who knows no art, only boundaries. Joe watched, nodded. Lines were always needed; Joe had learned it on the train, in the chalk that refused to hold lies. Lines held things together. Lines separated things. Maybe now a line could pull something away.

"Give me something they don't like," Buddy grumbled. "Something real." Joe turned around, searched his pockets. He pulled out two pieces of chalk he'd picked up somewhere—white, full of dust. He gritted his teeth. "Chalk," he said. "Stupid stuff. But it's helped us before." Buddy snorted. "So we'll paint them dead." He pulled his shoulder back, ready. Not to hit, to pull. To grab.

Joe drew a circle around the post, slowly, yet too quickly. He wrote words in the dust in scrawling handwriting: no long sentences, just short twists—"ONE," "NO ECHO," "BREAK." Not because words were magical, but because names often grabbed things fists couldn't. Words signify, and things that are signified are easier to break.

The five stared, and something in the air shifted. Not much. A flutter. A breath. The bound man grinned as if he owned the whole situation. "You think chalk will save you," he said. "You think lines are more than dirt. You're a dreamer

with dirt on your hands." His voice now sounded not just like one, but like five, as if he'd learned to sing in a choir in the last few minutes.

Joe continued writing. He scratched another sign—nothing religious, just a squiggle with a single line, quickly and roughly. An old man would have considered it a fool's sign. But signs are like locks: sometimes only one key fits.

"Buddy," Joe whispered, "when I say now, you do something else. Don't hit. Push. If you push, push hard. If you break, break all the way." Buddy nodded. His response was a nod, as heavy as a man who nods constantly because talking is tiring.

Joe knelt down and sprinkled the chalk dust over the lines with his fingertips. He clasped his hands not in prayer, but because his fingers were better when they were holding something. Then he hurled a word into the room, like one might throw a stone: "Now."

Buddy raised his shoulders, and not with a blow, but with a push, he placed his hands on the sides of the post. It wasn't a gentle grip; more the promise of brute force intended to be applied elsewhere. He pushed, pulled, pressed. Wood creaked. The man at the post didn't groan. He laughed, a short, hollow sound.

The five reacted. Not with blows, but as if someone were plucking a thread: their heads tilted, their steps became crooked. They didn't fall, they staggered—and that was enough. Because synchronicity is like a vessel: if you scratch one side, the whole thing stretches. Buddy kept pushing, as if he were pulling a tree from the ground.

Then something happened that neither of them had really planned: the post gave way. Not with a spectacular crash, but more with a sigh. Wood splintered. For a second, there was a sound like breaking toes. And with the give, one of the five figures fell to the side, as if someone had cut a string. The others staggered, uncoordinated, suddenly flawed.

The bound man didn't scream. He spat dust, grinned, and instead of "I'm holding it all together," his mouth uttered a different sound—a gasp, a laugh, as if he had shards of glass in his throat. "That feels good," he breathed. "When you hurt the wood, you think you're changing the picture. But the picture has holes."

Joe jumped up and fired twice. Not in the face, not in the body, but where the wood in the post still seemed intact. Sparks flew, dust swirled. He aimed at cracks, at seams. Shots aren't just for heads; sometimes they blow up a frame.

Buddy ripped the post out of the ground with his last bit of strength. The wood cracked, the man fell free, the ropes fell away like ugly dreams. The five fell, no longer synchronized, but like people who had waited so long until their watch stopped ticking. One fell to his knees, another pressed his hands to his head as if trying to silence the voices.

Joe was breathing heavily, the chalk shaking in his hand. "Not pretty," he said, barely loud enough for Buddy to hear. "But we've got a crack."

Buddy placed his foot on the piece of wood. "If that thing heals, I'll hit it again. And again. Until there's nothing left to hold it together." His voice was as flat as concrete. No anger, just a plan: destroy it until there's nothing left that can be called a bond.

The freed man staggered, then suddenly stood up and went to them. He wasn't grateful; gratitude is a form of obligation. He shook his hands free and rubbed his skin. His eyes were white with dust. "You wanted to help," he said. "But help yourselves. The wood was only a tool. The division is in everything." His words were both a curse and a piece of advice.

Joe put away the chalk and grinned crookedly. "Then let's have a drink first, and then we think about it." Buddy snorted. "Beans first. Then think."

They left the post lying there, half-smashed, and moved on. Behind them, something wheezed, like a machine restarting—or someone breathing again. Dust settled on the cracks. The five of them lifted themselves heavily from the ground; out of sync, no longer perfect. People with fault lines. Maybe this won't heal. Maybe it will stay this way.

Joe lowered his hat. "You know, Buddy... sometimes that's all it is: one post, one man, five shadows. You hit, you throw chalk, you tear. And nothing's ever really finished." Buddy spat dust and gave a short, dry laugh. "Then I'll keep hitting until you find a reason to stop."

They continued on, dust at their backs, beans in the distance. The corridor stretched on, undeterred, like the world that has no stomach and yet wants to eat.

The corridor smelled of dust and old sweat. The post lay shattered on the floor, splinters everywhere. The prisoner was free, but he wasn't standing with them—he stood at the edge, watching, arms folded, as if he had ordered the spectacle himself.

The five men stood up. Slowly, one at a time. For the first time, they weren't in step. One held his head, one clenched his fists, one just stared blankly, aimlessly. They were no longer mirrors, they were pieces. Shards.

Joe grinned wearily. "Great, buddy. Before, five puppets on a string. Now five crazy people without a wire. Congratulations."

Buddy grumbled, gritting his teeth. "Dolls, crazy people, whatever. I'll still knock them out."

The first one charged, wild, headlong. Buddy struck, a single blow—the man collapsed, a mixture of dust and blood.

The second came from the side, faster, smarter. Joe fired, the shot rang out, and the man fell, gasping.

"Two out of five," Joe muttered. "But now things are getting messy."

The third man ducked, grabbed Joe's ankle, and pulled him to the ground. Joe laughed dryly and kicked him away with his heel. "Damn... now they're beating like us."

Buddy blocked the fourth, fist against fist. Hard, loud, bone against bone. The man laughed, bled, and kept laughing. Buddy hit harder until the laughter stopped.

The fifth was still standing. Only he was standing. He didn't move. His eyes were empty, but his hands were grasping the splinter of a post. He held it tight like a knife.

Joe got to his feet, grinning crookedly. "There we go. One wants to play, one wants to kill."

Buddy stepped forward, heavy, his shoulders like walls. "Then I'll break his toy."

They stood in a circle. There had been five men. Four lay on the ground, gasping, silent, or already dead. The last one waited, the splinter in his hand, his eyes cold.

Joe raised his Colt, Buddy clenched his fists. The gang held its breath.

The last one stood still. Only the splinter in his hand gleamed, dull and bloody from the wood. His eyes were empty, but not dead. They were like a well too deep to look into.

Buddy stomped closer, fists raised. "A splinter against my hands? Bad bet."

The man didn't move. Only when Buddy had halfway closed the distance did he suddenly raise his arm and lunge forward, wildly, like a dog off its leash.

The wood twitched in the light, just missing Buddy's ribs. A scratch, nothing. Buddy grabbed his arm, twisted it around, and struck. Once, twice. The guy staggered, but he didn't fall.

Joe stood sideways, his Colt raised. But he didn't fire. He just grinned crookedly. "That's yours, buddy. That's not a man for bullets."

The splinter stung again, cutting Buddy's arm. Blood dripped. Buddy grunted, shook himself, and grabbed the guy by the neck. A blow to the head, dull, hard. The man spat blood, laughed briefly, then silence again.

"Tough bastard," growled Buddy.

"They're always tougher when they don't have faces," Joe muttered.

Once again the wood stabbed, this time deep into Buddy's shoulder. Buddy growled, yanked it out as if it were a toothpick, and threw it away. Then he struck. No skill, no hesitation. Just a fist like a sledgehammer.

The man fell to the ground. Dust flew. He twitched, then nothing.

Buddy breathed heavily, wiped his mouth, and looked at Joe. "Five men, one post. In the end, nothing but splinters."

Joe grinned wearily and put away his Colt. "Shrapnel, dust, blood. Always the same menu. But at least we're full."

The man who had been hanging from the post was still standing at the edge. Free, but not grateful. He looked at her, his eyes cold, as if he wanted to say something. Then he simply turned around and disappeared into the darkness. Not a word. Not a thank you.

Joe spat dust and laughed dryly. "See, buddy. No happy ending. Just a hole that leads even deeper."

Buddy growled and stomped off. "Let's go then. Maybe there will be beans at the end."

And they went. The post lay in splinters, the five men in the dust, and the passage swallowed them up again.

Banknotes that scream

The corridor ended abruptly. No more rocks, no more minecarts, no more splinters of wood. Instead, a hall, large, high, with walls as if filled with smoke.

And in the middle: paper. Mountains of it. Banknotes, jumbled together, crumpled, bloody, burned. Old dollars, new ones, some torn, others fresh as yesterday.

Joe stopped and grinned crookedly. "Well, buddy. We're rich. When we get out of here, we can buy our own town. With a saloon, a bean kitchen. With everything."

Buddy stomped closer, grumbling. "Paper doesn't fill anyone up."

But then they heard it. First a whisper. Very quiet. Like voices behind a wall. Then louder, clearer.

"Take me..." "I'm yours..." "Buy anything..."

Joe grimaced, but grinned nonetheless. "Great. Banknotes with a soul. As if it wasn't bad enough just sitting in the safe."

Buddy bent over and picked up a crumpled bill. The paper trembled in his hand, warm, like skin. And it screamed. Loud, shrill, right in his ear:

"MINE! MINE! MINE!"

Buddy growled and dropped the bill. "Paper screams. Shit."

The hall filled with voices. Some whispered, some shouted. Every bill spoke. Promised riches, threatened, laughed.

Joe put his hands in his pockets, his grin still tired. "This is worse than a saloon full of gamblers. At least they lose their voices eventually."

Buddy clenched his fists. "We'll shut up."

He stepped into the pile, stomped until the bills crumbled. But every step only brought new screams. Louder. Harsher.

The banknotes screamed as if they were dying.

Joe slowly drew his Colt. "Buddy... that's not money. That's a fucking choir."

The screams grew louder. No longer a chorus, but a storm. Each bill screamed differently. Some howled like children, others roared like men losing at the table. Some laughed. Some begged.

Buddy trudged on, growling, his fists at the ready. "Noise doesn't bother me."

But then the bills fluttered. First a rustling, like wind. Then they lifted, dozens, hundreds. They stuck together, attracted each other like magnets, pushed across the floor like waves.

Joe grinned crookedly, his Colt loosely in his hand. "Great. Now the moneybags are dancing. Buddy, we're in a fucking banking nightmare."

A carpet of banknotes crawled toward her, thick and alive. Every movement accompanied by cries. "TAKE ME!" - "BE MINE!" - "MORE! MORE!"

Buddy stepped on it, stomped. The bills burst, ripped, screamed louder. Pieces stuck to his boot, writhing like snakes.

Joe fired. One bullet, then another. Paper exploded, fluttering apart. But the hole immediately closed, and new bills crawled in.

"You can't fire a bullet at a bank robbery, buddy," he muttered.

Buddy grabbed a whole handful and tore them in half. They screamed in his hands, bright and sharp. He yelled back and threw them to the ground.

The hall vibrated. Bills fell from above, from the walls, from the ceiling. Soon the place was full. A storm of paper.

Joe pulled his hat down, coughed, but grinned nonetheless. "Buddy... we're drowning in money. And yet we're poorer than before."

Buddy clenched his fists, stamped, his eyes hard. "Then we'll fight our way out. Paper burns. Paper tears. Something like that works."

The bills weren't just flying across the floor anymore. They were jumping. Like insects, like boneless birds. They shot into Buddy's face, stuck to his skin, pressed against his eyes.

He yelled, ripping it away. "Dirty paper!"

But more came. They wrapped themselves around his arm, pulling, cutting almost like blades. Each bill screamed, each bill roared a different promise. "YOUR HOUSE!" - "YOUR WIFE!" - "YOUR GOLD!"

Joe barely had time to grin. The bills clung to his neck, tightening as if they were trying to strangle him. He ripped them off, but they came back. His voice was hoarse. "Buddy... the money wants to carry us. Like sacks. Like coins on two legs."

Buddy lashed out, his fists like sledgehammers. Paper burst, fluttered, and returned. He grabbed a whole wad, stuffed it in his mouth, and chewed. Saliva, dust, blood. He spat it out, yelling, "Tastes like nothing! Not even beans!"

Joe gave a short, dry laugh, despite the pressure on his throat. "If you have to eat it, Buddy, we're really in trouble."

The hall was now a storm. Paper was everywhere. Hands, faces, bodies—everything was wrapped up. Buddy looked like a man in rags, Joe like a gambler drowning in his own winnings.

Buddy tore himself free, his fists bloody from the edges of the bills. "It's just paper!"

Joe gasped, his voice choked. "Yeah. But paper has more mouths than any saloon full of drunks."

He fired, directly into the pile on his chest. The bullet burned, the scream deafening. The banknotes recoiled—for a moment.

Buddy stomped the ground and yelled. "If it's paper, we'll burn it."

Joe looked at him, grinning crookedly despite the welts on his face. "Finally, an idea that makes sense."

Buddy slapped the last bills from his chest, his fists bloody but firm. "Fire. That's the only thing that matters."

Joe coughed, brushing scraps of paper from his neck. "Great. And I don't even have a match. Do you have one, buddy?"

Buddy reached into his pocket and pulled something out. Not a match, just an old flint, worn from constant use. He wasn't grinning. Buddy never grinned when he was working. "That's enough."

The banknotes nearby stopped screaming. They were whispering now. Pleading. "No... not that... we're valuable... keep us..."

Joe grinned crookedly and ran his hand over his beard. "Buddy, I think those notes know what's coming. And for the first time, they're scared."

Buddy knelt down, searching for dry wood among the dust. He found only splinters from the post they'd left behind. He placed them together, striking sparks. Each blow a brief flash of light, each blow accompanied by hysterical shrieks from the sea of paper.

"No! No! Let us live!"

Joe shook his head and laughed dryly. "Money begging. If the bankers knew that, buddy, they'd laugh themselves to death."

Finally, a spark ignited. A small glow burned, blazing. Buddy bent over and blew. The light grew, a small patch of warmth amidst the cold madness.

The banknotes nearby recoiled, fluttered, and screamed, this time high, in panic. "ERASE IT! ERASE IT!"

Joe lowered his hat and grinned weakly. "There you go. We've found their vice. They wanted to buy us—now we're buying them. With fire."

Buddy added more splinters, and the fire consumed and grew. Even the first pile of banknotes caught fire. The screams became deafening, shrill, like an entire carnival on fire.

"MINE! MINE! MINE!" became "NO! NO! NO!"

Buddy stood up, stomped, and looked into the hall. "Everything has to burn."

The fire devoured the pile like a hungry dog. First slowly, then greedily. A spark, a burst of flame – and the first wave of banknotes was ablaze.

They screamed. Not like before. Not begging, not demanding. But like people burning alive. High-pitched, shrill, desperate.

Buddy stepped back, the smoke stinging his eyes. "Finally, they're really screaming."

Joe lowered his hat, coughed, and grinned crookedly. "Yeah. Sounds almost honest."

The bills fluttered, some flying burning through the air like butterflies from hell. They clung to the walls, the ceiling, and Buddy. One landed on his shoulder, hissing. Buddy grabbed it, squeezed it with his bare hand, and threw the embers to the floor.

"You're not burning me, paper," he growled.

Joe got a swarm in his face. He ripped them off, one burning his fingers. He cursed, laughing briefly despite the pain. "Damn, buddy. Money that bites back. I've never seen it like that before."

The hall was now filled with smoke. Visibility was zero. But the fire worked faster than any fist. Entire piles crumbled into a rain of black ash.

The screams became chaotic. First panicked, then fainter, hoarse. Every bill that burned took a voice with it.

"MINE!" became "...my..." and finally silence.

Buddy stomped through the fire, tall and heavy, like a man unafraid of the heat. He swatted away burning bills that leaped at him. Joe followed, coughing and gasping, but the grin remained somewhere on his face, beneath the soot.

"Buddy," he gasped, "if we get out of here alive, I'm not spending another cent. Never again."

Buddy stomped on a pile of spruce that was just beginning to burn. "I only eat beans. They don't talk."

The fire was no longer a campfire. It was an animal. Large, hot, hungry. It ate through the banknotes, through the walls, through everything.

The smoke hung low and heavy, like a sack of dirt someone had dumped over their heads. Every breath cut like glass.

Buddy coughed and spat black. "The fire is eating faster than we can hit."

Joe held his arm over his mouth and nose, his eyes watering. Nevertheless, he grinned crookedly. "For the first time, we're broke, buddy. Broke on air."

The banknotes were no longer all screaming. Some were only whispering, as if they were singing in their deaths. "My... my..." – an echo that no longer had any power.

But some weren't silent. Burning, fluttering, they threw themselves at Buddy & Joe like living torches. Joe shot one out of the air, the bullet tore him apart, ash scattering. Buddy batted the others away, his hands burned but firm.

The heat was now so intense that even the floor glowed. Wood splintered, stones cracked. The hall shook.

"Buddy," Joe panted, "if we stay here, the fire will grill us like bacon."

Buddy grumbled, trudging through the flames. "Then get out. Get out before we turn to coal."

They made their way through the burning sea of paper. Every step crushed bills to ash. Every breath stung their lungs. Behind them, walls collapsed, ceilings creaked, and flames leaped higher.

The last voices of the banknotes screamed in unison, a final cry as the hall collapsed. "MINE! MINE! MINE!" – then silence, only fire.

Buddy and Joe stumbled through a crack in the rock, out, panting, black with soot.

Joe laughed, coughing, half dead. "Buddy... we're the only idiots who come out richer by burning money."

Buddy spat and wiped the soot from his face. "Rich in hunger."

They sat in the dust, backs against cold rock, lungs filled with smoke. The passage behind them still glowed, as if someone had opened hell.

Buddy wiped his face with his hand. Soot, blood, sweat—everything black. "I would have preferred beans."

Joe coughed, laughed hoarsely, but grinned nonetheless. "Beans don't scream, buddy. Money does. Maybe we were better off."

They were silent for a moment. Only their breathing, heavy and ragged, like two horses after a race neither wanted to win.

Buddy broke the silence. "We won the fire. But we couldn't eat any of it."

Joe lowered his hat and leaned his head against the stone. "You're right. No gain. No wealth. Just ashes. But at least the ashes don't talk."

They looked back into the corridor. Where banknotes had just screamed like waves, there was now only a pile of glowing dust. No whispering, no roaring. Nothing.

Buddy slowly stood up, growling with every movement. "Come on, Joe. As long as we're running, at least no one else will scream."

Joe followed, grinning weakly. "Yes. And we have enough votes."

They continued on. Two figures, sooty, hungry, tired. The corridor swallowed them, and the silence remained, heavier than the screaming before.

Sermon in the backyard

The exit spat them out like two lumps of coal. The dust clung to their skin and beard, the smoke still lingered in their lungs. Buddy coughed black, Joe spat gray.

Before them, no saloon, no market, no sheriff. Just a backyard. Dry, full of wooden fences, a few barrels that looked like they'd already survived ten fires.

And in the middle of it all stood he: a man in a long coat, thin, his eyes wide, his mouth too big for his skull. He stood on an overturned crate, his arms raised to the sky.

Three or four figures knelt before him. Pitiful, broken, more shadows than people. They listened as if their lives depended on the next word.

"Sin is dust!" the man roared. "Greed is fire! You've seen it, you've tasted it! Only those who strip themselves of money, of flesh, of vice—only they will go free into the desert of the Lord!"

Joe stopped and lowered his hat. His grin was thin, almost gone. "See, buddy. As soon as we burn money, someone comes along and makes a sermon out of it."

Buddy stomped beside him, grumbling. "If he tells me not to eat beans, I'll give him a sermon."

The preacher saw them. His voice grew even louder, more shrill. "And here they come! The men from the smoke! The witnesses of the fire! The hands of judgment!"

The three on the ground turned their heads. Empty eyes, hungry faces.

Joe sighed and grinned crookedly. "Now we're biblical, buddy. First beatings, now prophets. All we need now is rain."

Buddy clenched his fists. "Rain or not. If he keeps screaming, I'll stop listening—and start hitting him."

The man on the crate continued to scream, his voice almost tearing. "Look at them! Two men from the dust, forged in fire! They are the tools! They are the fist of the Lord!"

The three figures below murmured, nodded, their lips moving as if in prayer. But no prayer arose. It was more a humming, a buzzing that itched beneath the skin.

Joe clicked his tongue and grinned wearily. "Great. Now we're God's ankles. Buddy, you're on the left, I'm on the right."

Buddy stomped closer, his eyes hard. "If I'm Faust, I want beans in heaven. Otherwise, I'll quit immediately."

The disciples raised their heads. Their eyes were empty, glassy, as if they were already halfway to the afterlife. But their hands were clenched. Not in prayer. In grasping.

The preacher spread his arms and shouted even louder. "Touch them! Test them! If they are strong, they are true! If they fall, they are lies!"

Buddy growled. "That's enough."

The three disciples rose, swaying, but firm enough to grab hold. One grabbed a stone, the second a board, the third simply raised his fists.

Joe didn't draw his Colt. He grinned, crooked and tired. "Buddy, this isn't church service. This is a bar fight in your Sunday best."

Buddy clenched his fists. "Then they'll get a Sunday beating, too."

The disciples approached, slowly, in time with the preacher's words. "Test them! Test them!"

Joe sighed, stepped aside, and left his Colt in his holster. "All right. Let's see if we can cut this sermon short."

The first one came with the rock. He swung like a man who'd never learned how to throw properly. Buddy blocked it with his forearm, the rock crashed, and fell into the dust. Buddy responded with a fist, short, hard, to the face. The younger man fell to the ground like a sack of dirt.

"Look!" roared the preacher. "The fist speaks! That is the sign!"

Joe laughed hoarsely and stepped aside as the second man approached with the board. A quick stab with the toe of his boot, the board broke, the man stumbled, and fell.

"Look!" the preacher shouted even louder. "The wood breaks before the truth!"

Joe shook his head and grinned crookedly. "Buddy, no matter what we do, that guy makes a sermon out of it."

The third man attacked Joe directly, fists flying, wild, untargeted. Joe let him come, dodged, and struck once with his elbow. The man slumped, gasping, dust on his face.

"Look!" cried the preacher, his arms raised to heaven. "The weak fall, the righteous stand!"

Buddy stomped toward him, his fists still warm. "One more word, and I'll preach back."

But the preacher didn't back down. His eyes gleamed, his voice vibrated. "Yes! Strike me! If you are the arm of the Lord, then break my ribs! If not, then you are a lie!"

Joe lowered his hat and grinned thinly. "Buddy... I think he really wants it."

Buddy growled. "Then I'll give him something to talk about in heaven."

Buddy stomped toward the box. The preacher spread his arms as if he wanted a hug. "Come! Strike me! Let the fist of the Lord fall upon my flesh!"

Buddy growled. "You want it like this? Then you'll get it."

He grabbed the man by the collar and pulled him down from the crate. His body was thin, almost light, but his mouth continued to scream, unbroken. "Look, brothers! I am being tested!"

Joe gave a thin grin and leaned against the fence. "This is the first time anyone has voluntarily booked Buddy's fist. I'm curious to see if he'll tip."

Buddy swung. A fist, right in the face. The preacher flew back, landing in the dust. Blood spurted, but the smile remained. "Yes! Yes! Harder! That's the voice of heaven!"

Buddy grumbled, kicked, a heavy boot into the ribs. The man doubled over, coughing up blood—and laughing, hoarse, mad. "Look! The ribs are singing! The bones are ringing!"

Joe shook his head and coughed up dust. "This isn't a sermon, buddy. It's an opera for lunatics."

Buddy picked the man up again, holding him in the air, his fists clenched. "One more word, and I'll break your jaw. Let's see how you preach without a mouth."

The preacher grinned bloodily. "Then my blood will preach. Then my bones will preach. The Word will never die!"

Buddy growled and hit him again, harder. His head hit the wooden fence, and the man slumped over, gasping for breath but still laughing.

Joe stepped closer, hands in his pockets. "I think, Buddy, this is one of those that makes more noise when they break."

Buddy dropped the man, heavy and dull. "Then let him preach in the dust. At least he'll listen."

The preacher lay on the ground, his laughter turning into gasps. But that misguided light still burned in his eyes.

The preacher lay in the dust, panting, his smile still fixed on his face. Blood dripped onto the ground, staining it dark.

The disciples, just a moment ago bruised, scrambled to their feet. One with a broken nose, one with shaking hands, one with dust in his mouth. They staggered, but they knelt again—this time not before the preacher. Before Buddy.

The one with the board muttered: "The fist... the fist is the word."

Buddy growled, clenching his fists. "If you keep talking, I'll knock you out again."

The one with the stone shook his head, blood running down his forehead. "No. We've tested you. You are stronger. You are true."

Joe laughed hoarsely, spitting dust. "See, Buddy. Now you're God. Do you want believers?"

Buddy took a step back, his eyes narrowed. "I want peace and quiet. And a pot of beans."

But the disciples crept closer, stretching out their hands toward him. Not to attack. To touch. To bless.

Joe grinned wearily, lowering his hat. "Look. First they want to hit us, now they want to touch us. Buddy, you're the first prophet with calluses on your knuckles."

The preacher coughed, blood in his mouth, but his voice still carried. "Look! They recognize it! They bow before the fist! So it is written!"

Buddy kicked the box that had just been the pulpit. It shattered and fell into the dust. "Nothing's written on it. Just dust and hunger."

The disciples looked at him, nodding as if his words had weight.

Joe snorted and laughed quietly. "Great. We've got a cult on our hands now. Congratulations, Buddy."

Buddy grumbled. "If they bring me beans, they can stay. If not, I'll kill them all."

The disciples crept closer. One laid his forehead in the dust, another grabbed Buddy's boot. The third murmured words that sounded like prayers but tasted more like fever dreams.

"Stay," one whispered. "Stay with us. Lead us."

Buddy pulled his foot away and grumbled. "I only lead horses. And even they sometimes go where I don't like."

Joe stood next to him, grinning crookedly. "Buddy, they want to keep you. Like a relic on two legs. If you're unlucky, they'll nail you to the next board tomorrow."

The disciples stood up, their eyes gleaming in the gloom. "You must not go," said one with a bloody lip. "If you go, the heavens will collapse."

Buddy clenched his fists and stomped forward. "Then let him fall. I don't care."

But they stood in the way. Wavering, broken, but with a faith stronger than bones.

Joe sighed, pulling his Colt halfway out of his holster. "Guys... I mean well, but we don't have time for pilgrimages."

The preacher on the ground coughed, bleeding, but his voice regained strength. "They don't belong to you! You belong to them! Don't let them go!"

The disciples nodded and came closer. Reverence turned into a grip, a grip into a clutch. One grabbed Joe's arm, one Buddy's shoulder.

Buddy grumbled, his muscles tensing. "Joe... I don't feel like playing messiah."

Joe grinned thinly, his voice raspy. "Then let's end the service, Buddy. With a fist."

The first one clung to Buddy like a child to its mother. Buddy shook him off, then struck. Short, hard. The man fell to the ground, and the dust absorbed him.

The second one was hanging on Joe's arm. Joe yanked him free, turned, and gave a quick elbow strike. Blood spurted, and the guy fell backward into the sand.

The third man came from behind and tried to grab Buddy's belt. Buddy turned around and struck him with his forehead. A dull, final blow.

The preacher on the ground laughed hoarsely, blood in his mouth. "Look! They strike like the Lord! They consecrate you with pain!"

Joe stepped closer, aimed his Colt next to the man's head, and fired into the dust. The bang echoed through the yard. "Be quiet. Your sky is empty."

The preacher laughed anyway, hoarsely, until it became a wheeze.

Buddy looked at him and snorted. "If he keeps talking, he'll just be talking to the stones."

The disciples lay scattered in the dust, dazed, broken, murmuring. They still prayed, but not to God. Only to the pain in their faces.

Joe lowered his hat and grinned wearily. "Buddy, we're the worst prophets the desert has ever seen."

Buddy stomped toward the exit. "Good. I don't want to be a prophet. I want beans."

And they left. Behind them was a courtyard filled with dust, blood, and words no one wanted to hear anymore. The sermon was over.

City under glass moon

They walked for hours through dust and rubble until the path widened and lamps appeared. No real lamps, only candles behind windows, a dim light barely enough to fill the alley.

And above it, the moon. Large, cold, round, like a pane of glass someone had leaned against the sky. It hung too close, too clear. Everything beneath it seemed trapped.

Joe stopped and raised his head. "See, buddy? That's not a moon. It's a lid. We're sitting in a jar."

Buddy trudged on, grumbling. "Glass or no glass. If there's a saloon in there, that's enough for me."

The city lay silent. No dogs, no laughter, no clinking of bottles. Just rows of houses, straight, almost too straight, as if someone had cut them out of the ground with a knife.

Joe grinned crookedly and put his hands in his pockets. "I don't like cities that are quieter than us. That never means anything good."

Buddy growled. "Quiet means no one shouts. I like it."

They walked down the main street. Windows glowed, but no one stood behind them. Doors were ajar, but no breath was heard behind them.

"City under glass," Joe muttered, "like a fly in a glass case. Looks beautiful, but stinks when you get close."

Buddy spat in the dust. "If the fly screams, I'll smash it. If not, I'll eat beans and go to sleep."

And they continued on, through the alleys, under the moon, which held everything still like a pane of glass.

The main street stretched like a line through dust and planks. Buddy walked heavily, his fists loose but ready. Joe slunk beside him, his hat low, his grin thin.

The windows still glowed dimly. Not a word, not a sound. But as they drew closer, Joe's eye caught sight of movement. Very slight. A curtain moving, though there was no wind. A shadow disappearing too quickly.

"See, buddy," he murmured. "This place isn't empty."

Buddy trudged on, grumbling. "If they want to stare, let them come out. I don't want to be stared at like a monkey in a cage."

They stopped in front of a two-story house. Light behind every window. Still quiet. Joe stepped closer and put his hand on the door. Warm. As if someone had just lit a fire behind it.

"I swear," he murmured, "there are people in there. But they're playing Gravestone."

Buddy kicked the door. It flew open, creaking. No scream, no shout, just a shadow scurrying along the wall.

Joe entered, his eyes narrowed, his grin crooked. "Good neighbors, buddy. They don't make music, they don't make drinks. They just do shadows."

There was a rustling sound behind them. Figures moved in the alley opposite. Quiet, heavy, like people who'd forgotten how to walk.

Buddy clenched his fists. "Now they're coming."

Joe drew his Colt, slowly, without haste. "Finally. I thought we'd just have to stare at windows all night."

They emerged from the alley. First three, then five, then ten. Men, women, children. All barefoot, all in the same gray dust coat, as if someone had stolen their paint.

They didn't speak. No cough, no throat clearing, not even a sigh. Just eyes. Dark, glassy, empty, and yet piercing.

Joe raised his hand, waved, and grinned crookedly. "Good evening, everyone. Nice city you have there. Is there a saloon, or are you just here to stare?"

No answer. Just the eyes.

Buddy grumbled, clenching his fists. "I don't like it when people stare and say nothing."

The people approached, step by step, in sync like a march, silently. Dust rose, but even that seemed quieter than usual.

Joe pulled the Colt slightly out of the holster and let it hang. "Buddy, it's like playing cards. Everyone keeps quiet until someone blinks."

A child stepped forward, no older than ten. He stopped directly in front of Buddy, looked up, his eyes black as coal. Not a word. Just a stare.

Buddy growled and bent down. "If you want to say something, say it. If not, get out of the way."

The child didn't blink. He raised his hand, very slowly, and pointed upward—to the moon.

Joe followed the finger, grinning wearily. "See, Buddy? Even the little ones know. Glass over our heads. We're locked in."

The crowd came closer, closer, closing the street. Not a word. Only silence and the moon like a disk above everything.

Buddy clenched his fists. "If they try to hold us down, I'll punch us free."

Joe nodded, pushing the Colt deeper into his hand. "Then we'll just make shards. Glass or faces, I don't care."

The crowd pressed closer together. Not a word. Just footsteps, steady, like drums without sound.

Joe grinned narrowly, still holstering his Colt. "Buddy, they want to touch us. Like cattle at a market."

The first ones were already close enough. Cold fingers rested on Buddy's arm, on Joe's shoulder. Gently, not firmly. But too many, too quiet.

Buddy snorted and ripped his arm free. "Hands off."

But they reached out again. This time two hands, three. A man placed his hand on Buddy's chest, as if trying to feel if there was a heartbeat. A woman touched Joe's face, as if checking if the skin was real.

Joe laughed dryly, his grin crooked. "See, buddy? They're looking to see if we're glass. Maybe they want to know if we're just shadows, too."

Buddy struck. Short, hard. A fist into the face of the man who had touched him. He fell back, silently, as if he had already been dead.

The crowd didn't flinch. No outcry, no murmur. Just more hands reaching for them.

Joe shrugged his shoulder and took a step back. "Buddy, they're not in pain. No sound. Just fingers. I hate fingers."

A child tugged on Buddy's belt, an old woman placed her hand on Joe's chest. Too gentle to be an attack, too cold to seem human.

Buddy growled deeply, his eyes hard. "Enough."

He swung his fist like a hammer, striking away the hands. People fell, others got up again, silent, relentless.

Joe raised his Colt, aimed high, and shot at the moon. The bang broke the silence, echoing like thunder in glass. People paused, their fingers dropped. They just stared, all at once, upward.

The moon hung, large, still, unmoved.

Joe grinned wearily. "See, buddy? The glass has ears."

The bang hung in the air for a long time. No echo from the mountains, no reverberation. Just a sound that remained trapped like a bell.

People stared up. Buddy too, and Joe with his crooked grin.

A shadow ran across the moon. Not a cloud, not a bird. A crack. Thin, almost invisible, but real.

"See, buddy," Joe muttered, "glass. I told you."

Buddy spat in the dust and clenched his fists. "If it's glass, I'll break it."

The people nodded, silently, all at once, as if they had the same thought. But they said nothing. No cheers, no cries of fear. Just stares.

Houses creaked. A beam broke, dust trickled from the walls. Shadows moved along the walls, faster now, as if they were finally running free.

Joe looked around, his grin still thin as smoke. "Buddy, this city won't last much longer. We've started something."

Buddy grumbled and took a step forward. "I always kick something. Otherwise it's not worth it."

The moon continued to tear. A second crack ran across the disk, as if a giant had scratched it with a fingernail.

People bowed their heads, some knelt, others just stood silently. But no one lifted a finger against Buddy & Joe.

Joe laughed hoarsely. "They pray to the glass. We don't pray. We hit."

Buddy growled. "Then let's get out of here before it comes down."

The second crack ran across the moon like a scar that would never heal. A third appeared next to it, thin as a hair, then another. The light grew colder. It sounded as if someone was breaking ice far above. No thunder, no storm—just the faint crack of something stretched too long.

The people on the street knelt lower. Some rested their foreheads on the dust. No one said a word. Buddy looked at them like a row of empty buckets. "If they pray, something's about to start falling," he grumbled.

"Then find a lid," said Joe, grinning narrowly. "We're standing in the wrong place for hail."

The cracking became a web, a network of fine sounds. Everywhere. Houses, signs, window panes. A "BARBER" sign cracked, the words migrating like fish behind glass. The air itself felt thin, as if someone had put the city in a balloon and pumped in too much air.

The first splinter fell. Tiny, harmless. It hit Buddy's shoulder and stuck, as if he were thirsty. Then the rain came. No water. Shards. Small, large, sharp, blunt. They fell silently, as if even the noise were forbidden.

Buddy ripped a door off its hinges and held it above his head. His hands tensed. The edge pinched his fingers. "Do we dare go for a walk now?" he growled.

Joe ducked under the makeshift blanket, hat pulled low, eyes alert. "Have you ever noticed, buddy... glass doesn't cut when it wants to. Sometimes it just sticks. That's worse."

He was right. The splinters didn't just sting. Some stuck to skin, coat, and beard, as if they wanted to take possession. On Buddy's forearm, they drew three thin

lines, clean, parallel, like lines in an account. A triangle remained stuck to Joe's cheek, like a seal.

"Don't touch them," said Joe. "If you pull them, they'll cut first."

"I touch what I want," growled Buddy – and didn't.

The crowd continued to barely move. Only their hands moved. They held them up, palms open, as if trying to catch the shards. Some held on tight, allowing themselves to be cut, and not a sound escaped their lips. Blood dripped onto the dust, forming small, dark islands.

"Offering," Joe murmured. "On the lid."

"We're not sacrificing anything." Buddy pushed the door forward. Splinters rattled against the wood. The street was covered in glassy rain, shop windows died in slow motion. The moon above received its fourth scar, then its fifth. It was now more crack than pane.

To the left stood a clock tower, too perfect for this city. The clock face gleamed, the hands pointed to twelve. They didn't move. A crack ran right through the twelve, cutting it into two cold crescents. Joe looked at it and grinned thinly. "Time never counted here."

"Only what you can hit counts," said Buddy. A sign came loose and landed next to them. GLASSWARE, it read. Irony without humor.

A gust of wind, without wind. The cracks above became lanes, entire fields in the pane gave birth to flakes. Shards fell like snow. The street dust suddenly became shiny, as if someone had wanted to shave the city. The mute ones stood in the middle of it, as if they were born for it.

"To the right," said Joe. He saw an arcade, three posts, a wooden roof. A gap, a shadow that looked like shelter. "If we get through there, maybe we'll get to the gap in the bell."

Buddy pushed, shoved, and stomped. The door shield whipped away the shards. Some pierced through anyway, stuck in the wood, glittering like stars on the plank. Joe held him by the coat and kept close.

Buddy paused briefly in front of a window. Behind the pane, a woman sat alone at a table. No face, just an outline, her hair tied in a bun, her hands folded. She

didn't move. But when Buddy looked, she nodded. Very slightly. A nod that meant nothing, yet everything. "Who is that?" he asked.

"Not an angel," said Joe. "Just someone who already knows how to wait."

The woman raised her hand and placed a finger on the glass as if she were about to write. The finger traced a circle, halfway, then stopped. The rest was a crack. "Chalk without chalk," Joe murmured. "Maybe Mary is everywhere there's glass."

"Mary's in a kitchen," Buddy grumbled. "And she's cooking." Then he moved on.

They reached the arcade. Shards slid across the roof like sand, collected at the edge, and fell in silent cascades. Beneath the wood, it felt like breathing air again. Buddy placed the door against the jamb, letting his fingers dangle briefly. His knuckles burned as if the specks of glass had tarnished them.

"Next?" asked Joe.

"Keep going," said Buddy. "As long as the lid doesn't break."

But the lid had other plans. A long, slow tone settled over the city. Not from the clock tower, not from a bell. From above. A tone like a pricked nerve. The disc above them took a final, deep crack. It ran from edge to edge, cutting the moon into two half-faces.

"If that thing falls now," said Joe, "we're like cucumbers in a jar."

"Then we'll fight our way out," said Buddy.

The sound continued. The moon didn't waver. Instead, in the distance, beyond the marketplace, a dark crack opened in the rim of the light. Not a gate, not a door. More like a hole in the glass—as if someone had pressed their thumb against the bell from the inside, tiring the material. There was no night beyond. Just less light.

"That way," said Joe without hesitation.

The crowd stood between them and the gap. Silent. Shards of glass on hair, blood on hands, their faces blank. When Buddy left the arcade, they didn't step aside. A woman raised her arm, pointed again at the moon, then at Buddy,

then placed her hand on her chest. An offer? A command? Nothing here had words.

Buddy looked at her. He said nothing. He just lifted the door higher and left. Joe followed, his Colt out now, not to shoot—just so his hand could hold something that still belonged to him.

They plowed through the crowd like two plows through silent snow. No complaints, no curses, just bodies giving way when wood pressed against them. Shards crackled under boots. The gap grew wider the closer they came. The sound above fell silent so suddenly that Joe staggered briefly.

“Now,” he said.

They stepped through the edge of the city, where glass no longer wanted to break. No resistance. Only a coldness that was impossible to breathe. Behind them remained the bell, with its moon and cracks. In front of them, nothing again—and a path that wasn't there before they took it.

Buddy paused for a moment, spitting out shards of food he hadn't even swallowed. "If I ever break a plate," he said, "I won't apologize."

Joe grinned crookedly, rubbing the cheek where the triangle was stuck. It came off, falling to the floor like an empty label. "The lid's open, buddy. Let's get out before she changes her mind."

They walked. Behind them, the rain continued, but more quietly. Before them lay the night, like a shed no longer occupied.

They let the bell shrink behind them, step by step, while the ground beneath their boots gave way again like real dust, not like a tabletop. The path wasn't one. It was formed by two men walking. To the left, rock, to the right, a hollow in which dead thistles stood like rusty nails.

“Do you hear it?” asked Joe.

"Nothing," said Buddy. "That's the best thing I've heard today."

A little farther on, Joe stopped. "Yes. There." He pointed behind them. The moon under the glass had already half disappeared from their view. Nevertheless, from there came this faint rattling, like someone turning a bowl on a table. It wasn't an alarm, not a shout. Just a residual noise that wouldn't stop because no one was there to turn it off.

Buddy didn't look back. "Let it clink. If a lid wants to ring, let it ring."

They passed an embankment where wind had settled. No joke: wind that had gotten stuck somewhere like a dress on a nail. As they passed, it ripped a hand's breadth off Buddy's coat and made the noise wind makes when it has no direction. Then it was gone.

"Do you notice," said Joe, "how the things behind us are suffocating? As if everything we leave behind no longer needs air."

"I need beans," said Buddy. "And something to beat, if necessary. Air comes naturally."

The path climbed slightly and curved past a rocky ridge. Beyond it lay a hollow in which a wagon stood. No horse, no human, no trace except old ruts. The wagon was covered with a tarp. The tarp shone as if it were wet, yet it was dusty. Joe tapped it with his finger. Hard. Not cloth. Scab. A dried-out crust that looked like cloth but felt like old leather.

"Old loot," Joe muttered. "Someone hid something and never retrieved it."

Buddy grabbed the edge and tore. The crust broke, cracked in large pieces, and fell silently. Beneath it lay crates. Crates and bottles. One was still half full, with clear contents that looked like water but smelled of nothing. Buddy unscrewed the cork and took a sip. He didn't flinch. "Tastes like air."

Joe grinned narrowly. "At least it's not like glass."

They found a bundle of fabric in a box – a coarse blanket, two shirts too big even for Buddy, and a worn apron with a name sewn into it with crooked stitches:**M.**

Buddy held the apron a second longer than necessary. Then he put it back, as if placing something on a coffin. "Go on."

They set off again. The night made no promises, and that was its kindest trait. Joe carried the Colt lower, not because of any danger, but because his hand had nothing else to believe in. Buddy rolled his shoulders as if they were doors that were becoming stiff.

As they reached the next hilltop, Joe stopped. "Up ahead," he said. "Do you see that?"

At the edge of the depression, where the ground sank into a basin of dark earth, stood a post. Not a gallows, not a signpost. Just a post. Something that might have once been a shirt fluttered on it. It sounded as if it were breathing. As they got closer, they saw that it was damp. Not from the fog. From the sky.

The first drop hit Buddy's forehead. Cold. Honest. A round trail ran through the dust like a small road. Joe looked up. There was no jar. No lid. Only sky, heavy and close. In the distance, the moon still glowed, torn, with its scars. Up here, only a black cloth hung, with nails stuck in it.

"Rain," said Joe. And there was something in his voice that was relieved, tired as he sounded. "Finally, something that falls because it wants to fall."

Buddy wiped his forehead, tasting the water on his knuckles. "Tastes like nothing," he said. "That's good."

The rain grew heavier. Not a downpour that overwhelms you. A true, gentle rain that makes things visible again by making everything wet: stone, coat, skin. The shards of glass that had been stuck to Buddy's sleeve slid off, clattered to the ground, and remained as dull stars.

"See?" said Joe. "Glass only has power as long as it sticks. The rain tires it out." He laughed softly, his grin crooked. "I could almost believe that heaven owes us something."

"Heaven doesn't owe anyone anything," said Buddy. "We owe each other beans."

They found enough dry sparks in the folds of the rocks beneath an overhang to make a small fire possible. Buddy stacked the thinnest twigs he could find, like someone who already sees the pot in his head. Joe knelt, struck the flint, sparks leaping and dying in his wet fingers. The rain didn't make it difficult; it just made it thorough. On the fifth attempt, it finally caught fire—a small, stubborn flame that looked as if it had no desire to burn, yet it stayed.

"Look," Joe murmured. "The two of us, fire, rain. Almost cozy."

"Almost," said Buddy. He pulled the old blanket from the wagon and laid it next to the fire. It smelled of sleep interrupted. They sat down. The heat came slowly, creeping into their fingers, into their words.

For a while, they said nothing. The rain made talking unnecessary. It said everything that needed to be said: that life goes on, that the dust won't win, that noise and silence are just two sides of the same knife.

"The city," Joe finally said, without raising his head, "had faces without voices. In front of it, money with voices, but without faces. In front of it, a train with hearts of bronze. And somewhere in the middle of it we stand, and you want beans."

Buddy nodded. "Because beans are neither. They have a face, and they don't talk."

Joe grinned, tiredly, genuinely. "When we get out, I'll build you a kitchen."

"You're not building anything," said Buddy. "You move faster than your shadow and lie slower than your mouth. I build. You eat."

The rain grew a little heavier, tackling individual, thick drops into the ceiling, drumming on Buddy's boottips. From the summit, a dark figure rolled down the slope—nothing more than a boulder that had come loose in the wet. It stopped just before the fire, puffed like an old animal, and lay there.

"You know what I'm hoping for?" said Joe. "For a completely ordinary morning. One where we go to a saloon that doesn't lie. A bartender with legs. A sheriff who whistles. A plate of beans and bacon. And then if someone says something stupid, we hit them. Simple as that."

"That's a good plan," said Buddy. "Stick to it."

"And you?"

"I'll stop you from messing it up."

They fell silent again. The fire consumed silently. From the distance, a rumbling sounded, like wagon wheels on stones—or like the memory of a rumbling. The moon under the glass was no longer visible. The sky above breathed more freely.

Joe half-drawn his Colt, looking at the weapon as if it were a knife to bread. "Tomorrow," he said. "Tomorrow I'll draw in the rain. Just because. For the elegance."

"If you knock over the pot," said Buddy, "you'll get one."

"I'll be careful." Joe put the Colt back in his holster and leaned against the rock. "I never pay attention. But maybe this time."

The rain drew threads that became wires in the firelight. You could have grasped them, had you had hands made of light. Buddy placed his large fingers closer to the flame. Scars emerged like little maps. Each scar a path they wouldn't walk again, but could, if necessary.

"We'll sleep here," said Buddy.

"We'll sleep here," Joe said. "And when the water wakes me up, I'll know I'm no longer under glass."

"Tomorrow morning," said Buddy, looking into the embers, "we'll find the kitchen."

"And if not?"

"Then I'll build it. From what's here. Stone, wood, rain."

Joe closed his eyes, leaving the tired grin on his face as if it were a lamp. "Then I'll eat double."

The rain continued. The fire held against it. The night held everything together, not because it had to, but because it could. Behind them, the landscape closed over the tracks, as if two men had no feet. Ahead of them lay a line that no one had drawn.

And somewhere between drops and embers, two sentences hang in the air like laundry between houses: **We're out.**

And just behind it, more quietly: **Not quite yet.**

Joe pulls in the rain

The rain wasn't loud, but it didn't stop. Drops pounded against stone, earth, fur, and skin until everything became equally heavy.

Joe stood up, his hat pulled low over his face, his grin tired but still there. "Told you, buddy. I'm going to pull in the rain. Just because no one else is."

Buddy crouched by the fire, stirring the embers with a branch as if searching for beans that weren't there. "Go ahead. But if you knock over the pot, I'll knock you over."

Joe laughed softly, turning the Colt in his hand. Drops slid down the barrel, beading up like little lies. "Drawing in the rain is like playing cards in the dark. You can't see anything, but it feels honest."

He stanced himself, raised his weapon to shoulder height, lowered it, and drew faster than anyone could blink. The bang shattered the rain, and the smoke rose like a second cloud.

A drop fell onto the tap and hissed. Joe grinned crookedly. "See? Even water can't extinguish bullets."

Buddy didn't even look up. "Don't shoot at water. It always comes back."

Joe twirled the Colt and blew over the barrel as if it were a ritual. "Sometimes you have to do things that don't achieve anything. So you know you can still do it."

The rain continued. The forest now smelled of earth, metal, and a little bit of gunpowder. Buddy moved closer to the fire, his shoulders hunched. "When you're done, Joe, come back. I don't want a lecture about the rain."

Joe put the Colt back and laughed harshly. "Then I won't give you one. I'll just give you proof: I'll still pull the trigger, even if the sky pukes."

Buddy grumbled. "As long as you find beans afterward, I don't care."

The rain didn't stop – it grew heavier. Drops now thudding like nails, so steady that at some point you couldn't distinguish the rhythm anymore. Everything shone. Everything was sticky.

Joe was still standing, his Colt loosely in his hand. He spun it, let it slide, and drew it again, faster than his shadow, but slower than the rain. He grinned nonetheless. "Speed is only relative, buddy. In the rain, water always wins."

Buddy continued to crouch by the fire. The wood hissed, fighting, each spark a small rebellion against the rain. "Then don't pull against the rain," he grumbled. "You'll lose. Pull against what's in the rain."

Joe looked up. The forest was barely a forest anymore. Everything was a veil, everything blurred, as if someone had placed a plate of glass across it, this time without the moon. Shadows moved between the trees, slow, formless. Maybe people, maybe just trees being pushed by the wind.

Joe laughed harshly. "You mean I'm supposed to move faster than shadows? They don't have bones, buddy."

"Then hit those who have bones."

Joe nodded, raised his Colt, and fired again. The bang was drowned out by the roar. No one screamed, no one fell. Only the smoke, which tried to rise, was immediately quelled by the rain.

His hat was soaked, his coat heavy, his boots covered in mud. Nevertheless, he grinned. "You know, buddy? I could stand in a lake, up to my neck, and I'd still pull faster than my shadow."

Buddy finally looked at him, his eyes hard, his beard wet. "And what's the point?"

Joe grinned crookedly. "Nothing. And that's the point."

The rain continued, never pausing, never showing mercy. It killed the dust, drowned the traces, erased the shards of glass that still clung to the ground. And somewhere in the gray, something moved again—slowly, heavily, not rain, not wind.

Buddy stood up and growled. "Now pull hard, Joe. This time it counts."

They emerged from the gray like statues that had finally found their feet. Three, four, five men. Old hats, long coats, rifles, revolvers. Everything wet, everything shiny with rust. They didn't speak, they didn't cough. Only the rain spoke.

Joe grinned crookedly, his Colt loosely in his hand. "There you go, buddy. Finally, an audience."

Buddy growled and took a step forward. "Don't let them get too close. I don't like hitting people in the water."

The men stopped, not ten paces away. One slowly raised his hand and pointed at Joe. Not a word. Just a gesture.

Joe laughed dryly, the drops clinging to his teeth like crystals. "You want to know, buddy. Who's faster—me or the rain."

He stanced himself, letting the Colt hang low. Rain ran down the barrel, dripping from the trigger. Buddy looked at him, said nothing. Joe pulled.

The bang was dull, almost smothered. But the bullet did what it was supposed to. The first man fell backward, heavily, and the water immediately absorbed his blood.

The others stirred. Two raised rifles, one a Colt. But they were too slow. Joe drew again, twice, faster than you could blink in the rain. Two more bodies toppled over, thudded into the mud.

Buddy stomped through the wetness and punched the fourth man with his fist. A crack was audible even through the rain. The man fell, his rifle flying into the mud.

The last one was still standing, staring, his face blank, as if he himself were already a piece of broken glass. Joe grinned and lowered his Colt. "Leave him alone, buddy. He already knows who's faster."

The rain continued to pour down. The bodies lay still, only the water still moving them, like toys no one wants anymore.

Buddy wiped his beard and snorted. "Now you've pulled in the rain. Satisfied?"

Joe put away his Colt and grinned thinly. "Not satisfied. But alive. And that's enough."

The bodies lay there like logs, the rain pounding on them, washing away the blood and dirt. For a moment, everything was silent. Only water, only drops, only mud.

Then the first one moved. An arm, heavy as a wet branch. He turned, sat up, his head hung to one side, the hole in his forehead still open.

Joe half-drawn his Colt, his eyes narrowed. "Buddy... did you see that?"

Buddy grumbled and stomped closer. "I see what I see. Rain doesn't make men."

But the second man was already standing. Slowly, swaying, but standing. The third man pulled his head up as if held up by an invisible thread. The fourth man reached for his rifle, even though his ribs were crushed like broken boards.

"Damn," Joe muttered. "The rain lifts her up. Like it's her soul."

Buddy growled, clenching his fists. "Souls are screaming. This is just water."

The men came closer, mud on their boots, water in their mouths. Not a word, not a scream, only the drops falling from them.

Joe grinned crookedly, even though it was thin. "In dry conditions, I can move faster than my shadow. But against water? That's a different story."

He fired. A shot into the chest of the first. The body fell, then got up again, even slower, but upright.

Buddy stomped forward and struck. A fist to the jaw, so hard it cracked bones. His head swiveled unnaturally far, but his body remained still. Water poured from his mouth like silent laughter.

"You see," Buddy grumbled, "no people. Just rain on skin."

Joe spat and raised his Colt. "Then we'll dry them. Bullet by bullet."

Buddy struck again, a plank of fist directly into the man's ribcage. He buckled, fell into the mud—and got back up, water pouring from his pockets like oil.

"It's no good," Buddy growled. "You can't empty them."

Joe fired two bullets into the next. The blood was long gone, leaving only mud and water splashing. The body swayed, fell, and picked itself up. "And I can't empty them. Buddy, they're not full—they're wet."

They stood back to back, the rain pelting down, the men crawling closer. Each step heavy, yet inexorable.

Buddy looked back at the fire. The small flame struggled beneath the tent they had tented. Tiny, stubborn. "Fire," he muttered. "Fire eats water."

Joe laughed harshly and shook his head. "Not in this rain, buddy. Any embers will drown faster than you can chew beans."

Buddy stomped over to the fire and pulled up the remaining glowing wood. Sparks flew, then were immediately extinguished by the rain. He held the branch aloft, yelling, "Then I'll die."

The men paused briefly. Water dripped from their hats, their hips, and their bullet wounds. They knew no fear. But they knew fire.

Joe pulled his hat down and grinned crookedly. "See, buddy. Even rain men don't like light."

He grabbed the second branch, which was still glowing, and swung it in a circle. Flames hissed, small but real. The men retreated, as slowly as they had come.

"Not much," Joe muttered, "but they notice. Fire is always stronger than shadow."

Buddy stomped forward, waving the branch, yelling into the rain. "Come on if you want! I'll burn you dry!"

And for a moment, rain and fire stood against each other. The men in the mud stopped, the water continued to drip, but they didn't move.

The circle lasted only seconds. Then it broke. The men in the rain moved again, heavily, but now purposefully. One approached Buddy head-on, two crawled sideways toward Joe. The embers in their hands hissed, small against the rush.

Buddy yelled, ramming the burning branch forward. The body caught fire—not much, just around the edges, like a cigarette in the dark. But the man didn't scream; he kept grabbing anyway. Buddy punched him with his fist, and only when the flames reached his chest did he slump down, steaming in the mud.

Joe turned, gun in one hand, glowing branch in the other. He fired, a dull thud, and immediately afterward, he swung the fire like a whip. The first attacker stumbled back, the second stumbled forward, caught in the face by the flame. Smoke mingled with rain.

"You see, Buddy," Joe gasped, "you have to hit them twice—first with lead, then with fire."

Buddy kicked the next guy over and stomped his head into the mud. The fire flickered in his fist, but the rain bit it down. "Then hit it faster, Joe! Otherwise we'll drown!"

The rain grew even heavier. Drops drummed like nails, sparks died, flames extinguished. But every blow from Buddy, every shot from Joe held the wet figures back, urging them on, even as they repeatedly got up.

Joe spat, water running down his cheek like blood. "This isn't a fight, buddy. This is a fight between heaven and hell, and we're the idiots in the middle."

Buddy grumbled and hit again. "Then we'll hit both sides."

And so they stood, back to back, fire stub in one hand, steel in the other, holding the line against men who were more rain than flesh.

The fire burned once more, then died down. A final hiss, a small spark, and then only smoke, pushed into the mud by the rain. Buddy held the charred branch like a weapon that could no longer do anything. Joe put the Colt back—not because he was finished, but because every bullet against water had become useless.

The men from Regen were still standing. Drops ran down their faces, riddled with holes, broken, empty. For a moment, it looked as if they were about to attack again. But then something else happened.

The rain itself began to swallow them. First their hands, then their shoulders. Skin dissolved, coats turned liquid, hats fell into puddles and dissolved like sugar. A face remained frozen for a while, still, silent, then it melted like chalk beneath the streams.

Buddy growled deeply. "What water does, it takes back."

Joe nodded, his grin thin and truly tired. "Like gold. Never belongs to just one person."

The rain didn't let up, but the street was empty. Just mud, just puddles, just the two of them. No bodies, no weapons. As if nothing had happened except the wetness.

Buddy dropped the branch and sat down heavily on a rock. Drops ran through his beard, making him look like a well that didn't even know who it belonged to. "I need warmth," he murmured. "And a pan."

Joe laughed softly, almost hoarsely. "And beans. I bet you can already smell them in your dreams."

Buddy looked at him and snorted. "When I dream, I dream about beating. Beans are for waking up."

Joe sat down next to them, hat pulled low, back bent. The rain leveled everything: mud, skin, iron. They were just two dark lumps holding up the sky.

"Buddy," he said after a while, "I pulled in the rain. And I'm still alive. That's enough."

Buddy looked into the distance, where the rain formed a line of puddles that continued in an unknown direction. "Then get up again tomorrow, Joe. Maybe you'll be moving in the sunshine."

Joe grinned crookedly, his eyes half-closed. "Faster than my shadow. Even in the sun."

The rain continued to fall, but the night had lost its bite.

The Baron washes his hands

The Baron stood in his room like a peacock, unapplauded. The rain beat against the panes, but he had a basin of clean water brought to him. Not rainwater. Not mud. Pure, still water that looked as if it had never touched earth.

He dipped his fingers in, turning them slowly, rubbing them together as if they were polishing coins. Drops ran over his rings, fell back into the basin, and sounded like little lies.

"Dirt makes you poor," he muttered, "but water keeps me clean."

His servant stood silently in the background, hat in his hands, as if he knew that every word would dirty the soap.

The Baron washed thoroughly: his fingernails, his palms, all the way up to his wrists. He did it as if it weren't a matter of hygiene, but rather a confession that no one was allowed to hear.

"They're fighting with the rain outside," he said quietly, "but I'm staying here. Clean. Clear. Untouchable."

He raised his hands, letting the water drip back into the basin in long strands. No trembling. No doubt. Just a man who believed guilt could be washed off like mud from a boot.

Behind him, the fire crackled in the fireplace. But he didn't turn around. He just looked at his hands. White. Clean. But not really.

"As long as they fight," he murmured, "the city is mine. And if they die, I'll wash them away, too."

There was a soft knock, so soft that the rain outside was louder. The Baron sighed and dried his fingers with a white cloth that was already covered in gray shadows that weren't visible at first glance.

"Come in," he said without looking up.

The door opened, creaking like an old tooth. A man entered, thin, dripping wet, his coat heavy, his hat in his hand. His gaze immediately darted to the basin, to the rings on the Baron's fingers. He didn't speak until the floor had already formed a small puddle of him.

"You're alive," the man said. No beating around the bush. No politeness.

The Baron raised his eyebrows, as if it were nothing more than a stain on his cuff. "Who?"

"Those two. The fat one and the fast one."

A brief shadow passed over his face. Then he smiled thinly, a smile that had no heart. "Of course they're alive. Men like that don't die in the rain. They're too... dirty for that."

The messenger took a step closer, uncertain. "They say they wrestled the men down in the rain. With fire."

The Baron snorted and placed his hands back in the water. "Fire and rain. Two peasant weapons. I have water that is pure. Fire and rain are for those who dig in the dust."

He rubbed his hands again, slowly, as if he could wash the news away. "And what do you do now?"

The messenger shrugged. "We don't know. But they're on their way. And they're getting closer."

The Baron smiled again. Broadly, but empty. "Then let them come. I have enough water. I'll wash away their traces, too."

The messenger stood there like a wet dog, hat in his hands, coat clinging to his skin like a second skin. The water dripped from his hair, ran down his collar, and collected on the floor. The Baron slowly turned his hands in the basin, as if the drop on the parquet floor were worse than what was happening outside.

"You see, my friend," he said in that thin voice that cuts without rising loudly, "that's the difference between them and me. They fight in the rain. They stink of smoke and mud. And I..."—he raised his hands, letting the water drip from his fingers—"I stay clean."

The messenger swallowed. "Clean... yes." His eyes flickered briefly to the rings, to the cloth, which was already stained.

The Baron noticed and smiled coldly. "Do you doubt it?"

"No, sir."

"Good." The Baron stood up, walked slowly to the fireplace, and placed the basin on the mantelpiece. "For purity is non-negotiable. He who stays clean dominates those who become dirty."

He turned around and looked at the messenger as if he were a shoe mat. "And you—you're dripping. Your filth is seeping through the floor. Every drop you drop here is a drop of guilt."

The messenger lowered his head. "Forgive me, sir."

"Forgive?" The Baron laughed softly, a sound like breaking glass. "I don't forgive. I wash."

He reached for the cloth again, wiping his hands, even though they were long dry. "Go. And before you come back, find water. Pure water. Not rain. Not mud. I want your shadow to be clean when it walks through my door."

The messenger nodded hastily, tipped his hat low, and stepped back as quickly as he could without appearing to be fleeing.

The Baron stopped and looked at the pool. The water was clear, but at the bottom, there was a glimmer of darkness—as if the rain had found its way through the door.

The Baron didn't bat an eyelid. He simply used new water, a new cloth. Always new. Always clean. At least for him.

The Baron sat again, his hands folded over the basin as if they were bones on an altar. The water was clear enough to reflect his face—but not clear enough to smooth the lines. He stared into it for a long time, until he found himself looking tired.

"Gold shines," he murmured, "because it's clean. No spot, no blemish. That's why it's mine. Because I hold it like my hands—clean. They run into tunnels, beat, sweat, die. I wash. And that's why it's mine."

He rubbed his fingertips together as if they were coins. "The city believes that you hold power with guns. That you win with fists. But bullets leave holes. Fists leave blood. Water washes both away. And whoever has the water has the final say."

The fire crackled in the fireplace, sparks flew, but he ignored it. His gaze remained on the basin, on the drop, which still shimmered darkly, no matter how much he stirred it.

"They're coming," he murmured. "That fat one, that fast one. Two scoundrels in the rain. They think that makes them strong. But when they walk through my door, they're already dirty. And dirt kneels before it dies."

He reached for the cloth again, wiping his hands, even though they were long dry. It was a compulsion, a ticking, that held him still.

"I am the Baron," he said quietly, as if reminding himself. "And the Baron is not to blame. Blame lies with those who die."

Outside, the rain pounded on the window. A drop found its way through the roof and fell directly into the pool. It circled, clouding the water for a moment. The Baron stared into it, gritting his teeth.

"Everything can be washed," he whispered. "Everything."

The door opened without knocking. The Baron flexed his fingers briefly, then let them sink back into the water. Only one person dared to enter like that without risking death.

The bartender. Wet from the rain, but not melted like the others. Her hair was flat against her head, her eyes hard as glass that wouldn't break. She wore no apron, no rag. Just her posture, straight and firm.

"It's so clean here," she said, her voice hoarse from the smoke. "Nicer than outside. Outside, every drop becomes an enemy."

The Baron didn't look up. He continued rubbing his hands as if she were merely a shadow. "Outside, the filth belongs to the people. In here, the purity belongs to me."

The bartender approached, dripping quietly onto the carpet, unconcerned. "Purity," she repeated, "is cheap when you buy it. It only costs water. But dirt—that costs blood. That's the difference."

Now he raised his head, his eyes thin and cold. "You come to my house to preach to me?"

She grinned wearily. "No. I'm coming because you think guilt can be washed away. But water lies. It dries. And then you see what's underneath."

The Baron reached for the cloth and wiped his hands, even though they were already shining. "I'm not to blame."

The bartender stopped, right in front of the pool. She stared into the water, into the dark drop that wouldn't dissolve. "Then explain this to me."

He followed her gaze, saw the shadow in the pool. His face twitched for a heartbeat, then he smiled thinly. "Just a stain. A drop of rain. Nothing lasting."

The bartender nodded slowly. "That's how all stains start."

"Go," said the Baron, his voice sharper than before. "This is no place for you."

The bartender didn't move. Drops ran from her chin, dripping onto his carpet, forming small dark dots. She grinned, cold and tired at the same time.

"Everything is my place, Baron. I see who drinks. I see who pays. And I see who washes their hands too often."

He straightened up, folded the cloth neatly, as if order could banish them. "You don't deserve to stand here. Your place is at the bar."

"My place is where truth sticks," she said, her eyes fixed on his. "And it sticks more here than out in the rain."

The Baron clenched his jaw. "I have no truth. I have water."

"And yet," she said quietly, "they're coming. The fat one. The fast one. They're on their way. They've survived the rain where your men have risen and fallen again. They're not washing anything away. They're beating it down. That's the difference."

For a moment, something twitched in his face, barely visible. Then he laughed, thin, dry. "Two tramps. Two handfuls of dirt. You think they could sully the Baron?"

The bartender leaned forward, her voice flat. "Dirt stays. Even underwater. And when they reach you, Baron, your white hands will be the first thing they touch."

The Baron slapped his hand against the basin. The water sloshed, the dark droplets mingling with it, staining the mirror gray. His gaze remained cold. "When they come, I'll be cleaner than ever."

The bartender straightened up and slowly turned toward the door. "Clean? No. Just wet."

The door closed behind her. No bang, no echo. Only the rain outside, continuing its steady drumming. The Baron stood alone.

He looked into the pool. The water was no longer clear. The dark drop had spread, shimmering gray, obscuring every reflection. His face was now only a shadow in it, distorted, torn.

He reached for the carafe and poured more water. The gray remained. He washed his hands, rubbing them until his skin turned red. Again. And again. Drops leaped, ran across the cloth, leaving streaks.

"Everything can be washed," he murmured, faster now, more restlessly.
"Everything."

But no matter how much water he added, the gray remained. It crept into his fingers, into the grooves of his skin. His nails darkened, as if the dirt was coming from within.

He rubbed harder, gritted his teeth. "Clean. Pure. I am the Baron. I am..."

The cloth ripped. A long thread hung from his fist, wet and stained. He threw it into the fire. It hissed, stank, and smoked black.

The Baron reached for the next cloth and repeated the process. Hands in the basin, rubbing, wiping. But the more he did, the more the water became colored.

Finally, he stopped, his hands in the basin, his gaze blank. Outside, there was no thunder in the sky; it was just rain. But in the water, he saw two shadows—wide, narrow, side by side.

The fat one. The fast one.

He blinked. The shadows remained.

"Then come," he whispered, his fingers continuing to move in circles. "I'm waiting. I'm clean."

But the water didn't laugh. It remained silent, murky and gray, swallowing the purity drop by drop.

Pan as a peace offering

The rain had cleared, leaving only the dirt clinging heavily to boots and the sound of drops falling from branches like belated bullets.

Buddy pulled the pan out of his saddlebag and placed it on a stone. The iron was old, blackened, with cracks that no one mended anymore. But it held. Always.

Joe grinned and sat down next to him, his hat pulled low, his eyes tired. "There it is again. Your diplomacy."

Buddy threw in strips of bacon, which immediately sizzled. Grease splattered, smelling of life. Then beans, thick, heavy, just right.

"Talking doesn't help," Buddy grumbled. "But beans... beans bring peace."

The smoke rose, mingling with the haze that still hung in the forest. Joe peered into it, his eyes bright, his grin crooked. "You know, Buddy, maybe this is the only weapon we've ever needed. No Colts, no fists. Just a pan of grease."

Buddy stirred, the iron crunched. "Colts are scary. Fists are painful. Beans fill you up. And when you're full, you hit slower."

They ate in silence. Spoon against iron, drops against leaves. The forest paused, as if in respect for the meal.

After a while, Joe put down his spoon and leaned back. "When we reach town, buddy... we should put some beans on first. Maybe they'll put the Colts away on their own."

Buddy snorted and stuffed another spoonful into his mouth. "And if not?"

Joe grinned. "Then we'll beat them until they want beans."

The bacon had survived the night, but the fire hadn't. Buddy blew into it, adding wood until the embers flickered again. The smell spread, thick, sweet, greasy.

Joe grinned and looked around. "I bet, Buddy, that smell will bring company. Better than any sermon."

He was right. There was a cracking sound between the trees. Footsteps, cautious, but not quiet enough. Three figures, soaked like everything else. Men, without uniforms, without insignia. Faces like boards, tired, hungry.

They stood at the edge of the fire, sniffing like dogs. One cleared his throat, then said: "Smells like beans."

Joe laughed dryly. "Your nose works. Sit down before Buddy decides the pan is just for the two of us."

Buddy stirred lazily, his shoulders broad, his eyes tired. "I don't like sharing."

The men exchanged glances, but sat down anyway. The fire crackled, the pan sizzled. One spoon was enough for five. No gold, no weapons, just beans.

"So," said Joe, grinning crookedly, "here's the deal: You eat with us. In return, you don't pull any Colts today. It's called a peace treaty, only without the paperwork."

One of the strangers nodded immediately, picked up the spoon, blew, and swallowed. The others followed. Sounds of swallowing and smacking filled the forest.

Buddy grumbled. "Beans solve more fights than bullets."

Joe raised his eyebrows. "And if they don't, we'll beat them until they get it."

No one laughed. But everyone ate. And that was enough.

The pan was soon half empty, and conversation didn't begin until everyone was no longer hungry. One of the strangers dug his spoon into the earth and sighed, heavy as a sack. "You're going to El Dorado, aren't you?"

Joe grinned crookedly. "Maybe. Maybe we'll just go somewhere where the beans are better."

The man didn't laugh. "In there... everything belongs to the Baron. Even the rain, if he wants it."

Buddy continued chewing, not speaking. He let the bacon crunch between his teeth as if it were a bone.

Another stranger looked into the fire. "He who digs something, doesn't dig for himself. He who drinks something, doesn't drink alone. The Baron washes everything. Including you, if you're not careful."

Joe tilted his head, his grin still intact. "Washing sounds clean. But I don't like men who clean their hands more often than they dirty them."

The strangers were silent for a moment. Then the first one said: "They say he has basins full of water. Clear as glass. He puts his hands in when there's blood on them. And the blood disappears. As if it were never there."

Buddy finally growled, his voice deep. "Blood never disappears. It stays in your fist."

Silence. Only the fire. Only beans.

Joe leaned back, tipped his hat back. "Thanks for the sermon, friends. You ate, you're still alive. That means you made a better deal today than most."

The strangers nodded, slowly, full, heavy. They knew that the meal was also a warning: Anyone who sits around the fire owes something.

The pan was empty. Only fat glistened on the bottom, and the fire crackled as if it had just eaten itself.

Buddy laid the spoon across the edge and looked at the strangers. "So. You've eaten. And you're alive. But remember one thing: beans aren't for everyone."

The men were silent, hands in their laps, eyes on the ground.

Joe grinned, lowering his hat. "What Buddy means is: If we hear you give the Baron a finger, you'll never get another spoon from us. Not even the burnt ones on the rim."

One raised his head hesitantly. "But the Baron... he'll take everything from us anyway. We have no choice."

Buddy grumbled, his voice deep as thunder. "Yes. You always have the choice of who you give the belly to. The Baron or yourself."

Joe leaned back, his grin crooked. "And now you've eaten with us once. That's a commitment. Call it a paperless contract. We'll stick to it. But heaven forbid we hear otherwise."

The strangers nodded quickly, like schoolchildren. One wanted to say something, but Buddy just raised his hand. "Enough. Go. Leave the pan."

They stood up, quietly, and stepped back into the forest. Footsteps in the mud, then only drops again.

Buddy watched them go, then reached for the pan and wiped away the last traces of grease with a piece of bread. "Peace lasts as long as the pan is full."

Joe grinned. "And when it's empty, buddy, there'll be more work for your fists."

They didn't pick up the pan until the last echo of footsteps had faded. The forest stood silent, only drops still falling from leaves to the ground, as if the rain had left its mark. Buddy wiped the soot off with a tuft of grass. It didn't clean it, but the pan shone in two places like a benevolent eye.

"Go," he said.

Joe was already standing there, hat pulled low, coat open, grinning like a slash. "Into town, then. The Baron has water. We have fat."

"And fists," Buddy grumbled, hanging the pan on the saddle pommel. The iron clanged softly against metal. A sound like patience.

The path stretched in long, wet ruts. Puddles stood still, as if waiting for a boat. The air smelled of damp wood, yesterday's gunpowder, and just a moment ago's bacon. A good mix, Joe thought.

"The Baron," he said after a while, "washes until his fingers are white. Do you know what that does to men?"

"It makes them soft."

"Yes. And soft quickly becomes thin. Thin tears. You just have to pull long enough."

Buddy nodded, as if the wood within him agreed. "I can pull."

They came to a wider path that almost resembled a road. Tracks of wagon wheels, old hoofbeats, a small flag of mud in the middle like a tongue. At the edge stood a dead acacia tree. Crouching beneath it was a boy, maybe twelve years old. He was holding a pot that had once been black and now smelled of rust. His eyes were large enough to take in the entire forest.

"Are you hungry?" Joe asked, as if they still had something left.

The boy nodded. He said nothing. Those who were very hungry spared words.

Buddy lifted the pan from the saddle and held it at an angle. A streak of grease ran like a river. He tore a piece of bread from the bag, wiped the floor, and gave it to the boy. The boy bit into it not greedily, but with dignity. Buddy liked that.

"Who do you belong to?" asked Joe.

"No one," said the boy, chewing. "But if I go to the city, the Baron is mine. That's what they say."

"Then don't go in today," said Buddy.

The boy nodded. He was smarter than his pot.

They continued on. The closer they got to El Dorado, the less forest stood in their way. Fences appeared that deterred more than held. An archway made of two crooked posts and a board that read MALZ, although no one knew who Malz was anymore. Behind them, fields where nothing grew but stones.

Joe tapped the board. "Lucky he who still has names."

"Lucky he who has beans," said Buddy.

"Let's say both."

At the end of the field stood a hut, half shed, half dream of order. A man was leaning inside, his coat too thin, his rifle too heavy. He had the face of a calculator who doesn't do arithmetic well.

"Customs," he said without looking up.

"How are you paying?" asked Joe.

The man blinked as if someone had thrown salt in his eye. "Excuse me?"

"You demand a toll," Joe explained kindly, "so you pay for the right to demand. It's the custom on our roads. A plate for a plate."

Buddy lifted the pan and tapped the edge with his spoon. The clay rolled, full. "We're cooking. You're smiling. Everyone's happy."

The man looked at the iron, then at Buddy, then at Joe's hat. He thought. Thinking was exhausting on duty. "I'm... on duty."

"Then you eat quickly," said Buddy, "and you're still on duty. That's what the smart ones do."

The man looked over their shoulders as if there were a rule behind them. The forest gave him none. He sighed. "Do you have any bacon?"

Buddy nodded. "A little."

"And a spoon?"

"Two."

"Then..." The man put down the rifle as if it were a wet dog that needed rest.
"Then I won't charge a toll."

They built a fire in a hollow where the wind was tired. Buddy cut bacon, the spoon found paths that only spoons can find. The man left his hat where it was and sat down. He ate the way men eat after no one has given them anything for a long time: not greedily, but seriously.

"The Baron is drawing water from our cellars," he finally said. "He says it's clean. Whoever wants it pays. Whoever doesn't pay gets rain. And rain is expensive in this area."

Joe grinned. "How much does rain cost?"

"Your back," said the man. "And your nights."

Buddy nodded, as if someone were throwing wood inside. "The Baron does the washing. We cook. Everyone has their religion."

"And yours?" The man looked from Buddy to Joe and back again. "You two... are the ones people are whispering about? The fat one and the fast one?"

Joe looked at Buddy. Buddy looked at the pan. "Maybe," he said.

The man considered the words. He pushed the empty plate forward. "Then the first thing to make noise in the city is the kitchen. People react more slowly when there's a smell. Even the Baron pauses for a moment when Fett sings."

"Good advice," said Joe.

"No advice," said the man, standing up. "Just hunger, which has learned to speak." He picked up his rifle, which again weighed too much, and nodded to Buddy. "If there's trouble, I ate well today. That'll keep me strong until evening."

They left him behind, with greasy fingers and in a better mood. The pan hung on the saddle again, and the path became a road, and the road led to a wall that pretended to be a wall. Two more men stood there. One with a pipe without tobacco. The other with a stare without reason.

"Closed," said the one with the pipe.

"Because?" asked Joe.

"Inspection."

"What is being inspected?"

"We."

"And who inspects you?"

The man raised his pipe as if that were answer enough.

Buddy stepped forward. "We want to cook."

The two looked at each other as if someone had spoken Spanish. "Cooking?"

"Beans. Bacon. A pot of peace. We'll put the pan out there, and everyone who doesn't have a Colt in their hand will get a spoon. That's how you start a day that shouldn't end badly."

The Pipe Man thought about it. The Eye Man looked. Finally, the first one shrugged. "I don't care. But the Baron..."

"The Baron is doing the washing," Joe chimed in. "Let him. We'll do the dishes afterward."

The gate opened. Not far. Just enough for two men and a pan to fit through. It squeaked like a bad song.

El Dorado lay inside like a dog pretending to sleep. Alleys that ran in the same direction for too long. Windows that refused to reveal what lay beyond. A fountain in the square, and next to it two barrels with lids. On one, written in chalk: **Just clear** The other one was empty. There was nothing written on it.

Buddy stopped at the well. He smelled the water. It smelled of nothing. That made him suspicious.

"You line up here," said Joe, tapping a spot where the wind swayed back and forth, as if unsure of what it wanted. "And I'll go down the market and invite people. Whoever comes, eats. Whoever leaves, stays outside."

"Who's moving?"

"Colts. Knives. Trouble." Joe grinned. "I can be friendly."

Buddy placed the pan on a low curb that had seen many shoes. He lit a fire. He did it with the composure of a man who had raised his fists a thousand times and a spoon a thousand and one times. Add bacon, top with beans, and let the fat do the talking. The scent crept between houses like someone who knows how to open a lock without a key.

People stopped, first two, then five, then Enough. No noise. Just noses. An old woman reached into the air as if trying to capture the smell. A boy with dirty knees tiptoed closer, as if the sound in the pan were a mass. A man with a shirt that was too clean remained by the barrel. **Just clear**stand and acted as if he were there by chance.

"Friends," said Joe, as if he were the tongue of the pan, "today the rule is: whoever has their hands free gets something. Whoever has their hand on their gun gets nothing. We only have two spoons and five eyes; we can't see everywhere, but we still notice."

A few laughs, a few furrowed brows. No one drew. It's hard to hold a gun when your gut is listening.

Buddy scooped. The first spoonfuls went to the littlest ones. Then to the older ones. Then to those who were breathing too fast. He made the rules in his head, and his mind wasn't complicated: those who needed it first.

The man with the too-clean shirt stepped forward. His beard was so well-groomed you could smell the barber. "In the Baron's name," he said, "no open flames, no—"

Buddy wordlessly held out the spoon. The man paused. The spoon steamed. Something in his face twitched, and his air of importance cracked. He took the spoon, hesitantly. He blew, tasted. His expression briefly became human, then orderly again. "Just today," he murmured, stepping back.

"Look," whispered Joe. "Purity tastes like nothing. Fat tastes like everything."

The barrel **Just clear**stood there like a threat. People walked over, dipped cups, and drank cautiously, as if it were costing money that didn't belong to them. Some frowned. Water without taste is like a promise without a handshake. It fills, but it doesn't warm.

The pan did what it always did: it focused its breath, steadyed its hands, and brought its eyes down to the same level. An old man who hadn't looked at

anyone in years did so now: he looked at Buddy and nodded. No big words, just respect among men who had eaten more dust than bread.

"The Baron will hear it," he said to Saubere, with spoon marks in his beard. "He doesn't like pans that are louder than his cymbals."

"Then let him come," Joe said kindly. "He can have a spoon, too. We're not dogs. We'll explain to him what peace costs."

"How much does it cost?"

Joe grinned. "Less than war. More than whitewashing."

A murmuring wind blew across the square. Faces moved behind windows, less cautiously. The fountain splashed coldly, the pan boiled warmly. Between the two stood a line, drawn this morning by no one except two men who didn't need a sign.

Buddy continued to scoop. The more he dished out, the calmer his shoulders became. Joe's hand wasn't on the Colt, but on the edge of the pan, as if he were holding the edge of a table during a conversation he wanted to win.

"He's coming," someone behind them said at some point, and all heads turned slightly. No screams, no running. Just that collective clunking in the stomach when a big name enters the alley before the man himself does.

Buddy filled the spoon to the brim and handed it to a freckled girl who was too serious for her face. "Slowly," he said. "Hot."

Joe looked up to the end of the street, where two rings flashed beneath a coat, even though it wasn't yet noon. He grinned crookedly. "Time, buddy. Let the pan do the talking before you have to."

Buddy nodded. The bacon sizzled, the beans bubbled. And a scent hung over the square that carried more guns than all the men combined—not to shoot, but to coax hands out of pockets and shut mouths before they said the wrong things.

The alley at the edge of the square opened like a maw. Two men entered first, neatly dressed, as if they had never seen dust. Their boots gleamed, yet one could hear the squeak of new leather. Behind them came the Baron. His coat smooth, his hands free. Free and white.

Buddy continued stirring as if nothing had happened. Bacon crackled, beans bubbled, the spoon made circles like a clock that only he understood.

Joe stepped forward, his grin tired but genuine. "Well, Baron. Hungry?"

The crowd held its breath. Spoons froze. Children stopped swallowing. The Baron stopped at the fountain, looked at the clear water. Then he slowly turned his head toward them, toward the pan.

"What is that?" he asked. The voice wasn't loud, but it cut through the square like a knife.

Joe opened his arms. "Breakfast. Peace offering. Anyone who doesn't pull a Colt gets beans. Even you."

The Baron smiled thinly, as if it were a joke without a punchline. "Peace stinks of grease. I offer purity." He pointed to the fountain. "Clean water. That's all a person needs."

Buddy scooped and handed a spoon to an old woman. "Yes. He needs fat. Otherwise he'll stay thin. Thinness breaks."

A murmur went through the crowd. Heads nodded unconsciously. Hands gripped their bowls tighter.

The Baron saw it. He saw that the smell of the pan was stronger than his water. A shadow passed over his face, briefly, then cold again. "You think you can gain power with beans?"

Joe grinned. "Not power. Just time. Time that feeds people before they have to die."

The two men next to the Baron reached for their belts, weapons flashing. But neither drew. Not while the scent hung in the air and Buddy was still holding the spoon.

"A spoonful of peace," Buddy said without looking up. "Or an empty stomach. Take your pick."

The square fell silent. The Baron stood there, his hands white, his eyes hard. The pan continued to bubble.

Buddy scooped slowly, as if weighing each bean to see if it was worth it. The spoon filled, dripping fat back into the iron. He held it up, extending his hand toward Baron. No rush. No fear.

"Your move," he grumbled.

The square became quieter than ever. No coughing, no clearing of throats, even the dogs lay still. The smell hung thick as a carpet.

The Baron didn't move immediately. He looked at the spoon as if it were poison. His hands, just a moment ago white and unwrinkled, twitched almost imperceptibly. Purity versus fat. Water versus bacon. Two worlds that should never meet—and now in one spoon.

Joe grinned and stepped forward. "You have two options. You take the spoon and become one of us today. Or you knock it away, and everyone here will see that you'd rather be hungry than have peace."

A murmur went through the crowd. Heads turned, eyes gleamed. It wasn't a threat. It was simply a truth already in the smoke.

The Baron slowly raised his hand. White. Thin. He reached for the spoon. The fat dripped, beans steamed. He brought it to his mouth as if it were a chalice.

He tasted it. Very little. His lips were barely open. Then he swallowed.

The crowd breathed again. Loudly. Liberated. One child even laughed, briefly, nervously, but genuinely.

The Baron stood still, his face impassive. Then he said quietly, "Peace tastes... heavy."

Buddy took the spoon back and dipped it into the pan. "Better heavy than empty."

Joe grinned broadly. "Then there we have it: a spoonful of peace for the city. And tomorrow we'll see if you stay full, Baron."

The crowd buzzed, grew, and lived. The Baron stood in the middle of it, white, wet, but no longer untouchable. The pan had spoken more than any Colt.

Seven doors and one step

The pan was cold again as they walked through the alleys. No more smoke, only traces of grease on the iron. The square behind them murmured, as if it had something other than water in its mouth for the first time in years.

"Seven doors," Joe muttered as they stood in front of the old warehouse. "At least. And each one wants you to choose wrong."

Buddy looked at the facade. Wooden boards like scarred skin, nails like rusty teeth. The doors stood next to each other, crooked, warped, as if they had lost a competition.

"One door is enough," he grumbled.

"Yeah," grinned Joe, "a door and your kick. That's all it ever takes."

They approached. The wind ran through the cracks, bringing voices—none clear, only fragments, laughter, coughing, the scraping of boots.

Joe put his hand to his Colt and peered over the door handles. "If we take the wrong one, we'll be stuck in the middle of nowhere."

"If we don't take one, we'll be stuck outside," said Buddy. "And it smells like traps outside."

They remained silent for a moment, only drops falling from the gutters, the last remnants of the rain. Then Buddy stepped back, braced his leg.

"Which one?" asked Joe, a grin already in his eyes.

Buddy pointed with his chin. "The middle one. Doors rarely lie in the middle."

Then came the kick. Heavy, direct, without negotiation. Wood splintered, hinges squealed. The door fell inward like a felled tree.

Darkness swallowed them. Voices broke off. And for a brief moment, the city was silent again.

Dust swirled as the door slammed shut. Inside, it smelled of old wood, wet straw, and fear that had squatted in the dark for too long.

Joe entered first, Colt loose, eyes bright. Buddy followed, the pan clinking on his belt like a reminder that there was more to life than lead.

Before them: a long hallway. Three doors on the left, three on the right, and a large double door at the end. Seven. Exactly seven.

"Look," Joe murmured. "The architect liked puzzles."

Buddy grumbled. "Puzzles are for people with time." He put his hand on the first handle. Cold. Silent. He pushed – nothing. Locked. So he kicked. Wood splintered, the door flew open. Behind it was only an empty room, dust, a table without legs.

Joe grinned. "One wrong. Six to go."

They continued walking. Behind the second door: voices. Whispers, quiet, nervous. Buddy stepped. Two men jumped back, guns half drawn. Joe was faster. Two shots, short, dry. The men fell, dust settled.

"Two doors, two bodies," said Joe. "The balance is correct."

The third: a cupboard full of barrels. The smell hit immediately—black powder. Buddy wrinkled his nose and stepped back. "Trap."

Joe grinned and closed the door again as if he had closed it politely. "Three."

They stood in the semidarkness, illuminated only by a crack of light at the end. Every door was a breath, every handle a question.

Buddy saw the big double one at the end. "I'd rather kick one big one than six small ones."

Joe nodded, his grin tired but still there. "Then let's go. Big doors lie louder."

Buddy took a run-up, a dull thud, and the double doors broke like ribs. The wood splintered, dust flew, hinges screeched. Behind them, not darkness, but light from lamps, far too bright for an old warehouse.

A table stood in the middle. Long, smooth, with cards, papers, and bottles on it. Surrounding it were men in suits, buttoned vests, trimmed beards. No Colts on the table, just ink and pen.

Joe stopped and grinned broadly. "Well, look at that, buddy. Not players—accountants."

The men stared, as if someone had raised the curtain too early. One cleared his throat, attempting dignity: "This is a closed session."

Buddy stomped in, kicking a chair aside so that it crashed against the wall. "Not anymore."

Joe strolled over to the table and looked at the maps. Streets of El Dorado, marked, colored lines. Wells, shafts, claims. "Aha," he murmured. "So this is the belly of the city. Paper instead of blood."

The oldest person at the table pressed his lips together. "These are confidential documents."

Joe looked at him and grinned crookedly. "Then you have a problem, friend. We're not confidential."

Buddy picked up a sheet of paper and crumpled it in his fist. "Paper burns faster than gunpowder."

A murmur went through the group. Fingers twitched, but no one reached for their weapons. These men weren't shooting. They were calculating.

Joe placed a hand on the paper and looked at the faces. "So: Which of you does the laundry for the Baron? And who secretly eats beans?"

Silence. Heavy. The lamps flickered, as if they knew more than the men.

The oldest man at the table cleared his throat again, his fingers folded on a leather journal cover. "You're mistaken about who's in charge. We're the city council. Order, supplies, security. The Baron is a sponsor, nothing more."

Joe traced the red lines on the map with his index finger, like feeling scars. "Order here means: close this alley, tax that well, put the kegs of 'Clear Only' there. Supply means you decide who drinks. Security means you count other people's Colts—not your own words." He tapped three crosses on the edge. "And those are?"

No one answered. Someone reached for a drawer. Buddy was faster. His boot slammed against the wood, and the drawer slammed shut with an ugly squeak. The man yelped, holding his fingers as if the furniture had bitten him. "Ouch—"

"We'll complain later," Buddy grumbled. He pushed the table forward with a single hip thrust. Ink spilled, bottles rolled, cards flew. The councilman jumped to his feet—not out of courage, but out of shock.

"Calm down," the elder pressed. "There are procedures. Complaints channels. Petitions—"

"Petitions are paper," said Joe, grinning crookedly. "Paper burns. Fists don't."

On the side wall stood a tall filing cabinet with seven small doors—narrow boxes, numbered I to VII. Brass locks, shiny, as if polished daily to make guilt shine. Buddy looked over and snorted. "Seven doors. Missed you."

The youngest man at the table—ink on his cuffs, eyes too alert—stepped to the side, as if to stand between Buddy and the shelf. "Those are sealed boxes. Confiscated documents. Private property."

"Sure," said Joe. "The city as a safe."

Buddy stepped forward and placed his boot in Door I. The brass gave way like a rotten gear. Behind it: stamp, sealing wax, barrel stamp. **ONLY CLEAR**, lacquered cords, neatly bundled. It smelled of resin and excuses.

"Evidence," Joe murmured, picking up a seal and holding it up to the light. A small crest: two rings above a wave. "I know the rings. And the wave says: White water, dark hands."

The elder raised his chin. "These are municipal stamps. Legally—"

Buddy kicked open Door II. Behind them: bound notebooks. Neatly written names, columns of numbers, columns marked "withdrawal/discharge," and next to them a column marked "laundry." Joe flipped through the pages. "Evening: five tubs. Morning: three. 'Laundry' as a line. You're recording debt like it's soap."

The man with the trapped fingers gasped: "These are... hygiene protocols..."

Joe continued reading. "Mary. Underlined twice. Bartender. 'Uncooperative' says here." His grin became thin and friendly, like a knife. "Who wrote that?" He looked around. Heads turned.

Buddy entered Door III. A hollow space. There were bags of tokens – brass plates, numbers on one side, a drop on the other. "Water tokens," Joe said. "They sell air for drinking, and if you don't pay, you get rain – they make dead people rise again. I saw it."

The elder searched for his dignity like a man searches for his handkerchief. "You don't understand logistics. A city needs rules. Allocation. Purity. Otherwise..." – he waved his hand helplessly – "...or chaos."

"Chaos?" Buddy put his hand on the edge of the table and pushed. The plate slid a foot further, hitting a councilman in the basin. He gasped. "This," said Buddy, "is chaos. It'll be over quickly."

Joe, dismounted, tapped ink off his sleeve. "We'll do it simply. You stay seated, open the seven doors, read aloud what's in your notebooks, and then you'll join us on the square. One spoon from the pan, one truth from the mouth. Today. Not tomorrow. And anyone who lies will only drink your 'Just clear.'"

"Impossible," hissed a gray-haired man. "We report to the Baron. There are protocols—"

"One of you just wanted to get a Derringer out of the drawer, and the logs broke his fingers," Joe said kindly. "I like logs that are on our side."

Buddy entered Door IV. Behind it: cards with red circles, "CLAIM Y" "CLAIM Z," and underneath: "to close," "to freeze." A marginal note: **"the claim that must not exist"** Joe whistled softly. "So he really does exist, the one no one is allowed to have. And you act like you just washed the towels."

The youngest swallowed. "This is... strategic. The ground is unstable."

"Your backbone is unstable," said Buddy.

Door V: Letters. Wax seals with the same two rings. Joe broke one open and read softly: "To the Baron. The pan in the market is becoming... 'disturbing'. Recommendation: Ban on open flames, arrest of the operators. Signed: Committee for Purity and Public Tranquility." He raised his eyes. "'Operators' means us. And here you sit."

The elder gathered courage; he heard his own voice and liked it. "Then let's make it formal. Leave the building. Come to a hearing tomorrow. We'll examine it. We'll weigh things up."

Buddy entered Door VI. A small box with seven keys, each neatly labeled: "North Gate," "South Gate," "Market," "Pump," "East Warehouse," "Shaft 3," "Back Stairs." "Give it here," said Buddy, taking "Market" and "Pump" and pocketing them. "I need these."

"This is theft of city property!" The gray-haired man blushed. "Guards!"

No one came. The corridor behind them remained silent. Someone had already forgotten about the men at door two and the powder kegs.

Joe pulled open the last door—VII. Nothing behind it. Just a wall of black. He knocked. Hollow. A shadowy line in the boards. "There's something."

The youngest breathed in audibly. Too loudly. "Don't—"

Buddy placed his heel under the edge, and with a single kick, the entire small back wall flew open like a crease in the eyelid. Behind it: a narrow passage, freshly used. Damp marks on the wood, a thin trail of water, as if someone had just had wet hands and hadn't bothered to wipe them on anything.

Joe blinked, grinning without joy. "Back stairs. And someone so clean they're dripping."

"No one's allowed down there," the gray-haired man blurted out. "That's... maintenance."

"Maintenance? For what—your conscience?" Joe pointed into the darkness. A staircase sloped downward, narrow, impossible for two people to stand side by side, light emanating from below as if from a belly.

Buddy grabbed the end of the table and, with a hard tug, pushed it across the large door, preventing anyone from getting in or out. "Meeting adjourned," he said. "We're going downstairs."

"You have no jurisdiction!" The elder gasped. "You have no right—"

Joe raised his hand. "We have the pan. And the city is hungry. Fair enough."

The youngest took a step forward, the ink on his cuff like a small flag. "He's downstairs."

"The Baron?" asked Joe.

The youngest nodded. "When he's not drying his hands."

A gasp went through the row. Two of the councilors automatically sat back down, as if their knees had brought them the truth faster than their heads.

Buddy turned and looked over his shoulder at the seven small doors, six of which were open like mouths. "When we get back up," he grumbled, "read to you. Everything. At the market. With a spoon in your mouth so you don't talk too much."

Joe winked at the youngest. "And you start. You have the cleanest hands here—just ink. I'll forgive that."

"I'm... coming..." The sentence caught in his throat. He tied a small knot with his fingers, as if he needed to tie his courage tightly so it wouldn't run away.

"Later," said Joe. "Now, gentlemen, hold the fort. And no—don't call anyone. The table is heavy, and Buddy still has one kick left."

Buddy kicked the lamp on the wall so that it tipped into the doorway, illuminating the first step. A yellow glow on wet wood. The smell changed: less paper, more stone, more water, which didn't smell clear.

Joe was already standing at the entrance. "Ready, big guy?"

"Already hungry," said Buddy.

"On beans?"

"To a face that believes guilt can be washed away."

One after another, they disappeared down the narrow staircase. Above them, the room breathed shallowly, like a dog that doesn't want to bark. The eldest stared at his clean fingers, and the youngest clenched his fists so tightly that ink stood under his nails like shadows.

Somewhere below, water broke over an edge, and the steps creaked as if they knew who was coming.

The steps creaked under Buddy's weight, as if to say: too much weight for the old wood. Joe went first, Colt loosely in one hand, the other on the railing, which was slippery from the drops falling from above.

It smelled of wet stone. Of lime, of water that had stood still for too long. One drop fell, then another, as if the building were sweating.

"Beautiful architecture," Joe murmured. "If you like basements."

Buddy grumbled. "Cellars don't lie. Upstairs, they lie."

The stairs led into a narrow corridor. Niches set into the walls on the left and right, each containing a basin. Water in it. Clear. Too clear. No algae, no dirt. Only mirrors showing their own faces, distorted by the light of the lamp Buddy was still carrying.

Joe stopped and stared inside. His grin thinned. "Look. I see double. One clean, the other not."

Buddy snorted and continued pedaling. "Mirrors are for narcissists."

At the end of the corridor, a hall opened up. Round, high, the roof like a dome. In the middle, a large basin, full of water, motionless. All around, pipes, barrels, and hoses. A machine that looked more like a heart beating too fast.

And there, at the edge of the pool: a figure. Dark coat, bare hands. White. The Baron. He kept his fingers in the water, moving them slowly, as if playing piano keys that no one could hear.

"There you go," whispered Joe. "The man who washes until he's dead."

The Baron raised his head, unhurriedly, as if he'd been waiting for her. "You're dirty." His voice echoed, carried by the water. "And dirt must be washed away."

Buddy stepped forward, pan still at his belt, his boot crunching on stone. "Then you must have plenty of water."

The pool remained silent. Only the dripping from above answered.

The Baron stood at the edge of the basin like a priest gazing at his altar water. His fingers glided across the surface, small ripples flowing out, breaking against the stone edges, and returning.

"Everything can be washed," he said. "Blood, guilt, hunger. Purity is power. Whoever stays pure stays on top."

Joe leaned against a pillar, grinning crookedly. "Up above, yes. But up above, people are just as hungry as down below. Beans feed more stomachs than your water."

The Baron looked at him coldly, as if Joe were a stain. "Beans stink. Fat spoils. Water remains."

Buddy stepped closer, the pan clinking on his belt as if he wanted to join in. "Fat fills you up. Water just makes you thirsty for more."

A twitch crossed the Baron's face. Only briefly. "You don't understand. The city belongs to the one who washes his hands. Not to the one who dirty them."

Joe laughed dryly. "The funny thing is, Baron: your hands are already dirty. You just don't see it because you keep pouring water over them."

The Baron pulled his fingers out of the basin. White, shining, as if they weren't real. "I am pure. That's what sets me apart from you."

Buddy gritted his teeth and took another step. "The difference is: I'll hit you in the face with my dirty hand, and then we'll see if your water can get rid of it."

The hall held its breath. Drops fell. The pool reflected the three of them: two shadows, one white figure.

"You want to fight?" the Baron asked quietly.

"No," said Joe, grinning. "We want to eat. But sometimes that only works if someone falls first."

The Baron spread his hands. Drops ran from his fingers like little knives. "You don't understand. Water is stronger than steel."

He flicked his fingers, and the hoses around him began to tremble. Valves groaned, a torrent shot out of a pipe, lashing against the wall. Cold water like a whip.

Joe ducked, but grinned nonetheless. "Well, buddy—that man's squirting."

Buddy grumbled and stomped forward. The next wave hit him, bounced off his chest, and soaked his shirt. He wiped his face as if it were just sweat. "Just water," he muttered.

The Baron stepped back, pointed, and even more jets whipped through the hall. Niches splashed, basins overflowed, drops became floods. The floor turned to slippery stone.

Joe jumped between the pillars, slid once, and caught his Colt on the masonry. "Damn it, buddy, we're about to be fish."

Buddy stood, solid as a rock. He grabbed the pan, pulled it from his belt, and held it up like a shield. Water slapped against it, sounding like drums. But it held. The smell of grease mingled with the wetness, a remnant of the last meal.

"Your water smells like beans now," Joe shouted, laughing.

The Baron hissed. He raised both hands, the basin in the middle swelled, a wave formed, rising as if it wanted to consume the hall.

Buddy stomped forward, the edge of the pan hard against the stone, each step heavy as thunder. "Purity?" he grumbled. "This is dirt."

He kicked. Not against a door this time, but against the edge of the pool. Stone crashed, broke. Water shot out, not as a weapon, but as a flood without a master. The hall filled with chaos.

Joe reached for the Baron, grabbed his coat, and pulled him back before he fell into the flood. "See, Baron? Your purity thing is running away from you. Fat stays. Water doesn't."

The Baron gasped for breath, hands dripping, eyes wild. Buddy stood there, dripping, the pan still in his hand as if it were a sword.

"Peace doesn't come from a well," he growled. "Peace comes from a pan."

The flood rushed through the corridors, taking doors, cabinets, and files with it. Everything organized above floated away below. The Baron gasped, Joe grinned, Buddy stood his ground.

And the hall sounded like a broken church in which water was preaching – but no one was listening anymore.

The market square counts to three

The market smelled of rain and old wood, of beans that were no longer steaming, and of fear that had been simmering for too long. Buddy trudged out of the alley, Joe beside him, both still wet from the bottom. Drops fell from his hat brim and beard, ran over his boots, and left traces on the pavement.

People stood in small groups, whispering, looking away and back again. Children squatted on barrels, men leaned against walls, women held baskets without moving them. The square breathed a collective, yet unequal, feeling.

"Everything's waiting," Joe murmured, his grin crooked, tired but alive. "They don't know it yet, but they're waiting."

"What?" Buddy asked grumpily.

"That one counts to three. And then the city goes in one direction. Ours—or his."

Buddy snorted. "Then someone should start."

They stepped into the middle, where the cobblestones were darker, as if blood or wine had always stood there. Buddy clinked the pan, placed it on a low pedestal, without fire, without beans. Just iron, empty, but heavy.

The crowd moved closer. Not a word. Just eyes.

Then he came. The Baron. His coat even darker than before, his hands white, as if the water had made his skin even paler. He stepped onto the square, unhurried, as if going to prayer. Two men behind him, guards with Colts, gleaming as if polished, but unused.

Joe looked up and grinned. "There he is, Buddy. The man with the clean fingers."

The Baron stopped, ten paces away. The square tensed. The air became rope.

"The city belongs to me," the Baron said quietly, but everyone heard. "Not to you. Not to your pan. To me."

Buddy looked at him, quiet, broad, heavy. Then he grumbled, "The seat counts to three."

Joe nodded and grinned. "One."

A murmur ran through the crowd.

Buddy clenched his fist. "Two."

The Baron raised his hand, white, flawless.

And the square held its breath, waiting for the three.

The crowd paused, like cattle sensing a storm approaching. Dust hung in the air, no wind, only anticipation.

Joe grinned wider, tipped his hat lower. His fingers hovered over the Colt, playing with the air like cards. "Three," he said quietly. Not shouted, not celebrated. Just spoken, as casually as a man ordering beans.

And everything broke loose.

The Baron raised his hand, white as chalk, and the two guards reached for their Colts. But Joe was faster. Two shots, dry, unadorned. The first hit the hip, the second ripped the pistol from his hand. They screamed, stumbled, dropped iron that struck the pavement hard.

Buddy stomped forward. No shot. Just a fist. His hand hit the first guy who came too close like a hammer hitting a board. The man fell, more wood than flesh. The second guy got his elbow and tipped over a sack of potatoes, which spilled across the square.

The crowd retreated, but not far. They wanted to see how clean dirt would finally become.

The Baron was still standing. Hands raised, not in prayer, but in cursing. "You are dirt! And dirt dies in water!"

"We're beans," Buddy grumbled, reaching for the pan. He held it up like a shield. "And beans swell when they get wet."

Joe laughed as he reloaded. "Well said, big guy. Almost poetic."

The Baron took a step back, but there was no pool, no cellar. Only pavement, only eyes. And every step back made him seem smaller.

Buddy stepped forward, slowly, heavily. Place no longer mattered. He had already decided.

The Baron raised his arms as if he could hold the very air. His voice echoed, clear but brittle. "Don't you see? Without purity, the city collapses! Without me, only filth flows into your cups!"

The crowd murmured. Some nodded, more out of habit than faith. Others shook their heads, the taste of the beans still on their tongues.

Joe took two steps closer, Colt loose, hat low. "You talk like a preacher with soap in his mouth. Nice and clean, but no one gets enough from it."

Buddy placed the pan on the pedestal that had once been intended for a statue. The iron clanged. Heavy. "People have tasted it. A spoonful. Just one. That's enough for them to know your water weighs nothing."

The Baron gasped. Sweat glistened on his forehead, though his hands remained white as bone. "They will starve if you seduce them! Purity is protection! Purity is..."

His words faltered as a boy—the same one Joe had seen outside the gates, with the rusty pot—stepped forward. Thin, barefoot, eyes wide. He lifted the pot. "I ate beans," he said loudly, almost defiantly. "And I'm still alive."

The crowd murmured louder. Heads turned, eyes lit up.

Joe grinned, showing his teeth. "Well, Baron? That's proof. Children don't lie."

Buddy crossed his arms and stood like a rock. "You can talk all you want. But beans are louder."

The Baron trembled. Only slightly, but visibly. He saw the crowd, which could tip over like a barrel that was too full. And Buddy and Joe stood there like two stones pushing the barrel.

At first, it was just the scraping of feet. Then a clearing of the throat, a second, a third. The crowd rose to its voice, first shaky, then more solidly. A woman in an apron—flour dust like snow on her fingers—raised her head. "I drank from the well," she said. "I haven't worked a day less because of it."

An old man leaned on a stick, the wood crooked like his back. "Purity didn't give me back my son. He remained in the shaft, and your water only washed the street clean."

The man with the too clean shirt from the morning stood again at the barrel. **Just clear** He wanted to say something, but his hand was on his stomach, not on the lid. "I..." He searched for an office in his mouth and found only hunger. "I... ate too."

A short laughter rippled across the square like sparks—not mocking, just surprisingly warm. The Baron whirled around as if someone had tugged on his collar. "Discipline!" he gasped. "Order! You'll fall back into the filth—"

"Dirt keeps you warm," the bartender interrupted. She was there, from the alley, her hair still damp, her eyes dry. "And beans keep you alive. Your water only keeps you alive."

Joe nodded at her, grinning crookedly. "Listen to the lady. She's seen more men sober than you have clean."

A murmur, louder this time. Behind the Baron, his two wounded guards stirred, tried to stand up, then sank down again. No one ran toward them. No one ran away. The square remained in the middle.

Buddy took two steps forward, the pan in his arm like a shield, the edge against his hipbone. "Whoever pulls a Colt today," he grumbled, "won't get a spoon. Not today. Not tomorrow. And whoever raises their hand, raises it to eat or not at all."

The boy with the rusty pot stood beside him without question. He raised the pot as if it were a banner. "No Colt!" he shouted, and his voice was clearer than many a bell.

"No gun," repeated two, three, five voices. It wasn't a choir, but it smelled like one.

The Baron raised his hands, whiter than ever. "You let yourself be bought! By fat! By stench!"

Joe lowered the Colt a little, not much, just enough to make it look like a friend, not an executioner. "No, Baron. Not bought. Fed. Small difference: buying makes you quiet, feeding makes you upright." He pointed his chin at the barrel.

"Want to show how free you are? Drink your own 'Just clear.' No spoon afterward. Just water. See how far that gets you."

A few heads turned toward the fountain. A woman giggled, then immediately shut up. The Baron stopped, as if the ground were sticking to his boots. "I'll drink when I want," he blurted out.

"Then you probably never want it," the bartender said dryly. "Because it tastes like nothing—just like your promises."

The man in the clean shirt placed his hand on the barrel lid, but not to protect it. He tapped it twice, a sign without law. "Today..." He looked at Buddy and back again. "Today we'll leave it open."

Joe took a half-step into the empty space between the Baron and the crowd. His grin was thin, but sharp enough to cut ropes. "Listen, people. There are times when words have to hit home like blows. So here's mine: Purity is only worth something if you can afford to get dirty. Anyone who refuses beans is afraid of the mirror, not the dirt."

He pointed at the Baron. "That one is afraid of beans."

A few laughed. Others didn't. But the silence that followed no longer belonged to the Baron.

He did what men do when words are lost: He searched for orders. "Guards!" he called. Nothing. "Council!" he shouted. No one. "Wellmaster!" A thin man raised his hand—and dropped it again when Buddy looked up.

Buddy placed the pan back on the pedestal, as if it were an altar. The pan was empty, but its weight filled the space. "We'll cook again," he said, not loudly, not pleadingly, just like that. "And whoever still thinks they have to pull it, count to three—alone."

Joe turned his head slightly so that the sun, finally breaking through the clouds' gums, rolled across his cheek. "The marketplace has counted to three," he said, his voice soft enough to carry far. "And I tell you: Three doesn't belong to him. Three belongs to those who hold the spoon."

The boy next to Buddy nodded vigorously, as if he were the notary of this sentence. The bartender exhaled—a smoke without a cigarette. The man in the clean shirt took his pipe out of his pocket and put it away, as if to prove that no one was whistling today except the wind.

The Baron took a step back. Just one. But it was enough to change the atmosphere. The square saw it, smelled it, knew it. Some things aren't decided by shots, but by shoe soles.

Joe placed two cartridges in his palm and let them clack together. "Two for later," he muttered. "One for nothing." Then, louder: "If you want to say something, say it. But if you touch the Colt, you'll have a mouthful of water. Your choice."

And suddenly they started talking. Not in chorus. But in sentences. "My well was dry." – "They collected my stamps." – "I've been paying for absolutely nothing for weeks." – "My wife smiled at the pan." – "The child ate today."

Words became hands. Hands became steps. No one ran, no one screamed. But the circle around the Baron was no longer there for him, but around him. Difference. Smaller, deadlier.

Buddy didn't look back. He just raised the pan as if it were full and nodded to Joe. Joe nodded back. Two men who had wanted to be full for hours, and suddenly they were—not in the stomach, but in the back.

"Go on," said Buddy. "To the next man's three."

"Up to three," said Joe, "and if someone cheats, we cook twice as much."

The square laughed quietly. For the first time, El Dorado sounded like a city, not a well. The Baron was still standing. But he was now one man among many—clean, yes. But alone.

The square vibrated like a drum beaten by no one. Voices that had been whispers an hour ago now ran freely, raw, almost defiantly across the pavement. Children giggled, men talked to each other through their teeth, women clutched baskets tighter, but no one backed away.

The Baron stood there, his hands still white, but empty. He turned, searching for support, for a wall, for a voice that would answer him. But even the houses seemed silent.

Joe let the Colt rest on his thigh and grinned thinly. "Well, Baron, do you see? The city washed you out without you falling into the pool."

Buddy lifted the pan and tilted it slightly, causing the iron to clatter against the stone, a dull, heavy thud. "This is the counting. No bell, no clock. Just pan. One."

A murmur went through the square. Heads turned.

Joe nodded, raised two fingers, and waved them in the air like cards. "Two."

The crowd breathed in unison, as if this had been rehearsed long ago.

The Baron opened his mouth, about to say something. Perhaps a command, perhaps a curse. But the words stuck in his mouth, like water that won't flow.

Buddy stepped closer. His boots crunched, his shadow fell over the Baron, tall and dark. The pan in his hand gleamed dully, as if it carried more weight than all the words in the city. "Three," he said. No threat. No roar. Just a sentence, heavy as a stone.

And the square responded.

Not with Colts, not with blood. With voices. "Three!" shouted the boy with the rusty pot. "Three!" repeated the bartender. "Three!" shouted men, women, children.

The Baron stepped back, one step, then two. His white hands trembled. The crowd moved after him, like water breaking a dam.

Joe grinned, showing his bright teeth. "See, Baron? Sometimes it's not who moves the fastest that counts. It's who lives the loudest."

Buddy nodded, the pan gripped tightly in his fist. "And the city lives."

The marketplace had counted to three. And this time the number no longer belonged to it.

The Baron stood as if the crowd itself had pushed him. His coat clung to his shoulders, his hands were white, but they now trembled like leaves that no longer have a tree. He took a breath as if he wanted to draw the city into himself once more.

"You think you've won," he blurted out. "But purity... purity cannot be killed. I still have..."

He reached inside his coat. Not for a weapon. For a small glass. Round, with a lid, containing water, clear as day. He held it up for all to see. "This is the beginning. One drop is enough to spoil your beans, separate your fat, rust your pans. With this drop, you belong to me."

The crowd murmured, unrest flickering like sparks in the wind. A few steps retreated.

Joe stepped forward, grinning narrowly, showing his teeth. "A drop? You want to buy the city with a glass of water?" He laughed, dry and harsh. "That's not magic, Baron. It's just glass."

Buddy lifted the pan. Heavy, empty, but stronger than the glass. "Try it," he grumbled. "Pour it in here." He held the pan out as if it were a bowl. "And then we'll see if any beans sink in it. I'm telling you: they float."

The glass trembled in the Baron's hand. He raised it higher, but his fingers betrayed him. The boy with the rusty pot shouted, "Break it!"

The crowd took up the cry: "Break it! Break it!"

Joe winked at the Baron. "Well, you hear? The marketplace has made your choice for you."

The Baron gasped, sweat running down his forehead. "You don't understand... this is purity, this is power—"

Then Buddy took a step, large and heavy. The boot sounded like thunder. He struck the pan against the glass, not hard, just decisively. The glass shattered, clinked, water splashed, a light rain fell over the paving stone and disappeared through the cracks.

Silence. Then cheers, raw, loud, unequal. The crowd screamed as if they were counting for the first time.

The Baron stared at his empty hands. White, wet, helpless. Not a drop left. No magic. Only two men in front of him, a pan, and a square that was now laughing.

Joe grinned broadly. "See, Baron? Purity evaporates. But fat sticks."

Buddy held the pan up, heavy, glistening in the sunlight, the last drops sizzling away. "Three," he said again. "And it's over."

The cheers came not as a chorus, but as a wave. First one cry, then two, then so many that even the pigeons flew from the rooftops. The Baron was still standing, but only like a piece of clothing no one wanted to wear anymore. His coat wet, his hands empty, his eyes washed out.

The people approached, not quickly, not greedily—just decisively. The boy with the rusty pot was the first to step forward. He held the thing up like a helmet. "We need no marks! No seals! No purity!" His voice broke at the end, but the square caught it.

The bartender followed, arms crossed, chin up. "We need fire. Beans. And men who don't preach, but hit when necessary."

The man in the too-clean shirt stepped slowly out of the crowd and pushed the Baron by the shoulder. Not hard, just enough to make the white man sway. "And we don't need anyone to pay for our drinks."

Joe grinned and raised his hand as if to slow the crowd. "Slow down, friends. One at a time. If you all pull at once, no one will see who hit."

Buddy put the pan back on its pedestal and looked at the Baron, who seemed smaller than ever. "You can go," he grumbled. "Or you can stay and eat. But you won't talk anymore."

The Baron sucked in air, as if he were hoping for water once more. But not a drop came. His knees buckled. He sank, not dramatically, just like a man who finally understands that he has lost.

The crowd stared. A moment of silence, thick as soup. Then someone clapped. A woman, with a floury apron. Once, twice. Others followed. Clapping, shouting, stamping. The square was alive.

Joe tipped his hat and grinned crookedly. "That's it, Buddy. The marketplace has counted. And you know what? For the first time, everyone counted correctly."

Buddy nodded, heavily and seriously. "Time to cook."

And when the sun finally broke through the clouds, the pan stood there like an altar. Not empty, not full, just ready.

The Baron squatted beside it, a shadow without water. And the city breathed, deeply, freely, for the first time in years.

Dynamite in the backcourt

The cheering in the square hadn't even died down when the air already smelled different. It was no longer just beans, no longer just rain on the pavement. It was that sour odor that comes when someone stores explosives too close to fire.

Joe raised his nose and gave a small grin. "Do you smell that, buddy? That's not pork, that's not sweat. That's dynamite."

Buddy grumbled and crossed his arms. "In the backcourt."

They stood at the edge of the market, where the houses grew closer together. Behind a crooked door, barely large enough for a cart, lay a warehouse. From the outside: boards, nails, dust. From the inside: a pounding that wasn't a heart.

"They're still celebrating," Joe murmured, "and someone in the back is already preparing the funeral."

Buddy reached for the handle. It was cold. He pushed, but nothing. So he lifted his boot. Wood splintered, a kick, a crash. The door slammed inward.

The stench hit them. Board walls, shelves full of crates. Straw in between, poorly concealed. And amidst it all: sticks of dynamite, neatly bundled, red as rage.

A man turned around, his face sooty, his hands black with powder dust. He stared at her as if he had just seen the devil himself enter.

Joe grinned and raised his hand in greeting. "Well, buddy. I thought the market was counting to three. But you're counting to zero."

Buddy stepped closer, the floor creaked, the dynamite fell silent. "If someone detonates it here," he grumbled, "it won't just be the Baron who'll be blown up. The whole city will be blown up."

The man stood there, frozen. Sweat ran down his sooty face, dripping onto his jacket, where there were already plenty of stains. His fingers trembled, his nails black. He was holding nothing, but it looked as if he were about to reach for a fuse at any moment.

Joe grinned crookedly and lowered his hat. "Calm down, friend. Nobody minds a little fireworks. But there's a bit too much celebration going on here."

Buddy took a heavy step, and the ground groaned. "Who sent you?" he grumbled.

"No one," the man blurted out, much too quickly. "I... I'm just on guard."

Joe laughed dryly. "Guard at Dynamite? That's like babysitting with wolves. You're not a guard, you're a worker. So talk."

The man looked to the side, toward the shelf. A rope hung there, with several fuses converging on it, finely twisted and ready. Joe followed his gaze, clucked his tongue. "Aha. So that's it. One pull, a fire, and half the town blows up. Not bad. But too cheap."

Buddy grabbed him by the collar and lifted him up, his feet dangling. "Who?"

The man gasped, his eyes wide. "The council! Not me! They said if the city collapses, everything collapses. Everything turns to ashes. Then it belongs to no one."

"The council," Joe repeated, as if he were tasting the word. "Those who were just sorting files while we were handing out beans."

The man nodded hastily. "They said... if you win, if the Baron falls... then no one else can take over. Then all that'll remain is dust. Then..."

Buddy dropped him. The man crashed onto the boards, coughed, and rolled away from the poles.

Joe whistled softly. "So that's how it is. If they can't govern, they'll blow up the church. Nice. But stupid. Dynamite has no faith."

Buddy lifted the pan from his belt, held it over a box, and tapped it with the spoon. A dull, metallic sound. "One wrong move," he grumbled, "and I'll smash the pan on your head. Then you won't need a detonator anymore."

The man pressed his lips together, silent. But his eyes betrayed everything: fear, guilt, and the command still lodged in his mind.

Joe grinned. "Then I'll tell you something, friend: There are no fireworks today. Today it's just cold pancakes. But tomorrow... tomorrow we'll count your doors again."

Buddy stood over the crates, staring at the red poles as if they were sausages, only more dangerous. He knelt, grabbed one, and slowly turned it in his fingers. Paper, string, the weight that's always the same. Explosives are the same everywhere: silent until someone gives them a voice.

"Nice work," murmured Joe, stroking a fuse. "As neatly bundled as if you'd just poured your purity into sticks."

The man on the ground gasped for air. "You have to... leave it. It's—it's not for you."

Buddy grumbled and put the pole back. "For the city."

"For no one!" The man coughed, spitting dust. "They said if the Baron falls, there's no aftermath. No beans, no pan, just smoke. Then El Dorado will be a desert again. No one inherits anything."

Joe grinned, but his eyes were cold. "That sounds like men who'd rather rule in ruins than live among beans."

Buddy grabbed the spoon and hit the pan once. The echo boomed dully between the crates. "So throw it away."

"No!" The man crawled a bit, hands outstretched. "You don't understand—if you carry it out, if someone sees it, then—"

"Then everyone will know how far your advice would go," Joe interrupted. He bent down, grabbed a bundle of fuse, and loosely unwound it. "They wanted to clean the city, but this time not with water. With dust and splinters."

Buddy stomped to the door, pushing it open wide to let in daylight. The smell from outside mingled with the pungent powder. "We'll carry it out," he grumbled.

Joe nodded, grinning crookedly. "To the market. On the pedestal. Next to the pan. Then everyone will see: purity is nothing compared to explosives made by their own fingers."

The man on the ground howled. "You're killing us all!"

"No," Buddy said calmly. "You would have killed us all. We're just exposing you."

And so they began to drag out crate after crate, the sun glittering on the red paper. Every pole a piece of evidence. Every crate a verdict.

The people in the market heard the rumbling, the boards creaking under the weight. Heads turned. Eyes widened. And the smell of explosives crept like a rumor among the voices.

The sun was low enough that the shadows were long as Buddy placed the first box on the pedestal next to the pan. The wood creaked dully, dust rose, smelling pungent. The crowd, which had just been laughing, fell silent in an instant.

Eyes widened, mouths half-open. One whispered, "Dynamite." A second repeated it louder. Soon it was no longer a whisper, but a word rolling across the square, heavy as a wagon wheel: **Dynamite.**

Joe added the next crate, casually, as if stacking potatoes. "Yeah, exactly," he said with a grin. "No fairy tale. No sermon. This is the gospel of your council. And the ending they wanted to serve you."

The bartender stepped forward, her apron still stained from the last keg, her eyes hard. "Damn," she muttered, "that's enough to send the whole town to heaven twice."

Buddy nodded and placed the pan on top, like a lid holding everything in place. "They wanted to blow everything away. No gold, no beans, just ash."

The crowd roared, voices rising. Some shouted for the council to be summoned, others called for rope, and still others ran back a bit as if a fuse had already been lit.

Joe raised his hands, his grin sharp. "Calm down, guys. If you run, you'll burn faster than any fuse. This stuff doesn't explode on air. It needs sparks. And you'll be the sparks if you freak out now."

Buddy banged his spoon against the pan. A dull gong cut through the voices. "Here. Stand still."

Silence fell like a sack onto the square. Breathing was suddenly loud.

"This isn't our end," Buddy grumbled. "This is their plan. The Council. The same Council that took your badges and sold you the 'Clear Only'. They wanted to clean you up until there was nothing left of you."

A man from the crowd shouted: "They're not all lying!"

Joe laughed dryly. "No. Just enough to fill the boxes here. And that's enough."

The bartender nodded and raised her voice. "You've all smelled what it means when there's gunpowder in the back. Now you see. That's not freedom. That's chain dust."

A murmur, darker this time. Anger, not fear. The crowd wavered – between flight and revolt.

Joe twirled the Colt and hid it in his holster. "No Colts. Don't panic. We'll cook this like we cook everything else. Slowly, with fire, but controlled. And if anyone feels like playing around, Buddy will make sure the spoon goes faster."

Buddy nodded seriously. "Food holds. Dynamite doesn't."

The crowd remained silent. Eyes stared at the crates, at the pan, at the two men standing wet, tired, but firm.

The pitch knew: This was no longer a game. This was a verdict.

It was as if the word "dynamite" itself had opened the doors. They came from Rathausgasse, one after the other, their faces smooth, their coats clean. Councilmen. Men who had never eaten beans if they could help it. Hands soft, eyes watchful.

They stepped onto the square as if they didn't know why the crowd was staring. The first one cleared his throat, the second one tugged on his vest, the third tried to smile as if it were just a tax issue.

But there were the boxes. Red. Stacked up. With Buddy's pan on top like a shield. And suddenly none of them had a voice anymore.

Joe grinned thinly, wiping the rain from the corners of his eyes. "Well, see, buddy? Here come the gentlemen who sold us cleanliness. Fresh from the back room, where it stinks of powder."

A murmur went through the crowd. People stepped forward, children craned their necks, women lowered their baskets.

Buddy crossed his arms and looked at the councilmen as if they were cows that had been fattened for too long. "Your plan," he grumbled. "We found it. Behind boards. Under dust. But it wasn't clean."

One of the councilmen raised his hand, as if he could stop the noise with a gesture. "This... this is false evidence. Piled up by strangers. We have nothing—"

"Wrong!" cried the bartender, her voice sharp as glass. "I've known that smell for twenty years. Powder doesn't hide. And you stacked it until it could have swallowed us all."

The boy with the rusty pot stepped forward and placed it next to the crates. "You wanted to let us starve and then blow us up! I've eaten. And I want to live."

The crowd swelled. Voices rose, wild and disparate. "Traitor!" - "Liar!" - "They wanted to kill us!"

Joe raised his hand and grinned crookedly, but his voice was serious. "Slow down, guys. This isn't a tavern where everyone hits until only one person is left standing. This is bigger. If you want to hang them, you'll hang the city with them. Show them first. Hear them lie first. Then judge."

Buddy banged his spoon on the pan. A dull, heavy thud, like a judge's gavel. "You talk. Then we eat. Then we decide."

The council members exchanged glances, as if they had hoped the dynamite would do the job on its own. But now it stood there, silent, heavy, and everyone in the market knew who it belonged to.

The square smelled of sweat, fear, and gunpowder. But no one backed down.

The councilmen stood like wax figures. Their shoes still shone, even though the square was muddy. One nervously tipped his hat, another wiped his collar, as if the dirt, visible to all, were sticking there.

The first one found his voice first. Thin, shaky, but loud enough. "The dynamite... that was just for emergencies. To protect the city, if bandits came. If—"

"Bandits?" Joe grinned, showing his white teeth. "So who are we? Two guys with beans in their bellies who found your powder. Are we the bandits?"

The crowd laughed harshly, without joy. A few shouted, "Liar!"

The second stepped forward, tugging at his vest. "It's not what it looks like. The poles... they were a supply in case the mines collapsed. So you could blast the tunnels. So—"

Buddy lifted the pan, holding it high so the light shone across it. "So you can blow us all up." His voice was deep, muffled. "We prop up mines with wood. Not with lies."

A murmur went through the crowd, darker, heavier.

The third, sweating, tried to smile. "You don't understand how administration works. Responsibility... sometimes means preparing things that..."

Joe cut him off, grinning crookedly. "Yeah, right. Responsibility means banning beans and stockpiling explosives. Responsibility means preaching water and stacking powder. Sounds like good accounting."

The people laughed again, this time more harshly. One shouted, "We're starving while you stack crates!"

Buddy banged his spoon on the pan. A dull clang, heavy, definitive. "No one eats explosives," he grumbled. "No one lives on lies. You plotted to blow us all away. So no one wins except you."

The councilmen gasped, looked at each other, searching for words. But the crowd stared at them like vultures at a carcass. And Buddy & Joe stood there, tired, wet, but firm.

Joe lowered his hands, placing them loosely on the Colt. Not threateningly, just visibly. "So, gentlemen. Do you want to tell another fairy tale? Or should the pan pronounce judgment?"

Silence. Then a few whistles. Then voices. "Tell the truth!" – "Speak or leave!" – "No more water! No lies!"

The councilmen had nothing left. Their mouths were dry. And the city was finally hungry for justice.

It was as silent as a church before the first amen is recited. The council members stood there, their lips dry, their eyes flickering. None of them had a compelling story anymore.

Then the man in the too-clean shirt stepped forward. The same man who had been standing by the "Just Clear" keg days ago. Now his collar was askew, his voice rough. "I drank your water. I paid for your tokens. And what did you stack? Explosives, not hope."

He spat at her feet. A small stain, but it sounded louder than any words.

The bartender followed, folding her arms. "You sold us out. First to thirst, then to death. No excuse. No administration. Only fear."

A murmur went through the crowd. Men nodded, women held their baskets higher, children craned their necks. Everyone saw: the men were naked, even with their coats.

Joe stepped forward, grinning narrowly, but his voice was razor-sharp. "We counted three, Baron. And now we count you. One: You took our stamps. Two: You banned us from beans. Three: You stacked dynamite. That's enough."

Buddy slammed his spoon down on the pan. A dull, heavy, final thud. "It's over."

The crowd roared. No chaos, no gunshots. Voices rising into a storm. Hands reached out, grabbed the councilmen, tore their hats from their heads, their coats from their shoulders. No blood, not now. But the city made it clear: These men no longer had a say here.

They were pushed, shoved, across the square, and through the alleys. Some screamed, some cried, but no one listened.

Buddy and Joe stood there, wet, tired, the pan on the pedestal, the boxes of dynamite next to it like a will.

"Now what?" asked Joe, his teeth flashing white in the evening light.

Buddy looked at the pan, then at the crowd, which was breathing like a new animal. "Now we eat," he grumbled.

The bartender laughed dryly. "For the first time, without fear."

The square no longer smelled of panic. It smelled of sweat, of grease, of the city. And somewhere in the distance, a dog barked—free, off-leash.

El Dorado had counted. And this time the verdict was louder than any explosion.

The right... and the other hand

The marketplace had quieted down, but the silence wasn't gentle. It was that silence that lingers when people don't yet know whether they've just won or just survived a round. The dynamite still lay on the pedestal, covered by Buddy's pan. Silent proof that the city had narrowly avoided its own end.

Joe stood with his hands on his hips, his grin wider than his shadow. "You know, Buddy," he muttered, "people look at us like we're preachers. Except our Bible is made of iron and beans."

Buddy grumbled, wiping his face with the back of his hand. "I don't preach. I hit."

"Exactly," grinned Joe. "That's why we're the right hand and the other hand. Sometimes Colt, sometimes fist. Sometimes clean, sometimes dirty. But never empty."

A boy came running up, barefoot, still carrying the rusty pot. He held it out to Buddy as if it were an offering. "Can you... can you cook again? Everyone wants some."

Buddy picked up the pot, heavy and rusty, and shook his head. "It's no good anymore. But it's still holding up. Like the city."

Joe winked at the boy. "See, little one? Right hand, left hand—the main thing is that the spoon hits the mouth."

The bartender approached, a rag over her shoulder, her eyes sharp as blades. "The gentlemen are gone. The Baron is broken. But that doesn't mean you're finished. Some rats don't run until the last keg tips."

Buddy looked at her seriously. "Then we'll overturn it."

Joe snapped his fingers as if dealing cards. "One with a Colt, one with a fist. Right and left hand of the devil, or whatever people call them." He grinned, crooked and proud. "But together we're better than any council."

The crowd listened. And some smiled for the first time, not just with their lips, but with their eyes.

The crowd slowly dispersed, like a herd after thunder. Some went home, others stayed, looking one last time at the pan and the crates, as if they needed to be sure that all this had really happened.

Buddy crouched down next to the pedestal and dragged the spoon across the iron, which emitted a deep, weary sound. "City's had enough for today," he grumbled.

Joe stretched, turned the Colt in his hand, and clicked it a few times before dropping it into the holster. "Fed? Maybe. But not sure yet."

The bartender came back, two bottles under her arm, her gaze hard, as if she were the last one left sober. "You think it's over? Then you're dumber than those who hid the dynamite."

Buddy looked up. "Red."

"Out there," she pointed toward the edge of town, "there are still men riding. Not from the council, not from the Baron. Mercenaries. Recruited in case words aren't enough." She placed the bottles on the pedestal, next to the pan, as evidence. "They don't come to talk. They come because they were paid to let the Colt do the talking."

Joe grinned, showing his white teeth. "Then they'll get an answer. One right hand, one left. Simple as that."

Buddy nodded heavily. "Colt and fist."

The bartender snorted. "You talk like it's a game. But the men out there don't know a pan. Only lead."

Joe shrugged. "Then they'll learn. Lead doesn't hold up against iron when Buddy swings it." He pointed to the pan. "And my bullets fly faster than they think."

Buddy stood up, tall and broad, and glanced at the crowd. "The city should sleep. We're keeping watch."

And so they stood—one hand holding the Colt, the other the frying pan. Two men against what was yet to come. But in the eyes of the people, they were more: the very balance, between shot and blow, between beans and blood.

The sun sank behind the roofs, as if it no longer wanted to witness it. Shadows crept across the pavement, lamps came on, one after the other, faint light against the excessive darkness.

Buddy sat on an overturned crate, the pan beside him like a dog asleep but ready to bite at any moment. Joe leaned against a pillar, his Colt loosely held, his grin thin but his eyes alert.

The square was almost empty. Only the boy with the rusty pot was still crouching there, as if he were too curious to go home. Buddy nodded at him. "Go to sleep."

"And if they come?" asked the boy.

"Then you're not here," Buddy grumbled.

Joe grinned. "Listen to the big guy. Sleep, little one. We'll count for you."

The boy walked hesitantly. His footsteps echoed for a long time.

Then came the other sound. Soft at first. A clang of metal, far away. A whinny. Then voices, muffled, unfamiliar. Not laughter, not talking like men returning home. But that terse, staccato murmur of people acting on orders.

Buddy raised his head. "They're here."

Joe tugged on his brim and grinned crookedly. "Sounds like at least a dozen. Maybe more. Mercenaries, after all. No hunger in their stomachs, just money in their pockets."

"And lead in the Colt," Buddy grumbled.

They were silent for a moment. The wind carried the smell of horses and sweat, and beneath it the sharp note of gun oil. Men stroking their rifles before firing.

Joe reloaded the Colt and clacked the cylinder. "So, buddy. Right hand, left hand. Shall we make the devil dance?"

Buddy picked up the pan and swung it once, making the iron sing. "Eat first. Dance later."

And they stood up, two shadows against the night, ready for what was coming over the edge of the city.

The first hoofbeats were like a heartbeat, too heavy, too close. Then a second, a third. Soon it was a rhythm, steady, cold, like drums in the belly of the night.

Horses crawled out of the darkness. Black shadows with gleaming flanks, on their backs men who looked as if they had no home except the Colts hanging from their hips. Twelve, thirteen, maybe more. The lanterns cast yellow light over the buckles, over the muzzles, over faces that bore more scars than smiles.

Buddy stood upright, the pan in his hand, heavy as a hammer. Joe was still leaning against the pillar, his grin thin, his fingers twirling over his Colt.

"Good evening," one of the riders called. His voice was rough, carried by dust and whiskey. "Nice city you have there. It'll be a shame if it... burns down."

A laugh went through the ranks, short, harsh, like the clack of rifles.

Joe stepped forward, two steps into the light, his hat brim tilted low. "It would be a shame if you upset your stomachs. The beans are still warm. Whoever pulls first doesn't get a spoon."

Some laughed. Others didn't. One spat on the ground. "We're not here for beans. We're here for money."

Buddy took a step forward, the floor creaking, the pan singing dully. "Then get it from the council. All we have are iron. And fists."

The horses snorted, the men drew closer. The air became thick, as if a rope hung between the two sides, stretched to the breaking point.

Joe grinned, showing his white teeth. "Well, buddy. They want money. We have nothing but hunger. That makes us richer than them."

Buddy nodded, his grip on the pan tight. "Then they'll notice."

And the square held its breath as the mercenaries stepped from darkness into light, ready for the night that would be longer than any sermon.

The rope in the air snapped as the first man laughed. An ugly, short laugh that sounded more like metal than joy. He raised his Colt – and Joe was already faster.

A crack, dry, without echo. The rider fell backward from the saddle as if someone had knocked him off his chair. His horse snorted, ran to the side, and kicked sparks from the pavement.

Buddy stomped off, no Colt, just a frying pan. The second man came, rifle across his chest. Buddy swung, the iron clanged against wood and bone, and the man flew off his horse like a burst sack.

The crowd hiding in the alleys remained silent. No screams, no shouts. Only eyes that saw two men pitting the city against a dozen.

"One," Joe muttered, reloading, his teeth flashing white. "Two."

Another mercenary pulled, but Buddy was faster, not with his fist, but with his whole body. He rammed the man and horse to the side, the pan thudded, dull, and definitive.

Shots rang out, three, four. Bullets ricocheted against stone, sparks flying. Joe ducked, raised his Colt, and fired twice. Two shadows slumped into the dust.

Buddy snorted, trudging on as if he were a wall no one could knock down. The pan sang with every blow, a dull gong echoing through the night.

"Three," said Joe, grinning as if laying cards on the table.

The mercenaries realized they weren't fighting two men, but something bigger. Right hand. Left hand. Colt and frying pan. Blow and shot.

And the marketplace, which had just been silent, now trembled with the sound of a battle that spoke louder than any word of the council.

Dust hung like a curtain over the square, punctuated by the flash of gunfire. The initial chaos was over – now the mercenaries began to think. They shouted commands to each other, turned their horses, and split up. Four to the left, four to the right, the rest remained in the front, rifles at the ready.

"They're surrounding us," Joe muttered as he reloaded. His fingers moved quickly, as if bullets were just cards in a pack. "They're really smart."

Buddy turned the pan in his hand as if testing its weight. "Let them. More room for punches."

A mercenary came from the left, leaping from his horse, knife in his fist. Joe let him approach, grinned, then flashed his Colt. A shot, and the man fell to the ground, the knife clattering across the pavement.

A rifle shot rang out from the right. The bullet whistled past Buddy's ear, striking sparks from the column behind him. Buddy grumbled and stomped off, his eyes on the shooter. Two quick steps, then a blow. The pan hit, dull, hard. The man toppled over, blood mingling with dust.

The other mercenaries yelled, trying to tighten the line. Horses pranced, hooves thundered. One raised a rifle and aimed at Joe. But before he could fire, Buddy's pan slammed against the barrel, bending it. The shot rang out into the sky.

"Thanks, big guy," Joe shouted, grinning broadly. "That was almost my hat."

"Keep your head down," Buddy growled, pushing the shooter aside like a bale of straw.

The crowd in the alleys murmured, some even shouted. But no one intervened. It was a battle of two hands—gun and frying pan—against men who were paid for blood.

And the circle became tighter.

The circle closed. Dust, horses, men with iron teeth. Every step taken by Buddy and Joe echoed as if they were walking against a clockwork that was ticking faster.

A scream, a shot—Joe dived, rolled across the pavement, and came back up, Colt in hand, grinning as he fell. Two shots, one in quick succession, and two mercenaries toppled from their saddles as if their horses had shaken them off.

Buddy stomped forward, taking the rider's momentum head-on. The iron struck the ribcage, dull, definitive. The horse bucked, the man flew, and Buddy kept pedaling, unstoppable, a tower of flesh and will.

"One more," Joe muttered, without looking, as he reloaded. "Two more."

The mercenaries roared, closing in, Colts flashed, knives glittered. But where there was a gap, Buddy was there, and where a shot rang out, Joe was faster. Right hand, left hand – Colt and pan, blow and shot, two bars of a song no one would forget.

A horse raced toward Buddy, its hooves thundering. He raised the pan, brandishing it like a shield. The stallion braked, startled by the sound, the rider lost his footing, fell, and Buddy dealt the rest with his fist.

Joe grinned, white and bright, amidst the chaos. "You know, big guy? I think they're learning: You can tie one hand, maybe. But not two."

"Not yet," Buddy grumbled, banging the pan so loudly that the iron sang.

And then the circle broke. Someone screamed, a horse reared, the line fell apart. The mercenaries swarmed, some running, others firing wildly, aimlessly. The square was open again, the rope broken.

Joe straightened up, breathing heavily, his Colt smoking. "So much for catching him."

Buddy stood there, pan in hand, blood and dust on the rim. "Circle won't hold if your hands are against it."

The last mercenaries fled into the darkness, horses snorting, hooves pounding away. Only the fallen remained, and the silence that followed was heavier than any gunshot.

Joe looked at Buddy and grinned wearily. "Right hand, left hand. The devil would be proud of us."

Buddy nodded and placed the pan back on its base. "We're eating."

And the city knew: as long as these two hands were there, no circle would break them.

When gold becomes heavier

The morning smelled of dust and smoke. Traces of the night still lay in the marketplace: shattered boards, shell casings, blood in the gutter. People were sweeping and collecting, but kept looking over at Buddy and Joe, as if they needed to be sure they were still there.

Buddy sat on an overturned crate, the pan beside him, heavy and still. He had rolled up his sleeves, scratches on his arm, but his gaze was calm. Joe stood beside him, his hat pulled low over his face, his Colt loose in his hand, his teeth flashing brightly in a grin that conveyed more fatigue than mockery.

"Do you see that?" Joe murmured, nodding his chin at a group of men loading carts. Crates, sacks, all heavy. "That's not food. That's gold."

Buddy grumbled, rubbing his beard. "Too heavy for carts. Too heavy for people. But they carry it like it's bread."

The bartender approached, a bucket in hand, her apron covered in dust. "They've been shoveling since daylight. Anyone who can carry something is hauling gold out of the mines. As if they're trying to save it before anyone else sees it."

Joe grinned crookedly. "Or like they wanted to drown themselves. Gold is heavier than they think."

"Heavier than beans," grumbled Buddy.

The bartender put down the bucket and looked at the two of them. "Yesterday you saved the city. Today it's destroying itself. Gold is worse than any dynamite. It explodes from within."

Joe snapped his fingers as if dealing cards. "Then we'll play. One of us has to show them how heavy their treasure really is."

Buddy stood up, picked up the pan, and hung it back on his belt. "Gold weighs more when worn wrong."

And they went off, towards the men who were bending down with their own treasures, as if they had forgotten that a full belly is easier to carry than a full chest.

The road to the mine was crammed with carts. Wheels creaked, boards groaned, men cursed under the weight. Some carried sacks on their shoulders, bent like old branches, others dragged crates that chafed their hands raw. No one spoke of beans, no one of water. Only gold, always gold.

Joe stopped, grinning narrowly, but his eyes were serious. "See, buddy? Yesterday they didn't even want to eat their fill, today they're working themselves to pieces for shiny metal. That's faster than any sermon from the Baron."

Buddy stomped over to one of the carts and put his hand on a crate. He pulled gently – and the man standing in front of it stumbled forward as if he himself had lost his footing. "Too heavy," Buddy grumbled. "Leave it."

"No!" The man grabbed the box again, his fingers white. "That's my share! If I don't carry it, the next guy will!"

Joe clicked his tongue. "And if you wear it, it'll carry you to the grave. Gold eats away at backs faster than any disease."

But the men didn't listen. They pushed, pulled, and gasped. One collapsed, falling into the dust next to the wagon. No one helped; they ran past as if there were only a shadow.

Buddy lifted him up, heavy and sweating. "Gold weighs you down, not up," he muttered, laying the man on the side of the road.

The bartender followed, her apron covered in dust. "They can't hear you. They only hear the sound of coins, even if they're not clinking."

Joe drew his Colt and fired a shot into the air. The bang echoed across the road, horses snorted, men stopped. Dust swirled.

"Now listen!" Joe shouted, his teeth flashing. "You want to wear gold? Fine. But look at yourselves! Every step makes you smaller! This isn't freedom, this is a rope."

Buddy placed the pan on a box, making a dull clang of iron. "Whoever wants beans, step forward. Whoever wants gold, see how heavy it is for them."

The men stared. No one moved. But the street no longer smelled just of sweat—it smelled of doubt.

The men stood there, gripping the carts tightly as if their hands were glued to the wood. Not a word, just heavy breathing and the clanging of the chains with which they had lashed their sacks.

Joe stepped forward, his grin crooked, his eyes twinkling. He placed his hand on one of the crates, tapping his Colt lightly against the wood. *Tok-tok*. "Come on, buddy. Show them what's inside."

Buddy grumbled, grabbed the lid, and pulled out the nails with his bare fingers. Wood splintered, a dull crash, then the lid fell back. The morning sun shone in—on gold bars, stacked, heavy, gleaming dully.

The men gasped, as if they'd seen for the first time what they were actually pulling. One reached forward, about to grab a bar. Buddy slammed the pan against it, a dull, hard thud. "Don't."

"But... it's ours!" cried the man, his eyes greedy, his voice hoarse.

Joe laughed dryly. "Yours? Ever eaten a bar? Ever cooked a piece of it? Gold won't fill you up, boys. Gold will only make you crooked."

The bartender approached, sweat on her forehead, dust in her hair. "I've seen enough men disappear with a sack of gold. No one comes back. The weight pulls you into the ground until nothing's left."

Buddy lifted a bar with both hands, holding it high so everyone could see how heavy he made it. Then he dropped it. The impact made the ground shake. Dust flew into the air. "Too heavy," he said. "Too heavy for a city that wants to live."

Silence. Just coughing, breathing, horses snorting.

Joe stepped forward again, grinning, but his voice was hard. "Do you want to live or die because you load shiny metal on your back? You've seen how dynamite almost tore everything apart. Gold does the same thing—only slower. Piece by piece. Bones, back, heart."

An old man in the crowd let go of the ropes. The sack fell, dust swirled, and the golden sheen lay like dirt on the street. "Enough," he muttered. "I'm not carrying anything anymore."

And that was the first crack.

The old man stood bent over his sack, his hands empty, his back trembling. Yet he seemed taller than before, no longer bearing the weight. His eyes shone not like gold, but like water in a bowl, clear and true.

The crowd swayed. Some stared at him as if he were crazy. Others looked at their own shoulders, at the welts left by the ropes, and you could see the trembling in their fingers.

"Fool," one of them hissed, clutching his sack tighter to his chest. "Whatever he leaves behind, I'll take!"

Joe stepped forward, his Colt loosely at his side, his grin narrow but dangerous. "And how long will you carry it? Until your back breaks? Until you run out of breath? The gold belongs to no one. It belongs only to itself."

Buddy lifted the bar again, holding it above their heads so the sun glowed on it. "Food," he grumbled, "makes you strong. Gold makes you weak." Then he dropped the bar again. The impact sounded like a blow against a coffin lid.

The bartender nodded and took a step forward. "I've seen men hide gold in their shirts. It dragged them deeper into the grave than any bullet. You want freedom? Then leave it. You want chains? Then keep dragging."

The crowd began to murmur. A few let go of their ropes, hesitantly, as if afraid their hands would fall off if they were no longer clinging to the treasure. Sacks splashed into the dust, carts groaned as the weight eased.

But others held on. "You just want to cheat us!" one shouted, his eyes wide, sweat glistening. "You want to make us poor so you can have everything!"

Joe grinned, showing his teeth. "Buddy, do you see a gold tooth in my mouth somewhere?"

Buddy snorted. "I just see hunger."

The crowd laughed briefly, harshly. A crack in the resistance. Another sack fell. Then a second. The sound was different from gold—it was liberation, muffled, real.

And slowly El Dorado began to understand that gold weighs more when you take it with you than when you leave it.

The road creaked under the tension. To the left, sacks fell into the dust; to the right, men pressed their burdens even tighter to their bodies, as if they were carrying air instead of metal. The sound of falling gold was not silent—it echoed like thunder in the heads of those still holding on.

"You fools!" one shouted, his face red, his fingers clenched on the rope. "This is our heritage! Without it, we are nothing!"

Joe took two steps forward, his Colt loose, his grin wide, but his eyes sharp. "And with that? What are you then? Cripples? Dead men with shiny pockets?"

Buddy placed the pan on the floor next to him, making a dull cracking sound. "Gold doesn't satisfy anyone."

A few nodded and let go. Sacks fell. Dust rose. Children stared, as if seeing their fathers without burdens for the first time.

But others shouted louder, more furiously. "They want to take our gold! They're pretending to be heroes, but they're stealing!"

The crowd split. Two sides, one rift. On one side, those who understood that a full stomach was more important than a full cart. On the other, those who preferred to shine with a broken back.

One of them ripped a knife from his belt, his face contorted. "No one's taking my share!"

Joe raised the Colt, quickly, bare, his teeth flashing white. "Then take it to your grave if it's so important to you."

Silence, sharp as a cut. The man stared into Joe's grin, his hand trembling. Then the knife slowly sank.

The bartender stepped forward, her voice harsh. "There is no share. Gold doesn't divide. It only divides cities."

Buddy nodded, picked up the pan again, and swung it like a bell. "Whoever wants food stays. Whoever wants gold goes. But not with a knife."

And so the decision came not in a scream, but in the dull sound of sacks plunging into the dust one after the other. Each blow heavier than the last—heavier than any bullet.

The dust didn't settle. It hung in the air, thick and heavy, like the gold itself. Dozens of sacks, boxes with splintered lids, and bars glowing dully in the sun already lay on the pavement. But some still clung to them, their faces hard, their eyes greedy.

"Get out of my way!" one yelled, pushing the cart as if he could simply run over Buddy and Joe. "This is mine, all mine!"

Buddy stood in the way, as wide as a wall. The pan rested in his hand, not raised, just visible. The cart crashed into him – and stopped. Wood creaked, the man cursed, pushed, but Buddy didn't move.

"Too heavy," he grumbled. Then he slammed the pan against the cart, a dull gong. The wheel popped out of its socket, the cart tipped, and the treasure of gold tumbled into the dust.

The crowd gasped. Some laughed, others screamed.

Joe stepped forward, his Colt loose, his grin cold. "You want to carry it? Then carry it on your back until you're lying in it. But you can't get through us."

Two men drew knives, one raised a pickaxe as if he were about to split Buddy's skull. They charged forward, blind with greed.

The pan roared, hitting the first man across the chest. The breath was knocked out of him, and he fell like a sack, only worthless. Joe drew, fired, and the second man stumbled backward, his hand still on his knife, before he fell into the dust.

The third came with the pickaxe. Buddy didn't flinch, waited until the blow landed—then he grabbed the handle with his free hand, twisted it around, and slammed the pan against the man's helmet. Wood splintered, iron clanged, and the man sank to his knees.

The greedy ones still holding on hesitated. They saw the fallen, saw Buddy with the frying pan, Joe with the Colt, both immobile, both faster than any hunger for metal.

The bartender stepped in, her voice harsh. "Enough! Anyone who still holds on now isn't holding gold—they're holding their own grave."

Silence. A final sack fell. Heavy. Final.

The last sack lay in the dust, burst, gold pieces like dead eyes in the light. No one bent down. No one reached for it. The sound of the impact still hung in the air, as if it had broken something larger than wood or cloth.

Buddy stood there with his legs wide apart, a pan in his hand, his breathing heavy. Scratches on his arm, blood on his shirt, but he didn't move, as if he himself had become part of the pavement. Joe stepped up beside him, grinning, his teeth white against the shadows under his eyes.

"Well, buddy," he murmured, "see that? Nobody's touching it. Looks like we won."

Buddy snorted. "We didn't win anything. We just dumped something."

The bartender stepped forward, her hands on her hips, her apron dusty. She surveyed the crowd, then the bags, then the two men. "They've got it. Gold is heavier than freedom. Today they felt it."

People murmured. No more calls for shares, no more squabbling over possessions. Instead, one heard children laughing—cautious, uncertain, as if they were tasting the sound of joy for the first time.

Joe holstered his Colt and turned to the crowd. "You've seen two paths: the sack and the pan. The sack will drag you down. The pan will fill you up." He grinned and raised his hands. "Your choice, folks. But I know what tastes better."

Buddy nodded and placed the pan in the middle of a pile of gold, the sound of metal against iron screeching. "Here. This is the weight that stays."

And suddenly it was quiet. Then the old man from before, the one who had been the first to let go, stepped forward. He saw the pan, saw the sacks, and knelt down. Not before the gold, but before the idea that he was finally free, without having to carry it.

The crowd followed. Not kneeling, not praying—but they turned away from the gold, leaving it lying there like scrap. One instead took a bean from his pocket, bit into it, and laughed.

Joe grinned broadly, showing his white teeth. "Well, buddy. Maybe there's a happy ending after all. Just without the gold."

Buddy raised his spoon and tapped it against the pan. A muffled, sated, final sound. "Food," he said. "Always food."

And El Dorado learned that day that the only weight a city can bear is not metal, but people who can still laugh while they are full.

Billing in the city's account

The morning after was quieter than the days before. No gunshots, no clang of metal. Only the creaking of brooms sweeping across the pavement and the murmuring of those too tired to argue.

Buddy sat by the well, pan beside him, spoon in hand. He was stirring a pot of beans as if it were the most important job a town could have. Joe stood a few feet away, his hat pulled low over his face, grinning broadly, but there was a watchfulness in his eyes that never faded.

The councilmen were gone. The gold still lay in piles in front of the mines, unnoticed like rubble. And now the city faced the question no one wanted to ask: **Who's counting now? Who's keeping the new account?**

The bartender stepped forward, a stack of papers under her arm, her apron stained, her voice sharp. "You've chased the gentlemen away. Fine. But the city has to run. Without order, it'll topple faster than a cart with a broken wheel."

Buddy looked at her, chewed slowly, and swallowed. "Order?" he grumbled. "Order almost blew us apart."

Joe grinned and raised an eyebrow. "But chaos doesn't fill cups, big guy. Someone has to draw the lines so no one secretly stacks crates anymore."

People gathered. Miners with scarred hands, women with baskets, children laughing for the first time in weeks. Everyone looked at Buddy and Joe as if they weren't just hands, but scales and weights.

"We need an account," said the bartender. "But this time, not an account of lies. Not an account that weakens us. One that says: Everyone gets their spoon, no one dies in the dust."

Buddy looked at the pan, then at the faces. "So, beans instead of stamps."

Joe laughed and snapped his fingers. "Exactly. An account you can eat. No number games, no explosive balance sheets. Just: full or not full."

The crowd murmured. And for the first time, it didn't sound like fear, but rather like approval.

The murmur of agreement was genuine, but not whole. Frowns mingled with the nods, and the first loud voice came from the back rows.

"And if one works harder than the other? Should he get the same amount? What about the miners who dig deeper than everyone else? What about the guards who keep watch at night?"

The crowd murmured again, this time sharper. A few nodded, others shook their heads.

Joe stepped forward, letting his gaze wander over the faces. His grin had become narrower, more serious. "So we start counting again? One gets two spoons, the other only one? And tomorrow the first one will be sitting in the back with a box and saying: *That's only fair.*"

Buddy stirred the pan, tapped the side once with his spoon. A deep, deep thud, like a bell. "Food is the same. Hunger is the same. Work is different, yes. But no one lives if someone starves."

A man with a sooty shirt stepped forward, arms crossed. "And what if someone is lazy? What if someone does nothing but still eats?"

Joe grinned again, this time sharply. "Then Buddy will stop by. He'll make sure no one gets lazy."

A brief laugh went through the crowd, nervous but genuine.

The bartender slapped the papers against her hand, hard. "You lost almost everything yesterday because a few gentlemen wanted more than the others. More power. More tokens. More gold. Do you want that again?"

Silence. No call, no answer. Only breath and the looks that were heavier than any words.

Buddy scooped a ladle of beans and held them up, letting the steam drift across the square. "Here. One spoonful. One for everyone. If you want more, you work. But no one goes hungry."

The steam wafted, warm and honest. People smelled what truth could be like when it tasted of beans and bacon.

And the first doubts began to crumble.

The voices grew louder. A prospector pushed forward, his hands calloused, his eyes red with fatigue. "I've been in the shafts, deeper than anyone else! I've eaten dust, drunk water that tastes of rust. And you're telling me I should get the same spoon as someone who's just standing up here watching?"

Murmurs, nods of approval. Behind him, a guard called out: "I didn't sleep last night while you were sleeping. Who's protecting the city? Us! And still only one spoon?"

Joe twisted his mouth into a grin, but his eyes sparkled. "You want more? Then we'll count tokens again. Then tomorrow we'll be back to men in suits and crates full of dynamite. Is that what you want?"

The crowd murmured uncertainly. Some nodded, some shook their heads.

Buddy slowly rose, tall as a tower, pan in hand. He trudged a few steps forward until he stood directly in front of the prospector. "You want more?" he grumbled. "Then eat two spoonfuls. But if your neighbor is hungry, he'll come to you. And then there'll be no peace. Then you'll get a beating."

The prospector glared back, but didn't back down. "Then the lazy ones should get the beating. Not us."

A murmur. The air crackled as if the first punch was about to fall.

Joe raised his hands and grinned crookedly. "Slow down, guys. This isn't a tavern. But if you want a fight, Buddy still has room in the pan."

The crowd laughed, briefly and harshly. The tension eased for a moment. But the prospector still didn't step back.

Then Buddy grabbed his wrists, hard, firmly, without force, but so that the man could no longer move. "No one is starving," he grumbled. "No one is dying in the dust. That's the account. Whoever fights against it is fighting against us."

The prospector tried to resist, but Buddy's grip was stronger than any resistance. Finally, he slumped back, gasping. "Fine," he muttered. "One spoon. But it should be fair."

Buddy let go and nodded. "Just is full."

And so the mood shifted again – from argument to agreement, raw, restless, but genuine.

The argument hadn't completely died down, but it had settled into people's stomachs. Buddy placed the pan in the middle of the pedestal, allowing the steam to drift across the square. The smell of beans and bacon hung in the air, stronger than any sermon.

"A spoon," he grumbled, "for each."

Joe grinned, grabbed an old tin bowl, filled it, and handed it to the first child who stepped forward. "Start small. Always like this. First, those who have the least."

The crowd watched, silent and rapt. The child took the spoon, blew over the beans, ate—and smiled. A smile so broad that it seemed like a response.

"Next," said Buddy.

A woman stepped forward, hesitant, her hands covered in calluses. She received her spoon, ate, and you could see her shoulders slump as if the weight were being lifted.

The bartender wrote on a piece of paper in rough strokes: one, two, three. No name, no brand—just lines. "This is the new account," she said loudly. "No lies, no bars. Just lines for full bellies."

People began to move. One by one, they stepped forward, got their spoon, and stepped back. No pushing, no shouting. Just the sound of metal on metal, spoon in pan, lines on paper.

Joe leaned back, grinning, his teeth flashing. "See, buddy? Simple math. Every line represents a life. And no one has to worry about starving anymore."

Buddy nodded and continued scooping. "So be it."

A prospector who had just been arguing finally stepped forward. He got his spoon, ate, and his eyes softened. "Fair," he murmured. "Not much. But fair."

The crowd roared, this time quietly and contentedly. For the first time in weeks, the growling of stomachs was fainter than the people's voices.

And so the city's account began—not with gold, not with stamps, but with beans, fat, and lines on paper.

It didn't take long for the bowls to be empty. Not because there weren't enough, but because people's hunger was greater than what a spoonful could satisfy. But the most important thing had happened: everyone had eaten. Everyone had felt that their stomachs were no longer empty.

But where people are full, there are also those who want more.

A man with sunken cheeks and nimble fingers crept back to the pan while the crowd was still laughing and talking. He raised the bowl, ready to dip it in again.

Buddy saw it without turning his head. He stomped over, grabbed the guy by the neck, and lifted him up like a wet sack. "A spoon," he grumbled. "One."

"But I'm still hungry!" the man gasped, his eyes wild.

Joe stepped up, grinning crookedly. "We're all hungry, friend. But if you take two, one will be empty. And then we're back to the old game."

The crowd remained silent, watching. The man squirmed, trying to break free. Buddy held him like a tree trunk.

"Greed," he grumbled, "is heavier than gold." Then he set the man down, firmly but not cruelly. "Wait. Tomorrow there will be beans again. Then you'll have your spoon. But not today."

The bartender crossed out the list. "Someone tried to cheat. Everyone saw it. This is the account—not just lines, but eyes. Whoever cheats, cheats in front of the whole city."

A murmur went through the crowd. It wasn't anger, not cheering—more like the nodding of people who understood that rules only apply when everyone can see them.

The man ducked his head and crept away, his gaze heavier than any blow.

Joe grinned, showing his teeth. "See, buddy? No rope, no gallows. Just an empty stomach for an evening. Harder than any sentence."

Buddy continued scooping, the pan heavy, the spoon steady. "That's how it should be."

And so El Dorado learned that the new account not only fed people, but also checked whether someone was greedy.

The sun was already high, and the square smelled of beans, bacon, and the first spark of order. People sat in groups, bowls on their knees, speaking more quietly than usual because they knew their stomachs were no longer their enemy today.

There he came. A shadow at the edge of the square, slow, hesitant, as if he no longer belonged there. An old councilman. Not in his Sunday best, not with his fine shoes—the fabric was wrinkled, his hat dented, and his expression flickered between pride and shame.

The crowd murmured. Some jumped to their feet as if they wanted to chase him away immediately. Others just stared, their fingers on their bowls.

Buddy stood up, pan in hand. He didn't say a word, but the sound of him placing the iron on the base was loud enough.

Joe gave a thin grin and tipped his hat a little lower. "Well, if that isn't one of the ghosts. I could have sworn you disappeared with the rest of the carriage."

The old man raised his hands, his voice raspy. "I'm not here to rule. I'm here to count. You have no account, no ledger, just lines on paper. That won't hold a city together."

The bartender stepped forward, list in hand, her eyes hard. "Lines are more honest than your books. Your numbers nearly broke us."

"But numbers are necessary!" he cried. "You think you can treat everyone equally—but the city needs measure, needs order. If you let me, I'll manage the new account. No lies, honestly this time."

The crowd began to murmur. Doubt. Old habits came knocking again.

Joe clicked his tongue, his grin sharp. "Honestly? From you? We saw your honesty, friend. It stank of dynamite."

Buddy trudged forward, so heavily the floor creaked. "A spoon," he grumbled. "Nothing more. Nothing less. An account is a pan. Not a book."

The old man took a step back, but raised his voice again. "You'll regret it! Without accounting, everything falls apart!"

Then the boy stepped forward with the rusty pot and placed it next to the pan. "This is the account," he said. "One pot. One pan. One spoon."

Silence. Then the people nodded. Difficult, slow, but one after the other.

And the councilman realized that he no longer had a place – not in this city, not in this account.

The old councilman still stood, his hands trembling, his gaze flickering. But he looked into the faces and knew he wouldn't be counting anything anymore. Not stamps, not gold, not people. He'd already been accounted for before he'd even opened his mouth.

The people turned away, one by one. Not a word, not a cry. Only this silent judgment, harder than any rope. The old man stumbled back, lost his hat, and didn't pick it up. Finally, he disappeared into the alley, smaller than when he came.

Buddy took the pan from its base and held it up, the light glinting off the metal. "This is the account," he grumbled. "As long as it's full, the city lives. When it's empty, no one makes a profit—only hunger."

Joe stepped up beside him, grinning narrowly, showing his white teeth. "And anyone who thinks they have to write books or print stamps again—they can try. But then there'll be trouble with both their right and the other hand."

A laugh went through the crowd, not wild, but free.

The bartender tore the council's old list in half, threw the scraps into the dust, and then wrote just three words on a fresh sheet: **Pan, spoon, lines.** She held it up for everyone to see.

The boy with the rusty pot stood proudly beside it, as if he were the custodian of the new archive. Some laughed, others clapped him on the shoulder.

And so the city of El Dorado settled its accounts. No gold, no stamps, no books. Just a pan, a spoon, a pot—and the memory of the night they were almost blown up.

Joe put his hands on his hips, grinning broadly again. "Well, buddy. Now they have an account they can eat. No interest, no debt. Just beans."

Buddy nodded, placing the pan back on its pedestal as if it were a sacred object. "Fed is enough."

And the city breathed a sigh of relief, for the first time not in the shadow of gold or dynamite, but under the simple promise that no one would go hungry anymore.

One last bean spoon

Evening fell quietly over El Dorado. No more shouting in the streets, no more chariots of gold, no more voices crying for more. Only the crackling of fires, the clinking of bowls, and the deep, contented sighs of those who had eaten their fill.

Buddy sat by the well, the pan on his knees. He stirred slowly, as if counting the beans, spoonful by spoonful, until none remained. His gaze was calm but heavy. Joe stood beside him, his hat low, his Colt loosely holstered, grinning that tired grin he only wore when he'd seen more than he cared to admit.

"You know, big guy," Joe began, "I think we're almost at the end. Not just of the pot. Of the story, too."

Buddy grumbled, pushing the spoon through the beans until it scraped the bottom of the pan. "The end means full."

"The end means," Joe blinked, "that the city now has to run without us. We were the right hands and the other hands. But at some point, they'll need their own."

The bartender approached, her apron stained, her hair disheveled. "You talk like you're already leaving. But without you..." She paused, looked at the pan, then at Buddy's face. "Without you, we'd have been dust long ago."

Buddy scooped, raised his spoon, beans steaming, bacon glistening. "Last spoonful," he said grumbly. "Then the pan's empty. And then... we're going."

Joe grinned broadly, showing his white teeth. "But only if we share it."

The crowd had gathered, silent, tense, as if this last spoonful were more important than all the gold that had ever come out of the mines. Children held their breath, men folded their arms, women nodded quietly.

Buddy handed the spoon to Joe. Joe took it, turned it once as if shuffling cards, and then they both ate—one on the left, one on the right, two halves of a whole.

And the city understood: this was not a farewell, but a promise that the beans' account would continue as long as someone could still hold the spoon.

The empty spoon clinked against the bottom of the pan. The sound echoed across the square like a final chord. No echo of argument, no more greed—just that single, honest clink.

Joe licked his lips, wiped the last bit of beans from his mouth with the back of his hand, and grinned. "Well, Buddy... that's it. All eaten. No more seconds."

Buddy slowly put the spoon down as if laying down a weapon. "Pan is empty. City is full."

The bartender stepped closer, her eyes gleaming in the firelight. "Do you really want to leave? You led us, you saved us. Without you—"

Joe raised his hand, cutting her off, his grin softer than usual. "Without us, you've learned to be satisfied. You no longer need Colts, no more fists coming from outside. You have your own now."

Buddy nodded, pushed the pan to the middle of the square, and placed it on the pedestal where the dynamite had been yesterday. "It stays here," he grumbled. "Not for us. For you."

The crowd murmured. Some wanted to protest, others watched in silence, but everyone felt it was the right thing to do.

A child, the boy with the rusty pot, stepped forward. He placed his pot next to the pan, proud, awkward, yet firm. "I'll keep an eye on it," he said quietly. "I'll count the marks."

Joe laughed brightly, showing his white teeth. "See, buddy? We've already been replaced. And better than we could."

Buddy grumbled, pulling his hat down. "Then we can go."

And so it was expressed: not in loud farewell speeches, not in grand gestures, but in a spoon clinking on the bottom of a pan and in two men who knew that their time here was over.

The night hung heavy over El Dorado, but it was peaceful. No smoke, no gunpowder, only the crackling of fires and the murmur of voices, quieter than usual. Buddy and Joe sat side by side on the well's edge, silent, each with his own gaze into the darkness.

Then the people gathered again. First a few, then more and more, until almost the entire town was standing in the square. They held bowls in their hands, empty bowls, which they no longer held out of hunger, but as signs.

The bartender stepped in front of the crowd and spoke briefly, simply: "You want to leave. We say: Stay."

Joe grinned, tilting his hat a bit so his bright eyes were visible. "Stay? What are we still here for? You've got beans, you've got lines, you've even got the boy with the rusty pot. What else do you need?"

"You," said the prospector who had once argued. His voice was rough, but not defiant. "We need your hands. If someone causes trouble, if someone starts lying again... then the city needs fists. Yours."

A murmur went through the crowd in agreement.

Buddy scratched his beard and grumbled deeply. "We can't always hit. At some point, you'll have to hit yourself."

A woman stepped forward and placed her bowl on the pan, which was still on the pedestal. "We don't want you to do the work for us. We want you to stay so we know we're doing it right."

Joe laughed softly, but this time his laugh sounded almost sad. "If you need us to tell you what's right, then you haven't learned it yet."

The silence afterward was heavy. No outcry, no protest, just looks like hands that wouldn't let go.

Buddy looked over at Joe, his hat tilted back, his teeth flashing in the firelight. "They're trying to hold us back," he grumbled.

Joe nodded, his grin narrow. "But we belong further along. The road doesn't end here."

And so the tension remained in the square – between the city's longing and the farewell of the two men who already had one foot in the saddle.

The night was silent, except for the crackling fire. Sparks rose into the sky, as if they wanted to tell the stars what had happened here. Buddy and Joe now both stood in front of the pan, which still sat enthroned on its base like an iron crown.

Joe took off his hat, turned it in his hand, and grinned, but his expression was serious. "You know, Buddy... if we stay here, they'll never stop looking at us. Then they'll ask us every day if we did the right thing, if we did it enough. And we... we're not teachers."

Buddy nodded, reached for the pan, and held it up for everyone to see. The steam had long since dissipated, only the smell of bacon lingered in the metal. "Last spoonful," he grumbled, "is gone. Now it's your turn."

The bartender stepped forward, her eyes shining. "Then give us a sign. Something that will stay when you're gone."

Buddy looked at Joe. Joe grinned, showing his sparkling white teeth. "Well, big guy, what do you say? One more fight to say goodbye?"

Buddy snorted and shook his head. Then he put the pan back on its base, grabbed the spoon, and slapped it hard against the edge.

BONG.

The sound rolled across the square, deep and heavy, like a bell ushering in a new era. People held their breath, children clung to their mothers' skirts.

Joe raised his hand and pointed at the pan. "Any time you want to know what's right, hit it. Listen. If the sound is deep, you know the city is still alive."

Buddy nodded, placing the spoon next to it as if it were a sacred object. "That's all you need."

The crowd began to nod, hesitantly at first, then more vigorously, until a muffled murmur filled the square. They understood.

Buddy and Joe turned around, shoulder to shoulder, and for the first time, they didn't seem like two strangers who had come here, but like men leaving something behind. No gold, no tokens—just a sound.

And that sound would last longer than anything that had ever shone.

The pan was back on its pedestal, gleaming dully in the firelight. The spoon beside it was more than a tool—it was a promise. People stared at it as if they were finally holding something in their hands that wouldn't betray, wouldn't break, wouldn't explode.

Buddy lowered his hat and tightened the strap of his bag. "Time," he grumbled, so quietly that only Joe could hear.

Joe nodded, turned around once, and looked at the crowd waiting in silence. His grin was broad, but in his eyes lay a farewell that weighed more than all the carts of gold. "So, guys," he said, "if you screw up, call the pan. But it would be better if you didn't need us anymore."

A few laughed nervously, others nodded, some cried quietly.

Buddy started off, slowly, heavily, every step echoing across the square. Joe followed, loose, light, but everyone knew he carried just as much weight as the big man next to him.

The bartender took a step forward, about to shout, but didn't. Instead, she placed her hand on the piece of paper with the lines—and that was answer enough.

Children ran behind for a bit, then stopped when their mothers held them back. "You have to go," they whispered, "otherwise we'll never learn."

Buddy and Joe reached the edge of the square. They turned around once. Two figures in the flickering light, a pan behind them, a city on their breath.

Joe raised his hat and waved it loosely. "Stay fed, folks."

Buddy just nodded. But the nod was as heavy as an oath.

Then they stepped out into the night. The city breathed a sigh of relief—not because they were leaving, but because they knew they could now continue on their own.

The streets of El Dorado were silent. No creaking carts, no men arguing over gold, no calls for tokens. Only the distant whine of a dog and the wind pushing dust across the pavement.

Buddy trudged ahead, his footsteps heavy, as if he still bore the burden of yesterday. Joe followed, his hands deep in his pockets, his hat pulled low over his face. His grin was there, but it was different: more remembrance than mockery.

"You know, big guy," said Joe, "I never thought we'd end up like this—no fighting, no gunfire. Just a frying pan."

Buddy grumbled without stopping. "The pan is louder than the gunshot."

They walked past the saloon. The doors were open, the lights were on, but no cards were flying, no bottles were clinking. Instead, they heard quiet conversation, a few songs that didn't sound like despair.

Joe paused for a moment, peering inside. "Remember, buddy? I lost the first one in there—at a card trick. And you bailed me out so I stayed alive."

Buddy snorted without turning his head. "You always lost."

"Maybe." Joe grinned broadly, showing his teeth. "But this time... this time we won. Without an ace up our sleeve."

Further down the street lay the bank. The sign was crooked, a window was broken. No security guard out front, no calls for security. Joe looked over and shook his head. "Everything they ever counted is now in the dust. Funny, isn't it?"

Buddy stopped and looked at the building for a long time. Then he grumbled, "Bank is dead. Pfanne lives."

They continued on to the blacksmith shop. The smell of iron still lingered there, but it mingled with the scent of beans, which even here didn't disappear. Joe laughed softly. "El Dorado smells like a kitchen now, not explosives. I wouldn't have thought so."

Buddy just nodded.

And as they left the city behind, they realized: what they had left behind was more than just an iron bell. It was a heartbeat that the city itself had to keep beating.

On the outskirts of town, the ground was harder, the dust colder. Behind Buddy and Joe, the firelight still flickered, but ahead of them lay only darkness and the vast, silent west.

They stopped, both at the same time, as if they had the same thought. Buddy looked back, tall as a shadow looming over the rooftops. Joe stood beside him, tipped his hat up, and grinned—not broadly, not mockingly, but warmly.

"Well, big guy," he murmured, "back there we're leaving a city that can now breathe on its own. Never thought we'd become pan-preachers."

Buddy growled deeply, his words heavy as rock. "We were just cooking. They learned to eat."

Behind them it was quiet, except for the dull *BONG*, wafting over the houses from afar. Someone had banged a spoon against the pan. Not loudly, not demandingly—more like a thank you.

Joe blinked and looked at Buddy. "Do you hear that? This is our reckoning. No tokens, no gold. Just a sound."

Buddy nodded, lowering his hat. "Good enough."

Then they set off. Two riders without horses, two hands without a master. The road took them in, dust beneath their boots, wind in their faces.

They no longer spoke. Words were used up, like the last spoonful of beans. But in their silence lay something that said more than any sermon: that they would never stop as long as there was a city somewhere that was still hungry.

The lights of El Dorado diminished until they merely glowed like stars on the ground. Before them stretched the darkness—wide, open, full of new stories.

And so the last spoonful of beans ended: not in the pan, not in the stomach, but in the steps of two men who kept going because they knew that the food never ends.

Dust behind two riders

The night had been short, yet it lay in the two men's bones like a leaden cloak. Smoke from the fires still hung over El Dorado, thin and faint, as if the city wanted to breathe carefully without shattering the silence. But light was already pressing in on the horizon. First gently, then greedily, until the sun burst through the darkness like a smoldering nugget of gold.

Buddy sat on a fallen fence post, his elbows on his knees, his large hand firmly gripping the handle of the pan. He'd wiped it down last night, polished it until the iron gleamed dully. It would stay here, in the middle of El Dorado, a heart of metal that smelled not of gold, but of beans.

Joe stood a few steps ahead, his weight casually resting on one leg, his hat low over his face, a match in the corner of his mouth. He grinned crookedly, but it was a different grin than usual—one that knew more about goodbyes than mockery. "Well, big fellow," he said finally, "we did it. The city's alive. We fed the people, and no one had to swallow gold for it. I wouldn't have thought so."

Buddy grumbled, frowning. "It was harder than any fight."

Joe laughed softly. "You said it. But you know what's even harder? Leaving. They want to keep us. They think we can settle any score, raise a fist if someone cheats again. But that's not how it works. We're not teachers. We're..." He dropped the match, stamped it out. "...just travelers."

The word hung between them, heavy, honest.

Buddy straightened up, shouldered the pan one last time, as if he were going to take it with him. Then he placed it in the middle of the pedestal where the dynamite had lain yesterday. The pan clanged dully on the stone, and for a moment, it seemed as if the entire square echoed. "It's theirs now," he grumbled. "No taking it back. No more."

The bartender stepped forward, her eyes glistening tiredly. She wanted to say something, but Buddy just raised his hand. "Pan speaks for itself."

Joe grinned, showing his sparkling white teeth. "And if that's not enough, you can always count on the big guy here—in spirit. But not in reality."

The crowd was silent. No protest, no pleading, just a low murmur that sounded like a bow. They knew the two men would leave. They also knew it was the right thing to do.

At the edge of the square stood two horses, skinny but tough. They had found them somewhere behind the shafts, neglected, almost forgotten. Now they snorted, as if they sensed it was time. Buddy placed his heavy hand on the neck of the brown horse, Joe patted the gray's neck.

The sun climbed higher, casting a harsh light over the rooftops of El Dorado. It was still gold, but a different kind of gold—not metal, but morning light.

Joe swung himself into the saddle, glancing back at the pan, which gleamed like a bell. "You know, Buddy," he said, "maybe that was our greatest coup. No bank robbery, no card trick, no colt duel. Just a city that can now run without us."

Buddy sat heavily in the saddle, looked long and hard into the people's faces. Then he nodded, so firmly it seemed like a vow. "Done."

The horses stamped, the wind carried the dust higher, and the path lay open before them. No trail, no destination. Only the west, vast and merciless, as it always had been.

They rode forward, slowly at first, then faster, until their hooves kicked up dust that glittered in the morning light. The city fell behind, smaller with every step, as the sun bathed the sky in a sea of fire.

And so the final ride began – not as the end, but as the beginning of a new road that was already waiting for them.

The sun was now at their backs, casting long shadows across the prairie. Two riders, two lines of darkness, almost touching on the dusty ground. The rhythm of their hooves was steady, almost like a heartbeat—heavy, insistent, endless.

Joe rode loosely, as always. He leaned halfway in the saddle, letting the reins slip through his fingers, as if the horse knew where to go on its own. His grin was there, but behind the gleam of his teeth lay something thoughtful. "You know, big guy," he began, "I never thought we'd leave behind something like this. A town that survives on beans instead of gold. Sounds almost like a sermon."

Buddy rode straight, heavily, his hands firmly on the reins. He didn't look back. "No preaching. Just full."

Joe laughed dryly. "True. But think about it. There are towns out there everywhere that think they can save themselves with gold. Banks, sheriffs,

barons in fine suits. All the same old game. Maybe... maybe we'll be needed again."

Buddy looked straight ahead, his eyes narrowed against the light. "The road never ends."

They rode in silence for a while. Only the snorting of the horses, the creaking of leather, the crunching of stones beneath their hooves. The wind carried dust with it, making it dance between them like mist.

"You know, Buddy," Joe murmured, "it's funny. I spend my whole life chasing every fight, every game, every quick buck. But today... today, for the first time, I feel like we left something truly complete."

Buddy pulled on the reins, slowing the horse down. "There's no such thing as finished. Always hungry somewhere."

Joe grinned and shook his head. "That's what I hate about you. You're always right."

They rode on side by side, and as the sky changed from gold to blue, they both knew: This wasn't the end. It was just a stop. The dust behind them wasn't the last thing that would remain of them.

Because somewhere, beyond the horizon, the next city – and the next pan – was waiting.

The day had become long. The sun was now high in the sky, scorching and relentless. The dust clung to skin and beard, and every snort of the horses sounded heavier than the last. Finally, Buddy and Joe found a patch of shade under a few gnarled mesquite trees.

Buddy dismounted, creaking as if the ground had given way. He tied his horse and sat heavily on a rock. He had left the pan behind, but he still reached for his belt, as if it were still there, as if the iron were still a part of him.

Joe slid off the saddle, rolled his shoulders, grabbed his canteen, and took a sip. "You know, big guy," he said, water trickling down his chin, "we could have actually stayed in El Dorado. Hot food, a roof, a bartender who looks at you like you're worth something... sounds almost like peace and quiet."

Buddy grumbled. "Calmness softens."

Joe grinned and sat down in the grass, legs stretched out. "And what's so bad about that? Not having to constantly watch out for someone with a Colt behind you? Not having to sleep in the desert every night?"

Buddy picked up a stone and turned it over in his hand, as if considering whether to throw it away or keep it. "Soft dies first."

For a while, the only sounds were the chirping of crickets and the crackling of dry wood as Joe nudged it with his boot. Then he pulled a small packet from his pocket—tobacco. He rolled a cigarette and lit it with a match. The smoke curled in the hot air.

"Sometimes I wonder," Joe murmured, "if we're ever going anywhere. Or if the road really never ends. Maybe we're just two shadows passing through everywhere, kicking up a bit of dust, throwing a few punches—and then moving on."

Buddy looked at him, his eyes dark, his brow deep. "The road doesn't end. But we do."

Joe blew out smoke and laughed softly, bitterly. "Well, thanks, you optimist. But maybe you're right. Maybe that's exactly the point: while we still can, we'll move. If we can't make it anymore, the road will eat us. That's it."

Buddy put the stone back in the grass, reached for his canteen, and drank deeply. Then, barely audibly, he said, "Until then—beans."

Joe grinned and lay back on the grass, hands behind his head, cigarette in the corner of his mouth. "Beans until then. Sounds like a plan."

And so they sat in the shadows, two men, two voices, who knew that the future would be as dusty as the path they had left behind. But also that they would continue riding as long as a city somewhere needed the sound of a pan.

The sun had long since disappeared behind the hills, and the desert had changed its face. The blazing expanse had become a sea of shadows, punctuated by the crackling of small fire pits that Buddy and Joe had assembled from dry wood. The fire was meager, barely more than an ember, but enough to bathe the evening in warmth.

Buddy sat with his legs wide apart, his back leaning against a rock. His silhouette seemed even larger in the play of flames. He held a tin can in his

hand, the last remnants of beans bubbling quietly. The smell hung heavy in the air, mingling with dust and dry smoke.

Joe lay half-stretched on the ground, his arms behind his head, his hat pulled low over his face. But his bright eyes sparkled in the firelight as he counted the crackling flames like other people count their money. He grinned, and you knew another joke was about to come out.

"You know, Buddy," he began, "I still remember that saloon in Santa Rosa. You knocked out two men with that frying pan while I was out there getting the horses ready. It was almost the same as in El Dorado. Only the beans got burnt that time."

Buddy grumbled deeply, stirring the can. "Your job was burnt."

Joe laughed and threw a small stone into the fire, sending sparks flying. "Maybe. But in the end, we always made it through. Always."

They were silent for a moment, accompanied only by the chirping of crickets and the distant howl of a coyote.

"Do you think," Joe finally asked, "that we'll ever really get somewhere? Really? A city, a roof, beans from the same pan every night, no more fights?"

Buddy frowned, picked up a spoonful of beans, and chewed slowly. "No."

Joe turned sideways, looked at him, blinked, and grinned. "Quick and easy. I like your answers, big guy. But you know what? Somewhere out there, maybe there's a city that needs us for more than just our fists. But..." He paused, chewing on the words. "But because we're staying."

Buddy swallowed and put the can aside. "Staying makes you weak."

The fire crackled as if in agreement. But Joe just grinned, showing his teeth. "Then we'll just stay long enough to get our fill – and move on."

They both laughed, briefly, harshly.

The sky above them was full of stars, clear and merciless, as only expanse could reveal. Buddy and Joe looked up, each in their own direction, and both knew: The West hadn't told all its stories yet.

The fire had almost burned down, only embers glowed in the circle of stones. The wind played with the shadows, drawing them long and narrow across the ground. Buddy was still sitting broadly, arms crossed, while Joe lay half-drowsy in the sand, a cigarette in the corner of his mouth, his hat pulled low over his forehead.

There it was. A sound, little more than a scratch. Somewhere out in the darkness, beyond the firelight. A twig snapping. A hoofbeat, dull, cautious.

Buddy opened his eyes, slowly but clearly. "Can you hear me?" he grumbled.

Joe blew out smoke, not turning his head. "I hear it. Three horses. Maybe four. Pretty light on their feet. No wagons. No cargo."

Buddy reached for the pan next to the can of beans and held it loosely in his hand. A familiar grip that was reassuring. "Pursuer."

Joe straightened up, pushing his hat up with his index finger. His teeth flashed in the glow of the embers. "Or customers."

The cracking grew louder. A shadow moved between the mesquite trees, then another. Buddy stood up, heavy, immobile, like a wall. Joe remained crouched, his hand on his Colt, but his grin never wavered.

"Well, friends," Joe called into the night, "if you want beans, you'll have to come closer. If you want trouble, come closer, too."

The silence that followed was sharp, as if the air itself were holding back the answer. Then a quiet laugh, strange, ragged. "You're the two from El Dorado. We heard you leave gold lying around like it's dirt."

Buddy snorted. "It's crap."

The shadows moved closer: three riders, their horses slender, their faces unrecognizable. But the way they sat revealed everything: men who knew weapons, men who didn't ask questions, but took.

Joe slowly rose, playfully running his hand along his Colt. "Well, buddy. They found us. Barely half a day's journey out, and someone already wants to know if we're really stupid enough to leave gold behind."

Buddy put down the pan and looked at Joe. "The road never ends."

Joe nodded, grinning broadly. "Luckily."

And then the night stretched out, silent, heavy, full of breaths just waiting to shatter into dust and fists.

The three riders stopped at the edge of the firelight, horses snorting, eyes glowing like coals in the darkness. The crackling of the embers was the only sound until one of them jerked forward on the reins. A thin man, a wire-beard, his voice raspy: "Gold. You have it. Otherwise you wouldn't have survived."

Joe stepped closer to the fire, his shadow dancing on the ground. His grin flashed, bright and mocking. "Gold? We only have beans. But they'll fill you up. Want to try them?"

The men laughed, harshly and threateningly. The second man pushed back his jacket and revealed the butt of a revolver. "We'll take what you have. And if it's not sacks, then you'll take us for fun."

Buddy slowly raised the pan, holding it like a shield. The iron gleamed faintly in the red light of the embers. He said nothing, only that deep hum that promised more than words.

"All right," Joe murmured, running his fingers over the Colt. "We'll do it like always: You take the left hand, I'll take the right hand."

"I'll take them all," Buddy grumbled.

The riders dismounted, the ground crunched, and dust rose. Three men stepped into the light, their faces sharp, their eyes full of greed. One reached for his weapon, the other for a knife.

Joe was faster. The Colt flashed, a shot rang out, and the bullet ripped the first man's hat off his head and nailed it to the tree behind him. The crowd's laughter died down.

"You see," said Joe, grinning slightly, "I'm in a good mood today. Otherwise, it would have been your skull."

The man with the knife rushed forward, aiming at Joe. But Buddy took a step aside, and the pan roared. A dull gong, a body crashing into the dust, the knife far away.

The third man hesitated, sweating, his eyes wide. Buddy looked at him for just a moment, and the man dropped his weapon.

"Food," Buddy grumbled, "makes you strong. Greed makes you weak."

Joe spun the Colt around, holstered it, and grinned broadly. "Hey, friends. Still hungry?"

The men backed away, one staggering, the other clutching his chest where Buddy's pan had hit him. Then they hastily mounted their horses and rode into the night, leaving a trail of dust that quickly disappeared.

Joe watched them go and spat in the sand. "And I thought the evening was going to be boring."

Buddy sat back down, put the pan on the fire, and stirred the last of the beans. "Never boring."

And so the night returned, quiet, but with proof that the street never sleeps – and that two men had to stay awake at all times.

The embers had died down, only a thin streak of smoke still rising into the sky as Buddy and Joe saddled the horses. The east was already beginning to glow, a streak of red, broad and sharp as a blade. Morning came, and with it the promise that the night hadn't definitively ended anything.

Buddy tightened the straps, checking the saddle with calm, heavy movements. Joe stretched, yawned, then grinned, bright and mocking as ever. "Well, big guy," he said, "another night survived. Three fewer idiots breathing down our necks. It's almost getting boring."

Buddy pulled his hat down low over his face. "Never boring. Just the road."

Joe laughed and swung himself into the saddle. "Yeah, yeah. Road, dust, beans. And a few fights in between. Sounds like a life no one wants to emulate."

The horses set off, slowly at first, then faster. The ground vibrated beneath their hooves, dust rose in clouds, and the light of the rising sun caught in it until it looked as if they were riding through a sea of fire.

Joe looked back, just one last time. El Dorado lay far behind them, barely more than a shadow in the distance. He could no longer see the pan on the pedestal,

but he knew it was there, that it clanged whenever someone lifted the spoon. That was enough.

"You know, Buddy," he called over the wind, "maybe there will be an end to this after all. Maybe when we're old, big bellies, gray beards, tired of fighting."

Buddy grumbled, his eyes never leaving the horizon. "Old means full. Full means the end."

Joe grinned broadly, showing his teeth, which were almost blinding in the morning light. "Then we'll just ride until we're full."

The sun now rose above the horizon, dazzling, golden, greater than any metal promise. Its shadows stretched long behind them, two lines that became one in the dust.

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