

# *Don Quixote*

The fight with the windmills



**Michael Lappenbusch**

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## The Knight of the Sorrowful Countenance

The house was a worn-out mouth growling at the street. Lime peeled from the walls like scabs, the door hung on a hinge that held as much hope as an empty beer mug just before closing time. Behind that door crouched he: the guy they used to call Alonso, but now only that when they were feeling charitable; mostly they called him "the one with the pan on his head" or "the saint from Fool's Field." He sat in his chair, which creaked as if it were in pain, a chair with splinters of wood that prick you like bad memories. His back was as crooked as an old question mark that had never been answered. And in his head rumbled a parade, trumpets, fanfares, the whole damned program, while outside only dust, flies, and yawning boredom went about their dull business.

The air smelled of warm goat dung and dead hope. When the wind came, it brought the breath of the fields, and that smelled of labor that tears at you until you no longer know yourself. But to him, it smelled of battlefields and wet banners, of iron and horse sweat and honor—that word that tasted like church wine to his tongue and sounded like a bad joke to the others. He had a face beaten by the sun too often, grooves like drag marks, eyes set too deep as if afraid of the light, and cheeks gnawed by life for so long that only a meager defiance remained. And when he blinked, you could see it: something was burning inside. Not cleanly, not clearly—more like a trash fire in a backyard, smelly, tough, but damned persistent.

There were books on the table, worn things, sweat-stained, greasy, with dog-ears like the ears of a drunk who missed the night going home. Stuff crawled out of their pages: heroes with jawlines you could cut your fingers on; ladies with eyes like mooncakes, so big, so silvery, so wrong; dragons who had the breath of blacksmiths; saints who were said to never have farted; kings who always knew what to do. Nothing smelled in these books. Not a cow, not a person, not a thing. Everything was beautiful and full of meaning. He gulped the stories down like the cheapest red wine swill, until the images rose and slammed against the ceiling. And when they came back down, they were no longer images, but commands.

The pan on his head? An old helmet, if you ask him. Born from a pot, blessed by necessity, polished by desperation until it flickered in the light like a bad idea on the verge of catastrophe. He put it on with a seriousness that silenced even the flies in the room; they paused, watched a man make a crown out of junk, and probably thought it was the most normal thing in the world. All that was missing was the lance. A broomstick with fever dreams. When you run against

the world with that, at least you can pretend the world has wounds. And, damn it, sometimes it really does.

He stood up, and the chair almost fell apart with relief. His knees creaked as if they had a will of their own, and that will meant no. He shuffled across the floor, where the traces of days that were never going to be any good had dried. His boots weren't boots at all; more like two sad leather sacks in which his feet lived like debts in a lousy account. He opened the door, and the sun touched his face like an old enemy. The street: a thread of dust and gossip that crisscrossed the village. The well: the kiosk of poverty, where women fetched water and stories. The men: shadows in hats who knew more than they said and did less than they boasted.

"There he is," one shouted, half laughing, half coughing, and spat next to the door. "Our knight with the potter's helmet." Another chuckled, the kind of thin, nasty chuckle that creeps into your bones. "He's going hunting again. Maybe he'll find a dragon in the latrine today." Laughter that smelled of burnt liquor.

He didn't see her. Or pretended not to. The same thing happened in this dump. He looked right through them, as if they were curtains of flies that could be parted with a single step. There was something conspiratorial in his gaze, like when you resolve at night to stop drinking tomorrow: a little vow that you know will lie to you, but warms you nonetheless. He raised his hand in greeting, so stiffly, so boastfully, that his crest crested. "Dulcinea," he murmured, not to the people, but to the sky, which lay like a tin lid over the village. "By your grace." The peasant woman by the well, whom everyone called Dulcinea when they were in a bad mood because it made her laugh, raised her eyebrows, scratched her arm, and said nothing. Her hands were red from water, her face red from life, and she had no room for other people's dreams—her own were enough to tire her.

Rocinante was tied up behind the house, a horse that looked as if the years had worn it dry and then forgotten to return its bones. Ribs like xylophone bars, fur like the cover of an old pub pool, dull, spotty, tired. His eyes were wide and glassy, as if waiting for the gong that never came. He approached the animal, placed his hand on its forehead as if blessing a king. "Old girl," he whispered, "you and me against the swamp." The horse blinked, turned one ear to the side, and farted softly. This was the sound of truth. He smiled as if he had received divine confirmation.

He lashed the saddle tight—leather that longed to turn to dust, held together only out of habit. The straps rattled like rusted jokes. He mounted, and the

world gave a little jolt, as if someone were tugging at the scenery. For a moment, it looked as if he might actually be higher than the dust, taller than the mockers, smarter than his bones. Then Rocinante snorted, took two steps as if cautiously groping for a memory, and found her rhythm: the tired cllop of hooves that have seen too much.

The road slipped beneath them, a shallow river of sand and eye-muck. He held the lance—broom handle, but gilded with hope—as if it were a lifeline. He talked to it. He talked to everything. To the sun, which was a bastard. To the wind that stank. To the shadow of a bird that pretended it was a sign. He talked because the silence would have gnawed him to pieces like rats. And people listened, whether they wanted to or not. Because there's nothing louder than a man who believes in something that doesn't exist. It's like an accident on the road: you don't want to look, but you do anyway.

In front of the tavern—which everyone called "the tavern," even though it had only a dented door, two tables, and a barrel—hung a sign with a horse painted on it that looked as if the painter had only three fingers and no patience. The innkeeper, a man the size of a rain barrel, scratched his belly, saw Don Quixote, saw the horse, saw the pan, and nodded slowly. "Well," he said, "the circus act is back in town." The men laughed. One raised his tankard and toasted the knight. "To honor and other ills!" More laughter, foaming like bad beer.

He guided Rocinante closer, his lance pointing heavenward. "Good men," he said, and the word "good" fell from his tongue like a rusty nail, "today I will set out to perform deeds your grandchildren will sing about." The innkeeper blinked, as if he had to get something unpleasant off his chest. "Grandchildren? I already have trouble with my mother-in-law, boy." A pause. A cough. Then, very quietly, the scorn was followed by something else, something no man at the table claimed to have known he possessed: envy. Not of the pan. Not of the lance. Of the audacity to speak so grandly in a world that keeps you small.

The village was a bottomless sack: You pour work into it, and it disappears. You pour time into it, and it disappears. You pour yourself into it, and in the end, you stand there, empty like the jug in front of you. But he, the one with the pot helmet, didn't pour anything in. He cut a hole in the sky and pretended to drink from it. Perhaps he was the only sober person in this madhouse, too drunk on his own myth to taste the water down here. And believe me: the water down here is stale.

A boy ran behind, barefoot, knees wide open, eyes like theft. "Sir Knight," he cried, "who are you killing today?" His voice a little knife, rehearsing. Don

Quixote turned his head, very slowly, so that his dignity wouldn't fall from his horse. "No one," he said, "except injustice." The boy giggled, bit into an apple that tasted of yesterday, and spat the seeds onto the street as if they were the teeth of a giant. "Injustice doesn't live here," he cried. "Only the innkeeper and his pig live here." Laughter. More laughter. The village was a choir without notes.

He rode on, and with every step, the shadow he didn't want to see grew: the shadow in which a man sits, alone for too long, his thoughts tamed like stray dogs. A man who has declared silence his enemy because it tells him what he really is. You know the kind: They paint their walls with words until the walls look like heaven. They fill cracks with songs until they stop dripping. They call it dignity, and maybe that's what it is, the last kind of it that won't be sold.

At the edge of town stood a wall, nibbled by the wind. Behind them, the fields, golden, tired, merciless. He stopped, put his hand over his eyes, as if he needed to balance the light. "Dulcinea," he murmured again, and the word was now a prayer no one subscribes to. In the distance, something turned—a mill sail, fat and slow, as if taking a stroll. It was still just wood and wind. Still. You could see his face changing, the books creeping out of his head and rising over his eyes. His gaze hardened. His chin became an argument. His hand gripped the broom handle like the throat of a liar god.

"Watch this, old horse," he whispered in Rocinante's ear. The horse snorted as if it had something clever to say, but didn't even try. "Out there," he said, "waits the world, so sure it's right. And we bring it the news that it's wrong." It sounded as if some bum had picked up the word "destiny," cleaned it from the floor, and tacked it back to the wall with a filthy hand. It stuck. Not pretty, but it stuck.

And as he dug his heels into Rocinante's flanks, as the animal advanced, limping, stubborn, with the defiance of a piece of furniture that hasn't yet broken, I knew—everyone who looked and didn't just stare knew—that it was better not to encounter that skinny silhouette in the dark. Not because it was dangerous. But because it was a reminder. That we all once wanted something our bones were too weak for. That hope stinks and yet still warms. That there's a difference between being alive and living.

He was ridiculous, a joke in tin and bone. But he was a joke that told itself, loud and unbroken, until the laughter faltered, somewhere between your throat and your chest, and you suddenly had the nasty feeling he might be right. Just for a second, sure. But a second is enough to ruin an entire night.

The flies returned, as if they knew the scene was over. The men drank, the women carried water, the boy searched for a new apple. And he rode. The pan gleamed. The lance wobbled. The world smelled of warm dust and a cheap future. And somewhere out there, beyond the open maw of the fields, wood was turning that would soon cease to be wood. Not in his head. Not today. Not while he was still breathing like a man who swears he's truly awake for the first time.

His house was a paper graveyard. Books were scattered everywhere, torn volumes, bloated pages stuck together by sweat and soup. Whole stacks on the floor, on the bench, on the table, even on the damned latrine. When he went to the bathroom, he didn't sit in silence—he rode through fantasies while going about his daily business. Nothing was sacred; everything was clogged with stories of knights, maidens, and dragons that had never existed, except in the minds of scribblers who'd drunk too much wine.

He read until his eyes burned like two old lightbulbs. He read until the letters started dancing as if they'd been snorting coke. He read until his body withered. No more food, no more sleep. Just pages, pages, pages. The neighbors said the books had driven him crazy. Screw it, he was crazy before he could even read. The books just dressed up madness and called it "chivalry."

The truth was: these books contained nothing of what he was looking for. No smell of cow dung, no flies, no rats, no moldy bread that sits in your stomach like bricks. Instead, there were gleaming helmets that never rusted. Women who always stayed young and never farted. Horses that never lame. Men who were brave and not like the guys at the tavern who smelled of cheap liquor and beat their wives. These books were a damn lie. But he needed the lie like a bum needs a hangover. Without them, he would have slit his wrists with a blunt spoon long ago.

He often sat late into the night. Candle stubs, barely burning, dripped wax onto the pages like tears. And he read aloud, as if to force the world to listen: "And the noble knight went forth to rescue the maiden who was imprisoned by a hideous dragon..." Outside, a dog barked, someone screamed at his wife, and in the distance, someone sang an old song out of tune and drunkenly. But to him, it was music. The world outside was filth. The world in the books was gold.

The people in the village knew when he read. You could hear it: that murmuring that seeped through the windows like smoke. Some swore they'd seen him, half asleep, struggling with the broomstick as if he were in the middle of a damned battle. Others said he'd once stood naked in the courtyard,

pot on his head, lance in hand, roaring at the moon, "Up, you scoundrels! Dulcinea is watching you!" Maybe it was true. Maybe not. But everyone agreed: the man had sold his mind—and invested the proceeds in books.

The books were his alcohol, his heroin, his damned crack. Every sentence a hit. Every paragraph a shot. Every hero a damned reflection he stared into until he thought it was staring back. He didn't want to be Alonso anymore. Alonso was old, Alonso was poor, Alonso stank of goats and loneliness. But Don Quixote—he was somebody. He could call something a knight that was nothing but dirt. He could turn a horse's carcass into a Pegasus. He could stifle the world's mockery with one word: "Honor."

Honor—what a shitty word. Most people in the village only used it to justify why they didn't come home last night or why they'd lost half their money again at dice. For him, it was a religion. He spoke the word as if it would cover the stench of the world. It didn't work. But he didn't stop.

And then there was Dulcinea. No one in the village knew exactly who he meant. Some said it was a fat cowherd with warts on her face. Others claimed he'd completely made the woman up. But whenever he spoke her name, he got this look, this crazy glow, as if he were kissing a goddess no one but him could see. "Dulcinea," he whispered, and even the flies on the wall stopped, as if afraid to contaminate the word.

So the days passed. The sun blazed, the fields waited, the village went about its routine—and he sat there, reading, drooling, dreaming. Alonso became a knight. Hunger turned into passion. Madness turned into armor thicker than anything he could ever have afforded.

And you know what? In a world that eats you up and spits you back out every day, maybe that's exactly what you need: an illusion you can embrace so tightly that you don't even feel the bruises anymore.

The village had many instruments, but only one song. It went like this: "Look at the idiot." It began in the morning, when the sun was running like a beer tap opened too early, at midday it foamed, and in the evening it grew stale and still stung the throat. The voices came from every hole—from windows with curtains that had long since seen no innocence, from doors that never fully closed, from yards where chickens lived like two-legged jokes. And in the middle of this concert, he ran, the skinniest drummer under the sun, with a frying pan on his head and a spear that was more like a toothpick for gods.

The children were the opening act. They had knees that looked like maps of wars they fought in the dust and throats that knew no respect. "Knights! Hey, knights! Are you slaying another dragon today, or is it just time?" They ran after him, shouting, throwing breadcrumbs as if they were stones and stones as if they were breadcrumbs. One made himself a crown out of straw, put it on his head, and staggered along beside him. "I am the King of Whatever! Bow down!" Laughter. Don Quixote wasn't looking. His eyes were fixed on a direction no one could see. In the shadow of his gaze, mockery crumbled, as if he had a sudden toothache.

The women at the well had voices like sandpaper. They scooped water and stories, tipping both into their buckets. "Did you hear? He declared war on the moon the other day."—"The moon? I thought he was in cahoots with the wind."—"The wind is his tail wagging. The moon is his mirror."—"And Dulcinea?"—"Dulcinea is the perfume in the latrine." Giggles that sounded like knives. One of them, with arms as strong as trough legs, watched him go, her helmet wobbling, the horse's hip nipping through the air like a sharp elbow. There was no laughter in her eyes, only weariness, not yet sure how she would sleep tonight.

The men stood in front of the tavern as if it were a church where prayers are only said when the jug is full. The innkeeper had a belly and an opinion, and both were openly displayed. "Knight! Knight!" he cried, holding up the jug as if it were a wafer. "Bless us with one of your noble oaths!" The giggles from the tables crept into the street. Don Quixote stopped, raised his lance as if to split the clouds. "I swear by the imperishable beauty of Dulcinea," he began, and the word fell like a jewel into the dirt, "that I will hunt injustice to the limits of this..." He searched briefly for a word large enough. The village had none. He had to bring his own. "...world." The men acted as if stepping onto a stage. "Hear, hear!" shouted one who had once learned to read a little and had since let everyone know. "That man has a whole world! I only have my barn, and even that belongs to the bank."

A dog barked. It sounded like applause. Another dog joined in. Applause in a duet. Don Quixote glanced briefly at the animals, nodded, as if they understood his program better than the humans. Perhaps they did. Dogs know that dignity is nothing but stubborn habit. Humans consider it a ticket to the top. He urged Rocinante on, his hooves counting the cobblestones like a bad prayer: one, two, three, miss, again.

The forge fire sparkled, sparks like little curses. The blacksmith, a man with arms like roast hams, hammered iron as if it were an enemy that wouldn't stop

breathing. He glanced up briefly as the knight passed, squinted one eye as if peering into the future, and then said quietly, only to himself, "Sometimes I wish I had a pan on my head. Then the voices would be quieter." His apprentice, who said everything louder than he should, heard the sentence and shouted, "Listen, the master wants to be a knight!" Laughter that stabbed his stomach and then went out again without paying.

The church stood there like a shrug in stone. The priest stepped out, thin, with a face that pretended to know more than everyone else. Beside him was the barber, a man who strokes men's necks with a blade that reminds you of your carotid artery. "We have to do something," the priest said, quietly, but in a way that sounded like thunder. "The books. They're eating him." The barber nodded, as if he were about to tie a knot in the air. "Burn him?"—"Test him."—"Test him and then burn him."—"For the good of his soul." And there was the smile that said: We'll save you by making you small. In a world that keeps you in the dust, salvation often means only: Hold still, we'll clip your wings so you don't fall.

The tavern continued to breathe. Inside, it smelled of beer on its way back, of meat that had known what it was for too long, and of men who had visited their mothers too rarely. Don Quixote did not enter. Heroes do not drink in caves—they drink under banners. He had none. So he did not drink at all. That was his banner. The men drank double to dilute the impudence. "He does not drink," one said, "that's proof enough: crazy."—"Or poor."—"Or holy." There was that little sting behind your tongue again, the same one that comes when someone drops everything and just leaves, and you stop and realize your shoes are much too heavy for the dreams you once had.

An old woman stepped out onto the street with a basket full of onions and placed it in the knight's path. "Noble sir," she said in a voice that hadn't been humored in years, "can you also slay monsters in my cellar? They're called rats and they eat my bread." Don Quixote bent down as far as his bones allowed. "Good woman," he spoke as if reciting from the mouth of God, "the rats of your world are the servants of the great dragon. I will..." He made a gesture that threw entire dramas into the air. "...drive them away." The old woman nodded slowly, looked at her basket, looked at his pan, and pushed the basket back up. "When you're finished with the dragon, come over. I'll make you some soup. But bring your own spoon; no one here has any left."

The mill outside the village stood there like a fat man who'd shaken out his arms and decided to whip wind. The sails turned, slowly, methodically, without any ambition to be anything other than a mill. The mocking chorus grew

quieter the further he walked; the voices fell from his back like pebbles that couldn't find a grip. But some stuck like chewing gum: "Fool!"—"Pot Knight!"—"Dulcinea, the cow!"—"Get him away before he hurts himself!" These words had long legs. They trailed behind him, even when the mouths that had thrown them were already back to the beer.

By the side of the road stood the peasant woman most people called Dulcinea when they felt brave enough to joke. She carried a jug and wore a face that knew jugs break. Her hair was tied back in a bun that had seen more lives than all men's faces combined. As Don Quixote leaned toward her in the saddle, something both terrible and beautiful happened: His gaze made her a queen without asking. "My lady," he said. The word settled on her shoulders like a cloak a size too big, but warm. She raised her hand as if to touch the word, frightened of herself, and murmured, "I am only I, sir."—"No," he said, and the decision was made as if her name belonged to him. "You are the flame in the darkness." Her mouth opened to laugh and closed again. Some gifts are too dangerous to be rejected outright. She watched him as he moved on, and the jug in her hand grew heavier or lighter, no one could say.

The children gathered again, this time like sparrows under the roof of words. "He told the cow she was a queen!"—"My mother says men say anything when they have nothing."—"My mother says kings are just men with servants."—"My mother says stop talking and fetch some water." Children's wisdom: It sounds like mockery, but it's just the truth in shorts.

Midday. The sun hung over the village like a dented plate. A second-hand dealer pulled his cart past, from which protruded things no one needed anymore: broken chairs, a mirror with a crack that divided the faces into two layers, a trunk without a handle. Don Quixote stopped, lowered his lance, and looked at the mirror. For a moment, he didn't see the knight. He saw the man. The crease that made the brow a road. The eye that knew the dust. The ear that had waited too many nights for silence that never came. The second-hand dealer cleared his throat and adjusted the mirror so that the light swallowed the ugliest spots. "Five coppers, sir." Don Quixote nodded, as if a deal had been struck, and rode on without paying. Sometimes five coppers is what you need to forget you don't have it.

Meanwhile, the priest and the barber entered his house through the back entrance. The priest carried an authority that came from books he had read properly; the barber carried a blade designed to remove anything superfluous. They pulled volumes from the shelves, leafed through them, and made faces. "This one is dangerous," said the priest. "Why?"—"Because it's good."—"Then

throw it out."—"This one? Trash."—"Trash can be useful. It tires you out."—"This one?—Keeps him awake."—"Then we'll burn him twice." Outside, the sun crackled. Inside, paper was already crackling, if only in his head. They wanted to save him from the fire that gave him warmth by lighting another fire that took everything away. That's how it is with healers: They often confuse burning with healing and are surprised when scars learn to speak.

When Don Quixote reached the edge of the village, the wind blew as if it had a message to deliver. The fields opened their mouths. Far behind, the mill thrust its arms across the sky like a drunken sentinel. He stopped. The lance vibrated in his hand as if it were a pointer pointing to something that couldn't run away. The mocking chorus was now just a humming in his back, a bad radio. Before him lay the great ear of the world, and he was ready to scream into it.

The evening routine began in the village: the beer changed hands, sentences were repeated, the day's weariness clung to the tables. The innkeeper told the story of the "pot knight," half made of gold and half of dirt. Some were still laughing, others not quite as loudly. One stared into his mug as if he might find another face there, one from earlier, from days when he had still given the mills names that weren't "work." The old woman with the onions arranged her supper and spoke to the empty room: "If he kills the rats, he'll get soup. God help me, I hope he brings at least one of the bastards back." The blacksmith continued hammering. The priest placed a match next to the books, didn't strike it. Not yet. The barber practiced a gentle smile in front of the cracked mirror from the junk dealer's cart. Children slept with dust in their hair and heroes in their eyes.

And outside stood a man with a pan on his head, listening to the wind utter the first sentence. It was old, very old, older than all the books put together: Come. It smelled of ground grain and opportunities disguised as mistakes. The knight laid his knees on the flanks of a horse made entirely of will, and the will said yes, even though everything else screamed no. He breathed deeply, as if he wanted to draw the world into himself and spit it out again with another mouth. Then he set off.

The first few meters still sounded like a village. The last few meters already sounded like a legend. Between the two lay the ditch into which most people fall when they try to be something bigger than their belly. He crossed it with a pan and a broomstick. That may be ridiculous. But it may also be exactly what's needed.

Behind him, the mocking concert died down, as if someone had finally caught the conductor. In front of him, the mills began to grow. And somewhere in the village, very quietly, barely audible, a voice sang, unaware that it was singing, a song without words. Perhaps it was hope. Perhaps it was just air. You never know until you breathe it in.

The village had broken glass, no steel. Iron was for plows, for nails that hold the roof when the rain batters the world. No one wasted metal on dreams. But Don Quixote needed armor, so he made some. Like any poor dog: he took what was left over. Old tin sheets that had once been part of a stove. A cauldron that had seen more soup than heroes had ever shed tears. A few scraps of leather that smelled of goat no matter how many times he washed them. He nailed, tied, laced, swore, and in the end, he stood there like a scarecrow who had decided to become a knight.

He held up the helmet. A dented pot, still stained with black traces of beans that had never fully digested. He saw his reflection in it: distorted, thin, laughable. And he grinned. "So it should be," he murmured, "the helmet of helmets." He put the thing on. It clanged, it wobbled, and a louse crawled out, as if it had chosen the wrong time to leave. Screw it. In his mind, the pot transformed into a miracle. Gold, shining, indestructible. It's so easy: turn your gaze a little, and you'll see the crown in the dirt.

His breastplate was a patchwork of stove tin. The village blacksmiths would have laughed themselves to death if they'd seen him going into battle wearing it. But he stood before the mirror—an old splinter cutting his face into three pieces—and saw a knight. The knight. His shoulders hunched, his stomach sucked in, his cheeks narrower than they were. He raised his lance—still the same broomstick, only now with a rusty iron tip he'd picked up somewhere. It was crooked, it was blunt, but in his hand, it was a sword of God.

Sweat ran down his back, dripped under the metal sheets, and collected in small puddles that stank like anything that's been covered for too long. He grinned anyway. The pain was proof. He stood there, sweating like a pig, and swore he was a lion.

The neighbors peered through the window. A woman held her stomach from laughing, a man shook his head. "Look at that madman. Now he's not cooking with the pot anymore, he's carrying it." A child shouted, "Ring the bells! The knight is born!" Laughter. But there was a twinkle in their eyes. Because deep down, everyone knew: He was doing something they couldn't. He was taking

their trash and making meaning out of it. They laughed because they were jealous.

Rocinante stood tied up, chewing boredly on a stalk, and watched the whole show. The horse had more experience with misery than anyone in the village. It saw the trays, saw the pan, saw the broomstick—and blinked. No judgment, no ridicule. Just a quiet snort that said, "If you want to ride, sit on it. I don't care if you're a king or an idiot."

He tied the straps tight, pulled on his gloves—they weren't gloves at all, but scraps of leather with holes he'd sewn together. He raised his arms, turned, heard the clang. It was the sound he needed. Metal striking metal, no matter how cheap. An echo from the books he'd devoured. He heard battles, heard glory. And the village heard an old man clanging in the kitchen like an overstuffed cupboard.

Then he stepped outside. Sun on the pot, dust on his face, sweat on the back of his neck. A knight of filth and madness. The people fell silent for a moment, just briefly. Then the laughter returned, harder, louder. "Our hero! Defender of the pigs!" - "Nice shoes, noble sir! Are those the spurs or are the mice squeaking in them?" - "Where is the lady you want to save? Has she gotten lost in the dung heap?" Words that flew like stones. But he raised his lance, raised his chin, and his gaze went through them, high, far, into a world that no one but him could see.

And in this world, he wasn't ridiculous. In this world, he was the beginning of a song that children would still be singing a hundred years from now. A song that stank, but still burned.

The horse stood there on its legs like a poorly patched-together coffin. If you looked too long, you felt as if the bones were about to fall out, as if they were tired of skin. Rocinante. That's what he called the beast, with a pathos that hung in the air like the stench of cheap liquor. To everyone else, it was just a carcass with a pulse, but in his eyes, it was a steed that had carried kings and that deserved to be in every legend. The truth was: the beast wouldn't have even managed a decent escape if the butcher came with a knife.

The ribs stood out like iron bars, trapped between them nothing but the weary breathing of an animal that had been in the world too long. The fur was dull, holes riddled with parasites, bald patches where the sun itself had given up. The eyes were large, dark, sad, and empty—like two old pub windows through which no light had shone for years. The hooves were cracked, as if they had

already trampled through every bad dream the area had to offer. And yet the animal still stood. Breathing. Waiting.

Quixote went over to him, stroking his neck with his bony hand, which felt like a piece of old leather left in the sun too long. "Noble companion," he murmured, and the people at the well rolled their eyes. "With you I will go to battle, and the world will know our name." The world didn't laugh, but the village did. One shouted, "Be careful he doesn't collapse under your arse, knight!" Another, "He looks more like dinner than war!" But he didn't hear them. He heard only the pounding of his own madness, louder than any of the mocking laughter.

Rocinante raised his head, as if he knew full well that he was being forced into a role greater than himself. He snorted, a sound that contained more dust than breath. Don Quixote smiled as if it were a yes. He saw a mirror in this beast. Thin, drained, mocked, but still standing. Both should have been dead long ago. But something held them. Stubbornness. Delusion. Perhaps the same damned energy that keeps a cockroach from dying if you crush it three times.

He saddled the animal with a frame that was already falling apart after the last generation. Leather that stank like a mixture of sweat and dead dreams. He tightened the straps, and Rocinante didn't make a sound. No protest, no flinch. Just a weary stand. He accepted it, the way old men accept their wives shouting at them or the barman cutting the beer. Resignation as a posture.

But for Don Quixote, it wasn't resignation. It was loyalty. He saw in the mute animal a friend who understood him because he himself was too broken to say no. "It's the two of us, old friend," he murmured, "it's the two of us against the world." And the beast just blinked, as if to say, "Do what you want, as long as you don't eat me."

The children screamed again. "Look, knight and skeleton!" one shouted, drumming on his belly until it sounded like hollow bones. Laughter whipped through the street, but something in the old horse's gaze made the laughter subside. There was a sadness there that even children understood. An animal that should have been dead long ago, but was still breathing. And suddenly the laughter wasn't so loud anymore.

But Don Quixote didn't hear it at all. For him, Rocinante was the most beautiful animal in the world. He spoke to him as if he were sitting at a royal court, murmured plans, swore oaths, and stroked his neck as if he were stroking a

queen. Rocinante didn't answer. But he stood there. And sometimes standing is all a hero has to do.

In the dust of this miserable courtyard stood two shadows: a man with a pot on his head and a horse that looked as if it were on its way to the afterlife. But in his imagination, they were larger than any army. And maybe, just maybe, that was enough.

Sancho Panza was no hero. He was a belly with legs, who walked this earth because someone decided peasants had to exist so knights could think their shit was more important. He had a face that smelled of garlic and hands that had more calluses than feeling. A man who knew how a plow worked but no idea what "honor" meant except as a curse word. He knew the price of beans, which cows calved when, and could drain a jug of wine faster than you could say "Holy shit." That was his life. And honestly, he was okay with it.

Until Don Quixote appeared, with his pan on his head, his broomstick in his hand, and that look that made you feel like you were in the wrong play.

"Sancho," he cried, sounding like a priest calling for prayer, except this wasn't about God, but about a damned madness. "I need a squire."

Sancho stood there, his hands full of manure—and I mean that literally. He'd just been working in the stable, dragging his fingers through the shit like it was butter, and was looking at that battered bird with the pan. "A squire?" he asked, his voice sounding like he was farting into an empty jug. "And what am I supposed to do then? Wipe your ass when you shit yourself out of honor?"

Don Quixote smiled as if he had heard an oracle. "No, Sancho. You will bear witness to my deeds. You will see the world. You will become rich, a lord, perhaps a king!"

Sancho laughed. Not that loud, dirty laugh you hear in a tavern, but a dull, bitter laugh that sounds like an empty stomach. "King? Me? I'll be glad if I have more bread than fleas at the end of the week."

But Don Quixote wasn't really listening. He was already in the middle of his speech, as if someone had turned on the tap. "I swear to you, Sancho, by Dulcinea, fairer than the morning star, you will rule an island! An entire island, Sancho! Your own throne, your own court!"

Sancho scratched his belly, which growled like a dog. "An island? I can't even swim, damn it."

"You don't need that!" cried Don Quixote, his gaze burning like a cheap firework set off too early. "I'll win it for you! You'll sit like a king while people bring you wine you won't even have to pay for."

And there, something flickered in Sancho's eyes. No faith, no trust—just the naked greed of a man who's been fucked so many times by life that at some point he thinks: Screw it, maybe I'll fuck back someday. "An island, huh?" he murmured. "And wine?"

"Yes!" cried Don Quixote. "And girls to wash your feet!"

"My feet?" grinned Sancho. "They should wash something else for me."

Don Quixote pretended he hadn't heard. In his world, there were no dirty words. But Sancho continued to grin, and the grin was genuine. He knew the old man was crazy. But he also knew: crazy people sometimes take you places normal people never go.

So he nodded. Slowly. Thoughtfully. With the expression of a man who knows he's selling his last brain cell—but maybe he'll get one more beer than usual in return.

"All right," said Sancho. "I'll go with you. But only if you swear there'll be something for me at the end. No honor, no virtue, no shit—I want something edible."

"You will have more than you ever dreamed!" cried Don Quixote, and in that moment he truly believed it. He saw Sancho not as a peasant, not as a fat, smelly sack, but as a shield-bearer, a brother in spirit, a witness to his greatness.

And Sancho? He just saw the pot on his head and thought: If so, then let's go with this idiot. At least he'll add some variety to the boredom.

So it began. A knight with bones like toothpicks and a farmer with a belly like a sack of potatoes. A maniac who wanted to save the world and a man who just wanted to eat. Two idiots who, together, had more truth than the whole damn village.

The sun hung low, a red-hot, split apple hung in the sky, and the village smelled of sweat, old beer, and pig piss. The perfect backdrop for an exit that was meant to seem grander than it was. Don Quixote stood in the courtyard, his tin armor rattling as he moved, as if he were a walking kitchen. The pan on his

head gleamed from polishing it with spit, and he swore it was a helmet that could ward off even hellfire. Beside him was Rocinante, the rickety frame that looked as if it would fall apart just by breathing. And beside this horse stood Sancho, the fat dog who had just been rummaging in the stable and was now acting as if he were part of something important.

Sancho wore no armor. He wore the same worn rags that stank of work and garlic. But he had a knitting bag with him, containing a piece of bread, hard as stone, and a bottle of wine he had conjured up from somewhere. He was no fool. If the world was going crazy, at least he didn't want to go down on an empty stomach.

"Squire!" Don Quixote called, so loudly that a few pigeons fluttered from the rooftops. "Are you ready?"

Sancho scratched his stomach and yawned. "Ready for what? For death? For blisters on my ass? For a night in a ditch? Yeah, sure, I'm ready."

"We're going out, Sancho!" the knight roared. "The world awaits us, our deeds, the justice we bring it!"

Sancho shook his head, grinned crookedly, and muttered, "The world waits for nothing, sir. But let's go before it throws stones at us."

The village had gathered. Not because they believed in him, but because they wanted to laugh. They stood in groups, talking, mocking, nudging each other as if they were at a fair, and indeed, it looked like a show. A man with a pan on his head, a horse on the verge of collapse, and a farmer who looked as if he were just there to see how far the madness could go.

"There he rides!" one cried. "Our hero! Our fool!" "Bring us a pig, knight, and name it Dragon!"

"Don't forget the island, Sancho! Maybe you'll get one with two huts and a dung heap!"

Laughter rolled through the street, thick and rich like smoke. But Don Quixote didn't hear it. He sat on Rocinante, pulled on the reins, raised his lance, and trumpets echoed in his head. He no longer saw a village, no mockers, no flies. He saw castles gleaming in the distance. He saw battles waiting to be won. He saw Dulcinea waiting for him, smiling, beautiful, unattainable.

Sancho only saw the sun going down and thought: It's about to get cold, and all I have is bread.

And then he rode off. Step by step, the rickety horse stumbling almost with every step, his armor clanking like a sack full of tin, and Sancho trudged behind, his bag over his shoulder, his bottle under his arm.

People laughed, they screamed, they called after them. But at some point the laughter died down as dust rose between them and the world of those left behind. Two silhouettes in the evening light, so damned pathetic that they seemed grand again. A knight who had nothing but madness, and a peasant who wanted nothing but bread and wine. Two idiots who wanted to change the world. Or themselves. Or nothing at all.

The sun ate deeper into the land. Shadows grew longer. The dust lingered in their throats, including those of the villagers. Their laughter froze as they watched the two go. One coughed. One remained silent. One thought briefly: Perhaps they have more courage than all of us combined.

And out in the open country, the madness began.

### Sancho Panza appears

Sancho Panza was the kind of man who gets up in the morning with a sigh, as if the night had been slept on his back. He had hips that could open doors and hands that looked like two blunt tools, as if life had used them as hammers for years. His gut—a character in its own right—always got through the door three seconds before him, no matter how narrow it was. But there was something in his eyes that you rarely saw in this dump: a smoldering remnant of intelligence that hunger hadn't yet consumed. He was no hero, no saint, no poet—he was a man who survived on bread, wine, and jokes, and sometimes that was more than the pious could boast.

His house was low and tired, a crouching man among crouching men. The roof held because it didn't know how to collapse. The walls held because they were too proud to fall over, as long as children's hands glided along them and mothers' hands wiped them. Inside, it smelled of what life really is when no one is looking: onions, doubt, goats, the snoring of a man who swears every night to drink less tomorrow and the next night pours the same vow into the same bottle. On the table lay a knife, blunt as a church day, next to it bread the texture of a shoe. Those who still had teeth called it "crunchy." Those who had none called it "grace, Lord."

Teresa, his wife, was a woman made of wood and iron. Not beautiful by the standards of painters—beautiful by the standards of fields: she didn't break, she bent. The seasons dwelt in her arms, the inventory of want in her gaze. When she laughed, the sky sank a little lower, as if trying to eavesdrop. When she was silent, the house became a mousetrap for excuses. She loved Sancho not as in songs, but as one loves a bucket: he's there, he's useful, he's sometimes in the way, but when it's missing, you notice immediately. And she could talk. Damn it, she could talk. Words like whetstones. Sentences that strip you to the bone.

That morning—the sun still smelled of night, the chickens still of cowardice—Sancho stood in the courtyard, scraping together straw like a man trying to organize his thoughts and finding only scraps. He had dreamed that someone called his name and held up a crown of bread. He woke up with saliva on his chin and a hunger that gasped from his stomach to his knees. He spat to the side, looked at his kingdom: a donkey that looked as if only yesterday he had realized that there is no heaven for donkeys; a few chickens that looked at each grain of corn as if it were an insulting gesture; a rain barrel that hated the rain. Then, out of habit, he smelled his shirt, and the shirt smelled back: work, the stable, the little death of everyday life.

"Sancho!" Teresa's voice came from the kitchen as if someone had torn open the wall. "If you work today like you did yesterday, tomorrow we'll get half of nothing!" He grinned. He liked her kind of arithmetic: it was always right, no matter the outcome. He stomped in, grabbed the bread, broke off a piece, tasted it, gave up, dipped it in water, and chewed. The water tasted as if someone had used it yesterday to wash away their sins, but it softened the bread. He chewed like a man who knows how long a day is.

"What are you staring at?" Teresa asked, without looking. She was kneading dough that looked as if it were in a bad mood. "I'm staring at the future," he said. "Do you see it?" "I see you," she said, "and that's enough." She wiped her hands on the edge of her apron, which looked as if it had long since conceived plans of its own. "The priest was here yesterday," she said, casually, like a blow. "And the barber. They were whispering about books and an old fool whose head is on fire." Sancho nodded slowly, as if agreeing with a song whose melody he didn't like. "I saw him," he said. "The one with the pan." "Pan?" She laughed briefly, but the laughter wasn't funny. "That God protects us from pans that think they're helmets."

He took the bottle—the wine was as thin as an excuse—and drank. It didn't burn; it merely reminded Teresa of what it would be like if it did. "He called me

yesterday," Sancho said, and the word "called" made Teresa pause, as if it had been grabbed by the back of her knee. "Called?" "Squire." "Oh, Jesus and the Seven Goats." She sat down without meaning to. "Squire? At your age?" "My age is a good time to think less," he said, and now he grinned, knowing how much she would hate that sentence. "He spoke of islands."

Teresa snorted. "Islands are just fields with water around them. What do you want with water? You're already drowning in wine." - "He says I'll rule." - "Who? The fleas in your pants?" Her gaze was the kind of knife that doesn't cut, but simply goes right through. "Sancho, you're not a ruler. You're a carrier. A dragger. Someone who holds when something falls. And here things are always falling." - "Maybe something will finally fall on me," he murmured, more to his stomach than to her. His stomach responded with a sound that said: We'll take what we can get.

He stepped outside again, because men always step outside in such moments, as if the air outside the house were less judgmental. Morning rose over the edge of the village, and the village yawned back. Far away, he saw a silhouette: long, thin, stumbling upright—the Pan Man on his bone horse, the broomstick like a finger pointing to the sky. Sancho blinked. In his head, two dogs were racing each other: the dog called Reason and the dog called Hope. Reason had thicker paws. Hope bit harder.

He thought of his children—faces like little mirrors in which you could see either your best or your failure, depending on how awake you were. He thought of the years to come, sniffing them like a piece of meat you don't know if it's still good. He thought of the men in the tavern who said the same things every night and then said the same things again the next night, as if they were actors in a play that never ends and never gets applause. And he thought of the feeling you get when someone has the courage to be ridiculous. The feeling that makes you angry because you're not.

Teresa stepped into the doorway, arms crossed, faceless. "Say it," she said. "Say what you want to say, and then sit down and eat." Sancho breathed. "I think I'll go with him." There was silence afterward, as if someone had dropped a spoon that never landed. The chickens suddenly scratched very politely. The donkey pretended to be a bush. Teresa looked at him, not surprised, rather tired in a new way. "Of course you're going," she said. "You're a man." That didn't sound like a compliment. "Men leave when the walls become too honest for them."

"He mentioned an island," Sancho ventured, because men in need like to reveal the biggest lie they have. "Then bring me one with vines," she said. "And with bread that doesn't break when you look at it. And with shoes for the children." "Shoes aren't islands," Sancho muttered, and immediately he was ashamed of the sentence because it sounded wiser than he felt. Teresa stepped closer and placed her hand on his stomach, as if she wanted to know if there was a heart beating there too. "If you're going, Sancho, you're not going because of him," she said quietly. "You're going because you can't bear how tidy our misery has become."

He wanted to kiss her—not like in songs, but in a way that would make both of them endure the day. But he didn't kiss her. Instead, he reached for the knitting bag, put in bread that would test the teeth, and an onion that would make promises tangible. He stuffed in the bottle that would be empty too soon, and a rag that could be used to wipe away blood or sweat, or both. No sword. Sancho didn't take swords. Swords are for men who think the world is listening. Sancho thought it was chewing.

"Give me the old coat," he said. "The one with the holes." "Why?" Teresa asked. "So the wind has something to blow through," he said, grinning crookedly. She gave him the coat. He smelled of rain that never came on time. Then he reached for his hat, which was fraying at the edges like a sentence without an end. He put it on, very serious, as if he were assuming an office known only to him. Outside, the silhouette of the pan grew larger.

"If you go," said Teresa, "take the donkey. That horse's just a bone with hair. If you walk, you'll be old by night." "The donkey is ours," said Sancho weakly. "You're ours too," she said, "and yet you're going. Take him." He nodded. The donkey turned its head so slowly, as if it had to ask if he was really the one being spoken to. "The two of us," Sancho whispered to the animal, "we're taking a break from poverty." The donkey blinked. Donkeys have the eyes of judges and the hearts of servants.

"Tell the children..." he began, forgetting what came next. Teresa helped him. "Don't tell them anything," she said. "They'll see what you do. And later, when they grow up, they'll either say: My father was brave. Or: My father was an idiot. Either is better than: My father always just watched." He nodded. It hurt because it was true.

The sun was now a golden letter that no one could read. Sancho slung his knitting bag over his shoulder, took the donkey by the halter, and stepped out onto the street, which had seen enough feet to know all the stories and tell

none. Teresa stood in the doorway, her hands on the edge, as if holding the house to keep it from moving. "Bring something back," she said. "A joke if need be." - "I have jokes," said Sancho, sounding sad. "I'll bring you another sky." - "The sky will stay where it is," she said. "Bring me something to eat."

He set off. Every step was a small betrayal and a small hope. The village watched as villages watch: curious, wickedly evil, ready to steal the story if it turns out well and bury it if it turns out badly. He raised his hand, waving to no one, and yet waving to everyone who had the same problem as him: too much day, too little money, too many reasons to stay, and that one small reason that whispers: Maybe not.

When Don Quixote was close enough, Sancho saw the details: the pan glittering in the sun as if it were a medal; the armor clinking like a memory of something that never happened; the horse that had postponed death; the eyes burning like a candle in a church where no one prays anymore. The knight raised the broomstick as if it were a flag. "Sancho!" he cried, "are you ready to see the world?" "I'm ready to hear it when it finally says something new," Sancho replied. "And if it has nothing new?" "Then we'll talk until it listens."

Teresa stood behind him, not waving, not crying, just there. Her presence was a roof over his back. "Come back safe," she said without moving her lips. Sancho nodded without turning his head. Some promises are made with the back of your neck.

He climbed onto the donkey, whose back creaked beneath him like an old joke that still works. The knight looked satisfied, as if fate had finally made its mark. "Squire," said Don Quixote solemnly. "Sir," said Sancho dryly. "Tell me the way, and I'll tell you the way."

And so a belly rode off next to a skeleton, both held by an idea that looked different in the light than in the shadows. Sancho felt the day take something from him and place something else there: an expectation that pressed like a stone in his shoe, but kept him awake. He thought of wine, of bread, of an island that was perhaps just a larger table, of Teresa, who held the house together like a belt that never gives way.

He also thought of fear—not the great, screaming kind, but the small one that gnaws at your trouser leg like an animal: What if everything just turns out ridiculous? And then he laughed, quietly, warmly, meanly at himself. "Ridiculous," he murmured. "That's something, after all. Ridiculous is

movement." The donkey set its hooves as if nodding. Don Quixote raised his lance in greeting a world that hadn't sent a greeting.

Sancho turned around once. Teresa was still standing there. He raised two fingers to his hat. There was nothing more to say. Then he shrugged his shoulders so the wind wouldn't tug at his doubts and let the donkey trot off into the day, alongside a man who believed too much. Sometimes that's the only kind of faith that takes two: one who believes too much—and one who's hungry enough to go along.

They met at the edge of the village, where the dust lay heavier than hope. Don Quixote, towering on Rocinante, his lance raised to the sky as if he had just reserved a seat in the theater of God. Sancho on his donkey, the animal with the gaze of an official who has seen it all and has never been paid for it. Between them was the heat, the buzzing of flies, and this unspoken contract lying on the table like a deck of cards.

"Sancho," Don Quixote began, his voice rising as if he were speaking to a thousand men rather than a peasant with breadcrumbs still on his shirt. "I have chosen you."

"Chosen?" asked Sancho, pulling at his lower lip as if to see if there was any wine left. "I see no altar or god here. Just you with your soup pot on your head."

"Not a soup pot! Helmet! Helmet of honor!" Don Quixote straightened up, and Rocinante pretended to understand, stretching his neck, which resembled a gallows rope more than strength. "You shall be my squire, Sancho. My companion. The man who will witness when we strike down injustice and establish honor."

Sancho belched quietly. "Honor won't fill a hole in my stomach. And I've seen enough injustice without someone having to hit me with a broomstick."

Don Quixote looked at him as if he were seeing a child who still knows nothing about the world. "Sancho, listen to me: I promise you glory. And not just glory—wealth! Lands! Islands!"

"Islands," Sancho repeated, the word rolling in his mouth like an olive in the dirt. "That's what he told me yesterday, too. Islands. I ask you: What do you even know about islands? You've never traveled further than the tavern."

"An island, Sancho!" cried Don Quixote, his gaze burning as if he wanted to nail the word into the air. "Your island, which you will rule like a king! Servants will lie at your feet. You will drink, eat, command. You will rise above yourself, Sancho."

Sancho snorted and scratched the back of his neck. "I'll just grow wide at most. And what am I supposed to do once I have the island? Milk the chickens?"

"You will rule!" cried Don Quixote, and a few crows fluttered in alarm from a tree, as if they had gotten the punchline. "Rule, Sancho, over men who obey you because you were my squire!"

Sancho let go of the reins, and the donkey stood still, as if he had long since decided to settle down here. "So... I'll go with you, watch your back, carry your manure, and in return I'll get a piece of land in the middle of the water? Is that the deal?"

"Yes!" cried Don Quixote. "A piece of land the world will envy! Your name will be sung in song, Sancho Panza, lord of an island, friend of a knight!"

Sancho grinned. Wide, crooked, with the remains of his teeth that looked like a bad construction site. "Friend of a knight? I thought I was just the idiot following you around."

Don Quixote placed a hand on his heart. "No, Sancho. A knight is nothing without his squire. Just as a bird is nothing without wings. Just as wine is nothing without the glass."

Sancho chuckled. "The wine's good without a glass. Ask me."

A moment of silence. Then that glow in Don Quixote's eyes that looked like a fever. "So? Are you coming with us, Sancho?"

Sancho thought of Teresa. Of the children. Of the bread so hard it could have been used as a weapon. He thought of the donkey, of the evenings in the tavern, of the laughter at men like him who never ventured beyond the edge of the village. And he thought of the island. Not the real one—he didn't even know what it looked like. But the idea: an island where he didn't always have to keep his head down.

"Screw it," he finally muttered. "I'll go with you. But I want wine, bread, and, at the end, my island. If I'm going to die, at least I won't die on an empty stomach."

Don Quixote stretched out his hand, clanging like tin, holy, ridiculous. Sancho took it, his hand sweaty, rude, honest. Two hands met in the dust, one full of madness, the other full of hunger.

And so the deal was sealed: a knight who had only air to offer, and a peasant who was stupid enough to buy it.

The Panzas' house wasn't a home, but a boxing ring with a roof. The adobe walls kept out less heat than an old blanket, and when the wind blew, it blew through the cracks like a drunken uncle who doesn't understand when to go home. Inside, bowls rattled, more cracked than promised, and somewhere a child screamed, because children scream, whether they have a reason or not.

Teresa stood at the table, her hands in dough, her eyes on war. She wasn't a pretty picture you could paint—she was reality, with her hair in a braid and muscles in her arms. She was the opposite of illusion. She smelled of work, of onions, of sweat, of survival. When she spoke, even the rooster stopped crowing for a moment, because he knew her voice pecked harder.

"Sancho!" she yelled when he came in, with that face that always looked like he'd just lost at dice, even though he never had enough money to gamble. "Are you really telling me you're going off with that fool?"

Sancho held the knitting bag in his hand, into which he'd already stuffed bread, onions, and the last half bottle of wine. "He promised, Teresa. An island. For us. For the children."

Teresa laughed. Not a warming laugh—a cutting laugh. "An island! God help me, Sancho. Do you even know what an island is? It's land in water. Water, you understand? That wet stuff you sink in because you're too fat to swim. Island! You'll be lucky if you don't end up as bait for him!"

Sancho lowered his head, but not out of shame—rather because he knew that one should never look a woman like Teresa directly in the eyes when she was burning. "He means it. He's crazy, yes, but he means it. And sometimes seriousness is enough."

"Is serious enough?" she repeated, and now her hands flew through the air as if kneading the words. "What's enough for you? An empty stomach? A ridiculous death? A grave where they don't even put a proper cross because everyone laughs? Sancho, listen: If you go, you won't go as a hero. You'll go as the village idiot number two, behind the old broomstick knight."

Sancho sighed, pulled the bottle from the bag, took a sip, and let the wine run over his tongue as if testing if it still had any courage left. "Maybe I'm a fool," he muttered. "But I'd rather be a fool on the move than one who sits here and dies watching chickens shit."

Teresa stepped closer, the dough still sticking to her fingers, and grabbed him by the ear like a rascal. "On the way! On the way to where? To death? To poverty? To the joke the village will tell for another hundred years?"

Sancho writhed, grinning despite the pain. "If they laugh at me, at least they're talking about me. Nobody's talking about me now. I'm just belly, Teresa. Belly and shit. But maybe tomorrow I'll be belly with an island."

She let go of him, threw up her hands as if suing the heavens. "An island! You're so stupid, Sancho, I almost admire you. But if you go, don't go alone. Take the donkey. At least he won't eat everything and he'll bring you back faster if the fool lets you starve."

Sancho nodded. The donkey had more sense than both of them combined.

The children peered out from the corner, wide-eyed, dirty faces. "Father," one said, "are you bringing us something?" "Yes," he said, "I'm bringing you stories." "Stories don't satisfy," the other murmured. Teresa turned to them. "Be quiet. Let him go. Maybe he really does bring us something. Maybe he doesn't bring us anything at all. But if he does bring us something, then we owe it not to him, but to luck that has gone astray."

She sat back down at the table, continuing to knead, as if the dough were a substitute for her husband's head. Sancho stood there, bag on his shoulder, hat in hand, looking toward the door. "I'll be back, Teresa," he said quietly.

"Of course you'll come back," she growled. "The world is too lazy to keep you."

He grinned, that crooked, tired grin that was both apology and defiance. Then he walked out, into the light, the dust, the absurd.

And Teresa, the woman who saw through him like a broken window, watched him go as if she already knew: He's leaving because otherwise he'll die here. And he can die outside, too. But at least he's laughing while he does it.

Sancho packed. When you use the word "pack" for a peasant, it doesn't mean he's shoving crates of gold into a chest. It means he's stuffing the last remnants of his miserable life into a knitted bag so he won't starve on the way. He had no

sword, no shining boots, no coats of arms. He had bread harder than the ground outside the door, onions that smelled so pungent even the flies hesitated for a moment, and a bottle of wine that should last him by noon if he was frugal—which he never was.

He put the bread inside, pounding it like a piece of metal meant to hold up. Then the onions, three of them, large, fat, each a grenade against hunger. Finally, the bottle. Thin stuff, almost vinegar, but enough to cloud your head when reality became too loud. Added an old piece of bacon that had more salt than meat. He tied the bag shut as if he were now ready for battle.

Don Quixote stood beside him, his helmet gleaming, the metal clinking like an empty trash can. He saw Sancho's equipment and nodded seriously. "A knight needs more than weapons. He needs strength in his stomach."

Sancho grinned crookedly. "That's exactly what I've always said. Only when you say 'strength in the stomach,' you think of honor, and I think of wine."

He rummaged in the corner for an old rag that had once been a coat. Holes everywhere, frayed edges, but it was warm enough if you folded it in half. He stuffed it over the bag as if he were trying to hide himself from the winter. No glamour, no glory. Just patches, bread, and alcohol.

The donkey snorted as Sancho threw the rope over him. No protest, just that tired "All right," that comes with animals that have been through too much. Don Quixote looked at the animal as if it were a divine messenger. "A noble mule for a noble man," he said pathetically. Sancho laughed and patted its fur. "Noble man? Donkey for donkey, sir."

The village had gathered again. The people saw the knight with his tin kitchen and the farmer with his bag full of food. One shouted: "Look! One carries weapons, the other carries the vespers!" Another: "At least the fat man isn't starving!" - "But isn't he choking on the garlic?" Laughter.

Sancho took a swig from his bottle, spat the first sip into the dust, then drank the rest. "To Dulcinea," he murmured, more in mockery than in faith. Don Quixote nodded reverently, as if it were a prayer.

And so they stood there: one with a knitting bag full of hunger, the other with a pan full of madness. Two soldiers who didn't know who they were fighting against.

They set off, if you could call it that. Don Quixote sat on Rocinante, the walking skeleton that creaked with every step like an old cupboard that's been opened and closed too many times. Sancho trotted beside them on his donkey, his knitting bag on his saddle, his bottle under his arm. The knight raised his lance to the sky as if he could spear the moon with it; Sancho merely stretched his back, which creaked from having already worked too hard yesterday.

"Sancho," began Don Quixote, his voice as loud as an echo in an empty church, "you must know: we go forth to destroy injustice and save honor."

Sancho munched on a piece of bread that was almost impossible to break between his teeth. "The honor? Is that supposed to fill you up? If so, give me two portions. I'll have some onions with it."

Don Quixote pretended not to hear the comment. "We will rescue maidens in chains! We will slay dragons that breathe fire!"

Sancho took a sip of wine and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. "Virgins? In this dump? The last virgin I saw was the neighbor's goat, and even she's been through enough."

"Sancho!" thundered the knight, and Rocinante stumbled, unaccustomed to the thunder. "You must believe! Without faith, there is no glory!"

"Fame." Sancho grinned, pulled an onion from his bag, and bit into it, tears welling up in his eyes. "I believe in onions. They're honest. They hurt you, and at least they admit it. Fame only stinks when you lose it."

Don Quixote sighed, but there was more preaching in this sigh than weariness. "You'll see, Sancho. The world needs knights. It needs us!"

"The world needs wine," muttered Sancho, "and sausages. And a warm ass in bed. Everything else is a bonus."

They rode on, the dust rising like a gray cloud pursuing them. The village disappeared behind them, and with every step they became more ridiculous—and simultaneously larger. One with vision, the other with hunger. One who lived only in books, the other who understood books as firewood at most.

Sancho looked at him, that gaunt bird with the pot helmet, and grinned. "You know what, sir? We two are the perfect couple. You're crazy, and I'm hungry. Together we almost make a normal person."

Don Quixote nodded seriously, as if this were a sacred truth. "Exactly, Sancho. Together we are stronger."

Sancho laughed so loudly that the donkey was startled and took a step to the side. "Stronger? The two of us? One who talks to the wind and one who negotiates with his gut? If that's strength, then the world is weaker than I thought."

But deep inside, between the breadcrumbs and wine, Sancho felt a tingling sensation. As if he actually deserved more than just dust and onions.

The road out of the village was nothing more than a crack in the ground, dust upon dust, the tracks of carts that never returned rich. To the left were the fields, to the right the world's dung heap, and in the middle of it all, the team: the knight on the bone horse, the farmer on the donkey. A picture so crooked that you'd want to hang it on the wall, just to remind yourself how ridiculous hope can look.

And the people watched. Of course they watched. When someone breaks out of their routine, everyone stares, like dogs scenting a stranger. The children shouted first, chorusing like sparrows: "The fool goes hunting! The fat one carries the sack! Bring us dragon meat, knight!" Stones flew, small, harmless ones, more out of boredom than hatred. Don Quixote didn't see them, Sancho didn't duck. Both had learned that stones rarely hit when thrown in mockery.

The women at the well stopped chattering and followed the two with their eyes. One laughed shrilly: "Sancho, bring your wife a king when you come back!" - "Or at least shoes for the children!" - "Or a pitcher that doesn't leak!" The laughter rattled through the street like broken glass. But one of them, the eldest, remained silent. She looked at Sancho, her mouth set in a line, and thought: At least he's leaving. At least he's trying to leave the dust.

The men outside the tavern held their mugs as if they were holding the world. "Look at them!" one shouted, a sack full of belly with more debt than hair. "The idiot with the pan and the glutton with the purse! Two kings on their way to nothingness!" Laughter, loud, fat, beer-soaked. One coughed, spat, wiped his mouth, and yelled, "Sancho! When you find your island, send us a tavern! We rule the thirst here, you rule the rest!" More laughter, this time sharper, more biting.

But behind the laughter was something else. That little tug of pain that no one acknowledged. That whisper in their heads: What if the crazy guy succeeds?

What if the fat guy really comes back with an island? What if their laughter suddenly turns to envy? They laughed louder to stifle the whisper.

Don Quixote heard nothing. His head was full of trumpets, his gaze fixed on the horizon. Sancho heard everything. Every "fool," every "idiot," every "ass." But he grinned. Because he knew laughter is cheap. Walking is expensive. And he was paying the price.

The animals saw them too. The dog, which usually scratched itself in the shadows, raised its head and followed them with its eyes. The cat on the wall twitched its tail. Even the rooster briefly held its beak when it saw the two of them. Animals know ridiculousness—and they know that ridiculousness is sometimes the beginning of greatness.

And so they set out: the knight, who had nothing but madness, and the farmer, who wanted nothing but wine. Behind them, laughter grew ever fainter. In front of them, the fields, the mills, the future.

They were already a few hundred steps outside, the sun licking their backs, and the dust clung to their necks like a bad memory. Behind them, the laughter was fading; in front of them, the fields so empty they almost wanted to scream. Sancho rode his donkey, his head bobbing, his bag rhythmically beating against his hip: bread, onions, wine—the arsenal of a true hero of misery. Don Quixote sat on Rocinante, his broomstick raised high like a flag, as if he already owned the world.

Sancho looked over at him. This gaunt fellow with the hollow cheeks, his eyes burning, his helmet shining like cheap brass. A fool. A goddamn fool. But one who walked. And that was more than the entire village ever did.

He thought of Teresa standing in the doorway, her hands full of dough, her eyes full of truth. She was right. Of course she was right. But being right doesn't buy you a pitcher of wine. Being right doesn't buy you an island. Being right just buys you one more night in the same bed with the same hunger.

He thought of the children, their thin voices, their wide eyes. "Bring us something, Father." What? Stories? Bread? Shoes? He had nothing. Nothing at all. But now he had this mad knight, and maybe, just maybe, through him he had a chance at more than nothing.

"Sancho," said Don Quixote, his voice vibrating like a badly tuned bass, "do you feel it? The adventure lies before us!"

Sancho scratched his beard and grinned crookedly. "What I feel is hunger. And my ass feels the donkey. This is my adventure."

Don Quixote nodded seriously, as if Sancho had just uttered a profound mystery. "Exactly! We can already sense the beginning!"

Sancho laughed, a dirty, warm laugh that hung in the air. "You know what, sir? Screw it. I'm sticking with it. I'm going with you. It's better to laugh at you while I'm on the road than for them to laugh at me in the village while I die in the dirt."

He took the bottle, drank, and passed it over. Don Quixote took it reverently, as if it were a sacred chalice, drank, coughed, and grinned. "To Dulcinea," he murmured.

"To the island," replied Sancho.

And that was it. No turning back, no hesitation. A mad knight, a hungry peasant, two idiots on their way into a world that neither asked for them nor wanted to make room for them. But screw it.

Behind them, the village, full of mockery. In front of them, the open countryside, full of dust and promise. Sancho tightened his pouch, slapped the donkey on the side, and grinned. "Better to go into chaos with a madman than to rot in the village."

The sun was blazing, the dust was rising, and the adventure smelled of sweat, wine, and stupid ideas.

### A donkey and a horse – companions against their will

Rocinante wasn't a horse; he was a skeleton with skin too proud to fall over. Every step sounded like an old piece of furniture that hadn't been thrown away because you were too lazy to carry it outside. His ribs jutted out like a damn railing, over which you could almost hang your jacket. His mane hung like a hooker's hair after a week without sleep, dull, matted, covered in dust. His eyes—large, dark, tired—had that look: "Why? Why still?"

And yet: there was something in its gait. Not strength, not pride—more defiance. The animal was so broken that it should have been dead long ago, but

it kept going. As if it wanted to prove to the world: "You can't beat me. I'd rather disintegrate piece by piece so you'll have something to stare at longer."

Next to him was the donkey. Not a hero, not a fool, just a donkey. Pot-bellied, stubborn, with a mouth that constantly chewed, regardless of whether there was anything in it or not. He had fur like an old rug that'd been left out in the rain three times, and he smelled of everything you wouldn't want near your soup: stable, manure, urine, sweat, life. His eyes were half-closed, as if he wanted to see as little of the world as possible. But if you looked closely, they had that dry sense of humor. The look of someone thinking, "You're all idiots, but I'll carry you anyway."

Sancho loved his donkey. Not the way poets love horses—he loved him because he knew him. The donkey was honest. He did what he wanted: eat, run, stop, fart. No heroics, no pathos. Just reality. If he didn't go any further, he didn't go any further. No big speeches. No "Honor, Sancho." Just stand, open his mouth, wiggle his ears: the end.

Don Quixote, on the other hand, saw Rocinante as a divine companion. "Noble steed," he called him, as the horse was laying a pile that looked more like surrender than triumph. He spoke to him as to a brother in war: "We two, Rocinante, we carry the banner of justice!" – and the horse snorted, flung snot on the ground, and that was his answer. More honest than any "Yes, sir."

The villagers who saw the troupe giggled more at the animals than at the men. "Look at that horse! A pile of bones covered in lice!" - "And the donkey? He's got more dignity in his tail than both of them combined!" Laughter wafted through the street like smoke from cheap oil. But the animals didn't care. The animals knew nothing of honor or shame. They only knew: run, eat, survive.

And so the journey began: a knight on a horse that should have been turned into soup long ago, and a farmer on a donkey who understood everything and yet remained silent. Two animals who were wiser than their masters – because they had no illusions.

The sun hung like a lazy god over the country road, and after just the first few hundred meters, it was clear: the journey was a joke, and not one that anyone would laugh at. Rocinante trudged forward, every step a squeaking joint that desperately needed oil—or a quick death. The horse stumbled over stones that weren't even there, placed its hooves on the ground as if considering whether it was worth it, and then dragged its legs on like an old man searching for his teeth.

Sancho followed on his donkey. The donkey was stubborn, stubborn like a barkeeper who won't give up his last beer. Sometimes he just stood still, as if to say, "And now?" Sometimes he walked across the path as if he were painting his own chessboard. Sancho cursed, yanked on the reins, and kicked his heels into the flanks. The donkey eventually moved, but no faster—purely out of boredom.

"Sancho!" Don Quixote called from the front, his lance raised to the sky, the pot sparkling in the sun as if he had just received God's blessing himself. "Do you feel the breath of adventure?"

Sancho wiped the sweat from his neck, which stank like an old fish, and growled, "I can feel the breath of my donkey's ass. And that smells of adventure too, but not the kind you're talking about."

Don Quixote laughed, a hysterical, high-pitched laugh that shattered in the air like glass. "Your mockery will pass, Sancho. Soon you will understand that we are chosen."

"Chosen by whom?" Sancho grumbled, while the donkey stopped again and scratched itself as if it had all the time in the world. "By the devil, at most. No sane person would voluntarily venture out into the heat, without water, without a destination, with a horse that's about to fall over."

Don Quixote turned in his saddle and looked at his squire with that look that burned like a bad sermon. "Sancho, you must trust. The road will test us. Every step is a test."

Sancho reached into the bag, pulled out an onion, and bit into it, tears streaming down his face. "Passed the exam," he murmured. "I'm crying on my own."

Rocinante suddenly stumbled, Don Quixote almost fell from the saddle, clung on, and shouted: "An ambush!" "Ambush, my arse," Sancho shouted back, "your horse is just a walking accident!"

The road ran like a scar through the landscape. Dust clung to skin, clothes, even thoughts. Flies buzzed around the animals' heads as if they had paid an entrance fee. The donkey farted loudly, Rocinante panted dryly, Sancho sweated, Don Quixote raved.

"Soon, Sancho!" cried the knight, his lance swaying like a drunken promise. "Soon we will encounter enemies who will bring us glory!"

Sancho spat in the dust. "If I meet another opponent, hopefully it'll be a tavern."

And so the caravan of misery moved on: two animals who had no desire to go, a knight who spoke in clouds, and a farmer who cursed in garlic. The journey was punishment enough.

"Sancho!" Don Quixote's voice cut through the heat like a rusty knife. He raised his broom handle as if it were a lance about to tear open the heavens. "Don't you see? Every step brings us closer to justice!"

Sancho tugged on the reins, his donkey stubbornly standing still, chewing on something invisible—perhaps air, perhaps boredom. "Every step brings me closer to heatstroke, sir. And if justice looks like my ass after this ride, then good night."

Rocinante stumbled over a shadow, snorting indignantly as if the shadow were to blame. Don Quixote patted his neck. "Courage, Rocinante! Your hoof is stronger than the forces of evil." The horse snorted dryly, turned its head, and spat a load of mucus onto the path.

Sancho gave a crooked laugh. "Yes, strong. Your horse is already fighting its own vomit." He shook his head, sweat running into his eye. He wiped it away, smearing dirt on his face. "Sir, listen: honor doesn't fill a belly. If you give me the choice between a knighthood and a bowl of lentils, I'll eat the lentils."

"Sancho, Sancho," Don Quixote crooned, his voice shaky yet solemn, "you are blinded by earthly needs. Man does not live by bread alone."

Sancho belched, the bread from earlier still in his throat. "That's right. He also lives on wine. And sausage. And if I don't get sausage, I'll turn around."

The donkey stopped again. Sancho cursed and yanked on the reins. "Damned beast! Move, or I'll make stew out of you." The donkey slowly turned its head, looking at him with that cold, superior gaze that said, "Go ahead. You don't even have firewood." Sancho stared back, laughing bitterly. "See, sir? My donkey takes me more seriously than you do."

Don Quixote was unimpressed. He raised his lance, which glittered in the evening light even though it was merely rusty. "We carry the banner of virtue, Sancho! We are chosen to save the weak, the widows, the children..."

Sancho interrupted him, growling: "The widows? The children? Lord, I have children of my own. They wait for bread, not stories."

Silence for a moment. Even Rocinante paused. Don Quixote looked at his squire as if he had committed a sacrilege. "But... stories are food for the soul."

Sancho shook his head and spat in the dust. "Soul doesn't eat. Soul doesn't shit. Soul doesn't bring shoes for my little ones. Bread is bread. Wine is wine. The rest is for fools with pots on their heads."

A brief gust of wind. Dust rose, biting his throat. Don Quixote inhaled deeply as if it were incense. Sancho coughed as if he'd swallowed the filth of the world.

The animals started running again because they wanted to, not because the men ordered them to. Rocinante dragged bones across the earth, the donkey trotted with the equanimity of a man who has seen it all. And so the caravan moved on: a knight talking, a farmer cursing, and two animals ignoring both.

They already had the dust in their teeth when the first voices came. Farmers slinking back from the fields, baskets on their backs, faces as tired as old shoes. Women in aprons bearing more stains than hope. Children, barefoot, knees ragged, eyes wide open. Everyone stopped when they saw the team. Not because of the lance. Not because of the helmet. No—everyone stared at the animals.

"Holy shit," one shouted, pointing at Rocinante, "that horse looks like it survived the plague twice!" Laughter. Rocinante lowered his head and snorted wearily, as if to say, "Exactly. And you're still watching."

Another child squealed and pointed at the donkey. "Look! He's fatter than his master!" More laughter. Sancho rubbed his belly and grinned crookedly. "See? At least someone in this group is good-looking."

The women giggled, but not in a friendly way. "One is swaying on his skeleton, the other is sitting on a beast that's about to fall asleep. What heroes!" Another tilted her head: "Or what idiots."

Don Quixote raised his lance, the sun reflecting off its rusty tip. "Silence, people! You do not see what you see: noble companions who will fight against evil!"

The men roared with laughter. "Evil? The only evil here is the fleas on your horse!" - "And the stench from that donkey!" A boy held his nose and pretended to faint. Laughter rolled across the square like a drunken man.

Sancho, fed up with the jokes, pulled the bottle out of the bag, took a long swig, and yelled back: "You're laughing now, but wait—when I get my island, you'll all come crawling over and want to eat it!"

The laughter died down for a second. Then it erupted again, twice as loud. "Island! Island!" the children cried in unison, "Sancho King of Shit Island!" They danced in circles, clapping, stomping their feet until the dust rose.

Rocinante stumbled, Don Quixote almost falling from his saddle. "An attack!" he cried, "a cunning spell!" The crowd roared as if they were witnessing a spectacle. In the midst of the commotion, the donkey laid down a smoky, honest, definitive heap. More laughter.

Sancho grinned and patted his donkey on the back. "See? My animal shows more character than all of you put together." Don Quixote nodded seriously, as if this were proof of divine providence.

And so they moved on, accompanied by the cheering, cheering village. But as the dust swallowed them, a small pang remained in a few eyes: Maybe they're crazy, but at least they're on their way.

The sun had finally drowned behind the fields, and darkness came like an old loan shark: slowly, surely, mercilessly. No inn, no roof, just a patch of hard earth and a few crooked trees that looked as if they had lost the war against the wind. So it was here that they made their first camp. Camp—that is, Sancho threw himself into the grass, which was more dust than grass, and Don Quixote stood as if he had to greet the stars.

Sancho unpacked the bag. Bread so hard you could hammer nails into the wall with it. Onions whose sharpness slit your eyes like little knives. And the bottle. He ripped out the cork, drank, sighed. Then he broke the bread and held a piece out to the donkey. The animal chewed as if it were nothing new that humans shared their meals with it. Sancho grinned and stuffed a piece into his own mouth. "The two of us, my boy. You and me. The fat one and the stubborn one. If the world screws us over, we'll screw it back by just keeping eating." The donkey farted softly. Answer enough.

Don Quixote, on the other hand, sat with Rocinante. No bread, no wine. Only his voice. "My noble friend," he began, and the horse blinked slowly, wearily, as if it had just heard everything he was about to say. "We set out today. And soon, soon, our names will be sung in every tavern." He placed his hand on his neck, feeling the bones beneath. "They laugh at us, but they'll see, Rocinante. They'll see."

The horse snorted and lay down, its bones cracking as if a bundle of sticks had been dropped. Don Quixote took this as a sign. "Exactly. Rest. Tomorrow we have trials."

Sancho laughed from the other fire—actually, it was just a pile of embers he'd squeezed out of some dry twigs. "Trials? Lord, the only test tomorrow will be whether your horse is still alive and whether my donkey is still up for getting up."

"Just mock, Sancho," murmured Quixote, his eyes sparkling in the darkness, "but one day you will understand."

"Perhaps," said Sancho, taking another sip of wine and handing the bottle to the donkey. The animal sniffed, wrinkled its nostrils, and turned its head away. "You see, sir? My animal is smarter than I am. It knows the wine is shit."

The night buzzed with insects, the fire crackled, the animals snorted. Two men, two animals, four damned figures in the dust. No one had more than the other. And somehow that was enough.

The fire was almost nothing, just a few branches that gave off more smoke than light. Sancho squatted in front of it, legs spread, onion in hand, chewing so loudly that even the crickets fell silent in offense. Don Quixote sat upright in the dust like a damned king, the pan still on his head, as if he wouldn't risk an inch of dignity even while sleeping.

The animals lay close to them. Rocinante stretched out as if he had made his will and was only waiting for its execution. The donkey curled up, warm, breathing heavily, content as long as its mouth remained occupied. They made no sound, no sermon, no curses. They breathed, they rested. Honestly, simply, without drama.

Sancho poked the bread into the fire, held it briefly over the embers, took a bite, and grimaced. "Tastes like burnt earth." He spat out a piece, which disappeared into the dust. "You know what, sir? Your horse and my donkey are

better off than we are. They eat when they're hungry, they sleep when they're tired, and they don't give a damn about honor and glory. Maybe those two are the real knights."

Don Quixote stood up straighter, as if he didn't want to leave any room for the sentence to fall into the dust. "Nonsense, Sancho. Animals are creatures without reason."

"Sense?" Sancho laughed dryly, taking a sip from the almost empty wine bottle. "My donkey has more sense than the entire village. He eats when he can, and when he doesn't want to anymore, he stops. I don't know anyone who does it so consistently. They all eat until they burst and keep running until they die."

Rocinante snorted in his sleep, kicking his hoof lightly as if dreaming of a better meadow. Don Quixote heard the snorting, nodded, and whispered: "He dreams of victories, Sancho. He sees the battlefields we are conquering."

Sancho grunted. "All he dreams about is a pile of hay you can never give him."

They were silent for a while. The fire crackled, the night smelled of dung, smoke, and a hint of hope that tasted more like illusion. Then Sancho murmured: "Perhaps we are the animals. And the animals are the people."

Don Quixote placed his hand over his heart, as if Sancho had cursed him. "No, Sancho. We are the dreamers. Animals can't do that."

"Dreaming, yes," said Sancho, lying back, his belly full of cheap onions. "But who's really waking up here? Us or them?"

The answer didn't come from Don Quixote. It came from the donkey, who let out a loud fart in his sleep, then stretched contentedly and went back to sleep. Sancho laughed so hard that tears streamed from his eyes. "See, sir? That's what I call wisdom. Just letting out what's bothering you."

Rocinante turned heavily onto his other side. Don Quixote looked at him reverently and whispered, "He understands me."

Sancho looked at him, shook his head and thought: *Maybe he does. And maybe that's the problem.*

Morning came as always: not as a gift, but like a punch in the face. No golden sunrise, no birdsong from fairytales—just a gray light that exposed every wrinkle, every scratch, every hole in his clothes. Sancho woke up with a mouth

that tasted like old boots. He reached for the bottle and found only a single drop, which he swallowed like medicine that cures nothing.

The donkey shook itself, its coat covered in dust, and sneezed so hard that Sancho got caught in it. "Thanks, my boy," he murmured, "at least I've had a bath." He broke off a piece of bread, hard as a cobblestone, and threw it to the animal. The donkey chewed, without expression, without thanks, simply: eating. Sancho nodded. "That's how it's done."

Don Quixote, on the other hand, had spent the night almost sitting down, his lance beside him, a pan on his head. He looked as if he had been awake, as if he were the guardian of an army, but it was merely a growling belly and a horse that had almost buried itself in the dust overnight. "Sancho," he began in a dry voice, "the day calls us. Adventures await."

"The day calls me to shit," growled Sancho, stumbling into the bushes. The donkey blinked as if to say, "Go ahead, I'm here guarding the knight." Rocinante stood up, bones cracking, joints creaking, as if he were about to fall apart. But he stood. Still.

Half an hour later, they were on their way. Don Quixote in the lead, mounted on Rocinante as if leading an army. Sancho trailed behind on the donkey, his knitting bag over his shoulder, his belly wobbling with every step. From a distance, they must have looked like a bad joke: a skeleton on legs carrying a pot, next to it a sack on a donkey that ran barely faster than death itself.

And yet: Something hung in the air. Not glory, not holiness—but movement. Dust rose behind them, as if they were real, as if they had weight. Two people, two animals, four pitiful silhouettes in the morning. Ridiculous, pathetic, comical. But also—departure.

The peasants who saw them from afar laughed. "Look at them, that troop of knights! A walking pile of bones and a belly on four legs!" Laughter rolled through the fields. But deep down, between the grain and the sweat, many thought: *At least they're going. At least they're trying.*

Sancho felt it too. He knew he was still a peasant with a bag full of onions and a donkey more stubborn than fate. But he was on the move now. And that was more than most people could ever say.

Don Quixote raised his lance, the sun blinding them like a cheap trick. "Forward, Sancho! The world awaits us!"

Sancho grinned, half tired, half defiant. "Then let's hope she's had breakfast."

And so the small army marched on, four wretches against the rest of the world.

### The oath to Dulcinea

The sun hung high, like a pompous sheriff trying to keep an eye on everything. Don Quixote stopped Rocinante in the middle of the path, raised his lance, which sparkled in the light as if it were gold, although even a blind person could see it was just rusty scrap. He turned to Sancho, who was rocking on his donkey and pulling an onion from his bag.

"Sancho!" Quixote cried, as if preaching the gospel. "It's time you knew who we serve! Every deed we perform, every battle we dare, every victory we win—all this is done in the name of the incomparable, the sublime, the divine Dulcinea!"

Sancho bit into the onion, the spiciness immediately shooting into his eyes. Tears streamed down his face, but he laughed as he did so, a deep, dirty laugh. "Dulcinea? Who the hell is that? Never heard of her, sir. Is that a saint who pours wine?"

Don Quixote raised his chin, his voice trembling. "Don't laugh, Sancho! Dulcinea is the most beautiful woman who ever lived, the crown of all virtue, the light that pales even the sun!"

Sancho coughed with laughter and spat a piece of onion into the dust. "The light, eh? I only know one woman you call that. And she smells more like garlic and cowsheds. If that's your sun, then good night."

Quixote's eyes flashed as if he'd been slapped. "Stop, Sancho! Don't you dare slander my lady's name. Dulcinea del Toboso is the queen of my heart, the reason for my existence!"

Sancho rubbed his eyes, wiping the tears from the onion. "Del Toboso? I know Toboso. There are more flies than women there. And if you're talking about the one I have in mind—sir, she's not even queen of her own pigsty."

Don Quixote slammed his lance into the ground, sending dust flying. He raised his right hand to heaven, as if forcing an oath to God. "By my blood and my life,

I swear: everything I do, I do for Dulcinea! She is the reason I breathe, the reason I fight, the reason I..."

"...that you've lost your mind," Sancho interrupted, continuing to chew and grinning broadly.

Don Quixote closed his eyes, as if that would drown the mockery. His voice sank, almost tenderly: "Sancho, without Dulcinea everything is dust. With her, anything is possible."

Sancho looked at him, shook his head, took another bite of the onion, and murmured, "With her, anything is possible, yes—even stomachaches."

And so the oath began: a man in the dirt, invoking a goddess who didn't exist, and a squire who knew that madness might be the only reason they were on the road at all.

Sancho wiped the onion juice from his beard, spat in the dust, and looked at Don Quixote, who sat enthroned on his horse like a damned king who owned nothing but a rusty pole and a rusty brain. "So, sir," Sancho began, with that grin that reeked of anger, "this Dulcinea... have you ever seen her, or just drunk in the stars?"

Don Quixote took a breath as if about to deliver a sermon, but Sancho held his breath. "Because I know the women in Toboso. Believe me, I know them. One of them has more hair on her arms than I have on my head. The other stinks so much of garlic you'd think she'd just rolled in the soup pot. And then there's the one you're talking about... that peasant woman who drives cows and looks like she could knock me over with one finger."

"Shut up, Sancho!" Quixote raised his lance as if he could skewer Sancho's words. "How dare you defile the mistress of my heart like that!"

"Mistress of your heart?" Sancho snorted, shoved the bread into his mouth, and continued speaking with his mouth full. "The only mistress I see in her is the mistress of the pitchfork. If she looks at you, it's not because she's enchanted—it's because she's considering whether you're fit to muck out the stable."

Don Quixote closed his eyes and pressed his hand to his chest, as if he needed to protect his heart from the insults. "Sancho, you are blind. She is not what she seems. She is what I see in her: the queen of the world, purity incarnate, the flower of all women!"

Sancho chuckled, thrusting the onion into the air like a scepter. "The only flower she has is the grass she plucks in the field. And purity? Lord, she washes her feet in the same trough as the pigs. I saw it. The only thing that was pure was the stench—pure and deadly."

Don Quixote opened his eyes wide as if he'd been cursed. "Enough, Sancho! Your mouth is worse than any enemy! I tell you: Dulcinea is flawless, untouched, superior to any woman who ever lived!"

Sancho leaned forward, grinning, his teeth like broken dentures full of stories. "Flawless, yes. Untouched, sure. Because no one dares to touch her, sir. She has a look that'll make your blood run cold if she catches you farting. And you call her a goddess? Well, have fun with your goddess, who probably wears her panties for three weeks straight."

Don Quixote raised his arms and looked up to heaven, as if to invoke God himself: "Forgive him, Dulcinea! He doesn't know what he's saying!"

Sancho chuckled, bit into his bread, and murmured, "Yes, I know exactly what I'm saying. Only you don't know who you love."

And so the oath rode on—a knight who painted a queen out of dust, and a squire who dragged the queen back to the dirt where she came from.

Dulcinea del Toboso. The name rolled off Don Quixote's tongue like honey that had never existed. He spoke it as if he had a jewel in his mouth, shining and sanctifying. But anyone who knew Toboso knew: there are no jewels there. There is dirt, fields, dung heaps, women with arms as wide as tree trunks from driving cows and carrying water barrels.

The real Dulcinea was actually called Aldonza Lorenzo. A woman who wielded a pitchfork as if it were a sword. She wasn't beautiful, not in the sense of the songs. She was coarse, rough, with hands like wood that could grip you until your blood ran cold. Her skin was brown from dust and sun, her neck thick, her voice deep. When she laughed, it sounded like you'd dropped a bucket. When she cursed, even the pigs flinched.

And she stank. God, she stank. Not because she wanted to, but because life made her that way: of sweat, of cow dung, of garlic, of damned survival. A smell that stuck, that went with you, that ate into your clothes. Everyone in the village knew that smell. It was as much a part of Toboso as dust and poverty.

But Don Quixote didn't see her that way. For him, she was a light that burned in every darkness. He saw in her calloused hands the tenderness of a queen, in her voice the song of angels, in her sweat the scent of innocence. He had once seen her standing at the well, drawing water, her sleeves rolled up. Others saw only a woman sweating like an ox. He saw a goddess who commanded the heavens.

"She is the sun itself," he murmured, while Sancho farted into his beard with a grin. "She is the flower of all women, the queen of my heart. Her beauty surpasses anything you can imagine."

Sancho laughed so loudly that the donkey's ears twitched. "Flower? Lord, the only flower she knows is the one she plucks to throw into the soup. And if she's sun, it's the one that burns you until your ass bleeds."

Don Quixote didn't hear him. In his mind, Dulcinea shone, a woman of light and splendor, immaculate, pure, the heart of the world. He saw her in every speck of dust that struck the sun, he heard her in every gust of wind that stirred the leaves. For him, she was no village woman. She was the holy cause of his madness.

And therein lay the difference: For Sancho, she was a woman who had once turned her back on him in the stable while adjusting her petticoats. For Quixote, she was the reason he lived, why he fought, why he hadn't perished in the dust long ago.

One was real. The other was a goddess. And both were named Dulcinea.

The sun burned, the air still, and the dust clung to everything, as if he himself wanted to listen. Don Quixote dismounted from Rocinante, stood in the middle of the path, lance in hand, and raised it to the sky as if he could rip open the firmament. The pot on his head gleamed as if it were a sacred helmet, and his eyes blazed as if he had just shaken hands with God himself.

"Oh Dulcinea!" he cried, his voice trembling with ecstasy, "by my blood, by my life, by every breath, I swear that everything I do is in your name! Not a blow, not a victory, not a word that is not consecrated to you!"

Meanwhile, Sancho sat on his donkey, pulled a piece of bread from his pouch, took a bite, and chewed slowly. He watched his master sweating in the dust and roaring as if addressing an army. Then he grinned and said with his mouth

full: "By your blood? Lord, your blood is thinner than yesterday's wine. If you promise that, she'll fall off the cow laughing."

Don Quixote fell to his knees, holding his lance before him like a cross. The dust blew around him as if he were on an altar. "Dulcinea, Queen of my heart! Your name shall be the shield that protects me, your image the weapon that makes me conquer!"

Sancho swallowed the bread, picked up the bottle, drank, and belched loudly. "If your picture is a weapon, then good night. The most you'll do with it is chase the flies off your horse."

Don Quixote spread his arms and looked up to heaven, as if awaiting a sign. "Angels themselves shall bear witness!"

"Angel?" Sancho wiped his mouth. "The only witness here is my donkey, and he's about to fart. If that's enough, then you've sworn to your oath."

That's right: The donkey lifted its tail and let out a long, wet fart that silenced even the crickets for a moment. Sancho patted it on the back. "Well, do you hear that, sir? Dulcinea is touched."

But Don Quixote wasn't bothered. He knelt there, sweating, swearing, talking as if he held the world in his fist. And the dust settled over him like a blanket, as if to say: *Just scream, fool. In the end, everything's mine.*

Sancho took the bottle, drank the rest, and shook it out as if he could find another drop. Then he leaned back, rubbed his belly, and grinned, while Don Quixote still knelt like a priest in the dust.

"You know, sir," Sancho began, "you talk about women as if they were stars falling from the sky. But to me, they're bread. Freshly baked, they're warm, soft, and smell good. You bite into them, and you think: This is paradise. But bread doesn't stay fresh. Give it a few days, and it gets hard. You need teeth like nails to break it down. And yet, damn it, you eat it. Because hunger is worse than hard bread."

Don Quixote raised his head and looked at him, horrified like a monk hearing a heretic preach. "Sancho! This is blasphemy!"

"No, sir," Sancho grinned, "that's experience. Ask any farmer. Women are like bread: sometimes there's none, then you die of hunger. Sometimes there's too

much, then you stuff yourself and later vomit. But no matter what, you always come back because your gut is stronger than your head."

The donkey snorted as if he understood, and Sancho stroked his ears. "And you know what? The wisest men are those who know. Not those who shout oaths. Not those who invent goddesses. But those who eat when food is there and are calm when it's not."

Don Quixote slowly stood up, his lance trembling in his hand. "Sancho, you insult the purity of womanhood! Dulcinea is not bread, she is wine, she is honey, she is..."

Sancho laughed so loudly that even the crows took flight. "Wine? Honey? Lord, be honest: She's garlic and sweat. And that's something too. But don't make a goddess out of it. Otherwise you'll choke on the stench."

He bit into the last piece of bread, chewed loudly, and continued talking with his mouth full: "I'll tell you something, sir. Women are like bread, men are like hungry dogs. And you're the only dog who thinks the bread sings while he eats it."

Don Quixote turned away, holding his lance tightly as if defending it against Sancho's tongue. Sancho grinned and thought: *That's better. He's dreaming, I'm chewing. Someone has to stay awake.*

The path stretched like a dry throat through the landscape when they saw her: a girl, maybe seventeen, maybe thirty—in Toboso, you never really know because the sun wrinkles faces faster than time. She carried a jug on her shoulder, her feet bare, her apron covered in stains that spoke nothing of roses. Her back glistened with sweat, the smell of it reaching them before they even got close enough.

Don Quixote raised his lance, his gaze ablaze. "Sancho! Do you see it? A sign! Dulcinea is sending us her apparition to show us the way!"

Sancho raised his eyebrows, bit into the bread, chewed, and laughed. "A sign? Sir, that's a girl with a smelly water jug and blisters on her feet. If that's a sign, then at most it shows that life sucks."

"No!" cried Quixote, snorting like a horse before battle. "Look more closely, Sancho. See the grace with which she walks, the radiance on her skin, the radiance of heaven itself!"

Sancho almost coughed over his bite. "Glare? That's sweat, sir. Sweat! Glory is when you reflect the sun in wine, not when the stench hits you in the face from ten meters away."

The girl saw the two of them, stopped, and stared. Two madmen, one with a pan on his head, the other with bread in his mouth. She frowned, turned around without a word, and walked on, swaying the jug as if the whole spectacle hadn't even happened.

Don Quixote called after her: "Dulcinea! Goddess! Your knight serves you!" Rocinante started moving, stumbled, and lifted his legs too high, as if he wanted to dance ballet and die at the same time.

Sancho held his stomach and laughed so loudly that the donkey neighed in alarm. "Sir, she didn't even look at you. Your goddess treated you like a damn beggar. And you call that love?"

Quixote looked at him with moist eyes, as if he had seen the Holy Grail. "Sancho, she's testing us. She remains silent to teach us strength. Her contempt is her greatest proof of love."

Sancho wiped the tears from his laughter. "Sir, if contempt is love, then my mother-in-law was Cupid himself."

But Quixote continued to stare into the void, as if he had just renewed a vow. And Sancho just shook his head: A man who finds goddesses in the dust, and a squire who swallows the dust.

Evening descended like a wet blanket, heavy and stuffy. The sky wasn't a painting, but a gray sheet full of holes, through which the stars peered like tired eyes. Don Quixote stopped Rocinante, jumped from his saddle, and knelt back in the dust. Sancho groaned as if he had a toothache and slid off his donkey.

"Sancho," began the knight, his lance raised like a cross, "today it has been confirmed to me. Every deed, every blow, every breath—they all belong to Dulcinea. She is my morning, my evening, my blood."

Sancho sat down on a rock, pulled an onion from his bag, and bit into it. "Your blood? Lord, your blood is thinner than my wine. If you're doing all this for her, at least do it so we have something to eat along the way."

Quixote ignored him. His voice rose, swelled like a choir in an empty church: "Oh Dulcinea, flower of purity! I, your knight, swear loyalty to you until my

body perishes in the dust! My sword—your sword! My heart—your heart! My life—your life!"

Sancho lachte, biss die Zwiebel kleiner, sprach mit vollem Mund: „Schwert? Herz? Leben? Herr, wenn sie dich so sieht, dann lacht sie lauter als ich. Und glaub mir, ich lache schon genug.“

Der Esel furzte, Rocinante schnaupte. Beide Tiere klangen ehrlicher als jeder Schwur. Sancho sah sie an, schüttelte den Kopf, und da war dieser Moment, wo er dachte: *Vielleicht sind die Viecher die Vernünftigsten von uns.*

Quijote aber stand auf, erhob die Lanze, blickte in den Himmel, als hätte er gerade die Welt erobert. „Sancho, von nun an gilt: Alles für Dulcinea!“

Sancho schnaubte, spuckte den Zwiebelrest in den Staub, grinste schief. „Alles für Dulcinea. Klar. Und alles für meinen Bauch. Wir zwei haben unsere Göttinnen, Herr. Deine heißt Dulcinea – meine heißt Abendessen.“

Und während Quijote mit glühenden Augen weiter in den Himmel schwor, legte Sancho sich ins Gras, den Bauch voll billiger Nahrung, den Kopf voller Zweifel – und blieb. Weil Wahnsinn, so dreckig er auch war, besser schmeckte als die Langeweile im Dorf.

## Die erste Begegnung mit Räubern

Der Weg war leer, aber nicht leer genug. Die Sonne hing noch immer wie eine rostige Pfanne am Himmel, und der Staub brannte den beiden in die Augen. Rocinante schleppte sich vorwärts, als zählte er jeden Schritt wie eine alte Kasse, die bald pleitegeht. Der Esel trottete daneben, stoisch, gleichmütig, die Ohren zuckten nur, wenn eine Fliege zu gierig wurde.

Sancho schwitzte, wischte sich den Schweiß mit dem Ärmel ab, roch an sich selbst und verzog das Gesicht. „Herr,“ murmelte er, „wenn wir noch einen Tag so laufen, dann halten uns die Geier für Aas.“

Don Quijote aber war in Hochstimmung. Er reckte die Lanze, als wolle er die Wolken kitzeln, und rief: „Sancho, spürst du es? Die Luft ist geladen! Ein Abenteuer naht!“

„Geladen?“, keuchte Sancho, zog an der Weinflasche, die längst leer war. „Das Einzige, was geladen ist, bin ich – mit Durst, Hunger und Blasen am Arsch.“

Da – ein Knacken im Gebüsch. Ein Ast brach, trocken, hart. Sancho hielt sofort an, der Esel spitzte die Ohren. „Was war das?“

Don Quijote ritt unbeirrt weiter, als hätte er den Donner selbst bestellt. „Nur die Vorboten, Sancho. Feige Seelen, die im Schatten lauern, während wahre Ritter im Licht stehen.“

Sancho kniff die Augen zusammen, starrte ins Gebüsch. Da bewegte sich was. Zwei, drei Silhouetten, schwerfällig, grob. Stimmen, tief, das Lachen von Männern, die nie ohne Messer lachen. Er spürte, wie sich sein Bauch zusammenzog – und das war nicht von den Zwiebeln.

„Herr,“ flüsterte er, „das sind keine Vorboten. Das sind Kerle. Dicke Kerle. Mit Stöcken. Und ich wette, die lachen nicht, weil sie über Gedichte reden.“

Rocinante schnaubte, als ahne er, dass bald mehr Staub fliegen würde. Der Esel scharrte, als würde er am liebsten jetzt schon umdrehen.

Don Quijote aber lächelte, die Augen glühten. „Dann ist es soweit, Sancho. Endlich – der Kampf, der uns Ruhm bringt!“

Sancho swallowed dryly, looked again into the bushes, and heard a knife scratching against a sheath. He thought: *Fame, yes. But not for us.*

Don Quixote reined in Rocinante, sitting upright in the saddle, lance in hand, pan on his head, as if he were the judge of life and death. His gaze burned into the bushes where the shadows moved. "Sancho!" he cried, his voice thundering, "remember one thing: only cowards lurk in the darkness! Only villains and traitors hide in the bushes like mangy dogs! A true knight steps into the light, proud, open, fearless!"

Sancho blinked, wiped the sweat from his brow, and nervously chewed on a piece of bread so hard he could almost use it as a weapon. "Sir, I don't know if those people in there are cowards. But they certainly have something we don't: knives. And if they have knives, I'd rather stand in the bush than in the light. Because in the light, you'll see better how they're ripping your belly open."

"Nonsense, Sancho!" Quixote raised his lance, the wood vibrating as if in fear. "Our honor is our shield! Our virtue is our armor!"

Sancho laughed dryly, spitting breadcrumbs into the dust. "My virtue can't take a blow. My virtue doesn't even have enough fat to grease a pan. And my belly is no shield, sir—even if it looks like one."

A rustling, a giggle from the bushes. Heavy breathing, boots treading on branches. Sancho ducked his head, muttering, "They're coming out. I hear it. Lord, can't we be cowards for once? Just today?"

But Don Quixote tensed up, proud as a rooster about to get into the soup. "No, Sancho! Today evil will come to light—and we will crush it!"

Sancho rolled his eyes, reached for the almost empty wine bottle, and muttered, "If it smashes us, at least say I told you so."

Then there was a loud crack. Three figures emerged from the bushes. Broad shoulders, beards covered in dirt, knives and clubs in their hands. They grinned, not in a friendly way. Sancho whispered: "There they are. Cowards in the shadows, sir. But now in the light. And they don't look any weaker."

Don Quixote raised his lance, his eyes sparkling. "Then it's time."

Sancho sighed, grabbed his bag as if it were a shield, and thought: *Shit. Another joke I can't survive.*

They came out like the dogs they were: three of them, as wide as barn doors, their flesh covered in scars, their teeth half-rotted, their eyes red from too much wine and too little sleep. One carried a knife as long as a forearm, the second had a club with dried blood still sticking to it, and the third grinned so broadly that the gaps in his teeth were like windows to nothingness.

They stank. Not of adventure, not of glory—of old sweat, cheap brandy, and the kind of filth you don't even wash off anymore. Flies buzzed around them as if they were part of the gang.

"Well, what do we have here?" growled the one with the knife, his voice as deep as a well you'd rather not fall into. "A jumping jack with a pot on his head and his fat squire with a snack."

The one with the club laughed, a sound like a stone hitting a skull. "And the beasts, too. A pile of bones and a donkey. Boys, this is our lucky day."

Sancho ducked his head, clutching the bag to him like a mother clutches her child. "Sir," he whispered, "they don't want to invite us to dinner. They want to make us dinner."

But Don Quixote stood proudly, raised his lance, and the sun glittered on it, as if to make the joke even brighter. "Halt, fiends! You stand before Don Quixote de la Mancha, knight without fear or reproach! Fall back, or you will feel the blade of justice!"

The robbers stared. Then the laughter erupted, filthy, loud, so raw that even the crows fell silent. The one with the knife wiped his eyes. "Blade? What blade? All I see is a stick in a madman's hand."

Sancho sighed and murmured, "That's exactly what I see."

Rocinante snorted and took a step back. The donkey turned his head as if asking if he hadn't had enough.

The robbers approached, knives flashed, clubs swung, and Sancho felt his stomach tighten. But Don Quixote glowed as if he were about to save the world.

And Sancho thought: *Shit, now I'm going to get a beating.*

Don Quixote dug his heels into Rocinante's skinny body, and the poor animal stumbled forward, as if it knew this wasn't a good idea. The spear lowered, clanging, wobbling as if it were too heavy for the man holding it. "For Dulcinea!" Quixote roared, and the robbers were already laughing before he reached them.

Sancho stayed behind, clinging to the donkey, which wouldn't take a step. "For Dulcinea, my arse," he muttered, "for the beating we're about to get, that's more like it." He looked around, searching for a way out, a ditch, a bush, anything. But there was only field, dust, and three guys happy that the evening program was coming to them.

Rocinante approached the first robber, but instead of galloping, he stumbled, almost stopping, like an old cart with a broken axle. Don Quixote nevertheless swung his lance forward, striking the man with the flat of it, more of a push than a blow. The robber staggered back, stared at him—and then burst out laughing, filthy and loud.

"The jumping jack wants to fight!" he roared, grabbed the lance with his bare hands, yanked it on, and Quixote almost fell from his saddle.

The second robber leaped forward with the club, swung the thing through the air, and hit Rocinante in the neck. The horse neighed pitifully, buckled, and Quixote tumbled off like a sack of nails. The pot on his head flew around in the dust, clattering miserably.

"Sir!" cried Sancho, but not out of concern – more because he knew: if he falls, I'll be next.

Quixote jumped up, dust on his body, his eyes blazing. "Cowardly dogs! You are nothing compared to the power of honor!"

"Honor?" The third robber spat in the dirt and drew his knife. "I just see two idiots bringing our dinner."

Sancho swallowed and rubbed his stomach, which growled louder than Rocinante. "If I run away now, they'll catch me. If I stay, they'll beat me. Shit. This isn't an adventure, this is math."

But Don Quixote heard nothing. He grabbed his lance and charged blindly forward again, his voice full of pathos, his body covered in dust.

And Sancho just thought: *If he's going to die, at least let him die first. Maybe they won't want me anymore after that.*

The first blow came swiftly. The one with the club swung through the air, a sound like a branch snapping, and it struck Don Quixote right above the shoulder. The knight fell into the dust, gasping, trying to get back up. "Ha!" he cried, "is that all? A true knight feels no pain!" But he lay there, panting, his armor clanging like a sack of pots, and everyone around knew: He felt a hell of a lot.

Sancho ducked his head and shouted, "Stop, stop, friends! No need for violence! We're just two poor idiots on the road! Look at my belly—it's all we have!" He patted himself and laughed nervously, like someone who knows his teeth are about to fly.

The one with the knife grinned broadly, the gaps in his teeth flashing like black holes. "I like your belly. Maybe there's wine in it." He grabbed Sancho's pouch and ripped at it. Sancho screamed, pulled back, stumbled, and fell off the donkey like a sack of flour.

"The bread!" cried Sancho, "at least leave the bread! I swear, without bread I'm nothing more than skin, fat, and farts!"

The third robber kicked him in the side, and Sancho rolled in the dust, panting, half laughing, half crying. "All right, take it, take everything, but leave me the donkey! At least he'll eat with me!"

Don Quixote scrambled to his feet, his face red, his eyes filled with madness. He charged again, his lance half-broken, shouting: "Cowardly dogs! I'm fighting for Dulcinea!"

The one with the club struck again, this time across the face, and Quixote flew backward into the dust. The pot on his head rattled, spun, and rolled away, as if even he was fed up with the drama anymore.

Sancho tried talking again. He raised his hands and coughed the dust from his lungs. "Listen, friends. You want our stuff, take it. You want the horses—well, the horse's dying tomorrow anyway. But you don't want to beat us up, do you? What do you get out of it? We're already poor. Beating poor people won't make you rich—it'll just tire you out!"

The one with the knife grabbed him by the collar and pulled him up until they were eye to eye. His breath smelled of rotting teeth and cheap brandy. "You know what I get out of this? Fun."

Then he punched Sancho so hard in the stomach that the fat man folded himself up like a wet towel. He fell into the dust, gasping, and all the bread he had just eaten sat like a lump in his throat.

"Sir," gasped Sancho, "if this is glory, I renounce."

Don Quixote lay beside him, bleeding, but still smiling. "No, Sancho... this is just the test. The reward is yet to come."

"The reward," gasped Sancho, "will probably be a kick in the balls."

And the robbers laughed as they pulled the last crumbs out of their pockets.

The robbers attacked like butchers. One snatched the bag from Sancho's hand and shook it out: bread, onions, a scrap of bacon—everything fell into the dust. The one with the knife picked up the piece of bacon, sniffed, and grinned. "It stinks like you, so it fits." Then he put it in his pocket.

"Hey!" gasped Sancho, still on the ground, "that's my bacon! That's my damn dinner!"

"Not anymore," laughed the clubman and kicked the bread aside before putting it in his pocket.

Don Quixote scrambled to his feet, blood dripping from his lip, but his voice trembled with pride. "Take what you will, scoundrels! You may rob us, but never our honor! For we fight for Dulcinea!"

The robbers laughed so loudly that even heaven was ashamed. "For whom?" one yelled. "For a whore? For a pig in a dress?"

Sancho hissed, "Don't say that, or he'll preach for another three hours."

The men grabbed the reins. Rocinante trembled, swaying as if he had already given up. The donkey stared stubbornly at the ground, as if he knew: discussion was pointless.

"Not the animals!" shrieked Sancho, rolling to his knees, his voice high as a dying rooster. "At least leave me the donkey, damn it! I'm nothing without it! I swear, it eats less than I do!"

The knife-wielding fellow grinned, let go of the reins, and patted the donkey on the butt. "Keep him. It's worthless anyway."

"Thank you," muttered Sancho, "you stink, but God bless you anyway."

The robbers departed, taking bread, bacon, and the bottle of wine. Dust, blood, and hunger remained behind. Don Quixote stood hunched over, leaning on his half-lance, which was more stick than weapon. His gaze was unbroken—on the contrary, it burned.

"Sancho," he whispered, "we have won."

Sancho turned to him, his face covered in dust, his eyes red, his lips bloody. "Victorious? Lord, they beat us, stole our bread, our bacon, our wine—the only thing we have left is my fart."

Don Quixote nodded gravely, as if Sancho had just said a prayer. "Exactly. We gave them everything, and yet we are free. They hurt us, but not our faith. They robbed us, but not our honor. Victory is moral—and that is greater than any purse."

Sancho laughed bitterly, coughed, and spat blood. "Morally, yes. Try eating morally. Try getting morally drunk. Morally, bread won't shit in your stomach."

But Don Quixote looked up; the stars began to flicker, as if proving him right. "Sancho, we are undefeated."

Sancho lay back in the dust, his hands on his stomach, and muttered, "If that's undefeated, then I don't want to know what losing looks like."

The robbers disappeared into the distance, their voices still echoing, a laugh that cut harder than any club. Then it was silent. Only the dust hung in the air, like a reminder of the beating.

Don Quixote lay on his back, his lance half-broken beside him, his face dented, his lips bloody. And yet he grinned, that mad, fiery grin. "Sancho... we have stood firm. We have fallen, but we have risen. That is true victory."

Sancho rolled onto his side, spitting out a sliver of blood and breadcrumbs that had been stuck somewhere between his teeth and throat. "Victory, yes. I've won so much my ass is blue. I've won so much my stomach is emptier than your pan up there."

Rocinante stood there trembling, like a piece of furniture about to fall apart. The donkey grazed serenely by the roadside, as if it had seen it all a hundred times before. The animals seemed less shaken than their masters—because they were never foolish enough to lay honor in the dust.

Don Quixote scrambled to his feet, swaying, holding his lance like a scepter. "Sancho, look at me: they haven't broken us. We are free because we serve Dulcinea. Her name sustained us."

Sancho lay there, belly in the dust, eyes closed. "Carried? At most, your horse trampled me half to death when it fell. And Dulcinea... if she could see us now, she'd probably laugh before she poured a bucket of water over us."

"You don't understand, Sancho," Quixote gasped, his voice trembling with excitement. "We have gained more than they can ever comprehend. They have robbed us—but we have raised the invisible banner of honor!"

Sancho turned his head, blinked at him wearily, his lip split. "Sir, the only banner I can see right now is my shirt hanging in the dirt. And it stinks."

A brief moment of silence. The wind blew, bringing the smell of blood, dust, and old sweat. Then Sancho suddenly laughed, dry, hoarse, like someone who no longer knows whether he's alive or dead. "You know what? Screw it. If you say we won—fine. Then we won. But woe betide us if there's no victory with dinner. Then I'll quit."

Don Quixote nodded solemnly, as if it were a sacred vow. "There will be dinner, Sancho. Heaven itself will see to it."

Sancho closed his eyes and murmured, "Heavens, yes. If heaven bakes bread. Otherwise, I'll eat your helmet."

And so ended the first encounter with the robbers: two men dented in the dust, a horse on the verge of collapse, a donkey getting its grass. One swore they had won. The other remained silent – because hunger was louder than any words.

### The first inn – a palace of illusions

The sun was already low in the sky when the two came across a building. From a distance, it looked like a palace—if you were blind, having a fever dream, and wearing a tin helmet. Don Quixote raised his lance, his eyes glowing. "Sancho! Do you see it? Our destiny leads us to a castle! A palace, shining in the evening sun, its towers reaching towards the sky!"

Sancho blinked, wiped the sweat from his brow, and what he saw was a crooked box of clay and wood, the roof half-caved, the windows as crooked as a drunken dentist. The smell hit them before they even reached the door: urine, brandy, burnt flesh, and the sweat of a hundred unwashed bodies. "Palace?" Sancho growled. "Sir, if this is a palace, then my ass is the throne."

Don Quixote didn't hear him. He saw walls where there were none, banners where only rags hung, knights where only flies danced. "At last! Hospitality, honor, a feast for heroes!"

Sancho wrinkled his nose and coughed. "You'll have a meal. But it'll run out of your back faster than you can say Dulcinea."

The animals stopped, as if they had more sense. Rocinante snorted wearily, the donkey laid back its ears as if they were both saying: *Not in there. Better to die in the dust.*

But Don Quixote raised his arm, as pathetically as a preacher. "Forward, Sancho! The castle awaits us!"

Sancho cursed, gripped the bag tighter, and muttered, "If this is a castle, then I'm the king of the latrine."

And so they entered: the fool with the lance, his eyes full of light, and the squire, who immediately felt like vomiting.

They entered, and the air was immediately a slap in the face. Smoke, cheap brandy that burned sweetly in the throat, sweat, urine, and the scent of meat that had died yesterday. Sancho almost held his stomach. Don Quixote, on the other hand, beamed as if he had just entered the gates of heaven.

Behind the tavern stood the landlady, a broad woman with arms like ham hocks, an apron stained with grease, and teeth like gravestones—half there, half gone. To Sancho, she was a woman who would put your beer in front of you and immediately take your purse. But to Don Quixote, she was a queen who ruled her castle. "Look, Sancho," he whispered reverently, "the mistress of the palace herself!"

Sancho grinned crookedly. "Yes, Lady of the Palace. If palace means a hole where the urinal is fuller than the wine jug."

The guests squatted in the corner. Three women, wearing makeup, but the color was crumbling in the sweat, their skirts hiked up, their legs open, as if it were an invitation or a threat—hard to say. Don Quixote bowed deeply, his lance across his chest. "Noble ladies! What an honor to be allowed to dwell in your august circle!"

The women giggled, one pulled on the pan on his head, banging it like a drum. "Noble sir? Do you hear that? Noble sir wears a cooking pot as a crown!" Laughter, dirty, loud, with teeth that told more stories than poems.

Sancho, on the other hand, saw them as they were: whores who had already served half the region, women with eyes that knew more cold than warmth. "Ladies, sir?" he whispered, "they've seen more ass than you've read books."

Men squatted at the table, faces red, noses broken, hands covered in calluses from swords or clubs; no one could tell the difference anymore. They stared at the two of them, their expressions half curious, half lustful, half angry—too many halves, but that's what happens when someone's drunk.

Don Quixote saw knights in armor, brothers in spirit, companions of honor. Sancho saw scoundrels who had to choose between fighting or getting drunk.

And so they stood there: the fool saw a farm, the squire saw the scum, and both were somehow right.

Don Quixote marched straight toward the tavern as if he were having an audience with God. He slung his lance under his arm, straightened his back, and knelt almost in the dirt before the innkeeper. "Noble lady," he cried, "we, weary knights, seek lodging in your glorious palace. I, Don Quixote de la Mancha, knight of honor and virtue, bow to you!"

The landlady stared at him as if he'd just dropped his pants. Then she laughed raucously and turned to the hookers. "Did you hear that? Palace! I'm a queen!" The women shrieked with laughter, slapped their thighs, and one coughed so hard she almost spat out her tooth.

Sancho rolled his eyes and slumped down on the bench, which was more wobbly than stable. "Mistress, yes. If she's the queen, then I'm the damned pope." He grabbed the jug one of the guests had left behind, sniffed it, grimaced, but drank anyway. It tasted thin, sour, almost like water someone had sweated through. He spat some back into the jug. "Sir, this isn't wine. This is piss someone filtered through an old barrel."

"Sancho!" Don Quixote snapped at him, "watch your tongue in the presence of distinguished ladies!"

One of the women sat down next to him, placed her hand on his helmet, and grinned with black teeth. "Oh, I already feel exalted. He wants to call us ladies while he drinks from the gutter."

Sancho laughed loudly, his belly wobbling. "Ladies, yes! Ladies of the night who avoid the light because no one wants to see them by day."

The men at the table threw back their heads and roared with laughter. One pushed the cup toward Sancho: "Here, peasant, drink. Perhaps then you'll become courtly." Sancho took the cup, tipped it down, and grimaced even

more. "Courtly? If courtly means drinking sloppy shit, then I'm already the damned king."

Don Quixote heard nothing. He saw only ladies-in-waiting, heard only angelic laughter, and smelled only roses where urine steamed. He bowed deeply, placed his hand on his heart, and swore: "Your beauty, noble ladies, is surpassed only by Dulcinea herself."

Sancho gasped, wiped his mouth, and muttered, "If beauty smells like that, then I'd rather stay ugly."

The landlady slammed the mug down on the table, the beer sloshing over like urine from a full chamber pot. She placed two bowls on the table: one filled with bread, hard as cobblestones, the other with meat so long dead it could tell stories. Fat swam in the broth, rancid, glistening like a pimp's face.

Don Quixote stood up, his hands clasped across his chest, his eyes shining. "Sancho! What a feast! What royal gifts! Look, the table bends under the weight of glory!"

Sancho pushed the bowl toward him, bit into the bread, and it cracked like bone. He grimaced, took another bite, and muttered with his mouth full, "If this is glory, then heaven has shitty teeth."

He tasted the meat, chewed, grimaced, and almost choked. "The animal was so old when they slaughtered it that it was already a widow. And now it wants to kill me." He took a long gulp of brandy that tasted of fire and death, coughed, and beat his chest. "Sir, this isn't drinking—this is suicide by installments."

Don Quixote raised the cup as if it were a golden chalice. "Dulcinea herself sends us this potion! May it nourish our strength!" He gulped down the brandy, choked, coughed for minutes, his eyes watered—but he smiled. "Ah! Divine!"

Sancho snorted, bit into the bread again, and almost tore one tooth loose on the hard edge. "Divine, yes. Divinely shitty."

The women laughed from the corner, one almost bursting out. "Well, heroes, do you like our feast?" A man at the table shouted, "The dogs eat better than you!"

But Don Quixote nodded, serious and full of dignity. "It is a privilege to sit at the table of kings."

Sancho slammed his fist on the table, making the broth splash. "Kings? Lord, I'm sitting here like a pig in a trough, and at least the pig has fresh food!"

But Don Quixote continued to smile as if he were at the emperor's court.

Don Quixote rose from the table, raising his cup as if it were made of pure gold rather than cheap tin. "Noble gentlemen!" he cried, "you see before you a knight who lives solely for virtue! I swear, my life belongs to Dulcinea, my lady, the queen of all women!"

The men at the next table stared at him, silent for a moment, then erupted: laughter, filthy, heavy, gurgling in the throat like brandy. One slapped his chest so hard he almost choked. "Dulcinea? Who's that? A sow with a crown?"

Don Quixote placed his hand on his chest as if he had been stabbed in the heart. "Guard your tongues! It is purity itself!"

Sancho was still chewing on his bread, grinning with his mouth full. "Pure, yes. Clean as a miller's sock after a week."

The guests roared, another yelled: "Your squire has more sense than you, Knight Pan!"

Don Quixote ignored them, raised his voice even higher, and continued preaching. "We are not here to mock, but as brothers in spirit, to defend honor and truth!"

Sancho shook his head, swallowing the hard bread like a stone. "Honor and truth? Sir, the truth is: the wine here is thin, the meat is old, and the ladies are whores. There's no more truth than that."

One of the women laughed loudly and slapped Sancho on the butt. "Well, at least the little guy has a sense of humor."

Sancho turned around and grinned crookedly. "Humor, yes—but also hands. And I don't pay for thigh slapping."

This caused laughter, but a man at the table slammed his fist on the wooden beam, sloshing the beer. "Hey, farmer! Shut your mouth, or I'll shut you up!"

Sancho raised his hands and laughed nervously. "Calm down, friend. I'm just hungry and loose-lipped."

"I'll break your mouth right now," growled the man, half standing up.

Rocinante neighed outside, the donkey pawed the ground as if even the animals had sensed that fists were about to fly.

But Don Quixote stretched out his arms as if he were a preacher in the midst of a miracle. "Peace, brothers! Let us praise virtue, not violence!"

Sancho murmured quietly: "If virtue replaces our teeth right now, then so be it."

Tension hung in the air – wine, sweat, violence, all in the same glass.

The landlady showed them into the stable, and it wasn't a stable, it was a hole. Straw that was more dirt than straw, walls full of cracks from which anything with legs crawled. The stench of dung, piss, and dead rat meat hung so thick in the air that Sancho immediately gagged.

"A royal chamber!" breathed Don Quixote, flinging his arms out as if he were cradled in silk. "Heroes have rested here before us, Sancho!"

Sancho scratched his neck before he even lay down. "Heroes, yes. Heroes of fleas. When I wake up tomorrow, I'll have more bites on my ass than bread in my stomach."

They lay down in the straw. Rocinante stood in the corner, almost collapsing from exhaustion, the donkey curled up, content as if it were a damned palace. Sancho tried to use a piece of cloth as a pillow and immediately felt something crawling across his back. He jumped up, slapped himself, and cursed. "Fucking fleas! Fucking stable! Fucking life!"

Don Quixote had long since stretched out, his hands folded like a monk, his eyes closed, his face transfigured. "Dulcinea... my queen... your hand strokes my hair..."

Sancho stared at him, stunned. "Your queen? Lord, those are lice, not hands. They don't stroke your hair, they eat it off your head."

But Quixote smiled in his sleep, continuing to murmur of beauty, roses, and caresses. Sancho, on the other hand, beat himself in the dark, scratching, panting. "I don't want roses, I want peace. I don't want caresses, I don't want another fucking flea in my underwear."

He tossed and turned, finding no peace. Every breath smelled of dung. Every rustle was a beast stinging him. But Quixote lay there like a saint sleeping in a temple.

"Fucking saints," muttered Sancho, "they never realize what it's really like. They dream while we bleed."

And he scratched until his skin burned, while Don Quixote slept peacefully in Dulcinea's arms - who was never there.

Morning came like a thud. No birdsong, no soft light—just a gray sky and the stench of old manure that had thickened in the stable. Sancho woke up, bruised, bruised, and sweating. He looked like a sack of meat that rats had used as a playground overnight. His eyes were red, his neck was covered in red spots, and his belly was growling.

"By all the saints," he cursed, "I've slept less than the fleas that have been fattening up on me." He scratched himself so hard he drew blood. "If that was a palace, I'll go back to sleeping in the gutter."

Don Quixote was already standing, lance in hand, pan on his head, his chest full of pathos. "Sancho! What a sublime night! I feel steeled, ready for any adventure! Dulcinea visited me in a dream and gave me strength."

Sancho stared at him, rubbing his eyes. "She visited you in your dream? Lord, what visited you was a flea nibbling on your balls."

Quixote grinned blissfully. "You mock, Sancho. But my soul is pure, my strength renewed. Onward, the world awaits!"

Sancho dragged himself over to the donkey, who was lying in the dirt, chewing contentedly. He patted its back. "See, my boy? He's dreaming of queens, we're scratching our balls raw. That's how it works."

Rocinante staggered out, bony and staggering, but he stood his ground. Quixote looked at him and nodded solemnly. "Even my horse knows we are blessed."

Sancho climbed onto the donkey and groaned. "Blessed. Yes. Blessed with hunger, thirst, and an ass that burns like fire."

They rode off, the dust swirling. Behind them was the inn that would remain a palace in Quixote's mind. Ahead of them lay the next nightmare on the road.

And so they continued on: the knight full of illusions, the squire full of doubts, the animals full of indifference. Four figures, one endless path.

### The fight with the windmills

The road stretched endlessly until the horizon swallowed them up. Dust, sun, no water. Don Quixote hung on Rocinante, half-dead with hunger, but the fire burned in his head. Suddenly, he raised his lance, his eyes glowing like a madman who had just discovered God. "Sancho! Look there! At last—the monsters ravaging the land!"

Sancho pushed his straw hat further over his face, wiped the sweat from his neck, and looked where the old man was pointing. Twenty, thirty windmills, huge wooden frames with wings slowly turning, groaning and creaking. No magic, no monster. Just machines that devoured the wind and spat it back out.

"Monsters?" Sancho asked dryly. "Sir, those are windmills. Things that grind grain. They're not giants—at most, giants at grinding. If you attack them, you'll get flour in your mouth."

Don Quixote trembled with excitement, his voice trembling. "No, Sancho! Look how they're waving their arms! They're stretching out their limbs, ready to destroy the land! Finally, finally, I've found the giants I must overthrow!"

Sancho stared at him as if he were completely lost. "Lord, I see boards, screws, dust. And I smell nothing but sheep dung. If those are giants, then I'm Jesus Christ."

Don Quixote raised his lance, the tip trembling in the sun. "Sancho, don't you understand? Our destiny lies before us! Glory, honor, victory—everything is there, ready for us to seize!"

Sancho spat in the dust, grabbed the already empty wineskin, and muttered, "All that's there is a pile of wood that'll chop you to pieces. But what do I know—I'm just the dumb one on the donkey."

But Don Quixote raised his lance to heaven, the pan sparkling on his head like a crown of garbage, and he shouted: "Forward, Sancho! The battle against the giants begins!"

Sancho put his hand to his face and shook his head. "Shit. Now he's completely out of his mind."

Don Quixote stood in his stirrups, his lance raised like a preacher raises his cross. His voice trembled as if he had an army before him: "Sancho, this is the hour! This is the battle for which knights were born! Our names will be heard in song when we overthrow these monsters!"

Sancho stared at him as if he had shit in his mouth. "Songs? Lord, the only song that's about to resound here is your howling when the wind vane breaks your bones."

Don Quixote didn't hear him, his eyes gleaming. "I can already see them falling! Giants who have tormented the people for centuries! Their heads will roll, their bodies will crumble, and we will stand victorious above them!"

Sancho jumped off the donkey, grabbed Rocinante's reins, and pulled desperately. "Lord, by all the saints, those are windmills! Planks! Wood! If you attack them, you won't be victorious—you'll be mincemeat!"

Quixote pushed him away, his lance trembling, the pan glittering as if it were a crown. "You don't understand, Sancho! Cowardice has you in its grip! But honor—honor knows no fear!"

Sancho screamed at him, his voice filled with despair and rage: "Honor, honor, honor! Your damned favorite word! I'm more hungry than honor! I want bread, not glory! And if you ride yourself into this, you'll ride alone!"

But Rocinante stamped as if madness ran through his veins, and Don Quixote swung himself high into the saddle, his lance forward. "Then so be it! I fight alone, in the name of Dulcinea!"

Sancho let go of the reins, tugged at his hair, and kicked the dust. "Shit, sir, if you survive this, I'll eat a whole bag of fleas. But I'm telling you: this isn't going to be a victory, this is going to be a fucking funeral."

But Don Quixote heard nothing. His gaze was fixed, his hands tightly gripping the lance. Before him, the wings rotated slowly, creaking like giant arms mocking him.

The wind blew across the plain, hot and dry, a breath that drove dust into every fold. Before them towered the windmills—tall, creaking, their blades turning slowly, smacking the air, squeaking like old doors. Sancho saw machines,

wooden workhorses built by men to grind grain. He smelled the oil in the axles, heard the constant screech of the gears, felt the desolation of never-ending work.

"There, sir," he said, wiping away the sweat, "see it? Wood. Ropes. Planks. Labor, not magic. If you attack them, you won't become a hero, but an idiot everyone will laugh at."

But Don Quixote stared at the windmills, and in his eyes, it was another world. The wings weren't wings—they were arms reaching out to him. The creaking wasn't wood—it was the roar of giants. The squeaking wasn't rope—it was the laughter of monsters who had mocked humanity for centuries.

"Don't you see, Sancho?" he cried, his voice trembling. "They stretch their arms to heaven to crush the people! They mock, they challenge me! These beasts breathe, their bodies tower like mountains, their souls are black as hell!"

Sancho laughed bitterly, scratching his stomach. "Breathe? The only thing breathing here is your hallucinations. They're damned machines, sir. If they have souls, they're the souls of peasants who'll laugh at you the moment you lie down in the dust."

The windmills continued to turn, their blades tearing the sky past in pieces. Quixote saw sword arms ready to strike him down. Sancho saw wood breaking like Don Quixote's ribs.

"Sancho, I hear them!" whispered Quixote, his lance gripped tightly, his voice trembling with ecstasy. "They're calling my name. They're calling me to battle."

Sancho stared at him, horrified, tired, angry. "They don't call a name, sir. They creak in the wind. And if you don't believe it, wait until you creak when they break your bones."

But Quixote was already half in the saddle, his eyes glowing as if he had seen the devil himself.

Don Quixote swung himself onto Rocinante, raised his lance, the pan on his head glittering in the sun like a crappy crown made of scrap metal. His eyes glowed, his lips trembled, and he roared: "Dulcinea! Today the giants will fall!"

Rocinante set off, reluctantly at first, then in that lame canter that looked more like a stumble than an attack. Dust rose, the lance lowered, and Quixote was king of the world—for a second.

Sancho jumped up, his hands flailing, his voice rising: "Sir! Damn it, sir! Those are windmills! WINDMILLS! Not giants! BOARDS! WOOD! Stop, you'll break your damn neck!"

But Quixote heard nothing. Battle music thundered in his head, trumpets, angels, and glory. Before him, the wings turned, giant arms mocking him. He spurred Rocinante on; the horse snorted, stumbled, and panted—but he ran as best he could.

Sancho ran after him, panting, breathing heavily, cursing. "Shit, sir, stop! This isn't a fight, this is suicide! If you die, who am I going to show my belly to? Who am I going to curse when I'm hungry?"

Quixote laughed—a mad, greedy laugh that cut through the dust. "The glory is ours, Sancho! The world will know our name!"

Sancho almost stumbled and shouted hoarsely: "Yes, the world knows us – as the idiots who fought with boards!"

But it was already too late. Rocinante reared up, the lance trembled, the wing of the first mill came screeching toward her—a giant, a monster, or just wood in the wind.

And Don Quixote roared, as if he wanted the whole earth to witness: "For Dulcinea!"

The wind took the wing, turned it slowly, deliberately, and then came down like the fist of a bored god. Don Quixote rammed his lance into the wood with full force – and the wood laughed. The wing caught him sideways, hurling him up like a ridiculous piece of cloth.

Rocinante fell, his legs pulled away, a pitiful whinny, and Don Quixote flew. Not like a hero, not like an angel—like a sack of bones with a tin pan on his head. He sailed through the air, his lance broke, his helmet rattled, dust swirled. Then he crashed to the ground with a force that even Sancho felt in his stomach.

"Holy shit!" Sancho ran, the donkey trotted behind him, as if he already knew he'd have to pick up the leftovers again. Sancho gasped, shouting, "Sir! Sir! Are you still alive? Or should I dig the hole already?"

Quixote lay stretched out, arms at his sides, the pan tilted over his face, blood on his lip. And then—he laughed. A hoarse, insane laugh that sounded like a cough. "Sancho... I... almost got him..."

Sancho bent down, picked him up as best he could, and roared with laughter, tears in his eyes. "Almost caught? Lord, you flew! You flew like a sack of hay! If that's winning, then I never want to lose."

Rocinante scrambled to his feet, staggered, and almost fell over again. The donkey stood beside him, chewing dry grass, blinking lazily, as if saying: *You guys are the biggest idiots I've ever seen.*

Sancho sat down next to Quixote, patted his belly, still laughing. "Sir, you're fighting against boards. Against boards! And the boards have won. Do you know what that means? It means the whole world is laughing at us. And they're right!"

But Quixote raised his hand, bloodstained and trembling, and murmured: "No, Sancho... it was magic. A sorcerer... turned the giants into windmills. Otherwise, I would have won... by Dulcinea... I would have won..."

Sancho almost fell over laughing. "Wizards! Of course. Always the wizards. You're never just an idiot. It's always the damn wizards."

And the mills continued to turn, indifferent, creaking, like machines that were uninterested in heroes.

Don Quixote lay half-covered in the dirt, his face bloody, the pan tilted as if it had given up. But his eyes sparkled as if he had just kissed a god. "Sancho," he wheezed, "don't doubt it. It was a sorcerer. He turned the giants into windmills at the last moment. Otherwise, they would have fallen. Otherwise, the glory would be ours."

Sancho knelt beside him, tore off a piece of his shirt, and wiped the blood from his beard. "Magician, yes. If I were a magician, I would have turned you into a donkey long ago. Then at least you'd be useful."

Quixote reached for his hand, weakly but solemnly. "You must understand, Sancho. The enemy fears me. That's why he resorts to sorcery. He knows he would be inferior to me in honest combat."

Sancho laughed so loudly that even Rocinante pinned his ears back. "Inferior? Lord, you flew through the air like a featherless chicken! The only one inferior to you is yourself!"

But he hastily untied his arm, pressed his lip shut, and sighed. "Damn it, sir. I laugh at you, but I'm still picking you up. Why? Because you're making me even more messed up than I already am."

Quixote closed his eyes and murmured, "Because you are my faithful squire. Because Dulcinea needs both of us."

Sancho spat in the dust and wiped his hands. "Dulcinea needs us? All she needs is a bucket of water and a new husband. But all right, sir, stick with your wizard. At least you'll have an excuse if you smash your head in."

The windmills continued to turn, creaking and groaning, as if they themselves had mockery in their wood. Sancho looked at them, then at Quixote, who was still smiling despite the scratches. And he cursed quietly, but not out of hatred. Out of the feeling that he would never be able to get away from this madman.

The sun was setting, the wind drove the dust like ghosts across the plain. Don Quixote sat crookedly on Rocinante, his lance broken, his face a patchwork of blood and scratches. But his eyes burned as if he had conquered the world.

"Sancho," he gasped, "that was only the first battle. The sorcerer wanted to discourage us, but he will fail. I swear to you: we will fight on. The world is full of giants. And I will overthrow them all. For Dulcinea."

Sancho squatted beside him on his donkey, his hands in his lap, his belly growling. He looked at his master, that skinny, confused, half-broken man with the pan on his head. Then he looked at the windmills, which continued to turn unfazed, indifferent, stubborn, like the world itself.

He sighed, deeply, heavily, as if he were trying to exhale all his resistance. "Lord, you're crazy. You're completely, hopelessly crazy. And I'm the idiot who's following you. Why?" He scratched himself, shook his head. "Because nothing else happens. Because my life without you would just be onions and shit. At least you get to fly sometimes. Even if it always ends in the dirt."

Don Quixote placed his hand on his chest as if making a vow. "Thank you, Sancho. Your heart is braver than you know."

Sancho grinned wearily, half mockingly, half sadly. "Brave? No, sir. Just too lazy to find another fool."

The two rode on, one on a rickety nag, the other on a stubborn donkey. Behind them were the windmills, which continued to turn, regardless of whether anyone called them giants or not. In front of them, dust, hunger, madness.

And Sancho knew: he would stay. Not out of faith. Out of habit. Out of that damned mixture of pity and boredom that was worse than any magician.

### The liberation of the prisoners

The path stretched as always—dry, desolate, sunburned. Rocinante trotted forward, every step a near collapse, the donkey trailing behind, stout and indifferent. Sancho was almost dozing in the saddle when he suddenly heard voices. Loud, harsh, the clanging of iron.

He blinked, saw clouds of dust. And then he recognized them: a column of men, perhaps a dozen. Chains clanged at their wrists, iron rings cut into their flesh. Their faces were narrow, dirty, tattooed, eyes that knew more darkness than light. Around them rode four soldiers, grumpy, armed with clubs and spears.

"Sir," muttered Sancho, "we should change our path. This smells like trouble. A lot of trouble."

But Don Quixote straightened up, his eyes glowing like a child's seeing a fairground stall. "Sancho! Do you see? Unfortunate souls, chained by tyranny! Noble men who have suffered injustice! It is our duty to grant them freedom!"

Sancho grimaced and shook his head. "Freedom? Lord, they don't look noble. They look like they've stabbed more people than they've eaten bread. If you free them, they'll free your teeth from your mouth."

The column approached, the clanking of chains mingling with curses. One coughed, spat into the dust, another laughed filthy, for no reason. The stench reached them: sweat, urine, old blood.

Don Quixote breathed deeply, like incense. "Sancho, this is the call of justice. Today we will be heroes."

Sancho stared at him as if he'd completely lost his mind. "Heroes? No, sir. Today we're going to get beaten. I can feel it in my gut."

And the chains clanged louder, as if they were actually asking for trouble.

Don Quixote stopped Rocinante and raised his lance as if about to say mass.

"Sancho! Do you hear that clanging? That's not the sound of chains—that's the wailing of innocence! There march men, noble and brave, kidnapped by tyrants! They are knights like me, heroes at heart, victims of a corrupt system!"

Sancho looked at him, stunned, his mouth open. "Knights? Sir, they have faces like my old neighbors in prison. I know that look—that's not honor, that's murderous intent. If any of them are noble, then I'm the King of Castile."

Quixote swung his arm pathetically, as if conducting an invisible orchestra.

"You're blind, Sancho! Your stomach is clouding your mind. Look more closely: these men are brave, only the injustice of the powerful has broken them. Each of them could be a hero if they were free."

Sancho rubbed his growling belly. "Free? Lord, if they're free, we'll be poorer immediately. They'll eat us alive. I tell you: They're thieves, murderers, sons of bitches. Nothing more. They belong in chains—otherwise, we'll be chained up."

Quixote snorted, proud and full of ardor. "Sancho, I know a knight when I see one. Their gaze speaks of honor!"

Sancho snorted back, biting into the dry bread that remained. "Honor? All I see are gaps in your teeth, scars, and the kind of eyes that slit your eyes open at night while you sleep. Lord, if you think they're knights, then the windmill sail has finally torn your brain apart."

But Quixote was undeterred. "Honor knows no chains! And these men will soon be free—by our hand!"

Sancho paused, stared at him, blinked slowly. Then he said quietly, "Shit. This is going to be bloody."

The column approached, the iron scraping against skin and bone, the clanging like broken music. Sancho scrunched up his nose, the stench burning his eyes: sweat that was years old, urine that no one could hold anymore, blood that had never really dried.

The men in the chains weren't victims, they were predators who had been tied up. The first was bald, his skin covered in scars; one looked as if someone had rewritten his face with a knife. The second was young, but his eyes were dead,

as if he'd already seen everything hell had to offer. Another grinned, his teeth black, gaps like holes, and he licked his lips as he looked at Sancho.

"Sir," whispered Sancho, "look at those faces. They eat children for breakfast. They don't need freedom—they need a rope."

But Don Quixote bowed in his saddle, his hand on his chest. "Noble lords who bear the yoke of tyranny! Your torment is the shame of the world. But do not despair—the hour of redemption is near!"

The prisoners looked at him, first surprised, then some laughed, deep, dirty, evil. One spat in the dust. "What's that madman with the pot on his head talking about?" Another shouted, "If he saves us, I'll eat my chain ring."

Sancho shook his head and cursed. "See? These aren't knights. They're pigs. And you want to redeem pigs? Lord, you're crazy."

But Quixote saw only heroes in the dirt, crowns in the dust, stars in the mud. "Sancho, they laugh because hope has become alien to them. But we will teach them that freedom lives."

Sancho sighed, spat into the grass, and muttered, "Freedom, yes. Freedom to rob us right now."

And the chains continued to clang, louder, as if they knew what was coming.

The soldiers rode ahead, tired, irritated, spears loosely in their hands. For them, it was just work: keeping the dogs in check, dragging them from one hole to the next. When they saw Don Quixote stopping in the middle of the path, lance raised, they grimaced. "Get out of here, you old fool," one growled.

But Quixote stood tall in his saddle, the pan on his head gleaming in the light as if it were a crown. His voice thundered: "Halt, tyrants! You have no power to lead these noble knights in chains! I, Don Quixote de la Mancha, command you: Release them immediately and set them free!"

The soldiers stared at him, then laughter erupted—dry, nasty, full of mockery. One spat to the side. "Did you hear that? The madman with the stick is giving us orders."

Sancho slumped down on his donkey, pulled his hat down over his face, and muttered, "Lord, for crying out loud, shut up. We've had enough beatings in our lives. I don't want a spear up my ass."

But Quixote didn't hear him. He brandished his lance, his voice rising: "Freedom is the greatest good a man can possess! And no law, no ruler may steal it! I swear, by Dulcinea herself, that you will fall today if you disobey!"

The prisoners suddenly cheered, roared, and whistled. "Yes, sir! Set us free, you tinhead!" One shouted, "That madman has balls, more than you!" They tugged at the chains, shook them, the soldiers cursed.

Sancho whispered, panicking, "Lord, they're not rejoicing because you're noble. They're rejoicing because they're about to be free to slaughter us."

The soldiers raised their spears, their faces hard. "Dude, step aside, or we'll stick our spears up your ass and stir things up."

Don Quixote placed his hand on his heart, his lance firmly in the other. "Then come, tyrants! Today you die for your injustice!"

Sancho put his hands over his face and thought: *Shit. Again.*

Don Quixote roared, urging Rocinante on—the horse stumbled more than it ran, but it ran. The lance forward, the dust rising, and the soldiers saw it coming like a joke they'd heard a hundred times before. The first spear flew, narrowly missed, and Quixote cried triumphantly as if he had defeated an army.

Then there was a crash: Rocinante rammed into the front soldier, the lance splintered, the wood breaking like rot. Quixote continued to roar, but the soldier slammed the pommel of his spear right into his face. Blood spurted, Quixote staggered, but clung to his saddle for dear life.

"For freedom!" he wheezed, his nose running like a broken rooster.

Sancho slid off the donkey, trying to duck in the dust, but stumbled into the middle of the convicts. One grabbed him by the belly, yanked him up, and yelled, "Take off the chains, you fat dog!" Sancho thrashed, kicked, and cursed, "Shit, leave me alone! I don't have any keys, I'm just hungry!"

The battle raged. The soldiers shouted, swinging clubs and spears. Quixote roared as if fighting dragons and received kicks, blows, and dust. One convict threw himself at the guard, biting his hand; another kicked the chain lock until it broke.

"We are free!" someone yelled, and chaos erupted. Chains clanged, iron snapped, hands grabbed, fists flew. The soldiers were lost in the tumult.

Sancho crawled on all fours, got a foot in the back, a knee in the face. "Lord!" he cried, "if this is freedom, then I never want to be free!"

Don Quixote, half bloodied, half delirious, laughed like a madman. "You see, Sancho! We have triumphed! Freedom returns!"

A convict spat in his face, ripped off his belt, and laughed. "Thank you, knight. Now you're the naked one in the dust."

Sancho took another blow to the stomach, collapsed, and gasped: "Damn it. I knew it."

And the chains fell – but not like salvation, but like the beginning of a new nightmare.

The chains lay in the dust, the rings broken, the iron bands dented. The convicts stood free, breathing heavily, rubbing their raw wrists. For a moment, it seemed as if things might turn out as Don Quixote had dreamed—as if the men would thank him, lift him onto their shoulders, and call him "savior."

Then the first one turned around, clenched his fist, and punched Quixote so hard in the face that the knight and pan flew back into the dirt. "That's for the time I'm in chains, idiot!"

Sancho yelled, "Hey! We helped you!" He raised his hands and ducked, but two of the guys grabbed him, hoisted him up, and shook him until his last crumbs fell out of the bag. One grabbed them, chewed, and spat them out. "Shit. Hard as rock. Still mine."

Don Quixote scrambled to his feet, blood dripping from his forehead, raising his arms, his voice shaky but full of pathos: "Brothers! I did it for you! For freedom!"

Another kicked him in the ribs, causing him to fall again. "For us? You don't do anything for us. We take what we want, Knight Idiot."

Sancho lay on the ground, one convict tugged at his boots, another grabbed his belt. "Stop that!" he wailed. "I don't have anything! You're stealing a beggar's fleas!"

"Then give me the fleas," growled the man, ripped the boot off his heel and laughed.

Rocinante whinnied pitifully, one of the convicts hit him on the flank, and the horse staggered, almost falling over. The donkey received a blow to the ear, brayed, but stood still, stubborn as ever.

In the end, Don Quixote and Sancho lay half-naked in the dust: their belts gone, their bread gone, the last of the brandy gone, even a few buttons from Sancho's doublet. The convicts ran away laughing, cursing them, spitting. One turned around, raised his middle finger, and yelled, "Thanks for nothing, idiots!"

Sancho coughed, holding his stomach, which was cramping with pain and hunger. "Lord... if this is freedom... then fuck freedom."

Don Quixote spat blood and smiled weakly. "You are free, Sancho. That's all that matters."

Sancho rolled his eyes, lay back in the dust, and muttered, "All that matters is that I'm about to die—and without dinner."

The street was silent again. Only the wind swept through the dust, carrying with it the stench of blood, sweat, and scorn. The convicts were gone, the soldiers lay somewhere in the dirt, and all that remained were two figures that looked like spit-out carcasses.

Don Quixote lay on his back, his lance broken beside him, his pan dented like a can after a fight with the street. His lips were bloody, but his eyes radiant. "Sancho... they are free. We have done what had to be done. Today we defended freedom."

Sancho groaned, holding his ribs, his boots off, his belt off, his stomach empty. "Freedom..." he gasped. "Freedom now means no bread, no wine, no shoes on my feet, and my ass burns from being kicked. Lord, if this is freedom, then put me back in chains—at least there's something to eat."

Quixote slowly sat up, swaying, his voice vibrating like an old preacher. "Sancho, freedom is the greatest gift a man can possess. It is more precious than bread, than wine, than any other good."

Sancho coughed and laughed hoarsely and bitterly. "More precious than bread? Lord, my stomach growls louder than your honor. Try eating freedom. Try drinking freedom. Try using freedom to mend your broken bones."

But Quixote placed his hand on his heart as if swearing before an altar. "We will continue to fight, Sancho. For freedom, for Dulcinea, for humanity!"

Sancho slumped back, arms outstretched, his gaze fixed on the unanswered sky. "For Dulcinea, for freedom, for humanity... Screw it. I just want a piece of bread and a good sip of wine. If that's a sin, then send me to hell—but send me full."

The animals stood silently by, the donkey with its head bowed, Rocinante swaying like a broken piece of furniture.

And so the great "liberation" ended: two beaten fools in the dust, one empty stomach, one full of madness. Freedom moved on—with the convicts who appreciated it better.

### The farmers who take revenge

The sun burned, the path dragged on, and the two still stank of their last "liberation." Rocinante limped, the donkey trotted silently, and Quixote held the remains of his broken lance as proudly as if it were still Excalibur.

A farm appeared on the horizon. A farm that had once been alive: fields, a barn, chickens, cows. Now there was only dust, trampled earth, a broken door, half a fence. Feathers lay scattered as if a storm had blown the chickens away. A pig ran free, bloody, with a rope around its neck, as if it had just escaped from hell.

Sancho stopped, took a breath, and his nose immediately wrinkled. "Sir... this smells like trouble. A very specific kind of trouble. And I'll bet my bottom dollar those were your beloved convicts."

Don Quixote looked at the ruins, and there was nothing but rapture in his eyes. "Sancho, don't you see? This is the sacrifice of freedom. Every revolution demands its price. But in the end, good triumphs."

Sancho kicked a broken jug, which shattered with a clatter. "Triumph? Lord, there's nothing triumphant here. Someone just drank, ate, fought, and smashed everything. Just like I said."

They walked across the courtyard. A barrel lay open, the wine spilled, sticky in the sun, full of flies. A sack of grain was ripped open, the kernels scattered, trampled. Sancho picked up a handful, dropped it again, and sighed. "This is what your damned freedom looks like. Hunger for those who work. Wine for those who steal. And beatings for those who get in the way."

Don Quixote raised his hand and preached into the empty air: "Sancho, you don't understand. This is only the wound before it heals. Freedom breeds chaos before it brings order."

Sancho spat in the dust and grimaced. "Sir, the only thing born here is flies. And they're happier than we are."

Don Quixote stood in the middle of the devastated courtyard, the sun on his helmet, dust on his lips, and raised his hand as if preaching to an invisible crowd. "Sancho, look around you! Yes, it is destroyed. Yes, it is devastated. But this is the sweat of freedom! One cannot build an empire without blood. This is the beginning—the price humanity pays to break its chains."

Sancho snorted, bent down to pick up half a chicken lying in the dirt, stinking, devoured by dogs. He held it up, looked at it, and threw it away in disgust. "Price of freedom? Lord, that's no price. That's robbery. That's the price you pay for your idiocy. You let the pigs loose—and they ate until nothing but bones remained."

"No, Sancho," Quixote cried, his gaze transfigured. "This is the path of heroes. First destruction, then renewal. First fire, then rebirth."

Sancho spat and wiped his mouth. "Fire, yes. Rebirth, no. This place stinks of piss, wine, and blood. If this is rebirth, then I want to stay dead."

Rocinante snorted, almost tripping over a broken wheel. The donkey pawed the dirt, pulled a half-rotten carrot from the ground, and chewed it contentedly. Sancho looked at him and sighed. "You see, sir? Even a donkey knows what to do with freedom: eat what's there. No big talk."

But Don Quixote raised his lance, which had long since become a staff. "Sancho, I tell you: the world will thank us. Not today, not tomorrow—but soon."

Sancho laughed bitterly and shook his head. "Thank you? Lord, the world will smash your face. And faster than you can say Dulcinea."

And at that very moment they heard voices – angry, loud, approaching.

The voices grew louder, footsteps pounded, clouds of dust rose. Sancho turned his head and saw them coming: a handful of peasants, dirty, sweating, faces covered in scratches. One had a black eye, another was bleeding from his arm, a third was limping along as if he'd been kicked by an ox.

Behind them, no wagons, no harvest, no supplies—everything gone. They only carried their anger with them, and that was heavy enough.

"Holy shit," Sancho muttered, "those are the ones who got it." He ducked his head as if he might disappear into his own stomach. "Lord, we should leave quietly. Quiet as a fart in the wind."

But Don Quixote stood proudly, his chest puffed out, his face transfigured, as if he were about to celebrate mass. "Look, Sancho! Here the victims return. Tried by suffering, but soon free in spirit. It is our duty to comfort them."

The peasants saw the two and stopped. There was a moment of silence, then the noise erupted. "There they are!" one roared, his voice filled with hatred. "The damned knight with the pan and his fat servant! Those are the pigs the convicts let loose!"

Sancho immediately raised his hands, waving them wildly. "No, no, no, it wasn't what it looked like! I swear! I didn't mean anything! I was just running along!"

The farmer with the black eye spat on the ground. "Running along? Those bastards took everything from us! Bread, wine, cattle, even my wife's clothes! And you say you just went along?"

Another raised a hoe he was carrying. "It's your fault! You let them go, and we paid for it!"

Don Quixote raised his lance—the broken staff—and spoke with a voice of thunder: "Halt! You are free, brothers! Free from tyranny! You should be proud to have paid the price of freedom!"

Sancho groaned softly, scratching his neck. "Oh God. Now he's preaching."

And the farmers clenched their fists.

Don Quixote stood with his legs wide apart in the dust, held his half-lance like a scepter, and raised his voice so that it boomed across the courtyard. "Noble men! Anger is blind, but freedom is eternal! You have suffered, yes—but your suffering is the seed from which justice grows! Do not thank the tyrants who bound you, do not thank the powerful who robbed you—thank fate, which has granted you freedom, by my hand!"

The peasants stared at him, and there was no spark of enlightenment in their faces—only more anger. The one with the hoe took a step forward, his face red, the veins in his neck bulging. "Freedom? You bastard! Freedom has taken everything from us! Our food, our cattle, our women! Your damned freedom has thrown us into the pit!"

Sancho raised his hands, wiggling his fingers nervously. "Lord, I tell you: They don't listen. They don't want to listen. They want to hit. And I want to run."

Don Quixote struck the air with his cane as if already battling invisible enemies. "You are blinded by your pain, but truly—I tell you, this is the path to glory! Your names will resound in the chronicles of freedom!"

The farmers laughed, but it wasn't laughter—it was a growl, bitter and cold. One spat into the straw, another clenched his fist so tightly that his knuckles turned white.

"Chronicles?" hissed the one with the blue eye. "Do you know where your name will be heard? In my punch, when I knock the teeth out of your mouth."

Sancho gasped, half-turning to the donkey. "Sir, last chance. Shut your mouth and run. I swear, otherwise you'll soon be more toothless than an old pig."

But Quixote saw only heroes who did not understand him and peasants whom he wanted to elevate.

The farmers saw only a madman with a cooking pot on his head – and a fat squire who was shaking along with them.

And they tensed their muscles.

The farmer with the hoe shouted, "Enough talk!" – and swung. Don Quixote raised half the stick like a shield, but the thing splintered at the first blow. Wood cracked, dust flew, Quixote staggered, but he grinned, blood on his lip. "Sancho, they're testing us – this is the baptism of glory!"

"Baptism?" gasped Sancho, as two peasants grabbed him, pulled him up by his belt, and threw him into the dirt. "Sir, this isn't baptism—it's a sloppy ass bath!"

Quixote lashed out, wildly, blindly, hitting a peasant in the ear, who cursed and stepped back—only to immediately punch him in the face. The pan on Quixote's head clanged, flying half-tilted, as if it were finally trying to get away from this spectacle.

Sancho crawled backward, his hands shielding his face. "Wait, wait! I didn't do anything! I didn't mean anything! I just wanted to eat!" But one of the peasants kicked him in the stomach, causing him to double over.

"Food?" the man shouted. "You ate our chickens, you fat dog!"

"Me?" gasped Sancho. "All I have is bread! Hard bread! Ask my ass, he knows how to get it out!"

But the peasants didn't listen. They beat, punched, and kicked. Quixote staggered, repeatedly getting up, preaching, fighting. "For Dulcinea! For freedom!" – and each time he received a fist, a kick, a blow from the handle of the club.

Sancho lay in the dust, trying another joke. "Sir... if freedom always tastes like this... I'd rather have slavery. At least there's soup." Then he coughed up blood and dust.

The courtyard was filled with screams, dust, and sweat. Quixote looked like a madman, Sancho like a sack of thrashing, the peasants like men finally letting go of their frustration.

And it didn't stop.

At some point, the peasants had enough of the beatings—but not enough of the humiliation. One tore the pan off Quixote's head and threw it into the straw. "There, your helmet! A cooking pot, nothing more!" The laughter was as hard as their fists.

Quixote staggered, his armor half torn, his shirt shredded, his chest covered in bruises. Nevertheless, he gasped, "You... are free... through my sacrifice..." – and immediately received a jet of spit in his face.

Sancho lay next to it, gasping, holding his stomach. Two boys had taken off his boots and were waving them around like trophies. "Look, that fat donkey still

has something valuable!" They laughed, one sniffed the leather and grimaced. "He stinks worse than he does."

"Give me back my boots!" whined Sancho, writhing. "I can't walk without them!"

"That's exactly the plan," one grinned and kicked him in the bare feet.

Rocinante stood aside, swaying, full of fear, the donkey lowered his head as if he were embarrassed by all this.

The peasants grabbed Quixote, ripped off his belt, and his trousers slipped halfway down. One yelled: "There's your knight! A naked idiot in the dust!" And they laughed, laughed, until their stomachs ached.

Sancho, half-naked, his dignity as far gone as the last drop of wine, murmured, "Sir... I told us to run away. But no... you wanted to save the world."

Quixote knelt in the dirt, bloody, trembling, his face transfigured as if he were still king. "Sancho... this is just... the test. The world will... understand us."

The peasants threw the last remnants of bread at them, hard as stones, and went away, laughing, spitting, with boots, belts and pride.

What remained were two beaten fools.

The dust slowly settled, the peasants' laughter faded into the distance. Only the creaking of the broken fence and Rocinante's panting remained. Don Quixote knelt in the dirt, bloodied, torn, his trousers half-down, his dignity long since evaporated. Nevertheless, he raised his eyes to the sky, his lips curling into a smile that was more madness than consolation.

"Sancho... that was a test. Fate tests us. Every hero must fall before he triumphs. Today we suffered—tomorrow we triumph."

Sancho lay on his back, barefoot, his belly covered in bruises, his boots off, his belt off, his stomach ravaging with hunger. He turned his head, stared at his master, and whispered hoarsely: "Master... I don't know if I'll still be here tomorrow. Perhaps you alone will triumph. Perhaps you won't triumph at all."

The donkey trotted up to him, nudged him as if to say: *Stay down, you idiot*. Rocinante chewed on a splinter of wood as if this were all normal.

Sancho groaned and sat up with difficulty, his feet covered in scrapes. "You know, sir, I'm sick of it. Beatings, hunger, dirt. The world laughs at us, and we don't even laugh at ourselves anymore. I swear to you, one more adventure like this, and I'm out of here. I'm going back to the fields, the earth, the soup—better sweat than blood."

Quixote placed his hand on his shoulder, trembling but with all the seriousness in the world. "Sancho... you are my squire. You cannot leave. Without you, I am nothing."

Sancho laughed bitterly, a sound like a cough. "You're nothing anyway. But at least I still have my boots."

They sat there, two wrecks in the dust, and the sun set as if it itself wanted to draw the curtain on this pitiful scene.

And so the great "rescue" ended: with bare feet, bloody faces, broken pride – and a knight who still swore that it was all part of a plan.

### The encounter with the priest

The path was endless, like a hangover after a long night. Don Quixote dragged himself on Rocinante, his armor hanging in tatters, his pan lost somewhere, and his face a battlefield of blood and dust. Sancho trotted barefoot beside the donkey, his feet blistered, his trousers torn, his belly empty and growling like an old dog.

"Sir," gasped Sancho, "we look like two drunken bums after a fight behind the tavern. If Dulcinea sees us like this, she'll run away screaming."

Quixote smiled weakly, but his gaze flickered. "Sancho... these are the scars of honor. We wear them like crowns."

Sancho raised his arms, showing his bare, bloody feet. "Crown? Lord, my crown is blisters, and they hurt more than your entire damned honor."

Then they saw him: a man in a black robe stood by the side of the road, with a bundle under his arm that smelled of bread and cheese. A priest, his face covered in sweat, his eyes suspicious as he watched the two wrecks approaching.

"By all the saints," muttered Sancho, "now we're going to get a sermon. Just what I need. No wine, no bread, just a priest with proverbs."

Don Quixote stood up as proudly as he could and breathed reverently: "Sancho, don't you recognize it? A messenger from God, a wise man who shows us the way!"

Sancho spat in the dust and grinned crookedly. "Wise man? That's a man who spends more time in the wine cellar than in the Bible. I know that look."

The priest took a step forward, looked sharply at Quixote, and there was something between shock and contempt in his voice. "Alonso Quijano? Is that you? For heaven's sake—what have you become of yourself?"

Sancho sighed. "Great. Now comes the part where someone tries to make you normal again. Good luck, saint. I've already given up."

The priest approached, staring at the derelict knight as if he were a sick man who had escaped from a mental asylum. "Alonso Quijano," he said sternly, "I've known you for years. What the hell are you doing here? Look at you—bloody, half-naked, devoid of any dignity. You're no knight. You're a peasant who's read too many fairy tales!"

Don Quixote straightened up in the saddle, his chest puffed out as if a king were honoring him. "Silence, stranger! I am Don Quixote de la Mancha, knight of honor and justice, servant of Dulcinea, conqueror of injustice!"

Sancho laughed hoarsely, clutching his stomach. "Conqueror of injustice? Lord, the only thing you've conquered is my last belt. And the peasants beat it off your ass."

The priest shook his head, his eyes filled with both pity and anger. "Alonso, listen to me. You're sick. Your mind is clouded by these tales of chivalry. Come back to the village. Let me help you. You're ruining yourself—and you're ruining this poor man along with it." He pointed to Sancho, who stood barefoot in the dust like a beaten dog.

"Yes, sir," cried Sancho, raising both arms. "Finally, someone says it! I'm ruining myself! I'm hungry, I have blisters, I've had more beatings than meals. If this is chivalry, then I'd rather be a cowherd—at least a cow knows when to eat."

Don Quixote ignored him, his voice trembling as if he were speaking before a throne. "I am not Alonso. I have renounced the name. I am Don Quixote—and God himself has called me to save the world."

Sancho rolled his eyes and muttered, "God. Always God. If God called you, he was drunk."

The priest sighed deeply and made the sign of the cross as if he were about to begin an exorcism.

Don Quixote half-dismounted, stumbled, picked himself up, and almost fell into the dust—but his voice sounded solemn, as if he were in a cathedral. "Sancho! Don't you recognize it? This is a wise man, sent by God to test us! Just look at his robe, his face—he bears the message from heaven!"

Sancho stared at the priest, his black robe covered in dust, his forehead damp with sweat, his belly beneath his habit as thick as a wine barrel. He snorted. "Message from heaven? Lord, the only thing he's carrying is a bundle of cheese and maybe a bottle of red wine. A wise man? He's a priest with more wine stains on his lips than prayers in his mouth."

The priest glared at Sancho. "Shut your mouth, squire. I'm speaking to your master."

Sancho grinned crookedly, showing his missing teeth. "With my master? The one who thinks windmills are giants and convicts are knights? Have fun, saint. If you can cure him, I'll make you a statue out of bread."

Quixote placed his hand on his heart and looked at the priest like a prophet. "Speak, wise man. Your word is divine. Your advice will strengthen me in my mission. Dulcinea expects me to follow the right path."

The priest gritted his teeth as if he wanted to slap him. "The right path? You're running to ruin, Alonso! You're wandering through the country like a madman, hurting yourself, disgracing your name, and plunging this poor devil into misery with you."

Sancho raised his hands and nodded vigorously. "Finally, someone who gets it. But believe me, Father, he doesn't hear a thing. You could also tell him the sky is falling on our heads—he'd think it was a dragon he had to slay."

But Don Quixote knelt in the dust as if standing before a saint. "I thank you, divine messenger. Your words are like fire—they burn in my breast. They strengthen me to fulfill my destiny."

Sancho put his hands over his face and muttered, "He's not even listening. The priest talks, and he hears Hallelujah."

The priest raised his hand as if about to celebrate Mass, in the middle of the dusty road. "Alonso! Listen to me. The Lord demands humility, not pride. The Lord demands obedience, not defiance. A farmer who works quietly is closer to God than a fool who wanders the land spitting blood. Return. Plow your field, honor the altar, go to Mass. This is your place."

Don Quixote straightened, his chest puffed out, his lips trembling. "No, father. My place is in battle. God created knights to overthrow evil. Dulcinea is my Madonna, whom I honor. My sword is my prayer, my shield is my altar! I do not serve in the church, I serve on the battlefield!"

Sancho scratched his belly and grinned wearily. "A farmer who works quietly, yes. That would be something. A little bread, a little wine, peace and quiet. But no, my lord has to play knight. And what do I get? Beatings, hunger, barefoot in the dust. If that's God's plan, I'll piss on it."

The priest gasped in horror. "Blasphemy! Watch your tongue, squire!"

Sancho raised his hands. "Blasphemy? I call it what it is. God speaks of humility, my lord of honor. And who sits in the dust with empty pockets and bloody ribs? Me!"

Quixote looked at him sternly, full of fervor. "Sancho, you don't understand. Honor is higher than bread. Fame is stronger than wine. Dulcinea is brighter than any mass."

Sancho laughed bitterly. "Honor higher than bread? Try chewing honor. Try drinking fame. I tell you, sir: honor gives you diarrhea, bread satisfies you."

The priest made the sign of the cross, murmuring prayers as if he were driving out demons. Don Quixote heard only trumpets, heroic cries, his face transfigured.

Sancho only felt blisters on his feet and hunger in his stomach.

Sancho put his hands on his hips, his bare feet standing in the hot dust, and suddenly he had that look on his face—a mixture of tiredness, pain, and a rage that no longer holds any dam. "Listen, Priest. I've had enough. Since I started following that idiot knight, I've received more blows than meals. I've lost my boots, my belt, my pride, and the only thing I've gotten in return is an assful of dust."

The priest raised his finger, about to say something, but Sancho stopped him. "You talk about humility. You talk about God. Fine. But if humility means dying barefoot in the dirt, then stick it somewhere else. And God? If God wanted me, he would have at least given me a piece of bread. Instead, he sends me beatings and fleas."

Don Quixote raised his hand as if to stop him. "Sancho, watch your tongue, Dulcinea hears you!"

Sancho laughed harshly, a sound like a bark. "Dulcinea? If she's really listening, she'll laugh her ass off at us two idiots. You with your pot helmet and your speeches, me with my blisters on my feet. Honor? Freedom? Holy mission? All bullshit. I just want something in my belly and peace in my ass."

The priest struggled to regain his composure, his hands raised to the sky, his eyes horrified. "Child, you blaspheme!"

"Child?" Sancho roared. "I'm not a child. I'm an old dog that everyone kicks. And you know what? I have no faith anymore. Not in God, not in honor, not in freedom. The only thing I believe in anymore is the pain in my ribs—and it's damn real."

Quixote looked at him sadly, as if Sancho had just betrayed his heart. "Sancho... without faith we are nothing."

Sancho pointed to his belly, which growled loudly. "Without food, we're nothing, sir. And I feel that more strongly than any damned faith."

The priest could take no more. He placed his fists on his hips, his habit billowing in the hot wind, and his voice was a thunderous roar that sounded more like rage than mercy. "You are both damned! You, Alonso, with your madness, your arrogance, your false chivalry. And you, squire, with your filthy mouth, your unbelief, your filthy life. You are a disgrace to humanity. May the Lord punish you until you recognize the truth!"

Don Quixote fell to his knees, raised his arms to heaven, his eyes shining like a martyr's. "Yes, father, pronounce your curse! For every curse of a tyrant is the blessing of the just! I am Don Quixote, sent by God! Your spell only makes me stronger! I bless myself in the name of honor, and Dulcinea watches over me!"

Sancho stood beside him, sweaty, bloody, barefoot, laughing so bitterly that it hurt more than the beating. "Blessing? Lord, you can bless yourself with shit for all I care. And you, holy man—shut up with your cursing. I've had enough punishment! Punishment is running across the steppe with that madman, without shoes, without bread, without wine. Punishment is being eaten by fleas at night and peasants during the day. Punishment is believing in God when God only sends you a beating."

The priest made a wild sign of the cross, muttering words that spat like poison. "You are lost. You are proof that the devil walks in human form."

Don Quixote placed his hand on his heart and the other toward heaven. "So be it. I am the devil who destroys evil!"

Sancho snorted and half turned away. "Devil, saint, knight, peasant—all bullshit. I only see dust and hunger. There's no more truth to it than that."

The priest shook his head, turned around, and continued muttering curses and prayers as if he needed to clear his tongue.

The priest stalked away, his habit billowing, shaking his head as if trying to shake off the madness of the two like flies. He continued to murmur prayers, while his bundle smelled of bread and cheese—and Sancho felt the scent like a knife in his stomach.

Don Quixote watched him go, his eyes fiery. "Sancho, do you recognize it? He came to test me. His curses weren't a punishment—they were confirmation. Heaven has chosen us, and even the Church fears us."

Sancho shuffled beside the donkey, barefoot in the hot dust, and groaned. "Chosen? Lord, the only thing I've realized is that we have nothing to eat again, and I'll soon be skewering my bare feet like meat on a spit. If that's being chosen, then I'll give it back."

Rocinante limped along, swaying like an old chair about to collapse. The donkey trotted stoically, as if it didn't care.

Sancho looked at her, then at his master, who was marching through the sun with his chin held high as if he'd just slain a dragon. "You know, sir," Sancho muttered, "sometimes I seriously think about running away. Just away. Back to the field. Screw honor, screw fame. I want bread, wine, and peace. Not sermons, not beatings, not your damned madness."

Don Quixote smiled, barely hearing him. "Soon, Sancho. Soon we will win. And then you will be proud to have stood by my side."

Sancho laughed hoarsely, bitterly, almost like a bark. "Or I'm dead, sir. And then I won't be standing anywhere anymore."

The priest had long since disappeared, leaving only dust behind. Two figures walked on, barefoot, bloody, broken—one full of madness, the other full of doubt.

And the sun laughed at them both, like a bad joke that never ends.

### Sancho doubts – and yet follows

Sancho trudged along beside the donkey, barefoot, his feet sore, his heels raw. Every step was a small execution. The dust clung to his skin, sweat burned his wounds. Rocinante trotted in front, half dead, with Don Quixote on top like a king without a kingdom—battered, ragged, but with his chin held high as if he had conquered the world.

Sancho gritted his teeth, then let them go, muttering and cursing. "Shit. I've had enough. Days of beatings, nights covered in fleas, and not a drop of wine left. My wife would be glad if I came back. She'd say, 'Sancho, you're an idiot, but at least you're an idiot with shoes.'"

He looked at his bare feet, covered in blisters and scabs. "Yeah, idiot. That's exactly what I am. An idiot chasing a bigger idiot."

The donkey shook its ears, chewing on a dried stalk. Sancho patted its back. "You're the only one who gets it. At least you're stubborn and silent. No more talk of honor, no more chatter about Dulcinea. Just eating and shitting. I'd rather be you."

Before him, Don Quixote brandished the remains of his broken lance as if holding a scepter. "Sancho, persevere! The path is difficult, but soon an adventure awaits us that will bring us immortality!"

Sancho snorted, rubbing his aching legs. "Immortality... I don't even get breakfast. I'm immortal, at most, in my stupidity, because I still follow you."

The wind blew hot, carrying the smell of dust and sweat. Sancho felt the thought growing within him: *Run away. Now. Back to the field. Back to the bread and wine.*

For the first time in a long time, he felt it seriously: He could leave him. Simply turn around, back down the street. Without honor, without glory, without a beating.

And he thought: *Maybe I really will.*

Sancho trudged on, every step a curse. In his head, he did the math—not with numbers, but with pain.

"So..." he muttered, half to himself, half to the donkey, "we were fighting windmills. Windmills! Planks and wood. Result: Mister flies through the air like a sack of shit, I almost laugh until my ribs burst—and in the end, I'm lying in the dirt myself."

He slapped his stomach with the flat of his hand. "Then the convicts. Freed, yes, grand gesture. And how did they thank us? With fists, with kicks, with theft. The dogs took everything from us, even my damn bread. Freedom, my ass!"

The donkey neighed softly, almost like a malicious laugh. Sancho nodded. "Exactly. You know. Freedom is when others steal your last shirt."

He paused briefly, rubbing his shoulders, still sore from the peasants' blows. "And then them. The peasants. They beat us, stripped us, laughed at us like we were jugglers at a fair. Left me barefoot in the dust. I swear, sir, if my ass gets one more kick, I might as well use it as a breadbag."

He looked ahead, at Don Quixote, who swayed in the saddle as if on an invisible throne. "And you, sir... you call these trials. Trials, yes! For my belly, for my feet, for my dignity! Soon there will be nothing left to test, because there will be nothing left!"

Sancho laughed hoarsely, like someone who could otherwise only cry. "Windmills, convicts, peasants, priests... all chapters in my own book of ass-kicking. And I'm the main character."

He kicked the dust, coughed, the sun burned. "Yes, Sancho, you are the king of idiots. But perhaps not for much longer."

Don Quixote half-turned in his saddle, his eyes glowing, his voice like a priest at the altar. "Sancho, I see your melancholy. But you must understand: great men bear great burdens. Our sufferings are nothing compared to the glory that awaits us. Soon our names will be heard in song. Soon Dulcinea will look down upon us with pride."

Sancho blinked, the sun burned his face, sweat ran into his eyes. *songs, he thought. If anyone sings about us, it's probably only in a pub, and the chorus is a laugh about two idiots.*

Quixote raised his hand as if to invoke heaven itself. "Look at me, Sancho: I am the knight of the sad countenance—but soon I will be the hero of all Castile! And you, my faithful squire, will not be forgotten. Your name will be recorded in the chronicles!"

Sancho laughed hoarsely, bitterly. "Chronicles? Lord, the only thing in my chronicle are my blisters. Chapter 1: Bloody feet. Chapter 2: Empty stomach. Chapter 3: Beatings galore. If that's history, then I don't give a damn about history."

Don Quixote nodded seriously, as if Sancho had said something profound. "Yes! Suffering is part of glory. Dulcinea sees our wounds and will bless us."

Sancho stared at him, hands on his hips, his voice a growl. "Lord, I swear to you: If you say Dulcinea again, I'll vomit in your helmet—which we lost anyway."

But Quixote saw only the sky, full of honor and lies, while Sancho saw only dust and hunger.

Sancho stopped, the sun burning his cerebral cortex. He felt his temper bursting. Rage rose like old booze downed too quickly. "Sir!" he bellowed, making even the donkey prick its ears. "Sir, that's enough! I've had enough of your honor, of your glory, of your Dulcinea! You know what I want? Wine! A damn barrel of wine to pour over my head until I forget all this filth!"

Don Quixote turned in his saddle, looking at him as if possessed by the devil. "Sancho, drunken desire clouds the mind. We must remain pure to serve Dulcinea."

"Pure?" Sancho laughed, dryly and angrily, like someone half-mad. "I'm only pure because of hunger! I'm pure because of beatings! I'm pure because of a shitty life! If purity means trudging across the steppe with you, then I'd rather drink vinegar until I'm lying in the gutter vomiting!"

He stomped toward Quixote, waving his arms. "Sir, you're a drunkard without wine! You're drunk on your lies, drunk on your honor, blind as one who's stared into a barrel too long. But me? I want the real stuff. Red, thick, cheap, I don't care. As long as it burns in your belly, and not just in the sun!"

Rocinante whinnied as if to agree. Sancho snorted, wiped the sweat from his brow, and spat in the dust. "You dream of songs, sir, I dream of a barmaid with dirty hands and a jug as big as my head. If I don't get that soon, I'll drink my own blood, because that's all there is."

Don Quixote stretched out his hand pathetically. "Sancho, you must not give in to drunkenness! A knight—"

"Shut up, knight!" Sancho shouted, his voice broken and hoarse. "I drink when I can, because it's the only consolation. Everything else is just beatings, dust, and your crazy chatter."

Then he collapsed, breathing heavily, as if he'd just swallowed half a wineskin. Only without the wine. Just with rage.

Dust hung heavy in the air, and for a brief moment, everything was silent. No cursing, no preaching, just the panting of two men who had trudged through hell for far too long.

Don Quixote turned in his saddle and looked at Sancho—not as a knight, not as a squire, but as a man. His eyes were tired, red, marked by blows and sleepless nights. A moment, as brief as the last drop in a bottle, and Sancho thought: *Maybe he'll finally see me. Maybe he'll understand.*

"Sancho..." Quixote began, quietly, almost humanly, "you are suffering."

Sancho nodded, his throat dry, his lips chapped. "Yes, sir. I suffer. And not nobly. Not for glory. I suffer because I walk barefoot, because my stomach is

empty, because not a drop of wine goes down my throat. That's all. Nothing more."

A crack ran through Quixote's face, almost like pity. For a second, there was no knight, no madness, just an old, broken man. "Perhaps..." he whispered, "perhaps I'm asking for too much."

Sancho blinked, his heart beating faster. "Finally..." he thought. "Finally, he gets it."

But then Quixote's body tensed again, his gaze flickered, his face twisted into that mad, fiery smile. "But it is precisely suffering that makes you great, Sancho! It is precisely because you know hunger that you will appreciate the feast of honor! It is precisely because you bleed barefoot that you will wear the shoes of glory!"

Sancho's jaw dropped. He stared at him, blank, burned out. Then he laughed briefly, bitterly, like a man in a bar who realizes the bottle is empty.

"Shit, Lord," he muttered, "for a second you were human. Now you're God again in your own drunkenness. Cheers."

And the silence was over.

Sancho stopped. Just like that. His bare feet sank into the hot dust, the sun burned on his back, and he thought: *Now. Turn around. Run. Stop this madness.*

He looked ahead: Quixote on Rocinante, like a king without a crown, with a lance reduced to a stick, his clothes torn, his back bent. An old fool who still thought the world would bow down before him.

Sancho felt himself choking. "Sir!" he cried, his voice harsh. "I can't go on. I don't want to go on. My wife might have a new husband, my children are forgetting my name, and here I am, trudging barefoot behind a madman. Enough! I'm going home, sir. Home, to wine, to bread, to a woman who at least doesn't mistake windmills for kites."

The donkey neighed softly, as if in support. Sancho patted his neck. "Yes, mate. Both of us. We just turn around. Go back. Let the knight eat his glory alone."

He took a step back. A real one. *I'll be gone soon*, he thought. *Just back to the village. Everyone will laugh, yes – but at least I'll laugh along with them sometime, over a pitcher of wine.*

Then he saw Quixote again. The old, rickety man, fighting empty-handed against a world that had long since laughed at him. His armor hung like rags, but his eyes still burned like those of a preacher who never notices that the church is long empty.

Sancho cursed quietly. "Shit. Why do I see him like this? Why don't I just see the idiot he is? Why do I also see the poor dog who thinks he's a lion?"

The donkey nudged him as if to say: *You stay. You're as stupid as he is.*

Sancho growled, clenched his fists, and spat in the dust. "I swear by all the saints: I'm leaving. Right now. Tomorrow. But not today."

And he took another step forward.

Sancho took a deep breath, feeling the rage burning in his chest like cheap liquor. "Sir!" he roared, making even Rocinante stumble. "You are the biggest idiot ever born under this sun! A fool, a madman, a drunkard without wine, a king without a crown, a hero without a brain! And me? I'm the even bigger idiot because I'm still chasing you!"

Quixote turned in his saddle, smiling gently, as if Sancho had just praised him. "Sancho, your loyalty is touching. Even if your tongue betrays you, your heart remains with me."

Sancho laughed bitterly and spat in the dust. "My heart? Lord, my heart has long been in the tavern, under the table, drunk as a pig. I'm only walking because my legs are too stupid to stand still."

He shuffled on, barefoot, his feet sore, his throat dry. Every step was a curse. "I should run away. I should let you die in your madness. But no, Sancho stays. Sancho curses, Sancho starves, Sancho wears the dust of the world. Why? Because he's more stupid than the knight he follows."

The donkey trotted behind, Rocinante swayed, and the sun burned as if it were laughing at the two figures.

"Sir," growled Sancho, "I'll tell you one thing: the day will come when I'll really run away. I'll drink myself silly, eat my fill, and if you end up fighting windmills, I'll leave without me."

Quixote nodded seriously, as if Sancho had just sworn an oath. "Then, Sancho, you will return. For your fate is linked to mine."

Sancho rolled his eyes, muttering, "Shit fate." But his feet continued, step by step, following this old fool.

And so he followed—cursing, trembling, hungry. The most loyal prisoner in the world.

### A peasant girl and the idea of Dulcinea

The sun hung heavy over the street, and Don Quixote raised his arms as if preaching to an invisible choir. "Sancho! Think of Dulcinea. Her hair shines like the gold of the sun, her eyes are two stars that rend the night, her breath sweeter than the scent of a thousand roses, her hands more delicate than silk..."

Sancho shuffled barefoot beside the donkey, its tail almost whipping his face. He grimaced, sweating, and thought: *Stars, roses, silk... he hasn't seen wine for days and is now hallucinating flowers made from his own filth.*

"Sir," he said finally, his voice dry, "Dulcinea has hair, yes—but it's greasy and sticks to her face when she pulls the bucket from the well. Her eyes are as tired as a donkey's after twelve hours of work in the field. And her breath? If garlic is roses, fine by me. But it's more likely to burn your nostrils off."

Quixote paused as if someone had slapped him. "Sancho! You blaspheme! Never again dare to speak Dulcinea's name in such a base manner. She is my light, my foundation, my heaven."

Sancho grinned crookedly, wiping the sweat from his brow. "Your heaven, sir, stinks of stable and goat. I only say it because you probably never smell it—you're so drunk on your dreams that you don't notice the stench."

Rocinante stumbled over a stone, caught himself, and Quixote cried pathetically: "Even the ground bends when I mention her name!"

Sancho rolled his eyes so hard they almost stuck in his head. "Or he'll laugh himself silly, sir. And I'll laugh too."

Sancho stopped, rubbed his bare feet, then grinned crookedly and said, "Sir, speaking of Dulcinea, I'll tell you how I know her. She's no princess. She's a maid who drives cows, shovels manure, and eats so much garlic that even the

flies fall dead from the sky. Her hands aren't as soft as silk, but as rough as an old sack. When she slaps you, you'll see stars—but not the ones you're talking about."

Don Quixote's eyes widened, his face twisting like a man who's drunk vinegar instead of wine. "Silence! Silence, Sancho! Your tongue is corrupt, your soul blind. Dulcinea is the queen of all virtue, an angel in human form! Anyone who sees her differently is accursed!"

Sancho laughed, coughing up dust, and the donkey bleated as if he were laughing along. "Cursed, yes. I'm cursed anyway, ever since I started following you. But I tell you: the only crown she wears is a headscarf covered in sweat. And when she speaks, it's not like a siren, but like a woman squawking the chickens together."

Quixote raised his hand as if to slap Sancho, but his limbs were too tired to be crushed. Instead, he shouted with his last strength: "You blaspheme, squire! Your mouth is full of filth! Were you not my faithful companion, I would silence you with steel and blood!"

Sancho grinned broadly, revealing his missing teeth. "Steel and blood? Lord, you don't even have a helmet anymore. And blood? You already lost enough of that in the last fight. So what do you have left? Words. And I'll listen to them as long as my stomach is empty. But they don't fill me up, Lord; if anything, they make me thirstier."

Don Quixote raised his eyes to heaven and sighed pathetically. "Dulcinea, forgive this foolish man. He doesn't know you. He doesn't know what he's saying."

Sancho growled, "I know her better than you, sir. I know what she smells like when she walks through the village. You only know what she looks like when you're drunk."

The road turned, and there she was coming towards them: a peasant girl, barely twenty, her hair greasy and tangled, her skirt stained, her feet as dusty as Sancho's. On her donkey, she balanced two heavy jugs of water that rocked with every step. She gasped, cursed softly, a drop of sweat ran down her face, and she wiped it away with her forearm, which was as brown and scarred as an old leather thong.

Sancho immediately grinned. "There, sir, your Dulcinea. Princess of garlic and cow dung, queen of blisters on the hands. Doesn't she look radiant, amidst all this stench?"

Don Quixote gasped as if he'd seen an apparition of the Virgin Mary. He almost tore himself from his horse, placed his hand on his heart, and gasped: "Sancho! Don't you see? Her dignity shines through her rags, her beauty shines through the dust! That's her—that's Dulcinea!"

Sancho shook his head, laughing so hoarsely he held his stomach. "Dulcinea? Lord, that one? She changes her underwear twice a year, if that. She's no princess. She's a girl who has more cow dung on her shoes than you have on your stories."

The maid looked at them, frowned, and brushed her hair from her face. "Why are you two birds staring like that? Never seen a woman with a job?" Her voice was deep, scratchy, shaped by shouting across fields.

Don Quixote almost slipped from his horse, his knees trembling. "My heart recognizes you, noble Dulcinea! Disguised in peasant form, but your nature betrays you!"

Sancho almost fell into the dust with laughter. "Covered! Yes, sir, you could call it that—covered in sweat, dust, and garlic. But otherwise..."

The girl stared at them like two dogs blocking her way. "You're crazy, aren't you? Get out of here, I have a load to carry."

But Quixote only saw the culmination of his madness.

Don Quixote threw himself from the saddle, almost hitting his face in the dust, scrambled to his feet and then fell with a *boom*. He fell to his knees. He spread his arms as if kneeling before the Blessed Sacrament in church. "Dulcinea! Divine Lady! At last you stand before me, in all your beauty, in all your grace, hidden from the eyes of the world, yet for me more luminous than a thousand suns!"

The maid stopped, placed her hands on her hips, the jugs wobbling dangerously on the donkey. She blinked, wiping the sweat from her face with the back of her hand. "What the hell are you talking about, you old fool? My name is Inés, and I don't have the nerve for drama right now. The sun is burning, the water is heavy, and my back hurts."

Sancho pressed both hands to his stomach, doubled over with laughter. "Inés! Lord, the princess has spoken! Do you hear her angelic tongue? It sounds like a landlady beating her guests out of the tavern!"

Don Quixote raised his hands to heaven, completely unimpressed. "It's a spell, Sancho! She calls herself Inés, but I see the truth! It's Dulcinea, veiled by a devilish spell so that unworthy eyes won't recognize her!"

The maid rolled her eyes, groaned, and grabbed the pitcher, which threatened to tip over. "You're completely crazy. If you don't have any coins, then get lost, I have work to do."

Sancho gasped, tears streaming down his face from laughter. "Did you hear that, sir? The princess wants coins! Buy her a castle made of garlic cloves!"

Quixote knelt lower, almost hitting his forehead on the ground. "Dulcinea, I will free you from this spell! I swear it, on my life!"

The maid stomped past them, muttering, "Idiots. Two walking scarecrows."

Sancho almost fell into the dust with laughter. Quixote saw them disappear—and bowed reverently, as if he were in a cathedral.

Sancho gasped and panted, tears streaming down his face. He doubled over with laughter, as if he'd really downed 18 beers and stuffed himself with tzatziki until his stomach was about to explode. "Lord!" he wheezed, "that's not a princess—that's a girl who smells of garlic and sweat! If that's your Dulcinea, then from now on I'll only drink vinegar!"

The maid—Inés—turned around, her hands still on her hips, and stared at Quixote, who was still kneeling in the dust like a pilgrim seeing the Madonna. "Listen, Grandpa. I'm tired of your chatter. I'm not a princess. I'm not bewitched. I'm just tired. And if you don't get up right now, I'll smash this jug over your head."

Sancho gasped again, holding his stomach, which was already aching from hunger. "Jug over the head, eh? Finally, a woman who gets it!"

Don Quixote slowly raised his head, his eyes transfigured, his voice trembling: "How cruel is the spell, that it forces you to deny your true nature. But do not worry, noble Dulcinea—I will free you!"

Inés snorted, kicked her bare feet into the dust, and glared at him. "You can free me by leaving. Now. Before I actually take the jug."

Sancho stood unsteadily, still half laughing, half serious. "Sir, listen to her. She speaks more clearly than you have in your entire life. She's no Dulcinea. She's an Inés, and Inés doesn't want you. Period."

The maid trudged on, the donkey trotted behind, the water splashed, and the two knight figures remained behind in the dust – one laughing, one kneeling.

Sancho wiped his eyes and grinned. "Oh, Lord... if that's love, then I hope I never fall in love."

Don Quixote rose slowly, dust clinging to his knees, his eyes sparkling with that holy madness Sancho could no longer bear. "Sancho! Now everything is clear. It was her. Dulcinea, my lady! But a powerful sorcerer transformed her. That's why she appeared to you as a simple maid, with jugs and sweat. It's a curse! A vile curse!"

Sancho almost fell over laughing. He doubled over, clutching his stomach as if he were pregnant with 18 beers. "Curse? Lord, yes—garlic is the curse. Sweat is the curse. Stable smell is the curse. But magic? If that's magic, then my wife was also under a spell every time she hit me with that wooden spoon."

Quixote raised his hands dramatically, the sun blinding him, and he looked as if he were about to fly into the sky. "Sancho, you fool! Only the noble eye recognizes the true form! The common man sees only the garment of magic, but I—I recognize the divine being behind it."

Sancho gasped, tears streaming down his dirty cheeks. "Divine? Lord, the only one who was divine was the goat I once saw in the village, climbing onto the roof. She was more divine than the girl with the jugs! And if you keep babbling about magic, I'll drink the nearest dung heap dry just to forget you."

Don Quixote stamped his foot, his voice trembling: "I swear, Sancho, I will break the spell. Dulcinea will shine again in her true form—and then you will be ashamed of your blasphemies!"

Sancho was still laughing, half-mad with hunger, dust, and fatigue. "Ashamed? Lord, the only thing I'm ashamed of is that I still follow you. But at the same time..." – he gasped, wiping away his tears – "without you, I'd never have so much to laugh about."

The road lay empty, the peasant girl long gone, leaving only dust and a few drops of water in the dirt. Don Quixote climbed back onto Rocinante, proud, uplifted, his face glowing. "Sancho, it's clear: Dulcinea is under a spell. But I will break it! I swear by my sword, by my honor, by my life—I will release her. No spell is stronger than my loyalty."

Sancho trotted behind, barefoot, his stomach empty, his head full of doubt. "Sir, you can swear as much as you like. Vows don't satisfy anyone. If I have to choose between your spell and a pitcher of tequila with a fat worm in the bottom, then I'll take the worm, swallow it, and sleep contentedly under the table."

Quixote turned around and looked at him seriously, as if he had just distorted the sacred truth. "Sancho, you think small. But one day you will understand: Dulcinea is the meaning, the purpose, the goal."

Sancho growled and spat in the dust. "My purpose is to finally get drunk. My goal is not to die. My goal is a bed, even if it's just a bench in a tavern. And if there's a bottle with a worm in it, that's my Dulcinea—and I'll kiss it as I swallow."

The donkey trotted, Rocinante staggered, and the sun laughed shabbily from the sky. Two figures, one full of madness, the other full of thirst.

"Sancho," said Quixote solemnly, "we are chosen."

"Yes," murmured Sancho, "chosen to drink, to curse, and to die in the dust. Cheers."

And they continued on – towards the next misery, as always.

### Don Quixote defends the weak

The sun hung blazing over the country road, the dust rising with every step, as if the stones themselves were trying to flee. Don Quixote sat crookedly on Rocinante, Sancho trudged barefoot behind, and both smelled of sweat, blood, and hunger.

Then they heard it: screams. Not heroic, not noble—just the whimpers of men receiving a beating. Sancho raised his head, blinked, and saw the scene: a burly overseer with a club as wide as a cupboard was beating three emaciated day laborers who barely raised their hands to protect themselves.

"There!" Quixote gasped, his eyes immediately glowing. "Sancho, do you see? Innocents struck by tyranny! This is our hour!"

Sancho scratched his belly and grimaced. "I see three poor bastards getting beaten up because they probably drank their wages away. And I see a bastard of a foreman who'll break our bones if we interfere. So, sir, let's just move on. We've already had enough beatings for three lifetimes."

But Quixote straightened up in the saddle as if he were young and undefeated again. "No, Sancho! A knight cannot remain silent when the weak suffer! Today justice is born."

Sancho snorted, kicking the dust that clung between his toes. "Today, at most, my ass will get drilled by boots again, sir. But go ahead, I'll hold the donkey tight."

The cries of the laborers grew louder, the club crashed against backs and shoulders, and Quixote clenched his fists as if this were the overture to his grand entrance.

Don Quixote raised his lance—or what remained of it, a crooked stick with splinters—and raised it toward the sky, as if he could summon thunder with it. "Halt, you minions of tyranny!" he roared in a voice that sounded more like a hoarse drunkard than a knight. "No man shall lie in the dust beneath the yoke of injustice as long as Don Quixote of La Mancha breathes!"

The overseer paused, blinked, and even the beaten laborers stared in confusion. Dust blew, a rooster crowed somewhere, and Sancho muttered, "Sir... every time you start like that, I know someone's about to kick me in the face."

Quixote snorted, his chest puffed out, his helmet missing, his head glowing. "Weakness shall find strength in me! Justice shall live in my arms! Sancho, witness this hour—we defend humanity!"

Sancho wiped the sweat from his brow, looked at the overseer's beating and the scrawny peasants who might as well run away. "Humanity? Lord, those are

three half-naked guys with more fleas than teeth. If that's humanity, then cheers."

"Silence!" thundered Quixote. "They are sacrifices, and a sacrifice is holier than any king! I will change their fate."

Sancho rolled his eyes, snorted, and grabbed his belly, which growled empty. "Yes, turn... they'll probably turn us in the dirt like a suckling pig. And I don't even have garlic to go with it."

But Quixote was not to be stopped – he urged Rocinante on, and the old horse took two stumbling steps forward, as if the drama were about to begin.

The overseer slowly turned to Quixote, rested the club on his shoulder, and looked him up and down: a half-naked old man in rags, a stick in his hand, and madness in his eyes. Then he burst into laughter as rough as gravel in his throat.

"Holy shit," he roared. "What are you? A scarecrow who fell off a pole? Or a beggar who found a stick in the dung heap?"

The three battered laborers, who had just been panting, giggled weakly along—too exhausted to flee, but too spiteful not to savor the moment.

Sancho shook his head and took two steps back. "Lord, I'm telling you: This won't work. He'll laugh you into the ground. We should get out of here before we start counting bones again."

But Don Quixote raised his chin, proud as a king who had just been crowned a god. "I am Don Quixote de la Mancha, defender of the weak, crusher of the oppressors! Your laughter will stick in your throat when my arm of justice strikes."

The guard spat in the dust and grinned with gap-toothed teeth. "Arm of justice? Your arm looks like it couldn't even lift a bottle of wine."

Sancho muttered, half to himself, half to the donkey: "True. And if he could, he'd drink them dry before he even got a chance to swing."

The warden raised his club and laughed again. "Come on, little knight. Show me your great justice. Perhaps I need a good joke today."

Quixote took a deep breath, his eyes full of madness, and Rocinante pawed the dust as if he sensed that another catastrophe was about to begin.

Don Quixote urged Rocinante on. The horse immediately stumbled over a stone, snorted, and in the same breath the knight almost toppled from the saddle. But he pulled himself up, roared, "For Dulcinea! For the weak!" and lowered his splintered cane like a holy lance.

The overseer grinned broadly, simply raised the club – and *BAM!* – knocked the stick out of his hand as if it were a branch in the way. Quixote staggered, Rocinante staggered, the overseer laughed.

"That's it?" he sneered. "So that's how you defend justice?"

But Quixote was unstoppable. He leaped from his horse, landed awkwardly in the dust, half-rolled, and got back up, his eyes burning. He threw himself at the man with his bare fist.

The overseer roared with laughter, made him strike wildly a few times—then his fist crashed into Quixote's face. Blood spurted, the knight staggered, laughing nonetheless, gurgling words. "One more blow! Every pain... is a song... for Dulcinea!"

Sancho stood beside them, holding his hands over his face. "Good Lord, this isn't a battle, this is a bar fight without a bar. And we don't even have a bottle to make it bearable."

The guard grabbed Quixote by the collar, lifted him up, and hurled him into the dust, making him clatter like a sack of bones. Quixote gasped, coughed up blood, got back up, staggered—and attacked him again.

"For the weak!" he shouted, and every blow he received only seemed to fuel him further.

Sancho sighed, snorted, and muttered: "He fights like he's drunk. But he hasn't a drop in his stomach. Madness is probably a stronger intoxicant than wine."

Dust swirled, the club cracked, and Quixote fell again—only to rise again. An opera of blood and dirt in which the hero dies and rises again and again until no one could count anymore.

Sancho was just about to pull the donkey around by the halter, away from the chaos, out of the cloud of dust filled with blood and screaming. "Lord, have fun with your martyrdom," he muttered, "I don't feel like spitting teeth again."

But then one of the beaten laborers saw him, a gaunt man with slumped shoulders and a face like a sack of bones. He shouted, "Hey you! Help your master!" and grabbed Sancho by the arm.

"Let go!" Sancho yelled, tearing himself free. "I'm just a spectator here!" But the club came, missed Quixote, and landed on his shoulder. Sancho cried out, staggered, and the pain burned like fire.

"Shit!" he yelled, "It always hits me! I didn't do anything!"

The overseer growled, "Then stay away from that idiot, or you'll get more!" – and kicked Sancho in the buttocks with a boot so hard that he almost flew into the donkey.

"Holy Mother Mary!" gasped Sancho, rubbing his ass. "I swear, I'll never be able to sit still in a church again—everything's deaf!"

Don Quixote, bloodied and staggering, saw him and cried: "Sancho! Hold on! Every blow ennoble you! Every kick elevates you!"

"Raise me, yes," gasped Sancho, "raise me from the ground straight to heaven! One more and I'll be lying dead among the angels! And I hope they have beer, or I won't go there either."

The guard now grabbed him by the collar, pulled him up, and growled: "What are you two? Comedians? Beggars? Lunatics?"

Sancho gasped, kicking his bare feet helplessly in the dust. "We're idiots, Warden! Complete idiots! But let us live, we're not hurting anyone but ourselves!"

But that wasn't enough – dust, screams, kicks – and Sancho was in the middle of a fight he never wanted.

The overseer swung again, his club whistling through the air. Quixote staggered, bleeding from the nose, his eyes still glowing as if he were a saint on the pyre. Sancho hung gasping in his grip, screaming like a beaten dog.

And then—suddenly—the three day laborers broke free. They took advantage of the chaos, jumped up, and ran away as fast as their skinny legs could carry them. Clouds of dust trailed behind them, no consideration, no thanks, not even a backward glance.

Sancho saw it, gasped, and cursed. "Hey! You pigs! He's fighting for you, and you're running away? The least you could do is shout 'thank you!'"

But they had already disappeared.

The guard cursed and tried to chase after him, but tripped over Quixote, who jumped on his leg like a mad dog. Both fell to the ground, dust swirled, curses mingled with pathetic cries.

"For Dulcinea!" roared Quixote, beating weakly but with madness.

"For my ass!" yelled Sancho, finally free and rolling out of the dust with aching feet.

The overseer staggered back to his feet, his face covered in scratches, and spat blood. "You two are crazier than the plague." He dropped the club and stumbled away, cursing, presumably after the fugitives.

Two wrecks remained in the dust: Quixote, bloody, staggering, but grinning like a victor. Sancho, stinking, tired, his ribs twisted in pain, his ass full of kicks.

"We have won, Sancho!" Quixote gasped. "The weak are free!"

Sancho laughed dryly, bitterly, without joy. "Free, yes. Free to abandon us. Lord, you fight for people who wouldn't even pay for a round of beer. And I pick up the tab."

Quixote raised his arm like a general. "It was the greatest victory yet."

Sancho spat blood into the dust. "Greatest victory? Lord, the only one who won is the devil, because he's about to laugh himself silly at me."

Don Quixote stood unsteadily, blood dripping from his nose, the dust clinging to him like a second skin. Nevertheless, he spread his arms as if he had saved the world. "Sancho, this was our greatest victory! The weak are freed, tyranny is defeated, and our fame grows in the chronicles of eternity!"

Sancho hobbled beside the donkey, his back bent, his rear end full of kicks, his feet sore. He grimaced, wiped the sweat with a dirty sleeve, and growled, "Chronicles of Eternity? Lord, the only ones who remember this are the flies about to swarm on our blood. If that's a victory, I'd rather drink down my defeats with a jug of wine."

Rocinante snorted tiredly, the donkey stumbled over a stone, and Sancho cursed: "Even the animals are smarter than we are—they know when to stop."

Quixote placed his hand on his heart, his voice filled with pathos. "No, Sancho! Today we have proven that a knight alone can change the world."

Sancho coughed and laughed hoarsely, a sound like a choking fit. "Yes, you've changed the world, sir. Now it stinks even more of blood and sweat. And I'm right in the middle of it. I swear to you, if I don't get something to drink soon, I'll change my world—without you."

Quixote barely heard him, his gaze transfigured, as if he saw trumpets in the sky. "Soon, Sancho, soon we will be honored."

Sancho hobbled on, barefoot, every step a curse. "Honored... phew. I only want to be honored with a jug as big as my head. With wine. Red. Cheap. And if I see a worm in the glass, I'll drink that too. Because better a worm in the stomach than another victory."

And so they moved on: one full of madness, the other full of thirst – both lost, both unstoppable.

### The prisoners and their gratitude

Night had fallen, and the sky hung heavy and black over the country road. Sancho trudged barefoot behind the donkey, his feet sore, his stomach empty and growling, while Don Quixote stared into the darkness with sparkling eyes.

There was a smell of smoke, of cheap meat, of spilled wine. Sancho raised his nose, and his stomach growled louder. "Sir... do you smell that? There's food. There's drink. Maybe even bread."

Quixote nodded seriously, as if the smell were a sign of fate. "Sancho, fate leads us to the souls I once freed. They will rest there, the men whose chains I broke, whose freedom I defended. And today we will reap their gratitude."

Sancho spat in the dust and grinned crookedly. "Gratitude? Lord, if there's one thing I've learned: those who sit in the dirt never say thank you. At most, they'll empty your pockets."

They rounded a bend, and there they sat: six men around a crackling fire, faces hard, eyes alert. Wine bottles circulated, one laughing filthy, another tearing a piece of meat from the bone with his teeth. Their clothes were ragged, but their faces brimmed with that raw pride of men who are free—and don't give a damn who they have to thank for it.

Sancho swallowed dryly, staring at the bottles circulating. "Holy Mary... wine. I'd even drink the worm if there was one in it."

But Don Quixote raised his hand, full of pathos, full of glory. "Sancho, prepare yourself: now we will be welcomed as heroes."

Sancho muttered, "Or as idiots."

And they stepped into the light of the fire.

Don Quixote approached the fire, his face shimmering in the flickering light, filled with embers and dust, as if he were a saint risen from hell. He raised his arms, his voice trembling like a preacher: "Men! Brothers! Do you not recognize me? It is I—Don Quixote de la Mancha! I, who once freed you from the chains of injustice! I have come to receive your gratitude, to receive the loyalty that is rightfully mine!"

The convicts stared at him. One stopped chewing, another stopped the bottle mid-sip. Then a laugh erupted, so filthy and loud that even the surrounding forest seemed to cough.

Sancho paused a few steps back, sighed deeply, and murmured, "There it is. The laughter. I should have known. If gratitude were a dog, sir, it would have died weeks ago. But you still call for it."

Don Quixote remained undeterred, his chest puffed out, his hands on his heart. "Laugh if you must, but your heart knows the truth! I have given you freedom, and in return you owe me loyalty until death!"

Sancho scratched his stomach, his stomach growling. "Loyalty until death, yes. Except that death is more likely to be us, if they pull out their knives."

The prisoners grinned, their eyes glittering evilly in the firelight. One nudged another with his elbow. "Listen, that nutcase really thinks we owe him something."

Sancho snorted, thinking: *Here we go.*

The convicts roared with laughter, throwing the morsels from their mouths so that the fat splattered into the fire. One coughed with laughter and slapped his knees. "By all the saints, look at him! Our knight in rags! The great liberator who barely has any pants left on his ass!"

Another wiped his mouth with his forearm and grinned broadly. "Look, he wants gratitude! Should I thank you for getting rid of the guards? Sure, thanks, dude! Without you, I'd still be in chains—and you wouldn't have been so well beaten."

A third poured the rest of the wine down his throat, belched loudly, and shouted: "Thank you, knight! Thank you that I can now drink freely again, steal freely, fuck freely..." he burst into filthy laughter, "and run away freely when the guards come."

Sancho stood a few steps in the shadows, muttering, "Sir, they're not weak, they're pigs. They have more dirt in their eyes than you had in your helmet. And that's saying something."

But Quixote raised his hand, serious, solemn, unwavering. "Your mockery doesn't affect me! I know, deep in your hearts burns the fire of gratitude! You deny it, yet you feel it!"

The convicts roared, one stood up, staggered, and slapped Quixote on the shoulder, nearly falling over. "Fire of gratitude? The only thing burning in my heart is the wine I stole. And believe me, it would have been better for you than for us."

Sancho groaned and grabbed his face. "Sir, that's not gratitude. That's the pub crowd after the third pint. And we're the punchline."

One of the convicts, a broad-shouldered fellow with gaps in his teeth and wolfish eyes, leaned back, belched loudly, and wiped the grease from his chin. "You know, knight? As soon as we were free, we snatched the first caravan."

Barrels full of wine, bread, meat, jewelry—we took everything. The traders cried like babies. That was freedom! Sweet, awesome freedom!"

The group roared with laughter, clinking bottles together. Sparks flew as fat from the meat dripped into the fire.

Don Quixote stood up proudly, his chest puffed out, his eyes gleaming. "Yes! That is precisely true freedom: to go one's own way, without chains, without tyrants! You have acted like free men!"

Sancho clapped his hand over his face as if trying to wipe away the madness. "Free men? Lord, that was theft. No freedom, no honor—just a pack of hungry dogs stealing the nearest piece of meat. And if we're not careful, we'll be the next ones they rob."

The convict grinned, showing his rotten teeth. "Clever, little one. Clever. Maybe I'll keep you as an advisor. You see the fun in games."

Sancho took a step back, shaking his head. "All I can say is that I'm fed up with beatings and stealing. But at least you have wine. And that's more gratitude than I get from my master."

Quixote raised his arm as if to bless the fire. "No, Sancho! You are free—and your freedom is my greatest reward!"

Sancho murmured, "My greatest reward would be a full stomach and a drunkenness that would make me forget everything."

The prisoners clinked their bottles again, drank, and mocked. For them, freedom was simply taking what they could get.

Don Quixote stepped closer to the fire, stretching out both arms as if to bless the convicts. His face glowed in the flickering flames, his rags clinging to his body like a second skin. "Listen to me! I, Don Quixote de la Mancha, ask not for gold, not for land, not for wine. I only ask for your thanks. One word is enough, one token of loyalty, and my heart will be richly rewarded."

The prisoners stared at him – and then that laughter erupted again, filthy, hoarse, biting. One shouted: "Thanks? You want thanks? Should I thank you that the guards are looking for me now? Should I thank you that I can't sleep anymore because a blade could be lurking behind every bush?"

Another spat into the fire, which hissed. "Thank you, knight. Thank you that I am free, but without money, without a roof, without a wife. Shall I weave you a wreath in return?"

The third pulled a knife from his belt and grinned evilly. "Perhaps we should thank you—with a slash through the stomach. Then you'll learn not to meddle in other people's business."

Sancho immediately raised his hands, his eyes wide, his stomach empty, but his fear suddenly sated. "Stop, stop, stop! Lord, I told you: there's no gratitude. Only trouble. And now we have it. Big as a barrel of vinegar."

Don Quixote, however, remained undeterred, his voice still trembling. "Do what you will! My blood is freely shed if it reminds you of virtue!"

Sancho gasped and waved his hand. "Virtue? Lord, these are convicts! They know virtue as little as I know a full stomach. If we don't get out of here right now, this will be your last prayer."

The convicts approached, knives flashed, fire reflected in their eyes.

One of the convicts stood up, knife in hand, his teeth flashing in the flames. He slowly approached Quixote, who stood proudly, chest out as if wearing armor—although only blood and dirt clung to his shirt.

"Give me what you have," the man growled. "Coins, bread, wine—anything. You owe us."

Sancho flailed his hands in panic and jumped back. "Lord, I told you this would end badly! I don't even have shoes—what else could they steal, my blisters?"

Quixote spread his arms, his voice trembling with pathos. "Take my life if you must, but not my honor! Dulcinea watches over me!"

The convict laughed, grabbed him by the collar, and Quixote struck back—with his fist, weakly but with madness. A commotion erupted. Two others jumped up and threw themselves into the fray. The fire flickered, dust rose, bottles tipped over, one screamed with laughter, another with pain.

Sancho was grabbed by the arm, a knife flashing near his throat. "Money, you bastard!" one of them hissed.

Sancho screamed, kicked wildly, and spat: "Money? If I had money, I wouldn't be here! I'd be sitting in a tavern with 18 beers and a plate full of tzatziki!"

He struck the convict in the shin with his bare heel, who screamed, Sancho tore himself free and rolled in the dust.

Quixote wrestled with the first, got the knife across his cheek, blood ran down his face, but he laughed. "Yes! That's how you test heroes!"

Sancho crawled, coughed, and screamed: "Heroes, my ass! We're dying like idiots, and they're laughing their heads off!"

It was chaos – dust, blood, screaming, sparks in the fire, spilled wine, curses in the night.

And then, as the confusion reached its peak, Quixote and Sancho somehow stumbled out of the circle. The donkey broke free, Rocinante stumbled after it, and the two staggered away into the darkness, while the convicts still raged in the fire.

They stumbled through the night, panting, bloody, every step a curse. Rocinante limped, the donkey snorted, and Sancho held his side where one of the convicts had kicked him.

"Holy shit, sir," gasped Sancho, "was that gratitude? If that's thanks, then I never want to be praised again. I have bruises where I don't even have skin anymore."

Don Quixote, his face bloody but his eyes shining, raised his arm pathetically. "No, Sancho! That wasn't ingratitude—it was a test! Heaven tests our steadfastness. True hearts aren't known by words, but by trials. And we passed!"

Sancho stopped, stared at him, and laughed dryly and bitterly. "Passed? Lord, I didn't pass anything except the ass-kicking exam. I passed in pain, in hunger, in stupidity. But if that was a test, then I want to fail immediately."

Quixote stood up proudly, even though his body trembled. "Soon, Sancho, Dulcinea will hear of this. She will know that we ourselves have endured ingratitude—and that makes us greater than kings."

Sancho limped, his head hanging. "Greater than kings... I'll be less than a beggar, as long as the beggar has a jug of wine. A jug, heavy, cold, cheap, with

enough alcohol to make me forget everything. If that's ingratitude, then at least I'll drink it down."

The night closed around them, the convict fire flickered in the distance, and the two continued on—one drunk on illusion, the other thirsting for real intoxication.

And the stars above them sparkled like a bar that never opens its door.

### Argument in the dust of the country road

The sun blazed down from above as if it wanted to obliterate the world. Dust lay on everything like a second skin. Sancho trudged along beside the donkey, barefoot, his blisters long since burst, his feet as raw as minced meat. Every step a curse, every breath a sigh.

"Lord," he began, his voice scratchy like sandpaper, "I'm telling you: I can't take it anymore. I'm done. My stomach is empty, my mouth dry, my ass blue from the last beating. And for what? For your damned honor, which you can't even eat."

He stumbled and caught himself on the donkey's halter. "You know, sir, I no longer dream of glory. I dream of bread. Of wine. Of a plate of beans and bacon. If you tell me about Dulcinea one more time, I'll vomit right in your armor—if you even have any left."

Rocinante trotted silently, with Don Quixote on top, his face caked with dust, but his chin held high as if he were riding in a golden procession.

Sancho gasped, shaking his head. "All I see is dust, sir. Dust and misery. No princesses, no castles, no heroes. Just us two idiots looking like we've vomited up. And I swear, I'm about to leave you—here, now, in the middle of this damned highway."

He stopped, hands on his knees, gasping. "Do you know what I'd do right now if I could? I'd sit down in the nearest pub, order 18 beers, a bowl of garlic sauce, and get so drunk I'd forget your name." *That would be glory, Lord. My glory.*"

The air shimmered, dust clung to his sweat, and he stared at Quixote—waiting, hoping that the old man would finally shut up.

Don Quixote pulled the reins lightly, sitting upright in the saddle as if he had just received a divine revelation. "Sancho, my faithful friend," he began, his voice soaring like a priest, "you see only dust, but I see the light. For every step brings us closer to Dulcinea. Her name alone is enough to nourish me. Her beauty quenches my thirst, her honor carries me above the dust of the world."

Sancho stood open-mouthed, staring at him, then laughed hoarsely, as dry as an empty bottle. "Sir, you're not hungry because your imagination fills you up. I am. My stomach knows no Dulcinea. It only knows growling. And my throat knows no sweet wine—only dust. Try swallowing Dulcinea's name like a mug of beer. I swear, you'll choke on it."

But Quixote raised his hand to heaven, undeterred. "Dulcinea is more than food. She is spirit. She is flame. Whoever serves her needs no tavern, no bread, no wine. Honor alone is enough!"

Sancho threw his arms up, desperate, exhausted. "Honor? Honor doesn't fill your belly, sir! Honor doesn't intoxicate you! Honor doesn't bring sleep when fleas are eating you. I tell you: If honor were everything, I would have been holy long ago. Instead, I'm just barefoot in the dust—and you, an old nutcase, who gets on my last nerve with every word."

Rocinante snorted, as if agreeing with Sancho. Don Quixote, however, closed his eyes and smiled blissfully. "Dulcinea... my star."

Sancho kicked the dust and spat. "Your star can go to hell. I just want a drink."

Sancho stopped, the veins in his neck bulging, sweat dripping into the dust. Then it all came out of him like a drunken keg.

"Lord! Enough! I can't take it anymore! All we do is eat dust, get beaten, and breed fleas! Because of you! Because of your damned madness! Windmills, convicts, peasants, priests—every time we end up in the dirt. And you call that honor? I call it shit!"

Don Quixote turned in his saddle, his eyes wide, almost insulted. But Sancho didn't let him speak.

"It's your fault, Lord! Everything! My feet are blisters—your fault. My stomach is empty as an old sack—your fault. My ass is blue as a prune—your damn fault! I warned you, I begged you, I cursed you—but no, you had to play the hero. And who pays the bill? Me! Always me!"

He kicked the dust, his fists clenched. "I swear, sir, I was a fool to follow you. A pathetic idiot who thought he'd get an island, a crown, something. Instead, I get beatings, hunger, and your damned Dulcinea in every other sentence!"

His voice almost broke, hoarse, angry, exhausted. "You know what I want? For you to shut up, sir. Just one hour. No Dulcinea, no fame, no honor—just silence. But you can't. You're addicted to your madness. And I... I'm the idiot who supports it."

The dust lay still, only the panting of the two could be heard. Sancho stared at him, his eyes full of anger and bitterness.

Don Quixote yanked on the reins, turning in the saddle, his face bloody and dusty, but his eyes burning. "Coward!" he thundered, his voice scratchy like rusted iron. "Sancho, you call yourself my squire, but your heart is as small as a wineskin after the last drop. You moan, you curse, you want bread, you want wine—but you don't understand that we live for greater things! For Dulcinea! For honor! For the glory that endures for centuries!"

Sancho snorted, but Quixote spoke hotly as if he had just drunk three jugs of wine that existed only in his head.

"You say you're suffering. Yes! And I'm suffering too. But suffering is our nobility! Suffering is proof that we're on the right path. Only the brave endure the dust, only the great endure the ridicule! And you want to chicken out, want to go back to the stable, back to the pig dung? Then you're nothing but a peasant, a weakling, someone who will never understand what greatness is!"

He struck his heart with his fist so hard that dust swirled into the air. "But I, Sancho—I am a knight! And a knight doesn't complain, he stands! He fights, even if he falls, even if the world thinks he's mad. For he knows: Dreams are greater than bread, honor stronger than wine!"

He stretched his arm toward heaven, his face transfigured. "You want silence? I want the thunder of history! You want wine? I want the blood of honor! You want peace? I want war—until the world knows my name!"

Sancho stood there, sweating, stinking, trembling – and saw only an old man screaming in the dust like a drunk without a bottle.

"War?" roared Sancho, hands on his hips, face red with rage. "You're no knight, sir—you're a poor madman who tells himself stories! And I, damn it, am the idiot who follows like a dog behind a cart full of manure!"

Don Quixote turned around, his eyes wide, his teeth bared. "Dog? You dare? You, who without me would be nothing but a fat peasant snoring in the dirt? I promised you greatness, Sancho—and all you want to do is eat and drink!"

"Yes, sir!" cried Sancho, his voice hoarse, spit flying. "Yes, I want to eat and drink! Because that's exactly what life is: a full belly and a buzz in the head. Everything else is just talk! Your fame, your Dulcinea—screw it! What has your greatness brought me? Blow jobs, hunger, beatings, fleas! If that's greatness, then fuck you, Sir Knight!"

Quixote almost leaped from the saddle, bent down, his fingers trembling, as if to grab Sancho by the collar. "And you—you are a coward! A traitor! A peasant who doesn't recognize the sacred, even if it tramples him into the dust! You are not worthy to be my squire!"

"Your squire?" Sancho approached, his face contorted, his eyes filled with rage. "I am your slave, sir! Your whipping boy! Your running joke! If I weren't so stupid, I would have left you to die in the dust long ago!"

Rocinante snorted, the donkey tugged on the halter – even the animals noticed that something was about to happen.

Both of them screamed, screamed so loudly that the dust vibrated, like two drunken dogs fighting over the last bone in a dive bar. One more word, and one of them would have struck.

They stood there, one on a horse, the other in the dust, both open-mouthed, both panting, sweating, full of rage. Words still hung in the air like fists that could no longer strike.

Sancho gasped for breath, felt his heart pounding as if he'd downed three jugs of liquor. But there was no liquor, just dust in his throat. He wanted to shout something else, some kind of curse, but his mouth was dry, his voice broken.

Quixote sat in the saddle, his back stiff, his hands trembling on the reins. His gaze still glowed, but his body sagged like an empty wineskin. He, too, wanted to continue preaching about Dulcinea, about honor, about glory—but even he was slowly running out of breath.

They just stood there, staring at each other, two broken men who had nothing left but their hatred and exhaustion.

Sancho was the first to break the silence, but only with a growl. "Screw it." He spat in the dust and turned away. That was all he said.

Quixote raised his head briefly, wanting to say something else, something great – but all that came out was a hoarse: "Sancho..." Then he fell silent.

The air was heavy, no wind, only the pulling of the animals, the creaking of the old saddle.

Both knew: Nothing was resolved. Nothing was forgiven. But neither had the strength to fan the flames any further.

Two men, shouting empty-handed.

The country road stretched before them like an endless stretch of dirt. No inn, no wine, no comfort. Only dust, stones, and flies.

Sancho pulled the donkey by the halter, his face grim, his shoulders heavy. Every step crunched, every thought burned: *I'm leaving. I'm really leaving. Right now. Tomorrow. Sometime.* But his feet continued to move, as if chained.

Quixote sat rigidly on Rocinante, his eyes fixed on the horizon, his chin raised. But behind the mask of dignity, he was just as empty as Sancho. His mouth wanted to form words, pathetic, grand, eternal—but it remained silent. Because every word would have been just more blood.

They walked side by side, silent, like two dogs after a bar fight. Neither spoke, neither looked at the other.

Sancho thought of wine. A jug, cold and cheap, that would make his head numb until nothing mattered anymore.

Quixote thought of Dulcinea. Her name circled in his head like a song no one wants to hear.

Two figures in the dust: one full of dreams, the other full of curses. Both lost. Both condemned to move on.

Night came slowly, and with it the silence.

## A priest, a barber and a plan

The country road lay empty, just dust, flies, and the endless horizon. Sancho trotted with slumped shoulders, his belly growling like a hungry dog, while Don Quixote still sat on Rocinante with his chin raised, as if riding in a holy procession.

Then two figures appeared: a priest in a black rag, sweat running down his face, and a barber with a bag that clinked as if it contained scissors and old razors.

Sancho blinked and groaned. "Well, wonderful. The priest and the barber. Two great figures in our village. One preaches water and drinks wine, the other shaves you and almost slits your throat. If that's any help, sir, then we're already dead."

But Don Quixote stood even more proudly in the saddle, his eyes shining. "Sancho! Don't you see? Heaven sends me advisors! Wise men, envoys who confirm my work! One guards souls, the other guards bodies—together they are the sign that my path is right!"

Sancho rolled his eyes so hard he almost fell over. "Sir, these aren't envoys. They're just two village idiots who don't want to see you lying in the dirt again. And if they're plotting something, it's probably a plan to put you in chains."

The priest raised his hand as if to bless, but his gaze was cool and calculating. "By God... Don Quixote. What has become of you? Rags, blood, dust... you are a shadow."

The barber grinned crookedly and spat in the dust. "Shadow? I'm more likely to see a jumping jack breaking his own bones. And his poor squire along with them."

Sancho grumbled: "Finally, someone says it."

But Quixote bowed solemnly, as if he had just been received by kings.

The priest approached, wiped the sweat from his face with his sleeve, and shook his head as if he'd just found a dead dog. "Oh, Don Quixote... you were once a respected man. Now you look like a beggar swept from the streets. Your face covered in blood, your clothes in tatters, your soul... strayed."

Don Quixote nodded seriously and placed his hand on his heart. "Yes, Father. All this suffering, all these wounds—they are the seal of my glory. Every tear in my clothes is a chapter of my heroic deeds."

The barber laughed loudly and scratched his beard. "Heroic deeds? If those are heroic deeds, then I've created twenty heroes with every shave. You look like you've been run over by a team of oxen, and your squire..."—he pointed at Sancho—"looks like he's been fermenting in a barrel for three days."

Sancho crossed his arms, his face covered in dirt, his belly growling. "Three days? I feel like I've spent 30 years in a barrel. And without the wine."

The priest sighed heavily, his eyes raised to heaven. "God forgive you, Don Quixote. Your madness is consuming you. You need redemption, not further adventures."

Don Quixote shook his head, his gaze transfigured. "No, father. I only need Dulcinea. And the world that awaits me. Your concern honors you, but you don't understand: I have not fallen. I have been raised."

Sancho snorted, murmuring softly, "Raised... yes. Raised in the dust. Exactly where we all land."

Don Quixote raised his arms as if he were standing in the middle of a royal hall. "Oh, noble men! Priests, guardians of souls! Barbers, masters of blades! You are not here by chance—no, heaven itself has sent you to confirm my path. You are emissaries of a higher power, messengers of my lady Dulcinea, who tests me, blesses me, and guides me!"

The priest and the barber exchanged a look – one of those looks that said: *Shit, he's even worse than we thought.*

Sancho groaned loudly and slapped his hand against his forehead. "Ambassadors? Lord, they're two poor village bastards who spend more time chatting than working. If they're ambassadors, then my ass is the Pope."

The barber grinned broadly and patted Sancho on the shoulder. "Your ass would probably make a better pope than that one in the saddle."

Don Quixote ignored this, his gaze glowing. "I recognize in you the wisdom that will help me fulfill my destiny. Dulcinea doesn't send gods, she sends men—simple, but enlightened. You both are signs and wonders!"

Sancho snorted and muttered, "It would be a miracle if you gave me a jug of wine. But all I see is sweating, hypocrisy, and razors."

The priest clasped his hands, his face hypocritically serious. "Don Quixote, if you truly consider us ambassadors, then you will have to listen to us..."

Quixote nodded, sublime, convinced. "Speak, wise men. I am ready."

The priest laid his head close to the barber, his voice barely a scratch in the dust. "Do you hear it? He's worse than ever. If we let him run free, he'll end up dead in a ditch. We have to bring him back. Somehow."

The barber nodded, stroked his chin, his eyes flashing slyly. "Yes. But not by force—he'll immediately conjure up dragons and demons. We have to entice him. With flattery, with a fairy tale that he'll gulp down like a thirsty man gulps down wine."

The priest snorted quietly. "So it's a trick. A holy trick, if you will."

Sancho stood not two steps away, pretending to pet the donkey, but his ears were wide open. *Holy trick, right? I know the smell of betrayal—and it smells of sweat, wine residue, and shaving soap.*

The barber grinned, quietly and dirtyly. "We tell him Dulcinea desperately needs him. That she can only feel at home if he returns to the village. Then he'll go voluntarily."

The priest nodded slowly. "Good. And if that doesn't work, we'll anesthetize him. But it's better if he leaves of his own volition."

Sancho bit his lip and cursed inwardly. *Screw tricks. I'll end up standing in the middle of the storm again. But if it gets us back to the village... maybe I'll finally get my damn jug of wine.*

Don Quixote turned slowly, his eyes sparkling. "Are you whispering, wise men? Is it a secret revelation that will soon be revealed to me?"

The priest smiled hypocritically. "Yes... you could call it that."

Sancho stood there, his hand on his donkey's halter, his belly growling so loudly that it drowned out half the whispers. Nevertheless, he heard enough. "Dulcinea... returning home... trick..."—words buzzing around his head like flies.

He glanced at Quixote, still sitting proudly in the saddle as if he were a king in exile, and then at the two smart-asses, grinning like crooks after a successful theft.

*They want to fool him, thought Sancho. Again. Priests, barbers—they're worse than pickpockets. They act pious, act good, but in their heads they're already calculating how to rip you off.*

But then another feeling came. Hope. As shallow, as cheap as the smell of vinegar. *If they manage to drag him home... then maybe tomorrow I'll really be sitting in the tavern. Bread, cheese, wine. Wine! A whole jug all to myself. No beatings, no windmills, no convicts. Just me, my stomach, and the drunkenness.*

He snorted, wiping the sweat with his sleeve. "Shit," he muttered quietly, "I want it. I want to go back. But I know you dogs—you pull a trick, and I'll end up with a knife at my throat again."

Quixote noticed nothing, his gaze transfigured. "Look at them, Sancho! Two men guided by higher powers. Their whispering is not deception, it is a revelation. Dulcinea herself speaks through them."

Sancho grimaced and spat in the dust. *Dulcinea, my ass. If she doesn't hand me a jug of wine soon, I won't care if she's a princess or a cowgirl.*

And so he stood there: between longing to return home and the bitter suspicion that things would go wrong again.

Don Quixote pulled the reins so tightly that Rocinante raised his head, as if the old horse, too, suddenly had something important to announce. Quixote puffed out his chest, his face covered in dirt and blood, but his voice vibrated as if he were standing on a pulpit.

"Pastor! Barber! You whisper of plans, of paths, of lists. But I tell you: No plan is greater than I. I am the plan! My actions are the law, my will is the map, my heart is the compass. Wherever I go, history follows. Wherever I look, fate trembles."

The priest cleared his throat, the barber grinned evilly. Sancho shook his head, clutching his stomach. "Lord... you are not the plan. At most, you are the catastrophe that awaits at the end of every plan. And me? I am the poor dog, searching for crumbs in the rubble."

But Quixote raised his finger pathetically to heaven. "No, Sancho! Do you hear? No man, no priest, no barber needs lists when I'm here. I am chess piece and chessboard, player and piece. Whoever thinks they're deceiving me is deceiving themselves, for Dulcinea watches over me!"

The barber laughed out loud. "If he's the plan, then we're all already doomed."

Sancho grunted. "We were doomed ever since he bit into the first windmill. Everything after that was just a bonus."

But Quixote smiled, transfigured, with bloody teeth. "I am the plan. And the plan is unstoppable."

The priest and the barber exchanged a long glance, then nodded at each other almost imperceptibly—like two scoundrels who knew the game was won. The priest cleared his throat and clasped his hands together as if he were the angel Gabriel himself. "Don Quixote... it's true. We carry a message. Dulcinea calls for you. She longs for your return, but only if you come to the village. There alone can she appear to you, released from the spell."

Quixote absorbed the words like sacramental wine. His eyes sparkled, his back arched, and he pounded his fist against his heart. "So it is! I knew you were messengers. Dulcinea calls me—and I will follow!"

The barber smiled thinly, already mentally counting how many steps they still had to take before the knight was trapped. "Then let's head home. For her."

Sancho grumbled, trudging after the donkey. "Yes, for her... or for you two, who want to finally take him out of circulation. I don't care. If it means I'll soon have a jug of wine in my hand again, I'll even follow the devil himself."

Quixote rode in front, proud as a general commanding the heavens themselves. The priest and the barber adjusted their false faces, somewhere between hypocrisy and mockery. And Sancho trotted behind, full of doubt, full of thirst, muttering: "If this doesn't go wrong again, I'll eat my hat. But please, Lord God—at least leave an inn along the way."

So they set off: a knight in a frenzy, two tricksters with a plan, and a squire who could only think about alcohol.

And the dust of the country road clung to them like an inevitable omen.

## The nightly dream of fame

The country road had become silent. No birds, no wind, only the chirping of crickets and the distant howling of a dog. The priest, the barber, Quixote, and Sancho had lit a meager fire by the side of the road. A few branches crackled, sparks rose as if they were about to escape again.

Sancho threw himself into the dust next to his donkey, arms outstretched, belly empty. "If I don't fall asleep now, sir," he muttered, "I'll steal the priest's shoes, sell them tomorrow in the next village, and drink myself to death."

The barber laughed softly, the priest shook his head hypocritically. "Always the same disbelief," he muttered, but he yawned so wide that his words fizzled out like a fart.

But Don Quixote sat upright, his face hard in the firelight, his eyes shining. "Sleep, my friends. I will stay awake. I will keep watch over you all. No bandit, no sorcerer, no demon shall approach as long as Don Quixote lives."

Sancho rolled onto his side, pulled his cloak over his legs, and grinned wearily. "Sir, the only demons here are hunger, thirst, and your mouth. If you banish those, you'll have my thanks. Otherwise, not."

Night fell upon them, heavy and gloomy. The fire crackled, the barber's snores began early, muffled and rattling. Sancho drifted off to sleep, the priest murmured a hypocritical prayer before he, too, drifted off.

Only Quixote was still awake, his hand on his sword, his eyes fixed on the sky where the stars sparkled like eyes examining him.

Don Quixote stared into the embers as if fate itself were flickering there. His back was bent from riding, his lips chapped, his hands sore—but in his eyes still burned that holy madness that no beating could extinguish.

"Stay awake," he murmured, "the knight doesn't sleep, he watches. The knight is rock, shield, sword..." But his eyelids grew heavy, like two doors being forced shut by a gust of wind.

He forced them open, looked at the stars, and in them he reflected himself: a hero, a name that rolled through the centuries like thunder. "Don Quixote... Liberator... Protector... Dulcinea's champion..."

His head slowly sank forward, then back up, then down again. Every thought slipped from his fingers, only one remained: Dulcinea. Her name, sweet as wine, hard as iron, floated through the chambers of his skull.

"Dulcinea," he whispered, "my light... my prize... my heaven..."

Sancho snored beside him, rolling in the dust, and farting in his sleep. The barber grunted, the priest murmured an "Amen" in his sleep. But Quixote heard only the sound of the trumpets beginning to blow in his head.

And slowly, very slowly, he slipped away – from the country road, from the dirt, from the stench – into a dream of glory.

The embers faded, the dust disappeared, and Quixote found himself in a vast hall. Torches blazed on the walls, trumpets blazed, and a crowd roared as if the world had found its new messiah.

"Don Quixote!" they cried, a thousand voices, raw, greedy, hungry for a hero. "Don Quixote, savior! Liberator! King of honor!"

He entered, his rags gone, replaced by armor of gold, heavy as guilt and shining as a wet dream. His rusty helmet was now a crown, his broken lance a scepter, and every blow he had ever taken was transformed into cheers.

He strode through the hall, the crowd stretched out their hands, worshipping him. Men knelt, women wept, children sang his name. Everywhere, Don Quixote.

And he absorbed it, breathed it in like the smell of wine after a long dry spell. *This is glory. This is what I bleed for. No dust, no beatings—just my name, great, immortal.*

At the end of the hall stood a throne, tall, shimmering, covered in red velvet, and he ascended it, heavy, dignified, holy. "I am the plan," he murmured in his dream. "I am history."

And the crowd roared until the hall shook.

The hall suddenly fell silent, as if someone had cut through the cheering with a knife. On the other side, heavy doors opened, and a light burst in, bright, dazzling, sweet like the first sip after a week of thirst.

Dulcinea.

She strode in, a long gown, a face cut from stars. The crowd fell to their knees, tears flowed, hands clasped. Don Quixote breathed heavily, his heart pounding as if it would burst his chest. *There she is. My lady. My sun. My holy Dulcinea.*

She came closer, every step a thunderbolt, every glance a blessing. He almost fell from his throne, knelt, and reached out his hands to her. "Lady... I am your knight, your servant, your fool..."

But then—a tear. A tiny twitch in her face, a shadow over her mouth. Her smile twisted, became crooked. Her skin was stained, dirty, sweaty. Water dripped from her robe, heavy and stinking, like from a stable.

The goddess transformed. Instead of stars in her hair, straw clung to it. Instead of golden hands, he saw cracked, calloused fingers. Her voice, which had just been sweet, suddenly sounded harsh, annoyed, full of curses: "Carry the damned jug yourself, you old fool!"

Don Quixote gasped and shook his head, but the hall laughed. First quietly, then louder. The crowd pointed fingers at him, shrieked, and roared until the echo rained down on him like blows.

And Dulcinea – the goddess, the maid – turned around, spat in the dust and walked away.

Don Quixote toppled from his throne and knelt in the dust of the hall, while the crowd around him laughed, roared, and jeered. The echo roared like a thousand beer bellies belching in unison.

His golden armor crumbled, splintered, and fell off like cheap paint, until the old rags reappeared—torn, covered in dirt and blood. His crown became a rusty helmet, his scepter a stick that broke in half.

The cheering crowd transformed. Instead of noble men and women, he saw peasants with dirty faces, robbers with knives, convicts with malicious grins. And they all shouted, "Hero! Hero! Savior!" – while spitting in his face and kicking him.

The hall warped, tilted, and suddenly he was lying in the dust of a country road again. No throne, no goddess. Only blows, clubs, blood, dust. His "victories" passed him by: the windmills that hurled him through the air; the overseer who beat him like a dog; the convicts who threatened him. Every triumph a punch, every glory a bruise.

And the laughter, oh God, the laughter—it mingled with the pounding of his heart, with the buzzing of flies, with the snoring from the real world.

He reached for air, for a sword, for something to hold on to – but all he held in his hands was dust.

"Dulcinea..." he murmured. But even her name tasted of dirt and iron.

Sancho lay stretched out in the dust, his coat half-pulled over him, his hands on his stomach. He snored so deeply it sounded like an old door creaking in the wind somewhere.

In his dream, he was no longer on the country road. He was in a tavern, large, warm, packed with people drinking and making noise. Before him stood a table, crooked and sticky, and on it: bread, cheese, fried sausages, jugs full of wine, so many that they bent the table.

"This is it," he mumbled sleepily. "This is my heaven."

In his dream, he reached for a pitcher and tipped it into himself—the red wine flowed down his chin, into his rags. He laughed, belched, and another pitcher came, another, another. "More! More and more!"

He bit into a sausage, greasy and dripping, the fat running down his fingers. A loaf of bread, thickly spread with garlic, lay ready. He stuffed himself, laughing, snorting, and drinking at the same time.

Beside him, in his sleep, a fart escaped him, a long, contented fart, a comment on the party. The barber next door turned around in annoyance, the priest muttered "sin" in his sleep—but Sancho was far away.

His face gleamed in the firelight, a broad grin in his sleep. He continued to dream, of an innkeeper's wife bringing him the next pitcher and a donkey pushing bread and cheese onto the table. "Yes, my boy," he laughed, "you're the best squire."

While Quixote sank into the darkness of madness, Sancho lay in the paradise of intoxication.

The sky turned gray, the fire was nothing but ash, cold and gray like an empty jug after a night of drinking. The crickets fell silent, and the country road lay there again, endless and desolate.

Don Quixote's eyes widened, his body jerking up as if he'd spent the night negotiating with the gods. His face was dusty, his lips chapped, but his eyes shone like freshly oiled lanterns. "Sancho! Today our greatest work begins. I've seen what's coming. Glory, Sancho, glory that shakes the earth! Dulcinea calls me, louder than ever!"

Sancho lay on his back, arms outstretched, mouth dry. His head pounded as if he'd drunk a dozen mugs without seeing a drop. "Glory, sir? The only thing calling me is the pain in my skull. I feel like an ox trampled through my head. And you know what the worst part is? I had the best dream of my life—and now I wake up here. With you. In the dust. Without wine. Without sausage."

The barber yawned, the priest mumbled his morning prayers, pretending everything was perfectly normal. But Sancho cursed quietly, holding his empty stomach, which growled again.

"I tell you, sir," he grumbled, "I have a hangover without having had anything to drink. It's torture. If heaven were just, it would have left me in the tavern."

Don Quixote was already standing there, sword in hand, proud as a king. "No, Sancho. Heaven has left you here—because today is the day of greatness."

Sancho pulled the blanket over his head and muttered, "Shit. Then at least give me a jug so I can endure this."

So their new day began – with glory in the head of one and thirst in the bones of the other.

### Sancho discovers the art of cunning

The sun had been burning on their necks for hours. The dust clung to their skin and tongues, and Sancho trotted barefoot beside his donkey as if he were on his way to his own execution. His stomach growled like a stray dog that hadn't smelled garbage in three days.

"Lord," he lamented, "I swear, I'm emptier than a wine jug after a wedding. My stomach is sticking to my back, my tongue is so dry it's about to crack in the

sun. If a piece of bread and a sip of wine don't appear somewhere, I'll just fall over and stay there."

Don Quixote sat on Rocinante, haughty as ever, his eyes transfigured. "Sancho, endure the suffering! Every step in the dust is a step closer to Dulcinea. She is our goal, she is our bread, she is our wine. He who lives for her will never go hungry!"

Sancho stopped, staring at him, his eyes blazing like knives. "Sir... with all due respect. Dulcinea doesn't fill my stomach. I can say her name a hundred times, but it still won't fill me up. If I eat her name, the most I'll do is shit letters. And I can't buy anything with that."

Quixote didn't hear him, already lost in his dreams again, his arms raised as if angels were marching with fanfares. "Oh Dulcinea! Your name nourishes me!"

Sancho sighed heavily, spat in the dust and trudged on. *Shit, he thought. If I keep complaining, I'll die of thirst here. The old man can't hear me. He only hears his own nonsense. So... if he falls for words, I'll just feed him the words he wants to eat. And I'll get my fill in the process.*

He grinned crookedly. "Perhaps, Sancho, you finally need to learn not just to endure the world... but to make a fool of it."

Sancho blinked at the sun that was baking his skull, and then his gaze fell on a tattered scrap of an inn: an old signpost, leaning in the ground, with a half-scraped image—a chalice, next to it a loaf of bread, barely recognizable.

His stomach growled so loudly that he almost laughed. *There, Sancho, is your salvation.*

He stopped, threw up his arms, and acted as if struck by lightning. "Lord! By all the saints—look there! A sign! A true sign from Dulcinea!"

Don Quixote pulled on the reins, and Rocinante stopped in the dust. "A sign, you say? Where?"

Sancho pointed at the weathered signpost with a trembling finger. "There! Don't you see? A chalice! Bread! The symbols of body and soul! Dulcinea herself has marked this path for us to follow! She wants us to stop here—to gather strength for your next heroic deed!"

Quixote stared for a long time, his eyes shining, his mouth trembling. "By God... you're right, Sancho. Only the blind wouldn't see that. She's testing us—and rewarding us!"

Sancho bit his lip, almost trying to hide his grin. "Exactly, sir. A test. And the reward lies a little further down the path—in the form of jugs of wine."

Quixote raised his hand solemnly. "Forward, Sancho! Dulcinea is calling!"

Sancho murmured, "Yes, she's calling me to the table."

And for the first time in days, he realized how his cunning was getting him further than all his whining.

The tavern stood crookedly on the side of the road, a wooden shack with dirty windows from which smoke and laughter billowed. Sancho smelled the wine even before he pushed open the door.

"Lord, do you see?" he gasped, his eyes shining. "The sign has guided us!"

Don Quixote entered, his head held high as if striding into a temple. The guests turned and stared at the two figures—one a scoundrel in the dust, the other a fat squire with eyes like a dying man.

"Innkeeper!" roared Sancho, "a jug as big as my donkey's head, and some bread with it, before I die here!"

The innkeeper, a gray-bearded dog in an apron, actually placed a pitcher on the table—heavy, shiny, filled with dark red. Sancho reached for it, tipped it, and the first sip ran down his chin and throat, sweet, sour, raw. He laughed, a sound that sounded half like crying. "Oh God... this is life. This is salvation. This is my Dulcinea!"

Don Quixote solemnly placed his hand on the jug, as if it were a holy chalice. "Sancho, drink with reverence. This is not ordinary wine—this is the drink Dulcinea bestows upon us, the sacrament of our mission."

Sancho coughed, wiped his mouth, and grinned filthily. "Sacrament? If this is a sacrament, then I swear I'll become Pope tomorrow—if the Pope can knock back a jug like this every night."

The guests laughed, the innkeeper grinned, and Sancho took another sip, bigger, greedier, while Quixote looked at the jug reverently, as if it had just fallen from the sky.

And Sancho thought: *Shit, this is working. A little drama, and I'll get drunk.*

Sancho wiped his mouth, wine still running down his lips, as he looked at Quixote, who was staring fixedly and transfiguredly into the barroom as if he were sitting in the middle of a cathedral.

*If he considers wine a sacrament, then he swallows the rest,* thought Sancho, and started, sweet as a landlord who sells you the last diluted drop as "vintage."

"Sir..." he began with feigned reverence. "Did you notice? When we arrived, the room was dark, the fire small, and the faces tired. But as soon as you stepped over the threshold, light burst in. I swear on my donkey—the sun itself rose as you entered the room."

Quixote's head whipped around, his eyes flashing, and he placed his hand over his heart. "The sun...? Yes! I felt it! A ray that blessed me. Dulcinea has consecrated my arrival."

Sancho nodded, as serious as a liar who almost believes his own story. "Of course, sir. I mean, look around—the people here look differently. They don't see two poor bastards. No, they see you, the knight who leads even the sun like a dog on a leash."

A few farmers at the next table grinned dirtyly, one belched, another muttered: "If he leads the sun, then I lead the moon in my pants." – and the group laughed.

But Quixote heard only Sancho's voice. "Sancho, my faithful squire, your eyes are the purest. If even you can see it, then it must be true. Dulcinea has enlightened me. I—I am the light."

Sancho took another sip and grinned into the jug. *Shit, he'll eat it. He'll eat every morsel if you just garnish it with honor.*

Sancho tipped the jug, wiped his mouth with his sleeve, and saw Quixote sitting in the corner, looking as transfigured as if he had just seen the Virgin Mary herself in the bar.

*Shit, thought Sancho, That really works. A little babble, and he swallows it like a donkey swallows dry straw. I tell him the sun is his buddy – and he believes it, as if he himself had pulled it out of the sky by its tail.*

He grinned into his beard and leaned back. *So, Sancho, remember this: complaining will get you a beating. But a good lie? That'll get you bread, wine, and maybe even a warm place to sleep.*

He looked at Quixote, who was nodding seriously, moving his lips, probably chanting a silent prayer to Dulcinea. *Yes, Mr. Ritter, thought Sancho, You're the preacher—and I'm the guy who collects the collection plate in the back. And guess who gets his help first.*

A farmer at the next table roared with laughter because he'd found a fly dropping in his beer. Sancho raised his mug and toasted him. "Screw it," he muttered, "the main thing is that it blows your head."

And a small, nasty pride grew within him. He, Sancho, the eternal whipping boy, held the reins for the first time. Not from Rocinante, not from the donkey—but from Don Quixote himself.

*Shit yeah, he grinned. It's an art. The art of cunning. And I'm learning it faster than I can drink a pitcher of beer.*

Quixote jumped up from his stool, the old bar counter creaking under his movement. His gaze wandered around the room, his hands raised as if he were preaching to an invisible court.

"Sancho!" he thundered, "you were right! Don't you see? Everything here is a sign! The smoke above the fireplace—it rises like incense sent by Dulcinea! The jug of wine—not earthly, no, it is a chalice of purity! And even this peasant who spat in the beer—he is the symbol that even in the lowly dwells the divine!"

The guests roared and laughed, one shouted: "Hey, holy man, then drink my spittoon if it's so divine!" – and the laughter doubled.

Sancho grimaced and held the jug tighter. *Shit. I overdid it. Now the old man sees every fart as a miracle.*

Quixote grabbed Sancho by the shoulder, his eyes glowing like torches. "Do you understand, my friend? We are chosen! We, among peasants and robbers, in the middle of the dust—and yet the light of Dulcinea shines above us! Every drop of wine you drink is a drop of her grace!"

Sancho stared at him, swallowed, and grinned crookedly. "Yes... of course, sir. Every drop... pure grace." Then he tipped the jug and muttered, "And if this is grace, then I damn well never want to sin again."

The crowd roared, Quixote waved his arms, the innkeeper rubbed his hands because the madmen were about to hand over their last coins. And Sancho just thought:*Cunning brings you wine... but it makes him even crazier. And that means things will soon get heated again.*

Sancho sat at the rickety table, his stomach finally half full, his head warm from the wine. Next to him, Quixote roared a sermon about omens, signs, and Dulcinea, while half the tavern staff laughed and the other half just drank because life would have been even more unbearable otherwise.

Sancho rested his head in his hand and glanced at his master.*Shit, he's further removed from reality than ever. And I pushed him there myself.*

He took another sip, feeling the cheap booze scratching his throat.*But whatever. Complaining makes you hungry. Lying makes you full. It's that simple.*

One guest roared, another vomited in the corner, the innkeeper counted coins, and Quixote gave a speech as if he were emperor in Rome. Sancho laughed softly, a grin spreading across his face.

"You know what, sir?" he muttered into the jug. "As far as I'm concerned, you can be the prophet, the saint, the nutcase. The main thing is that I get my share. If I lie to you and you believe it – then that's my victory. Finally, my damn victory."

He toasted his own reflection in the wine, belched and thought:*Sancho Panza, you're no longer just a butt for a beating. You're a liar with style. A poor dog, yes—but one who's learned to hide his own bones.*

He grinned, broadly, dirty, contentedly.

And outside the wind howled as if it were laughing at both of them.

### Don Quixote against the flock of sheep

The sun burned like a curse, the dust lay heavy on the country road, when Don Quixote suddenly tightened his reins and held his hand before his face, as if

peering into another world. His eyes shone like those of a madman who has finally found what he's been waiting for: an enemy.

"Sancho!" he cried, his voice trembling. "Don't you see? There, in the dust! An army! Lines of soldiers, banners waving, shields, swords! This is the hour my glory will be sealed!"

Sancho stopped, squinted into the distance, and wiped the sweat from his eyes. All he saw was a gray cloud moving slowly. Then he heard it: a bleating, dull, steady, almost ridiculous.

He laughed dryly, bitterly. "Sir... those aren't soldiers. They're sheep. A damned flock. Do you hear? Bleating, not a battle cry. Manure, not blood. Wool, not steel."

But Quixote shook his head violently, his face full of glory. "No, Sancho! It's just the sorcerer trying to deceive my eyes! He wants me to see sheep in them so I won't recognize the army. But I see the truth—giants, knights, enemy banners! And I will destroy them in the name of Dulcinea!"

Sancho tugged at his hair and spat in the dust. "Shit, sir, if you ride off now, you'll end up face down in the manure. But you won't listen to me anyway. So please – go off and show the sheep who's the biggest idiot around here."

The herd approached, their bleating filled the air. Quixote raised his lance, his eyes glowing, and Rocinante snorted, as if he sensed this was about to hurt again.

Don Quixote stood upright in his saddle, his lance tilted, his armor clattering, as if he were about to ride into eternity. His voice rose, full of thunder, full of bombast, as if he were preaching to kings.

"Hear me, Sancho! Before us lies not a herd of beasts—no! Before us marches the army of tyranny, the brood of injustice, the enemies of honor! Their banners flutter in the wind, their swords thirst for blood, and only I, Don Quixote de la Mancha, am chosen to break them! For Dulcinea, for truth, for the glory that never fades!"

Sancho stood beside it, sweating, his hands on the donkey's halter, and snorted. "Sir... those are sheep. They poop, they bleat, they eat. The only banners fluttering are their tail hairs in the wind. If you call that an army, then my ass is the general."

But Quixote was undeterred; he stared into the shimmering light as if he saw a thousand spears gleaming. "I hear drums, Sancho! Don't you hear the thunder of hooves?"

Sancho put his hands over his face. "Yes, I hear something. The bleating. That's not thunder, that's a sheep calling for its mother while it's about to shit in your face."

Quixote raised his lance, his face burning, his lips trembling. "Then be witness, Sancho. Be witness how a knight marches alone against an army—and returns victorious!"

Sancho groaned, looked up to heaven, and murmured: "Lord, when you return, you will be full of wool rather than full of glory."

But Quixote urged Rocinante on, and the old horse set off, groaning, into the cloud of dust, into the laughter of the gods.

Rocinante stumbled forward, his bones creaking, the dust rising like a curtain of smoke, and Don Quixote lowered his lance as if charging an imperial army.

"For Dulcinea!" he roared, his voice so shrill that even the crows took flight.

The sheep looked up, frightened, bleated loudly, and scattered. A gray cloud of wool, dung, and panic filled the air. But to Quixote's eyes, it was the tumult of battle: lances flashed, helmets clanged, shields clashed.

He stabbed a fat ram with his lance, which ran away in terror, leaving a small pile of flesh in its wake. Quixote, however, rejoiced: "A general fallen! Look, Sancho, the army is trembling!"

Sancho stood by the roadside, his hands in his hair, yelling, "Sir, you're stabbing shit, not steel! They're damned sheep, not knights!"

But Quixote heard nothing. He swung his lance like a berserker, blazing among the animals as they scattered, bleating and kicking. The dust settled on his head like a crown as he mowed down new "heroes" with each blow.

A sheep jumped over Rocinante in panic. Quixote saw it as a flying demon, raised his sword and struck at nothing, only to almost fall from his saddle.

Sancho knelt in the dust, screaming: "Damn it, why do you let me travel with this madman? I'd rather be a goatherd than a squire to this madman!"

The sheep bleated, their hooves drummed, and Quixote rode into the middle of them, a king without a crown, a fool in a cloud of dung.

Quixote raged in the middle of the herd, his lance thrusting into the air, his rusty sword clanging, and his cries almost drowned out the panicked bleating.

"Down, you traitors! For Dulcinea! For glory and honor!" he roared, hacking at a sheep that simply ran away, its eyes wide with fear.

A goat leaped past him, nearly knocking him out of his saddle. Quixote mistook it for the attack of an enemy giant, parried with his sword, struck at nothing, and exclaimed triumphantly: "Another fallen! The Titans are wavering!"

Sancho stood at the side, his head in his hands. "Sir... you're slaughtering sheep! Bleating sheep who haven't done anything to you except now think you're the biggest idiot in Spain."

A young lamb stumbled against Rocinante's hooves, and Quixote cried out as if an enemy spy had been discovered. He grabbed it by the fur and lifted it up, while it bleated pitifully. "Sancho, look! A prisoner! He'll tell me their secrets!"

Sancho nearly fell into the dust in shame, his hands pressed to his face. "Sir, that's not a prisoner, that's a damn lamb! Let it go before you roast it!"

But Quixote was deaf to reason. In his head, he was a general, a victor, a hero in a world of glory. In reality, he stood knee-deep in manure, his face covered in sweat, blood—and sheep dung.

And Sancho thought: *If there is a God, he's laughing his ass off right now.*

The commotion had long since passed the point where it was still laughable. Quixote was screaming like a madman, stabbing in the air, a lamb thrashing frantically in his hand, while the herd scattered, bleating.

Then they appeared – the shepherds. Three burly men, tanned, with clubs in their hands and anger on their faces. One yelled: "Hey, you fool! Leave the animals alone, or we'll make mincemeat out of you!"

Quixote turned to them, his sword raised. "Ah! Reinforcements for the enemy army! Come, I fear you not—I, Don Quixote, Knight of the Sorrowful Countenance, will destroy you in the name of Dulcinea!"

The shepherds looked at each other, then one of them grabbed a stone, heavy, round, straight from the earth. He hurled it, and it struck Quixote right in the chest. The knight gasped, swayed, but held his saddle valiantly.

"More giants!" he roared, "throwing boulders! Oh, what a heroic battle!"

The second shepherd slammed his club against his helmet, making the rusty bucket rattle. Quixote staggered, raised his lance—and Rocinante stumbled as if he'd had enough of this shit.

Sancho ran up, arms in the air. "Stop, stop! He's crazy! He doesn't know what he's doing!"

"Then hold him back before we beat him to death!" yelled one of the shepherds, sending another stone that whizzed just past Quixote's ear.

But Quixote raised his hand, bleeding, staggering, and gasped: "This is how heroes are tested... only this way..."

Then the next blow hit him and he fell like a sack in the dust.

Sancho ran, panting and cursing, and grabbed his master, who lay in the dust like a broken jug. Quixote was wheezing, his armor dented, blood on his forehead, his lance lost somewhere among the dung and sheep droppings.

"Lord! Damn it, Lord, I told you!" Sancho tugged at his arm while the shepherds were still threatening him with clubs. "If you touch him again, I'll hit you—well, probably not, but I'll scream damn loud!"

The shepherds snorted and spat in the dust. "Keep your idiot in check, farmer, or next time we'll dig him a hole!"

Sancho nodded and led Quixote away from the herd, while the men rounded up their animals. After just a few minutes, the drama was over—the sheep were grazing peacefully, bleating stupidly as if nothing had happened.

Sancho let Quixote sink into the dust, half supporting him. "Sir, do you see? Everything's back to normal. The sheep eat, the shepherds curse, and we... we lie in the dirt. You call that glory? I call it the same old shit."

Quixote blinked, his lips bloody, his voice a whisper. "Sancho... I... fought bravely... they were many... and I alone..."

Sancho stared at him, shaking his head. "Alone? Lord, you weren't alone. I was there. I was there and saw you again getting your asses spanked by sheep."

He sighed and helped him up. "Come on, sir. Before they come back and finish you off. And if you hear an army bleating again, I swear I'll hit you with my club myself."

Don Quixote staggered, every step staggering like a drunk after ten too many pints. His helmet was dented, his forehead was bloody, his shirt was covered in dung. But his eyes glowed as if he had just conquered empires.

"Sancho..." he murmured, panting, "did you see? An entire army... defeated. They fled before me, their ranks broke, their banners fell. I have triumphed... for Dulcinea!"

Sancho stopped, puffed, wiped the sweat from his face, and laughed dryly. "Victorious? Lord, the only ones who have won are the sheep. They're grazing again as if nothing had ever happened. And the shepherds have crushed your bones. If that's victory, then I'd rather remain a loser—with a full belly and a jug of wine."

Quixote staggered, smiling blissfully. "Your cynicism, Sancho, is blind. The world will sing of my deed."

Sancho spat in the dust and pulled the donkey by the halter. "The world will laugh, sir. And I will too. But not at fame—but at the biggest fool it has ever seen. And you know what? I'd rather be fighting my thirst than your sheep. At least that fight can be won."

The sun was high, the flies were buzzing, and the sheep were bleating harmlessly in the background.

And so the "victor" left the highway, bloody, stinking, accompanied by a squire who was more thirsty than hopeful.

### The laughter of the world

The country road stretched endlessly like a scar through the dust. Don Quixote hung crooked in the saddle, his armor dented like an old tin can that someone

had thrown stones at. Blood clung to his forehead, sheep dung on his legs. Rocinante trotted like a tired dog that had long since given up.

Sancho walked beside him, his donkey on a rope, his eyes half-closed, his face puffy with fatigue and anger. He muttered curses that would have made even the devil's ears ring.

Two traders with mules came towards them, men with weather-beaten faces who had seen it all—but at this sight, they immediately burst into laughter. First a grin, then a snort, then loud laughter.

"Holy Mary," one roared, "what is that? A knight? Or a laundry bag dragged through the alley?"

The other pointed, laughing until he cried. "Look at that helmet! Dented like an old pan. And the little one next to it – looks like he slept in the basement of a tavern for three days."

Sancho stopped, crossed his arms, and glared at the two. "Laugh all you dogs. At least I still have all my teeth. And if you keep laughing, I'll break one of you—with my damned hungry breath."

The traders just laughed louder, urged on their mules, and shouted, "Farewell, sheep knight! Beware of the herds!"

Sancho sighed and trudged on. Quixote, however, straightened up in the saddle as proudly as he could and murmured gloriously: "They mock, Sancho, because they are jealous. The true hero is always laughed at before he is honored."

Sancho spat in the dust. "Or laughed at before he dies."

The village lay before them, small, dusty, full of crooked huts. And children—always children. Sancho hated children. Not because they were evil, but because they always laughed mercilessly and honestly when a man was already deep in the mud.

And then they came running: ten or twelve brats with snotty noses and bare feet. They pointed at Quixote, shrieked, and the first one roared: "There he is! The knight who fights sheep!"

The others joined in: "Sheep Knights! Sheep Knights!" – a shrill echo that flew through the street like daggers.

A boy picked up a stone and threw it, hitting Quixote's helmet with a dull clatter. The children shrieked with laughter and threw more.

Sancho shouted: "Hey, you little devils! Stop that or I'll hit you..." –*GOSSIP!*– a stone hit him on the shoulder. "Ouch, damn it!"

The snot-nosed animals squealed, hopped, and threw things. One shouted, "Watch out, or the herd will come!" Another bleated so realistically that even the donkey pricked up its ears.

Sancho raised his fist threateningly, but they only laughed harder. A stone hit him in the buttocks, and he jumped up, cursing: "You bastards! I'll kick you to hell if I catch you!"

But Don Quixote sat upright, blood dripping, his helmet dented, and spoke with calm dignity: "Sancho, let them go. Children mock because they are not yet mature enough to recognize the greatness of a hero. There is only ignorance in their laughter."

Sancho rubbed his shoulder and growled, "Ignorance, my ass. They're little monsters. And they know exactly how to throw stones."

The children ran away, the laughter echoing after them like a mocking trumpet.

The tavern was crowded, stuffy, the floor sticky, the air saturated with cheap wine and sweat. Quixote and Sancho entered, both filthy, one bloody, the other stinking. As soon as they closed the door behind them, a roar erupted.

"There they are!" someone at the table shouted. "The knight and his squire! The great conqueror of sheep!"

Another stood up, raised his mug, and bleated so loudly that the whole tavern joined in: "Baa, baa!"

The laughter swelled, pitchers banged on the tables, men doubled over with laughter, women giggled, children under the tables joined in the laughter. One almost fell off his chair, he was snorting so hard.

Sancho stopped, his face turning red. "Sir... we should go. Immediately."

But Quixote stepped solemnly into the center of the room, his hands raised, his helmet tilted, but with a dignity no one else saw. "You laugh because you don't

understand. You see sheep, I saw an army. You see defeat, I witnessed triumph. The laughter of the world is merely the echo of its blindness!"

The tavern erupted in jeers. One man threw a piece of bread, which hit Quixote on the head. Another shouted, "Watch out, knight, or a goat will run you over!"

Sancho pressed his hands over his ears. "Sir, that's not envy. That's mockery. And it hits us both. I'm about to get ashamed as a hangover."

But Quixote stood there as if he were a martyr being stoned in the marketplace – only here pieces of bread, laughter, and a few drops of wine flew.

And the tavern shook with laughter that seeped through every crack like smoke.

Don Quixote raised his arms, his helmet wobbled, blood dripped from his ear, but he stood there as if delivering a coronation speech. The tavern erupted, laughter rolled like a wave—and he spoke against it, his voice hoarse but full of fire.

"Just laugh, you fools! Laugh at me as the prophets were once laughed at! The true hero doesn't wear laurels on his head—he carries the laughter of the world on his shoulders. Every one of your mockeries is a medal, every insult a knighthood. You laugh because you are small—and I am great!"

A farmer yelled, "Big? Big as a scarecrow!" – and the tavern almost collapsed with laughter.

Quixote was undeterred. He beat his heart, his voice trembling. "You think you're belittling me with your mockery. But I tell you: The laughter of the world is the music of glory! Today you are fools, tomorrow you'll sing songs of Don Quixote, the one who fought armies where you've only seen cattle!"

The guests howled, one fell off his chair, another spat wine across the table with laughter. A drunk shouted, "Then I'll sing: Baa, baa, Don Quixote!" – and the entire tavern joined in, bleating in unison.

Sancho sat beside him with his head hanging, his hands pressed into his lap as if he wanted to sink into the ground. "Sir... don't you hear? This isn't respect, this is pure mockery."

But Quixote smiled blissfully, raised the jug that someone had mockingly placed before him, and murmured: "And yet I drink to their envy."

Sancho sat there, his back arched, his hands in his lap, while the tavern roared. Bread flew, cups tipped, and the "baaaaa" rang out as if the world had been turned into a stable.

He raised his head and tried again. "Hey, stop it, you drunks! You have no idea what we went through!"

But that made it worse. One guy yelled, "Yeah, we have no idea what it's like to lose to sheep!" – and the whole place exploded.

Sancho flailed his arms, his voice faltering. "He's no fool! He's..." – then he broke off. Because suddenly he heard himself, and it sounded so ridiculous, so pathetic, that he couldn't bear it any longer.

And he laughed. First a cough, then a grin, then a throaty laugh that almost burst his ribs. He laughed, tears welling up in his eyes, as he raised the mug and snorted.

"Shit," he gasped, "Shit, you're right! My master is fighting sheep, and I'm the idiot standing by!"

People patted him on the back, cheered with him, and for the first time Sancho didn't laugh *above* Quixote, but *with* the world about itself.

It was an evil, dirty, bitter laugh – but it also freed him, for a moment.

But Quixote looked at him, serious, like a father catching his son in a sin. "Sancho..." he murmured, disappointed.

Sancho wiped his eyes and grinned crookedly. "Lord, if I don't laugh, I cry. And that doesn't get us anywhere."

The tavern was boiling, wine was sloshing, voices were booming, and then he staggered up: a fat farmer, his waistcoat open, his belly like a barrel, his eyes glassy, his mouth dripping with booze.

He stopped directly in front of Don Quixote, swayed, grinned crookedly – and leaned forward.

A rumbling, wet sound rolled from within him, first like thunder, then like a horn, until a disgusting blast of air hit Quixote right in the face. A belch so long, so foul, that half the tavern banged on the tables in jubilation.

"Hah! There, knight! Greetings from the belly!" roared the farmer, slapping his belly and laughing.

Sancho grimaced and waved his hand. "Holy shit, sir, that's not a greeting—that's a stomach attack!"

People were doubled over with laughter, some almost rolled under the table.

But Don Quixote stood rigid, dignified, slowly wiped his face—and nodded. "Sancho... you see? Even in belching, I am honored. The man expelled the inner demons from his belly to show me respect."

The tavern roared, one fell back into the embers and cursed, while the others roared.

Sancho clapped his hand to his forehead. "Sir... if that's respect, then I never want to see honor again."

But Quixote nodded solemnly, as if he had just been anointed with incense.

In the morning, they stumbled out again, the sun harsh, the dust merciless. The tavern was behind them, but the laughter still clung to the walls of their minds.

Quixote sat on Rocinante, crooked and dented, but with his chin raised. "Sancho... they laughed, but I tell you: this is the path of the hero. First mockery, then glory."

Sancho trotted alongside, hands in his pockets, stomach empty, eyes heavy. "Glory? Lord, I can still hear the 'baaaa' in my ears. That wasn't a mockery, that was a choir. And we were the main act."

From afar, another cry came across the fields: "Sheep Knights! Baa!" – the echo followed them like a chain.

Quixote closed his eyes and murmured blissfully: "They are trials. Trials that will purify me."

Sancho snorted and spat in the dust. "Nothing here will purify me. I'm dirty, hungry, and thirsty. And when the world laughs, I laugh too—because otherwise I'd just cry."

Rocinante stumbled, the donkey snorted, and the two figures moved on—one with burning madness, the other with his head hanging.

Behind them the laughter, in front of them the dust.

### In search of new adventures

The sun hung like a rusty pan over the country road, the dust heavy in the air. Don Quixote sat hunched over on Rocinante, but his eyes sparkled as if he had found divine revelation in the world's mockery.

"Sancho," he began in a thunderous voice, "you've heard it. The laughter, the insults. And yet I tell you: no mockery can break me. No—it hardens me! Every mockery is a nail in the crown of glory I will wear. I need new adventures, greater, more dangerous ones. Only then will the laughter of the world fall silent."

Sancho trudged alongside, his stomach empty, his head full of dust, and growled: "Sir... I don't need an adventure. I need bread. Ham. A jug of wine. And when the world laughs, it laughs—but I'm no longer laughing with it. My stomach is emptier than your helmet after the last blow."

Quixote raised his lance as if already pointing into the next inferno. "Sancho, don't you understand? The laughter is the proof! The world only laughs at those it fears. They mocked Hercules, Alexander, Caesar—and now they mock me. I must show them that Don Quixote is not a man of mockery, but of glory!"

Sancho rolled his eyes and wiped away the sweat. "Sir, if Caesar had looked like you do now, no pig would have mocked him. They would have simply thrown him into the nearest hole. And Hercules... he would have carried us both to the tavern with one finger and said: 'Sit down, eat, drink, shut up.' And I swear to you—that would have been the greatest hero in history."

But Quixote didn't listen. He was already far away again, somewhere between fame, legend, and madness.

Sancho trudged along, his shoulders slumped, his tongue heavy as lead. "Sir," he growled, "I'll tell you straight: I want to go home. Home to my wife, home to my bed, home to a piece of bread and a jug of wine. I've had enough of dust, of sheep, of stones thrown at my ass by children. I'm not a hero, I'm a peasant—and peasants belong where the food is hot and the beer is cold."

Quixote straightened in the saddle as if heaven itself had struck him in the ribs with a whip. "Sancho, don't you dare think small! Peasants, yes—they plow the earth, they eat, and they sleep. But knights... knights plow the stars! Knights

eat glory and sleep in immortality. You are my squire, my companion. Your place is not at home with soup and women—your place is at my side, where world history is written!"

Sancho stopped and put his hands on his hips. "Sir, you can keep the history of the world. I want my wife, my donkey, and my damned wine. If I walk around with you another day, the most I'll end up writing is a story about how some idiot starved to death while his master gulped down air."

But Quixote looked down at him seriously, his voice deep like a preacher: "Sancho, think of Dulcinea. Think of honor. Think of the song that will one day be sung about you: 'Sancho Panza, the faithful squire who never wavered.' Do you want to be mocked in the taverns as a traitor?"

Sancho grumbled, kicking a stone away. "Sir, in the taverns, all they want to hear is how much wine someone can handle. And that song about me? Only my wife will sing that when I finally get home—and it will go: 'Sancho, you stink, sit down and eat.'"

Quixote raised his hand solemnly, as if he had made a vow. "No, Sancho. We move on. Not homeward bound, but toward glory."

Sancho groaned, trotted off again, and muttered, "Shit. Fame should pay me a jug of wine, or I'll vomit it right into the dust."

They trudged on when a hunched figure appeared on the horizon—a pilgrim, dressed in rags, with a staff in his hand and a bag over his shoulder. His face burned by the sun, his feet bloody.

"Peace be with you," he croaked when they met. "But beware, knight... peasant... whoever you are. Ahead of you lies a ravine, and there robbers are up to mischief. They take everyone's last penny, and anyone who resists is left half-dead in the ditch."

Sancho swallowed, his eyes wide. "Robbers? Shit, sir, that's it. This is the end of me. They'll smash our bones, and my donkey will be the only thing left."

But Don Quixote immediately stood up, his eyes shining. "Sancho! Do you hear? Not robbers—no! Dark knights, supporters of injustice, minions of evil! Finally, a worthy opponent! An army that doesn't bleat, but fights!"

Sancho grabbed his boot. "Sir, these aren't knights, they're damned bandits! Men with clubs, not swords. They want money, not glory. And we have nothing but dirt in our pockets—they beat us for nothing!"

But Quixote grinned, blood from the last fight still on his lips. "Sancho, that's exactly why: He who has nothing has everything to give. And I give them my blade. For Dulcinea, for honor!"

The pilgrim stared at him, then burst into a hoarse laugh. "You're crazy, knight. But if you go down—good luck. The world needs fools like you, so the others have something to laugh about."

He continued to limp, while Sancho muttered, "Yeah, go on laughing, old man. In the end, I'm the fool who goes along."

A few miles further, they met another traveler—a merchant with a bulging cart pulled by two oxen. He was sweaty, his cap askew, but there was pride in his voice.

"Have you heard?" he cried. "The daughter of the rich merchant from Toboso is traveling through the region. A beauty, they say, so finely dressed that one could easily mistake her for a princess. With servants, with carriages, with jewelry—a procession that amazes the villages."

Sancho groaned, holding his stomach. "Great. Another rich brat who wants nothing to do with us. Lord, don't listen."

But Quixote was already intoxicated. His eyes glittered, his hands clenched on the reins. "A princess, you say? A fair maiden, perhaps in distress? Dulcinea herself could have sent her, as a test for me! Oh, holy heavens, this is no coincidence—this is fate!"

Sancho grimaced. "Destiny? Lord, this is at most a move with far too much luggage. And if you interfere, their servants will chase us away with whips. I can see it."

The merchant grinned broadly, chewing on a piece of bread. "Go ahead and interfere, knight. In the end, she might laugh at you like everyone else."

But Quixote nodded solemnly. "No. She will recognize me. A princess always recognizes her protector. She will see in me what the world doesn't—the hero she is destined to be."

Sancho put his hand to his face and muttered, "If she sees anything in you, she'll probably be the next laughing stock."

The merchant drove on, giggling, leaving dust behind.

But Quixote stared into the distance as if he already had the crown in his sights.

Sancho trudged alongside, sweating, his face covered in dust, muttering, "Sir, I tell you again: That's no princess, she's a merchant's daughter. She has more jewelry than brains and more servants than you have teeth. If you interfere, you'll end up in the ditch. I swear."

Quixote nodded gravely, as if he had just received a prophecy. "Exactly, Sancho. You speak like a prophet. A trench, you say? A trench of trial! And servants—ah, servants are nothing more than knights in disguise who will challenge me. Dulcinea is testing me again."

Sancho groaned, tugging at his hair. "Sir, when I tell you to stop, you take it as a divine command to continue. When I say it's nonsense, you call it prophecy. No matter what I say, you only hear what you want to hear."

Quixote puffed out his chest, raised his lance. "Sancho, your words are like torches that light my path. You are my oracle, even if you don't recognize yourself. Each of your curses is a sign from fate!"

Sancho stopped and hit his forehead with his fist. "Damn it, I'd better shut up. Maybe someday I'll stop being your destiny."

Quixote laughed, transfigured, and pointed into the distance. "You see, even your silence is a sign! Heaven itself wants us to move on!"

Sancho murmured, "Sir, my silence is at most a pause between two curses. And the next one is coming soon."

But Quixote was long since back on cloud nine, and Sancho trudged behind him, a man who was slowly realizing that his every sentence was fueling his madness.

The country road ended at some point, turning into a narrow path that ran between thorny bushes and stunted trees. No more village, no more inn, just dust, stones, and the buzzing of flies.

Quixote rode in front, his lance raised as if he were leading an army of invisible warriors. His face was burned by the sun, his eyes glowing as if he could already see the banners of an enemy army in the thorn bushes. "Sancho! Do you feel it? The air is heavy with omens. Every step brings us closer to the adventure that will silence the world!"

Sancho trailed behind, pulling the donkey by the rope, his belly empty, his head pounding. "What I feel, sir, is blisters on my feet and a hole in my stomach. The only air here is full of dust and stench. If that's an omen, then it tells me: 'Sancho, you're going to die soon.'"

A crow cawed, high on a withered branch. Quixote pointed up. "Do you hear that? A messenger's voice! It heralds danger and glory!"

Sancho growled, "Sir, that's a crow. At most, it's announcing that there's carrion somewhere—probably us, if we keep going like this."

Quixote laughed loudly, proudly, as the horse stumbled over a stone. Sancho cursed and pulled the donkey tighter. "Shit, sir, we're going deeper into the wilderness, deeper into hunger, deeper into madness. And I ask myself: Why am I still following you? Maybe because I'm stupider than you."

But he trudged on because turning back had never been a real option.

The sun hung low, the air shimmered, as the path suddenly diverged: on the left, a wide, flat path gently descending the hill; on the right, a stony, narrow one, full of thorns and boulders.

Sancho stopped and immediately pointed to the left. "That way, sir. There might be water, maybe a village, maybe an inn. And definitely fewer blisters on my feet."

But Don Quixote stared at the right path, his eyes shining. "No, Sancho. Don't you see? Two roads, two destinies. The easy one is for the cowards. The difficult one is the path of heroes. Dulcinea calls us to where the blood flows and the thorns tear."

Sancho let his arms hang, the donkey snorted wearily. "Sir, my blood is already flowing, and my thorns are already deep enough. I want to go left. Left is my destiny—ham, wine, and sleep."

Quixote raised his lance and pointed among the thorns. "Heaven is testing us, Sancho! Whoever goes left will go into oblivion. Whoever goes right will go into history!"

Sancho stared at the thorny path, then at the sky, muttering, "Shit. History or not, this is going to hurt." He sighed, gripped the donkey rope tighter, and trudged after it, his eyes fixed on the thorns.

"Sir," he murmured, "if this is really fate, then I hope there's at least an inn at the end."

And so they disappeared into the prickly twilight—a knight full of madness, a squire full of curses, both caught in an adventure that was already beginning to consume them.

### The fight for a fake princess

The sun hung like a rusty nail in the sky when they saw the train approaching: two heavily laden wagons, pulled by oxen, accompanied by a handful of servants with clubs in their hands. In front rode the merchant himself, fat, red-faced, with a gold chain around his neck glittering in the sun.

But Quixote's gaze immediately fell on the second wagon. There she sat— young, in colorful clothes, her hair shining in the light, her face pretty but bored, her hands full of rings. A merchant's daughter on a journey, nothing more, nothing less.

Sancho saw it and thought: *A rich brat with too much jewelry. Nothing more.*

Quixote, on the other hand, gasped as if heaven itself had placed an angel before his eyes. His hands trembled, his lance wobbled, and he whispered: "Sancho... do you see? A princess. A true princess, captured by vile villains, dragged into the dust."

Sancho stopped and spat on the ground. "Sir, that's no princess. She's the daughter of a merchant who probably pays more taxes than both of us idiots combined. She's bored, not imprisoned. The only villains here are the servants, who'll smash our heads in if you make a fuss again."

But Quixote heard nothing more. His eyes burned, his chest swelled, and he murmured, as if hearing Dulcinea's voice in his ears: "This is the hour. I will free her. My sword will break her chains."

Sancho groaned loudly. "Chains? Lord, the only chain here hangs around your fat father's neck, and it's made of gold. And if you 'break' it, he'll rip your balls off."

But Quixote was already lost, caught in his own heroic song, as the procession drew closer and the dust covered their bodies like a curtain.

Quixote pulled on the reins so hard that Rocinante snorted, as if he sensed that another beating was about to arrive. The knight raised his lance, his armor rattled, and spoke as if he had an army around him:

"Sancho! By Saint Dulcinea, by my oath as a knight, I swear: I will save this fair princess! No villain, no executioner, no goddamn sorcerer will snatch her from me. Her suffering is my mission, her gaze my reward, her freedom my glory!"

Sancho stopped, stared at him, and threw his hands in the air. "Sir, stop it! This isn't a princess. She's bored, fed up, and probably has more shoes in her trunk than we've ever had meals in our stomachs. If you interfere, the servants will beat you until you truly believe the stars are angels carrying you to heaven."

But Quixote didn't see him, didn't hear him. His eyes were glued to the chariot, as if it were the source of all light. "Sancho, stop trying to stop me. The world laughs at me, but here is my hour. I will silence the mockers—with blood, with courage, with sacred duty."

Sancho grabbed him by the boot, almost shaking him from the saddle. "Sir, if you charge forward now, you'll be not only the sheep knight, but also the fool a princess laughed at. And I swear, the laughter will be so loud it'll be heard all the way to hell!"

But Quixote struck the air with his lance as if it were the prelude to battle. "Liberation or death, Sancho! Today everything will be decided!"

Sancho sighed, spat in the dust, and muttered, "Shit. Death then, I suppose. And I get to pick up the pieces again."

Don Quixote dug his heels into Rocinante's ribs, and the old horse began to move with a groan. Sancho yelled after him, "Lord, no! No, damn it, not again!" — but there he was, a walking catastrophe with rusty armor and burning eyes.

He held the lance high and called to the servants who were walking leisurely beside the carriage:

"Stop, you worthless villains! You wicked minions of darkness! I, Don Quixote de la Mancha, recognize your vile deeds: You have kidnapped a fair princess and carried her off in chains to foreign lands. But by Dulcinea, I swear: I will free her, even if it costs me my blood!"

The servants stopped and stared at him—first irritated, then one burst out laughing. "Princess? Does he mean old Gómez's daughter? She's sitting in the carriage chewing nuts, as regal as a donkey in a stable!"

The second one laughed so hard he had to lean on his club. "And he calls us villains? Look at him! Helmet like a dented pan, armor covered in sheep shit, and he wants to court us. Holy God, this is better than a circus!"

Quixote, however, stood up even more proudly. "You're laughing? Of course you're laughing, like villains laugh just before they're struck down by the sword of justice! But your laughter is your last!"

Sancho came running, waving his arms. "Sir, please! They're not laughing because they're villains—they're laughing because you look like you beat yourselves in the stable!"

But Quixote heard nothing more. For him, it was already a battle.

The servants were still laughing, shaking their heads, and were about to move on. "Come on, let the nutcase talk," one said. "If we stop, he'll keep us forever with his bullshit."

But Quixote had the fanatic's gaze, his lance firmly in his hand, and before anyone could blink, he spurred Rocinante on. The horse stumbled, clattering, puffing, but it ran—and Quixote lowered his lance like a divine thunderstorm.

"For Dulcinea! For the princess's freedom!" he roared as dust rose.

The first servant jumped aside, the second, surprised, raised his club. The lance crashed against the wooden handle, splintering in half, and Quixote staggered in the saddle as if struck by lightning.

"Holy shit!" one cursed. "He's serious!"

Sancho held his head and shouted, "Sir, stop before they break your bones!"

But Quixote was already in a frenzy, drawing his rusty sword and swinging it as if he could mow down armies. He hit nothing but air, but the pose was so crazy that the servants suddenly became truly angry.

"Enough drama," one grumbled. "Now that nutcase gets what he's looking for."

And they raised their clubs.

The servants made short work of him. The first swung his club, striking Quixote with such a hard blow that his helmet rattled like an old bell. Quixote staggered, but instead of falling, he cried out, his sword raised high: "See how the enemy defends himself! Oh, what a heroic battle!"

The second one laughed, grabbed a stone from the ground, and threw it. The lump hit Quixote on the shoulder. He yelped, but immediately cried out: "Just another knighthood! Dulcinea, I am your martyr!"

Sancho jumped in, raising his hands. "Hey, stop it! He's just crazy! Leave him alone, he won't hurt you!"

A club whizzed and hit Sancho on the backside, making him squeal like a pig. "Shit! Ouch! Let me out of this madness!" But he immediately received a second blow to the back.

Quixote, half-slung in the saddle, lashed out wildly, barely grazing a servant's arm. The man cursed, grabbed him by the helmet, and threw him to the ground. In the dust, in the dung, the knight lay in utter ridiculousness, and the clubs rained down on him until he was gasping for breath.

"Enough, sir! Please stop!" yelled Sancho, who was being beaten himself for trying to take the blows. His lips were bleeding, his ribs were burning.

The servants laughed as they beat him and shouted, "This is your glory, knight! This is your deliverance!"

And the dust was full of coughing, blood and curses.

Amid the cloud of dust, amidst panting and beatings, the cloth on the cart folded back. A narrow face appeared, adorned with rings, earrings, and an excess of boredom. The merchant's daughter saw the spectacle, tilted her head—and began to laugh.

"Holy Virgin," she cried, "is that supposed to be a knight? That one there, in the dust, with sheep dung in his beard? Father, look at the fool!"

The fat merchant approached, wiped the sweat from his brow, and grinned broadly. "Knight? That's at most a court jester on the run."

Quixote, half-dead and bleeding, looked up at her with radiant, glowing eyes. "Do not be afraid, fair princess! I, Don Quixote, sacrificed myself to save you. For you I take blows, for you I bleed, for you..."

She burst into peals of laughter and pointed. "For me? You look like an old sack of potatoes that's been dragged through a river! I don't need a savior, especially not one who can't even stand up to a club."

The servants laughed along, one of them kicking Quixote in the side, making him gasp. Sancho groaned beside him, his hands behind his back, cursing. "Sir, do you finally hear it? Even the princess is laughing at you. Your fairy tales are just jokes."

But Quixote smiled bloodily, nodding as if he had honey on his tongue. "No, Sancho. Your laughter... is only a veil. Behind it lies gratitude. I know it. I feel it."

Sancho almost fell over. "Sir... you're sicker than your horse."

The wagons moved on, the servants shouldering their clubs again, still grinning at the ridiculous scene. Two bodies remained in the dust: Don Quixote, twisted like a broken scarecrow, and Sancho, panting, with a bloody ear and an ass burning like fire.

Quixote wheezed, turned his head, spat out dust and blood—and smiled blissfully. "Sancho... we have fought a great battle. Look at me: dented, broken, but undefeated. The villains fled, the princess was saved—even if she doesn't know it yet."

Sancho lay beside him, his head resting on his arm, staring at him as if he were the greatest madness of God. "Saved? Lord, she laughed at you. She tore you to pieces—with words worse than clubs. And I... I got a beating without a single piece of bread falling into my lap."

Quixote closed his eyes and breathed: "The bread of glory... is worth more than any meal."

Sancho snorted, laughed bitterly, and spat in the dust. "Sir, if this is what fame tastes like, I'd rather have dry bread and old wine. At least it won't give me a cracked skull."

They lay still for a while as the sun sank lower and the flies crawled curiously over their wounds.

And so ended the "Battle for a Princess" – a knight in the dirt, a squire full of curses, and a world that moved on without caring about its fairy tales.

### Sancho in temptation

The night had been long, and the morning smelled of sweat, dust, and horse dung. Sancho trudged behind Quixote, the donkey on a leash, growling like a dog that hadn't seen a bone in days. His stomach growled louder than he did.

"Lord," he began, "I can't take it anymore. My belly is sticking to my back. I need bread. Meat. Wine, lots of wine. And if a woman came along to comb the fleas out of my beard—then I'd believe heaven hasn't forgotten me for once."

Quixote, however, turned in his saddle, his eyes transfigured, his hand raised, as if delivering a sermon. "Sancho, you think too earthly. We are not born for meat and wine, but for ideals! For honor, for virtue, for the beauty of Dulcinea. The body perishes—but the deeds of the spirit, they shine eternally!"

Sancho grimaced and snorted. "Forever? Lord, my belly is already glowing—empty, like a lantern without oil. And my deeds? They consist of pulling your ass out of the shit every time you think sheep are soldiers."

Quixote nodded seriously, as if Sancho had just paid a compliment. "You see, that's it: sacrifice. The squire who endures everything is mentioned in the songs alongside his master. Your hunger is your martyrdom."

Sancho stopped, grabbed his crotch, and muttered, "My martyrdom runs deeper. Down there, it's low tide, too. And if I stay much longer without wine, without meat, and without a woman, then Dulcinea can go to hell—and heaven with it."

Quixote raised his lance, proud as ever. "Sancho, hold on. Soon fate will test us—and reward us."

Sancho stomped off again, hanging his head, and cursed: "If that's the reward, then I want punishment. Punishment with bread, wine, and a warm leg."

Around midday, a small village appeared, houses leaning like drunken men, roofs covered in moss, fences with more holes than slats. But Sancho didn't care. He raised his nose, sniffed – and there it was: the scent.

Bread, freshly baked, the crust crispy, the dough still warm. Added to that was the smell of roasting, fat sizzling in a pan, seasoned with garlic. And in between, a hint of wine, sour-sweet, that caught in the throat as soon as you breathed it in.

Sancho stopped, his eyes half-closed, his tongue moist on his lips. "Sir... do you smell that? This is heaven. Heaven on earth. Bread, meat, wine. I could die if I don't get it. Better dead today, full of food, than alive and hungry tomorrow."

Quixote, however, sat stiffly in the saddle, as if sniffing incense. "Yes, Sancho, I smell it too. It's the test! The devil puts temptation in our path so we don't reflect on the higher things. Stand firm, my friend, stand firm! Let the body hunger so the soul grows."

Sancho stared at him like he was crazy—which he was. "Lord, my soul isn't growing. My belly is shrinking. My ribs are already beating against my skin, asking if there's anything else to come. If this is temptation, then I say: Welcome, temptation, take off your shoes and sit at my table!"

Quixote smiled gently, almost pityingly. "Sancho, your words are like those of a child crying because he doesn't get his toy. But I tell you: the true knight is happy to go hungry if it serves his honor."

Sancho rubbed his belly, which growled like an angry dog. "Sir, a true squire doesn't like to go hungry. He eats whenever he gets the chance. And if you say one more word about honor, by God, I'll bite you in the leg and pretend it's a ham."

A door opened in the village, and the scent grew even stronger. Sancho almost staggered with longing.

In the shadow of a low tavern stood a woman, arms crossed, her breasts heavy in her bodice, her face rough but not without fire. She studied Sancho, who had stopped like a dog before a bone.

"Hey, farmer," she cried, "you look like you're about to collapse. Do you want bread? Do you want meat? Do you want wine?"

Sancho nodded vigorously, his eyes wide. "Yes! Yes, holy woman, all of it—and preferably immediately!"

She grinned crookedly, revealing a gap in her teeth that didn't diminish her appeal at all. "But it costs. Coins. Or... services." She let the words hang, her eyes gliding slowly over his body, not without mockery.

Sancho swallowed, wiped the drool from his mouth. "Coins..." he muttered, reaching into his pocket. Nothing but a few copper pieces, barely enough for half a jug. He laughed bitterly. "Not much. But services..." His voice broke, he cleared his throat, his gaze glued to her cleavage.

The landlady grinned broadly. "Well, I can imagine something. Chopping wood, hauling water... maybe something else, if you don't faint right away."

Sancho staggered, sweating, his heart pounding. His stomach cried out for bread, his throat for wine, and a little further down, an old hunger stirred. He saw the tavern, he smelled the roast – he would be doomed if he took another step closer.

"Sir," he called weakly to the back, where Quixote sat enthroned on Rocinante, "I... I'm just clarifying something important. Very briefly."

The landlady laughed and wiped her hands on her apron. "Come in, little one. I'll give you something that'll fill more than just your belly."

Sancho sucked in his breath, wavering between greed and guilt, while his stomach growled louder than all the bells of La Mancha combined.

Sancho had barely set foot toward the tavern when someone cleared their throat excessively loudly. Don Quixote sat on Rocinante like a battered archangel, lance in hand, his eyes stern like those of a priest at the confessional.

"Sancho!" he thundered. "Stop! What are you doing? Don't you know that every false desire, every piece of bread not earned by honor, is a stab in the heart of virtue? Dulcinea herself would blush if she saw you staring so lasciviously at a roast and a peasant woman."

Sancho turned slowly, drool still in his beard, his knees weak. "Sir... this isn't a stab in the back. This is hunger. And thirst. And... well... a little more. I'm a man, not a saint."

But Quixote raised his hand as if swearing an oath of purity. "Sancho, I will tolerate no treason. Not in me, not in you, not in Dulcinea. Your belly may growl, your throat may burn—but true glory satisfies not the body, but the soul! He who runs after wine will end in the filth of shame. But he who perseveres will be raised to eternity!"

The innkeeper behind the door laughed loudly. "Eternity? The only eternal treasure here is my roast, knight. And it'll go to someone else if your squire doesn't come in."

Sancho scratched his belly and sighed. "Sir, I swear to you: between eternity and roast meat, I'll choose roast meat. But alas, I'm stuck by your side, and you make every bite a sin for me."

Quixote nodded sternly, as if he were the Pope himself. "Then decide, Sancho: the path of glory or the path of the belly."

Sancho muttered, "Shitty decision..." and stepped back, the smell of bread and meat hitting him in the face like a slap.

Sancho stood there like a man caught between two nooses. To the left, the tavern with its bread, roasts, wine, and the landlady's warm apron. To the right, the old fool in the saddle, babbling about honor and Dulcinea.

His stomach growled like an animal about to bite through his ribs from the inside. His throat was so dry that even dust seemed like a feast. And deeper down, another need stirred, one that had lain dormant for weeks.

"Sir..." he began quietly, "what good is loyalty if I die trying? My belly needs bread, not glory. My heart needs wine, not virtue. And my cock... well, it needs something too, and certainly not Dulcinea, who only exists in your dreams."

Quixote shook his head, stern as a confessor. "Sancho, you speak like a sinner on the brink of the abyss. Your words are snakes that want to bind you."

Sancho pressed his hands to his stomach and gasped. *Shit, if this keeps up, I'll eat my own shirt.* He looked back at the tavern and saw the landlady provocatively waving the roast at him.

Then back to Quixote, who was staring at him as if examining his innermost being.

"Sir," murmured Sancho, "you want me to be strong. But I'm no hero. I'm hungry, thirsty, tired, and lonely. I'm just a man, and men break eventually."

The silence was heavy. The smell of meat mingled with the dust of the street.

Sancho took half a step towards the tavern – and then stopped.

He cursed loudly and ugly, so that even the crows took flight. "Damn it! You're making me a saint against my will. And saints are always the hungriest pigs."

Sancho still stood rooted to the spot, saliva practically running from his mouth. The landlady grinned broadly and held out a piece of bread so fresh that steam still oozed from the crust.

"Come on, little one," she called. "Just one bite. Just one sip. That's all it takes."

His stomach howled. His knees wobbled. For a moment, he was on the verge of forgetting everything—Quixote, Dulcinea, honor, all that damned chivalry.

But then he heard Quixote's voice, stern, pathetic, like an iron hammer: "Sancho! Remember your oath. Remember loyalty. Remember that you are more than your hunger."

Sancho clenched his fists and tore his eyes away from the bread as if it were poison. He screamed so loudly that it echoed through the alley: "Shit! I give up! Eat your temptation alone, world, I'll stay with the old madman!"

The landlady raised an eyebrow and laughed ugly. "Your bad luck, farmer. Then you'll starve to death beside him." And she bit into the bread with relish, making a crunch.

Sancho turned away, his eyes filled with tears—not from emotion, but from pain. "Damn it," he muttered, "I would have done anything for a crumb. Anything."

Quixote nodded solemnly, as if Sancho had just slain a dragon. "Sancho, my faithful friend, you have shown the world that you are a man of virtue."

Sancho growled and spat in the dust. "Fucking virtue. My stomach didn't understand. It now thinks I'm the biggest idiot in the world."

And he grabbed his stomach, which growled so loudly that even Rocinante pricked up his ears nervously.

They moved on, away from the village, away from the smell of bread and roast meat, while Sancho trudged like a man whose soul had been torn from his body. His belly growled so loudly it sounded like drums in the evening breeze.

Quixote looked at him proudly, his lance raised, his eyes transfigured. "Sancho, my faithful companion! You have resisted. You have shown that you are more than a belly on two legs. You are virtue in human form! A hero without a crown, but with purity of heart."

Sancho stared at him, aghast, and muttered, "Sir, I'm no hero. I'm an idiot. The biggest idiot who ever walked past a tavern while wine and bread were waiting for him. I didn't win—I lost. And I lost to myself."

Quixote nodded, but only heard what he wanted to hear. "No, Sancho. You have won. The world will sing of you one day."

Sancho laughed dryly, bitterly, almost hysterically. "Sing? Yes, perhaps. But the song will be called: *Sancho, the fool who gave up wine and women to chase after a madman*. And I swear to you, Lord, this will be the saddest song in all of La Mancha."

He grabbed his belly, which was growling again, and shook his head. "Screw virtue. Virtue doesn't satisfy."

But Quixote rode on, transfigured as if he had just created a new knight.

And Sancho trotted alongside, growling, cursing, feeling that he had just made the worst deal of his life.

### A kingdom on the island of Barataria

They led him there—Sancho Panza, peasant, squire, beaten, hungry—and suddenly servants stood around him, their faces solemn, as if he had just fallen

from heaven. One announced with much ado: "In the name of the dukes, you, Sancho Panza, are today installed as governor of the island of Barataria!"

Sancho blinked, gasping for air. "Me? Governor? You're joking. I can't even order my donkey not to shit in my shoe."

But they nodded solemnly, the trumpets blared, and Quixote looked at him, full of pride, as if he had crowned his son king. "Sancho," he cried, "heaven has exalted you! You are a ruler, a prince, a man of justice!"

Sancho heard only one thing: ruler = food, wine, women. His stomach leaped with joy, his tongue rolled over his lips. "So... that means... I get roast meat, wine, a bed without fleas? And no one hits me with a club if I fall asleep?"

A servant stepped forward and bowed. "Your Grace, whatever you wish will be granted."

Sancho giggled, almost hysterically. "All I want? Then start with a roast pig, three jugs of wine, and a wife who doesn't laugh at me the moment I drop my pants."

The crowd laughed, but he meant it. Quixote beamed as if hearing a heroic song. "Sancho, rule with wisdom. Dulcinea sees you."

Sancho grinned, his teeth yellow, his eyes moist with greed. "Screw wisdom. I finally want to eat. And if that means governing—then I'm a born governor."

Sancho sat on a chair that was far too big for him, his legs dangling like a child's. But he didn't give a damn – because in front of him, they piled plates upon plates. Roasts, glistening with fat. Bread, warm and heavy. Cheese that still smelled of the stable. And jugs of wine, dark red, heavy, and sweet.

He grabbed it without hesitation, stuffed bread into his mouth, and tore meat with his teeth, fat running down his chin. "Now THAT," he snorted with his mouth full, "that's governing! Anyone who tells me that power means anything else has never sat in this chair."

Servants glanced at each other furtively, but they obeyed and brought more. One asked cautiously, "Your Grace... perhaps some vegetables?"

Sancho roared, wine dripping from his beard: "Vegetables are for goats! More pork! More wine!"

He raised the mug, drank, spilled half of it over his vest, and laughed filthy. "My Lord... this tastes of fat and alcohol. And I'll tell you one thing: I could get used to it."

Quixote, standing at the side, nodded solemnly, as if witnessing a coronation. "Sancho, you eat like a ruler and you speak like a prince. But don't forget wisdom—power is not just in the belly, but in the mind."

Sancho belched loudly, making even the servants flinch. "Mind? My mind says one more jug. And my gut says keep going."

The hall filled with smacking, slurping, belching – Sancho Panza, the peasant, drowned in his dream of fat and wine, believing himself to be king.

Sancho had barely emptied the third jug and torn the last piece of pork from the bone with his fingers when two peasants stepped forward, barefoot, with faces like leather. They bowed awkwardly and murmured: "Your Grace, we beg for justice."

Sancho swallowed and wiped the grease on his sleeve. "Justice? Well, let's go. But hurry—my stomach's digesting, and I'm getting sleepy."

The first farmer said: "That neighbor over there stole a goat from me!"

The second immediately shouted, "Lie! She came over the fence on her own. Goats know where they're better off!"

The servants looked on expectantly, Quixote nodded solemnly, as if awaiting a divine decision.

Sancho rubbed his forehead, the wine humming in his veins. "Good. If the goat went over the fence voluntarily, then it belongs to whoever it's with now. Period."

The first farmer shouted: "But she was mine!"

Sancho raised his finger, smeared with grease. "Then you should have built the fence higher. End of proceedings."

The hall erupted in laughter. The second peasant laughed filthy, the first cursed, and Sancho grinned, satisfied with his logic.

He was barely about to hang on to the jug again when the next one came along: an old woman with a chicken under her arm. "Your Grace, he killed my chicken!"

"And why?" asked Sancho, half-yawning.

"Because it ran into his garden!"

Sancho looked at them both, sipped wine, and said, "Then he'll eat the chicken, and you'll get his next egg. Done."

The people giggled, some angry, some confused. Sancho shook his head. "Justice, ugh. All goats, chickens, and whining. If that's governing, then my court was a kingdom."

But Quixote beamed. "Sancho, you speak with wisdom; peasant logic surpasses all the laws of the world!"

Sancho grinned crookedly. "Or she'll drown everything in wine, just like my mind right now."

It didn't stop. Sancho had barely finished the chicken case when the next farmer appeared: "Your Grace, he's impregnated my cow!"

Sancho blinked, the wine roaring. "And what do you want from me? Greeting cards?"

The man shouted: "I want compensation!"

Sancho scratched his head. "If your cow is pregnant, you'll get more out of it. Be glad the neighbor's bull thought she was pretty. Lawsuit dismissed."

The hall laughed, the plaintiff raged.

Then a child came crying: "Governor, he stole my ball!"

Sancho rolled his eyes. "Give the ball back, or I'll steal your teeth. Next!"

And so it went on—quarrels over fields, over a sack of flour, over a shovel. Sancho sat on his chair, his belly heavy from the roast, his head dull from the wine, and with every complaint he grew more tired.

He tried to get away with sayings:— "He who shouts is wrong."— "He who loses a goat should get a dog."— "Share the bread and stop whining."

Some laughed, some were angry, no one was satisfied.

Quixote stood at the side, sparkling with enthusiasm. "You see? Sancho, my squire, he speaks like Solomon, he judges with heart and mind!"

Sancho leaned back, rubbing his belly, which was already aching. "If this is wisdom, then wisdom is nothing but a never-ending hangover. I thought governing meant eating, drinking, and sleeping. But here it's just whining, crying, and endless idiots who think their chickens are more important than my wine."

He belched so loudly that the hall fell silent for a moment. "Okay. Next."

It was no coincidence that the complaints became increasingly silly. Behind the curtains, the dukes who had orchestrated the whole thing sniggered. They sent disguised servants posing as peasants just to parade the "Governor" Sancho.

Then someone came and shouted: "Governor, my neighbor says the sun belongs to him because it shines on his roof first!"

Sancho blinked, the wine making the world blurry. "The sun belongs to no one. And if it's too bright for you, build a damn wall. Next."

The hall laughed. Behind the curtains, the noblemen giggled.

Then a woman stepped forward and shouted: "Governor, my husband always sleeps with the neighbor. I demand punishment!"

Sancho yawned. "If he prefers to lie there, then you're punishment enough. Next."

The laughter grew louder, Quixote nodded seriously like a judge hearing divine wisdom.

And finally an old man came with a stick and shouted: "Governor, he has stolen my shadow!"

Sancho stared at him, put his hands over his face, and muttered, "Holy shit... now the shadow is complaining. I'll tell you one thing: if anyone else comes along and steals my breath, I'll resign immediately."

The hall erupted, the dukes wept with laughter. Sancho wiped his sweat, swayed in his chair, and thought: *This isn't governing. This is a circus. And I'm the fat clown in the ring.*

Sancho sat in his large chair, his legs heavy, his stomach stretched like an overflowing barrel. He had eaten until he was sick, drunk until his tongue went numb, and let himself be called "Mr. Governor" until the word rang in his ears like a bad song.

But now... the wine burned my head, the meat lay like stones in my stomach, and the peasants' complaints still screamed through the hall.

"Your Grace! My neighbor is peeing in my well!" "Your Grace! His dog scared my rooster!" "Your Grace! He owes me three beans!"

Sancho put his hands over his face. Everything was spinning, his head was pounding, and he felt more miserable than when the robbers had hung him by his feet.

*Shit, he thought, is that power? Eating, drinking, and then listening to other people's garbage until you become garbage yourself?*

Quixote stood at the side, proud as ever. "Sancho, your name will shine. Your judgments are wise, your belly strong, your spirit sublime."

Sancho raised his head, his eyes glazed over, and murmured, "Exalted? Lord, I feel like a gluttonous pig staggering to the slaughterhouse. Power is nothing but a hangover in the head and a stone in the stomach."

The servants whispered, the dukes giggled in the background. Sancho groaned loudly, clutching his stomach and thinking: *if this is ruling, then my donkey was more of a king when he shit freely.*

The hall was empty, the peasants gone, the servants tired, the dukes behind the curtains already giggling about the "governor." Only Sancho remained, on his oversized chair, his belly full, his head dull, his heart empty.

He stared at the remains: bones lying on the slabs like corpses. Jugs half-empty, wine spilled across the floor like blood after a battle.

"So," he muttered, "this is the island of Barataria. My realm. My kingdom. My damned stomach."

Quixote approached him and placed his hand on his shoulder, proud as a father: "Sancho, you rule with wisdom, as only a man of virtue can. Dulcinea would praise you."

Sancho grinned crookedly, his eyes tired, his voice dry. "Sir, if Dulcinea sees me like this, she'll probably vomit faster than I can drink wine. I'm not a king. I'm a peasant in a costume. And honestly? I'd rather be poor again, hungry, with my donkey—but without all the drama. At least the hunger was real. At least then I knew who I was."

He stood up, swayed, brushed the wine off his shirt, and belched. "Screw the crown. It doesn't fit me. I'm giving it back—the dukes can wipe their asses with it."

Quixote stared at him, stunned. "Sancho! Reject a kingdom?"

Sancho laughed bitterly, scratching his belly. "A kingdom? This was never one. This was a stage. And I was the clown. Thanks, but no thanks."

And so he stepped out into the night, a farmer who had briefly played king – and discovered that freedom on a donkey tasted a thousand times sweeter than a throne of lies.

### Sancho rules – and suffers

Sancho had barely closed his eyes. The wine still gurgled in his stomach, his meat lay horizontally like a stone, and the dream had been sweet: he, alone with a roast, three jugs, and a wife who didn't laugh at him.

But reality blasted him out like a barroom brawler. Servants stormed into the room, ripping open the curtains, stabbing him with light like knives. "Your Grace, rise! The people are waiting!"

Sancho groaned and pulled the blanket over his head. "Shitty people. Wait. I need a burp, a piss, and a piece of bread first."

But they dragged him up, stuffed him into a robe that was far too heavy, and put a cap on his head that looked like a joke. He staggered to his feet, his knees weak from the booze.

Outside in the courtyard: a line of people. Farmers, women, children, all with complaints, demands, and whining.

"Your Grace, my neighbor is stealing my water!" "Governor, he says my dog brought fleas!" "My husband isn't coming home, I want him locked up!"

Sancho rubbed his head, his eyes red, his mouth dry as straw. "Holy shit... is this governing? No breakfast, no sleep, just whining?"

The dukes stood on the balcony, grinning from ear to ear as if they were watching their best play.

But Quixote nodded solemnly from the corner. "Sancho, hold on. This is how every great day of rule begins: with effort, with sacrifice, with the cry of the people."

Sancho growled. "Sir, if this is the cry of the people, then I'd rather hear the cry of a roast being roasted on a spit."

And the morning hadn't even really begun yet.

Sancho dragged himself onto the chair they called "the throne." He sat down heavily, his stomach aching, his head pounding. A clerk with a goose-quill pen waited as if this were the highest court in the land.

The first accuser stepped forward: a farmer with a rope in his hand. "Your Grace, my neighbor is tying his donkey to my post. That's theft!"

Sancho scratched his beard. "If the donkey is at your stake, untie him. The end. Next."

People murmured, the dukes grinned in the background.

The next one came: a woman with messy hair. "Governor, my neighbor stole my laughter!"

Sancho blinked. "Your... laugh? How the hell do you steal a laugh?"

"He insulted me," she shrieked. "I haven't been able to laugh since!"

Sancho slapped his hand against his forehead. "Then laugh now. The lawsuit was dismissed."

The crowd roared, some actually laughed, and the writer took notes as if it were a judgment from heaven.

Then a guy came along with a sack. "Sir, this sack is half mine, half his. But he says it's all his."

Sancho stared, the wine making everything blurry. "Divide the sack in two. Everyone gets half. If it's wheat, each bakes their own bread. If it's shit, you both have shit. Next."

People laughed, some cheered, some booed. The dukes held their stomachs in delight.

Sancho leaned back and snorted. "Ruling, ugh. That's nothing more than babysitting a village full of madmen."

Quixote nodded proudly. "Sancho, you are a true Solomon."

Sancho muttered, "If Solomon ruled like that, I'm not surprised he eventually turned to drinking."

Sancho sat on his "throne," sweating like a pig on a spit. His belly, which yesterday had been rejoicing over pork and cheese, was today a stone, spinning, growling, and rebelling. Every movement sent acid rising up his throat.

His head pounded as if a blacksmith were hammering nails in it all day. His eyes were red, his eyelids heavy as if they were weighted with lead. The wine had burned his throat, his tongue felt like an old rag.

And yet, complaints continued to be heaped upon him. Voices like mosquitoes, annoying, shrill, endless.

"Governor, he stole my beans!" "Governor, he insulted my goat!" "Governor, his children are singing too loudly!"

Sancho raised his hand, his face contorted in pain. "Holy shit, stop it! My stomach is as full as a dung heap, my head as empty as your babble. If you bring me another fart, I swear I'll kick you all out of my 'kingdom'!"

The crowd murmured, some laughed. Quixote, still proud, stepped forward. "Sancho, the burden of power is heavy. But your steadfastness is a testament to your greatness."

Sancho wheezed and placed his hand on his stomach. "Greatness? Lord, I am great, yes. Big as a sack of manure. Power isn't a gift—it's a hangover that never ends. I was happier when I was hungry. At least then I knew where the pain was coming from."

He wiped the sweat from his forehead, his eyes glazed over. "If that's ruling, then it's nothing more than slowly dying—in fine clothes instead of in a stable."

Sancho slammed his fist on the table. "Damn it, stop your whining! If someone steals beans, plant new ones. If a goat is insulted, let it bleat back. And if the children sing too loudly, sing louder! That's it!"

The crowd stared, then burst into laughter. One man shouted, "Your Grace speaks like a drunken chicken!"—and more laughter, filthy, loud, piercing.

Sancho blushed and waved his hands. "I'm your governor, damn it! You should listen to me!"

But they didn't listen. A farmer imitated him, squatting with his legs wide apart, holding his stomach, and roaring: "Screw the beans! Plant new ones! Do you hear, people?"

The hall shook, they banged on the tables, laughed at him.

Sancho tried to regain control. "I judge by common sense, not by books! An honest fart is worth ten legal texts!"

That made it worse. Laughter like thunder. Some held their stomachs, others wiped tears from their eyes.

And up on the balcony, the dukes: they held their stomachs, grinned, whispered, as if they had never seen anything funnier.

But Quixote nodded seriously, proudly, as if Sancho had just been crowned Solomon of the village. "Look, Sancho! Your wit disarms them, your courage silences them."

Sancho snorted and spat on the ground. "Mute? Sir, they laugh at me louder than at the court jester in the circus. I'm not a governor. I'm the punchline."

They led her in—three men in long robes, with pointed hats, and serious faces. They looked like scholars, spoke like preachers, and smelled of old cheese.

"Your Grace," began the first, "we are the Council of the Wise. We advise you so that you may rule justly."

Sancho, who was already halfway off his chair, straightened up. "Finally! Someone to share the burden. Speak up, you smartasses."

The second bowed deeply. "First commandment of the ruler: If you are hungry, you should only eat when others are full."

Sancho blinked and grabbed his stomach. "So... I should wait until everyone has eaten? Then I'll have nothing left! Forget it."

The people giggled, the "wise men" nodded solemnly.

The third said: "Second commandment: A true ruler only sleeps when his subjects are awake. So: no rest, no bed, no dreams."

Sancho stared at her, aghast. "No sleep? Holy shit, I'll be dead tomorrow! Who thought of this crap?"

The crowd roared, the dukes on the balcony held their stomachs.

The first added: "Third commandment: A ruler must never curse. Every curse weakens the crown."

Sancho jumped up and yelled: "Screw your command! And screw the crown! If I can't eat, sleep, or swear, then I'm not governor—then I'm a dead dog in my Sunday best!"

The hall erupted, the people laughed until they cried, the "wise men" bowed as if they had brought heaven to earth.

But Sancho sank back into his chair, his head in his hands. "Sir," he muttered, "I thought power was a roast. But it's a starvation diet with an extra beating."

The hall emptied, the laughter died down, the "wise men" disappeared, and only the stench of sweat, wine, and burnt fat remained. Sancho sat alone on his throne, his head in his hands, his stomach heavy, his mind empty.

Quixote stood beside him, still beaming as if he had seen the sunrise. "Sancho, you are a beacon of justice. The world will praise your judgments."

Sancho slowly raised his head, his eyes red, his gaze dull. "Sir... do you actually listen to yourselves? I'm not a lighthouse. I'm a blown-out candle in a

shithouse. No one here takes me seriously. They laugh at me, they play with me, and I... I let them."

Quixote placed his hand on his shoulder. "They laugh because they are blind. One day they will see who you really are."

Sancho laughed bitterly, scratching his stomach. "One day... Yes, maybe, when they've run out of things to drink and can't find any more fools to send to the front. Then they'll remember Sancho, the clown governor."

He looked at Quixote, tired and hard. "And you, sir... you can't help me here. Your talk of honor and Dulcinea is worthless. The only thing that counts here is who laughs the loudest. And believe me: that's not me."

For a moment it was silent, only the dripping of a wine jug echoed.

Sancho sighed deeply. "Fuck governing. It consumes me more than any hunger. At least when I was hungry, I knew I was alive."

Night crept in, the people had disappeared, the torches cast long shadows. Sancho still sat on his chair, which was too big, too cold, too empty for him. His stomach rumbled like an old stove, his head pounded, his heart was heavy.

He spoke softly, almost to himself: "This is not a throne. This is a cage. As a farmer, I was hungry, yes—but I could laugh, curse, and drink whenever there was something. Now I have a title, servants, clothes... and yet nothing. I am poorer than before."

He picked up a bone from the table and stared at it like a mirror. "That's me. Gnawed. Discarded."

Quixote approached, proud and transfigured. "Sancho, you rule because heaven wills it. Your burden is great, but it elevates you."

Sancho laughed hoarsely, a sound halfway between a cough and a spit. "Rise? Lord, I sit lower here than in the dirt of my farmyard. Out there, in the dust, next to my donkey—I was freer then. Here I am nothing but a clown in a costume. A king without a crown, a peasant without land."

He stood up, swaying, and spat on the stone slabs. "Screw power. It's nothing but poverty in a golden hat."

The torches flickered, the hall was silent.

And so the day ended: a ruler who wasn't one, and a squire who was slowly realizing that even an empty stomach was better than a full one filled with lies.

### The Council of the False Wise

The hall was full, torches ablaze, and the dukes acted as if they were about to receive the Pope himself. "Your Grace," one cried with artificial solemnity, "now that you are rulers, you shall not rule alone. We present to you the Council of the Wise!"

Sancho sat on his chair, his stomach still heavy from the day before, his eyes puffy, and thought: *Even more idiots making my life difficult. Great.*

Then they marched in—three figures in long, colorful robes, with pointed hats that looked like oversized chamber pots. They carried books under their arms, quills behind their ears, and faces so serious they were almost ridiculous.

The first raised his hand and spoke in a deep, theatrical voice: "Your Grace, we have come to support you with our wisdom. For without the counsel of the wise, every rule falls into chaos."

Sancho stared at them, saw the glued-on beards, the oversized hat, and muttered, "Chaos? This IS chaos. And you look like you stole your clothes at the fair."

The dukes giggled behind their fans, the people whispered, but the "wise men" nodded solemnly as if they had announced a revelation.

Quixote stepped forward, thrilled. "Sancho, be grateful! No ruler is greater than his council. With such men at your side, you will shine."

Sancho sighed and scratched his belly. "Shine? More like sweat. And if those are the best minds, I'd rather ask my donkey. At least he farts honestly."

The laughter of the crowd rolled through the hall, but the "wise men" remained serious, as if they were really philosophers from Athens.

And Sancho suspected: This isn't going to be good.

The three "wise men" stood in a semicircle, each raising their hand as if reaching out to touch the sky. The first began: "Governing, Your Grace, is like a

river that remains pure only when the dam of virtue holds back the waters of desire."

Sancho frowned. "River... dam... water..." He shook his head. "What's this nonsense? I'm hungry, not thirsty."

The second sage continued, his voice even more pathetic: "Power is a mirror in which the ruler sees the people—and the people the ruler. But woe betide us when the mirror fogs up!"

Sancho blinked. "Foggy? Lord, I can't see anymore when I've been drinking. Should I clean the windows now, or what?"

The crowd laughed, the dukes grinned.

The third pounded the ground with a stick as if he were a judge. "And remember: every decision is a seed. He who sows wrongly will reap only thorns."

Sancho grumbled, rubbing his belly. "Seeds, thorns... I already have thorns in my ass from your wisdom. Can't you make it clear? Bread is bread. Wine is wine. The end."

The three nodded solemnly, as if they had affirmed Heaven. "Truly, what profound spirit lies in your simplicity," one exclaimed.

Sancho snorted, muttering, "Simplicity? I'm not simple. I'm just honest. You guys are complicated because you wrap shit up in pretty words."

The people laughed, the "wise men" looked dignified, as if they had quoted Aristotle himself.

And Sancho thought: *If that's wisdom, then my donkey is a fucking philosopher.*

The first "sage" stepped forward, his hands raised as if about to perform a miracle. "Your Grace, remember: A true ruler never sleeps while his people are awake. Therefore—no sleep before midnight, no sleep after dawn. Only watchfulness, only thought, only sacrifice."

Sancho opened his eyes wide, his dark circles black as coal. "No sleep? Holy shit, I'm already sleeping too little! If I sleep any less, I'll soon be carrying death itself on my shoulders."

The crowd laughed, the “wise men” nodded seriously.

The second continued: "A ruler must not eat meat. Meat makes one raw, greedy, and mean. Only vegetables purify the soul."

Sancho grabbed his stomach, almost screaming. "No meat? Yesterday you served me a pig, and today I'm supposed to gnaw on carrots like a donkey? Then put me in the stable and call me 'Your Grace the Carrot.'"

More laughter. The dukes grinned like cats.

The third said: "And finally, a true ruler must not curse. Every curse corrupts the crown. He who does not control his tongue loses his dignity."

Sancho jumped up, almost spitting blood. "Not swearing? Damn it, that's my only skill! I swear better than I breathe! Without swearing, I'm nothing but a fat sack with an ass full of air!"

The hall roared with laughter, Quixote nodded like a proud teacher. "Sancho, these rules are tests. Stick to them, and you will be a true king."

Sancho fell back into his chair, muttering, "A king? More like a dead dog. No sleep, no meat, no curse. Better back to hunger, then, at least I can still say shit."

Sancho pushed himself to his feet, his hands pressed to his stomach, his eyes red with fatigue. "Listen to me, you phrase-mongers! Sleep is sleep, flesh is flesh, and a curse is a curse. Without sleep, a man dies, without flesh he becomes weak, and without a curse, his anger remains lodged in his stomach. That's not wisdom—that's idiocy!"

A murmur went through the crowd, but it only lasted a moment. Then the laughter erupted. A farmer yelled, "Do you hear that? Our governor would rather sleep than rule!" Another bellowed, "And eat pork instead of chewing carrots!"

Sancho clenched his fists. "Yes, damn it! I want to sleep, eat, and curse. Call it what you will—I call it life."

But the crowd roared louder, the dukes laughed until they cried, and one of the false sages raised his hand as if to pronounce sentence. "See, what a simple mind! He believes governing is living. But governing is dying—slowly, with dignity, as befits a ruler."

Sancho spat on the floor, his voice scratchy. "Die? I'd rather die with a full belly in the dirt than slowly torture myself to death on this chair."

The people screamed, a few clapped, most laughed. Sancho looked at them, tired, bitter, and thought: *I'm not a ruler. I'm their figure of fun. A clown in a peasant shirt.*

Quixote, however, stood gravely beside him, nodding solemnly. "Sancho, you talk like a philosopher. They just don't understand you yet."

Sancho growled, "If that's philosophy, then my donkey is Aristotle. He farts more clearly than all of you put together."

The eldest of the three wise men stepped forward, opened his silly book, and spoke in a grave voice: "Your Grace, when a rooster sits on the ridge of the roof and lays an egg—which side does it roll down to?"

The crowd held their breath as if they had just heard the deepest thought of humanity.

Sancho stared at the man, his eye twitching. "A rooster? An egg? Listen to me, you painted peacock—roosters don't lay eggs. Period."

The hall laughed, the dukes held their stomachs.

But the sage nodded meaningfully. "Quite right, Your Grace. The riddle shows: Only he who recognizes that there can be no egg is worthy to rule."

Sancho jumped up, waving his arms. "You've got to be kidding me! First you ask a stupid question, then you celebrate because I say it's stupid. That's not wisdom, that's just drunken bar-room logic!"

The crowd roared, some clapped, most laughed. A farmer shouted, "Our governor hates philosophy!"

Sancho yelled back: "Screw philosophy! Philosophy doesn't fill a stomach or cure a hangover! If I have to choose between a riddle and a roast, then you'll eat your riddles alone!"

He threw his hands in the air, sweat pouring, his stomach cramping, and he muttered, "If this is wisdom, then I want to die stupid. At least stupid and full."

Quixote stepped forward and placed his hand on his shoulder. "Sancho, you have seen the truth. They laugh because they fear you."

Sancho stared at him, his eyes dark. "Sir, they're not laughing because they're afraid of me. They're laughing because I'm the clown in the game. A rooster without an egg—that's me."

Sancho sat there, his hands heavy on his knees, sweat running down his neck. The crowd's laughter still echoed like hammers in his head.

He saw the three "wise men," looking so serious as if they had just discovered the formula for the universe. Their beards were badly stuck on, their hats wobbled, and their eyes flashed with the grin they were trying to suppress.

Then it dawned on Sancho: *They're playing with me. They're making a fool of me. I'm not sitting here as a governor—I'm sitting here as a figure of fun.*

He laughed dryly, an ugly, short bark. "You pigs. You're just trying to make a fool of me. Your wisdom is a joke, your riddles are rubbish. I see you staring at me. You're just waiting for me to fall again so you can laugh."

The wise men acted indignant and raised their hands. "Your Grace, we are only servants of the truth."

Sancho pointed, his voice full of resentment. "Servants? You're court jesters in long shirts. I could throw my shirt on the floor, and it would be wiser than you."

The crowd murmured, some laughed, others whistled. On the balcony, the dukes giggled behind their fans.

Quixote leaned toward him and whispered with a serious expression: "Sancho, your words are bold. But persevere—even in mockery, you prove yourself a hero."

Sancho growled, clenching his teeth. "Hero? No, sir. I'm their donkey. And I carry their jokes on my back. One more saying from those idiots, and I'll shit right in the middle of their council."

The crowd laughed again, thinking it was a joke. But Sancho meant every word.

Sancho jumped up, his chair tipping backward, crashing onto the stone slabs. His face was red, the veins in his neck thick as rope. "Enough! Listen, you

phrase-mongers, you chatterers, you masked monkeys! You call yourselves wise, but you're dumber than the chickens you claim to rule!"

He stomped forward, pointing his finger at the first one. "You and your river babble—I'll pee in your dam, then you'll know what a current is!"

On the second. "And you and your mirror—if I see you in it, I'd rather smash it before I get sick."

On the third. "And you can stick your rooster egg somewhere else. Even my donkey knows that's nonsense. And believe me: it farts out more truth than you've ever had in your heads!"

The crowd roared, half in shock, half in excitement. The dukes on the balcony wiped tears of laughter.

But Sancho trembled, his hands clenched into fists. "If I need advice, I'll get it from my donkey. He eats, he sleeps, he farts. There's no such thing as honest advice. Everything else is just theater for idiots."

He turned around and raised his arms. "Do you hear this, you out there? I, Sancho Panza, governor without a brain, tell you: I'd rather rely on a donkey than three inflated sacks of shit!"

The laughter echoed, the hall shook, the wise men stood there like pissed-off clowns without a punchline.

Sancho breathed heavily and spat on the ground. "So much for your advice. Next time I'll bring my donkey—then you'll finally have some real wisdom."

And with that the meeting was over.

## Don Quixote in the Magic Garden

The dukes had spared no expense to create the garden like a damned fairytale. High hedges, so meticulously trimmed they looked like the stubble of a vain snob. Flowers of every color that smelled as if they'd been steeped in wine.

And fountains that trickled while servants stood behind them with hoses, refilling the water.

Don Quixote entered, raising his arms as if he had just ascended to heaven. "Sancho! Look! The enchanted garden! A place created by magicians, blessed by angels! Here dwells the soul of miracles!"

Sancho trudged after him, sucking in his stomach because the gate was too narrow. He looked around, squinted in the sun, and rubbed the sweat from his eyes. "Magic? Lord, this is a garden. A perfectly ordinary garden. Roses, water, a few statues that look like they've seen too much sun. If this is magic, then my pig at home is a unicorn."

But Quixote turned, his eyes wide, his voice trembling with awe. "No, Sancho, you do not see with the eyes of faith! Look there—the hedges! Trimmed by invisible hands! The wells! Filled with the tears of the fairies!"

Sancho yawned and scratched his stomach. "Invisible hands? Sir, there's a servant over there with a hose. If that's a fairy, I'll eat a bucket of roses."

The dukes hid behind windows, laughing quietly, while Quixote, kneeling, picked up a flower, kissed it reverently, and murmured, "Dulcinea... I feel your presence."

Sancho groaned and spat into the gravel. "All I can feel is my back and my ass. And both say: Magic Garden or not – I want a chair and a jug."

Quixote stood in the middle of the garden, his arms outstretched as if he were embracing the sun itself. "Sancho! Don't you see? Every bush, every flower speaks to me. These are no ordinary roses—they are messengers from heaven! Here, in this enchanted garden, the hand of higher powers reveals itself. I swear: every step is a sign, every blossom a prophecy."

Sancho stopped, pulled a thistle from his trousers that had pierced the fabric, and muttered, "A sign, yes. A sign that the gardeners here have too much time on their hands. Higher powers? Lord, those are hedges. Hedges! Trimmed with a knife, not with angel wings."

Quixote fell to his knees, kissing the ground as if it were holy ground. "Oh Dulcinea! Are you hidden here? Are you whispering messages to me through the leaves?"

Sancho rolled his eyes and spat into the gravel. "If she whispers something to you, it's probably: 'Get up, you fool, you'll dirty your pants.'"

Suddenly, white cloths, secretly hung by servants, fluttered from the trees. Quixote gasped. "Sancho, do you see? The spirits are sending us their veils!"

Sancho grinned crookedly. "Veils? Lord, those are bedsheets. I can even still see the stains on them. If this is magic, then my wife is a witch for hanging our laundry on the line."

The dukes chuckled behind the wall, but Quixote raised his arms, trembling with emotion. "I swear, this is the Garden of Trials. Here my fate will be sealed."

Sancho groaned. "My destiny is to drag you around, whether you're kneeling in an enchanted garden or in a latrine. Both smack of madness."

They walked deeper into the garden, where the hedges narrowed. Suddenly, something flashed: mirrors, cleverly hung among the branches, reflected the sunlight, making it flicker like firelight.

Quixote paused, gasping. "Sancho! Lights from another world! Flames that don't burn—a spell, a protective circle against the unworthy."

Sancho squinted, saw the mirrors rattling in the wind. "Sir, those are mirrors. The things my wife uses to find her face, and I use to find my belly. No magic, just glass. And when there's wind, they wobble. Simple as that."

A caw sounded. Hidden servants had released caged ravens, which fluttered and screamed. Quixote recoiled, raising his lance. "Do you hear, Sancho? The voices of the damned! They warn us of the dangers of this realm!"

Sancho shrugged. "Ravens, sir. Only ravens. If they're damned, then my chicken at home is the Archangel Gabriel."

A servant threw powder into the fire, green smoke rising, reeking of sulfur. Quixote clutched his chest as if he had a revelation. "This is the sign! The sorcerers are testing us! We are in the middle of their realm!"

Sancho coughed, waving away the stench. "Test? Lord, that's sulfur. Sulfur stinks, whether in the Enchanted Garden or the Thunder Beam. If you ask me, that's not a test, it's a bad joke."

But Quixote stepped forward, his face full of fervor. "No, Sancho. It's magic. It is the hour of my destiny."

Sancho muttered, "Shit, my fate is about to collapse. They're making this into a circus act, and you think you're the damned leading man."

Quixote stopped in the middle of the hedges, threw his lance into the gravel, and knelt down. Dust clung to his armor, sweat dripped down his face, but his voice trembled like that of a priest.

"O Dulcinea, mistress of my heart," he cried, "in this enchanted garden I swear loyalty to you! No pain, no deception, no demon will deter me. This is your sanctuary, and I am your servant!"

He hit his chest with his fist so hard that he gasped.

Sancho stood beside him, scratching his ass and grimacing. "Sanctuary? Lord, that's a garden with roses and ravens. If this is a temple, then my barn at home is the Sistine Chapel."

Quixote raised his arms to heaven, pleading. "Dulcinea! Give me a sign that you hear me!"

Behind the hedge, a servant pulled a cord, and a cheap bell echoed through the greenery. Quixote gasped. "There! She answered! A heavenly ring!"

Sancho rolled his eyes and sighed. "Lord, that was a guy with a rope. If that's heavenly, then every donkey bray is divine music."

But Quixote was long lost, kneeling in the dust, his hands folded as if he were standing before an apparition.

Sancho muttered, "If you kneel any longer, sir, you'll fall. And I swear, I won't carry you out—Magic Garden or not."

Suddenly, there was a rustling sound from behind the bushes. A servant, half-wrapped in a torn cloth, with a ridiculous papier-mâché mask and feathers on his head, leaped out. In his hand, he carried a staff with a turnip stuck to it.

"Mortal Knight!" he croaked in a disguised voice that sounded more like a cold than magic. "You have entered the realm of wonders! To proceed, you must pass a test!"

Don Quixote jumped up, his face burning, his eyes feverish. "Finally! The magician reveals himself! Tell me, O creature, what do you want of me?"

Sancho stood beside him, his eyes wide open, and muttered, "Holy shit... that's Esteban, the stable boy. I recognize that voice. And I saw that turnip in the kitchen yesterday."

But Quixote knelt low, as if standing before an angel. "Command me, magical creature, and I will obey, even if it costs me my life!"

The "creature" raised its staff and wagged the turnip threateningly. "You shall... uh... you shall eat this apple without touching the peel! And then run three laps around the well while calling my name: 'Great Aramandulus!'"

Sancho put his hand to his face. "Aramandulus? That sounds like a fart after beans. Lord, that's not magic. It's cheap slapstick."

But Quixote nodded reverently, reaching for the apple as if it were the Holy Grail. "So be it. For Dulcinea, for honor, for victory over the dark forces!"

Sancho sighed and spat into the gravel. "If you do that, sir, you're officially more insane than any rooster that supposedly lays eggs."

And the dukes behind the hedges held their stomachs with laughter.

Quixote took the apple, held it up as if it were a wafer, and whispered, "Dulcinea... for you." Then he bit into it carefully, without touching the skin with his fingers, as if the world hung on the edge of this ridiculous task. The juice ran down his chin, dripping onto his rusted armor.

Sancho stood beside them, wiping his eyes with laughter. "Sir, you look like you're burying an apple. So much seriousness for a bite... when you're done, I'll make you a shrine in the fruit basket."

Quixote chewed with a heroic expression, swallowed, then raised his lance and shouted: "The first part is complete! Now the laps around the fountain!"

He jumped up and ran, rattling in his armor like a broken carriage, shouting at the top of his voice: "Aramandulus! Aramandulus!"

Sancho collapsed, clutching his stomach, tears streaming down his face. "Sir... hahaha... if Dulcinea hears this, she'll die laughing. You're running around like

an old rooster with a cramp, yelling a name that sounds like a drunken disease!"

Quixote continued running, stumbled once, got up, and shouted even louder: "Aramandulus! I obey you!"

The "magical creature" nodded seriously, barely able to keep from bursting out laughing. Behind the hedges, the dukes rolled around, servants covered their mouths to keep from screaming.

Sancho was practically lying on the gravel by now, gasping for air. "Shit, sir, if this is magic, I'll be cursed for the rest of my life. This is the best comedy I've ever seen."

And Quixote ran on, full of glory in the dust.

Quixote came out breathless, panting, sweat dripping from beneath his helmet, but his eyes glowed like torches. "Sancho! We have done it! The garden has been conquered, the magic exposed, the test passed. No spell can stop us now!"

He spread his arms, almost tripped over a root, caught himself, and added with a pathetic tremor: "Dulcinea has tested me—and I have triumphed! This garden is no longer a place of enchantment, but a monument to my courage."

Sancho stood beside him, hands on his hips, stomach still shaking from laughing. He snorted, spat into the gravel, and said dryly, "Sir, if that's a monument, then you're the statue of the biggest idiot Spain has ever seen. You ate an apple, ran three laps, and screamed like a drunk, and now you call it a victory? Holy shit... I'd rather have been sitting in a tavern, ass in the dirt, jug in hand. That would have been real magic."

Quixote, however, didn't hear him; he still stood there, transfigured, as if he had redeemed the world. "Sancho, the road to glory is full of such trials. You'll see: the historians will mention this garden as a sacred place."

Sancho grunted, grabbed his donkey rope, and muttered, "History writers? At most, the pub clowns who sing it back. And I swear, they get more beer for it than I'll ever see here."

And so they left the garden – a knight who thought he was a victor, and a squire who knew they were just extras in a bad comedy.

### A Mirror Knight appears

It was late afternoon, the sun hanging low, when suddenly something flickered on the street ahead. At first, Sancho thought he was staring at stars from hunger. But no – there actually stood a figure, shining like a walking glass cabinet.

A knight, his armor covered in mirror plates, reflected the sun so sharply that Quixote was almost blinded. The horse underneath was sweating because it looked as if it were carrying a stove full of tiles.

Quixote jerked on the reins, his eyes wide, his breath heavy. "Sancho! Look! A divine adversary, a knight of truth, an emissary from another world!"

Sancho narrowed his eyes and held his hand over his forehead. "Sir, that's not an envoy. That's a guy in a tin can who looks like he's left over from Carnival. If this is magic, then my mother-in-law is a fairy."

The figure raised his lance, his voice echoing tinnily from beneath his helmet. "Don Quixote! I am the Knight of Mirrors. I have come to show you who you truly are!"

Quixote beat his chest with his fist. "O holy moment! Finally, an opponent made not of flesh alone, but of truth itself! I accept the challenge!"

Sancho groaned and scratched his stomach. "Truth? Sir, that's a clown in disguise who's about to punch you in the face. And then I get to pick up your mess again."

But Quixote didn't hear him. His gaze was fixed, fiery, as if he were about to enter the greatest battle of his life.

The knight raised his lance so that the sun shone through it, and the mirrors on his armor cast patches of light across the ground, as if ghosts were dancing in the dust.

"Don Quixote of La Mancha," he boomed, "I have come to bring you the truth! Not the one you seek in your dreams, but the one that dwells within yourself! Look at yourself—in me you see yourself! Your honor, your madness, your downfall!"

Quixote's eyes widened, almost kneeling before the figure. "A divine mirror! A messenger of trial! Oh, what a high honor that heaven itself should show me my own abyss!"

Sancho stood beside him, wiping the sweat from his brow and muttering, "Holy crap... Lord, that's not a divine mirror. That's a guy in disco armor telling you you're an idiot. And you're still bowing down to him."

The knight tapped the ground with his lance, sending dust flying. "If you wish to prevail, Don Quixote, then stand! Fight me—fight yourself!"

Quixote raised his lance, trembling with emotion. "Yes! I will fight myself and emerge from this battle purified, cleansed, invincible!"

Sancho spat in the dust and shook his head. "Invincible... Lord, you're so invincible that even a goat would knock you off your feet if you kicked him in the ass. But sure, only fight the walking wardrobe."

But Quixote only saw the mirrors – and himself in them, distorted, glittering, grotesque.

Quixote raised his lance, trembling, his eyes shining like a fanatic's. "Sancho! Don't you see? This is no ordinary opponent. This is fate itself, wrapped in a thousand mirrors so that I may face myself. A sacred duel—me against my own being!"

He beat his chest so hard that the rusted armor rattled. "Today everything will be decided: whether I am just a fool or a knight by the grace of God!"

Sancho stood a few steps back, his arms crossed, his face full of disgust and weariness. "Sir, you are both: a fool in a costume and a knight in your head. But what stands before you is not fate. This is a student in disguise who has spent a week polishing himself in the sun. A ridiculous masked ball, nothing more."

Quixote growled, his voice trembling. "You don't understand, Sancho! Every mirror shows me my doubts, my mistakes, my greatness! I MUST fight him!"

Sancho laughed dryly. "I can see mistakes even without a mirror. I can see greatness too—the greatness of your stupidity. You don't need an opponent. You bring your own blows."

But Quixote had already ridden a few steps forward, his visor down, his spear steady. The sun reflected off the stranger's armor, almost blinding him—and he took it as a sign from heaven.

Sancho spat in the dust and muttered, "Lord, if this is heaven, then it's just as crazy as you. And I'm the poor dog who pays the entrance fee for the masked ball."

The horses were spurred. The Knight of Mirrors lowered his lance, and Quixote followed suit. His armor rattled, and his breath whistled from his nose like a broken bellows.

The sun refracted in the mirrors, and Quixote was instantly blinded, seeing only a flickering shimmer, as if he were storming into a thousand suns. "Sancho! Heaven itself is testing me! I'm riding into the light!"

Sancho held his stomach, tears streaming down his cheeks. "Into the light? Lord, you're riding into a walking wardrobe. You can't even see the ground anymore! You're about to run into your own reflection!"

Dust rose, the horses thundered toward each other. Quixote roared as if charging against demons, trying to save the world. The Knight of Mirrors, on the other hand, grinned beneath his helmet, holding his lance loosely as if he knew the whole thing was just an act.

And Sancho stood there, slapping his thighs, laughing so loudly that even a few birds fluttered out of the trees. "Holy shit... if this is Spain, then it's a circus, and you're the main act!"

The lances hit home—at least the Knight of Mirror's. Quixote stabbed into the void, blinded, and his old horse stumbled, nearly breaking its neck.

The crowd of servants, who had formed up as spectators, cheered as if in the arena.

And Sancho muttered between laughter and sighs: "If I don't wake up here soon, I'll go even crazier than you."

Quixote scrambled to his feet, his spear splintered, dust on his face, but his eyes glowing like those of a fanatic. "No! Not yet! I will conquer you, O mirror, I will defeat my true self!"

He charged forward, swinging his sword, clanging against the mirror plates. The metal screeched, sparks flew, but the knight himself barely flinched—he only held his shield aloft, and in every blow, Quixote saw nothing but himself: distorted, twisted, with a wild look, a bloody face, a fool in the metal.

"You see, Sancho?" he cried, gasping. "I'm fighting against my own soul! I... I'm going to conquer it!"

Sancho crossed his arms and snorted. "You're fighting against air, sir. And the mirror shows you what you really are: an old, sweating idiot, breaking his own bones. No demon, no magic—just you and your madness."

Quixote continued to strike, hitting only the mirror glass, which clinked without breaking. His arm grew heavy, his breath hoarse, but he continued to scream, as if in an exorcism: "Dulcinea! Strengthen me! I must not fall!"

The Knight of Mirrors stood almost motionless, the sun glittering above him, and Quixote struck his own image: a knight, twisted, ridiculous, bloody, like a bad caricature.

Sancho groaned and grabbed his head. "If you see each other more often, sir, you might begin to understand how crazy you are. But that will probably only make you prouder."

And the servants who watched held their stomachs with laughter.

The Mirror Knight barely moved. A slight thrust of the lance, and Quixote flew backward, like a sack of bones, clattering in the dust. He lay there, gasping, trying to rise, but the mirror above him blinded him until all he could see was his own distorted mouth—bloody, dirty, with eyes full of madness.

"Look at you, Don Quixote!" boomed the tinny voice. "That's you! Not a hero, not a knight—just a fool staring in the mirror and believing he's a king."

Quixote almost howled, pounding his chest with his fist. "No! I... I am a knight! Protector of the weak, fighter for Dulcinea!"

The mirror sparkled, reflecting his image back to him: a battered, sweating, panting old man lying in the dust.

Sancho stepped a little closer, saw his master, and muttered, "Holy crap... he sees it, and he doesn't understand. Even when the mirror laughs at him, he thinks he's in a painting."

The knight held the shield so close to Quixote's face that all Quixote could see was himself. "Know yourself, fool! You are no greater than your own delusion!"

The servants' laughter grew louder, the dukes grinned in the background.

But Quixote sank back, arms outstretched, and murmured, "So be it. I have fallen... but fallen for honor."

Sancho spat in the dust. "Fallen for honor? Lord, you fell because you fought yourselves. No one else struck you—only your damned head."

Quixote lay motionless in the dust, his armor dented, his breath labored, his eyes shining with a mixture of shame and pride. "Sancho... I have failed. The mirror showed me my true self, and I could not conquer it. I fell, not by steel, but by truth."

Sancho knelt beside him, sighed, and shook his head. "Sir... that wasn't a mirror of the truth. That was a guy in a tin costume who set you up. Nothing divine, nothing demonic—just a masked ball, and you were the main attraction."

Quixote coughed, blood and dust on his lips, and smiled blissfully. "No, Sancho... I know better. Every blow was a blow from my destiny. Every reflection a glimpse into my soul. I... I failed a test."

Sancho huffed and rubbed his face, annoyed to the core. "Test, test... everything with you is a test. Do you know what that was for me? Theater for bored noblemen who have nothing better to do than blind a poor madman with mirrors. And I get to watch you make fools of yourselves."

The servants were still laughing, the dukes clapping quietly in the background.

Quixote, however, remained lying in the dust, his arms outstretched as if he were a martyr. "Then laugh, world. I have lost... but in defeat, true greatness grows."

Sancho spat next to him, muttering, "True greatness? You're smaller than your shadow. And I swear, sir, someday I'll get so drunk I'll forget all this. Otherwise I'll go mad myself."

They moved on – Quixote limping, full of false glory, Sancho with his head hanging, full of bitter clarity.

## The hero's defeat

The sun was low, the dust of the country road hung in the air, when a figure appeared before them—not a jumping jack with mirrors, not a disguised servant, but a knight mounted on a heavy, black horse. His armor was brightly polished, his spear long and sharp, his visor closed.

Quixote yanked on the reins, his eyes blazing. "Sancho! This is the moment. The battle that will decide my fate. No trick, no deception—a true opponent. I swear, I will defeat him or die in the dust."

Sancho stopped, staring at the dark figure, feeling his stomach lurch. "Sir... that one's no actor. He's a guy with muscles, a horse, and a lance, and he doesn't look like he wants to spare you. If you ride off now, you'll break more than just your teeth."

Quixote raised his lance, his armor rattling as if it would break with his breath. "I fear nothing, Sancho! In this fight I will find my crown or my grave."

Sancho spat in the dust and muttered, "More like the grave. And I get to hold the shovel again."

The strange knight lowered his lance and spoke in a deep voice that bore no trace of mockery: "Don Quixote, I challenge you. Today you will see that your dreams are nothing but dust."

Quixote nodded gravely, his eyes full of fire. "Then let the dust rise. Come, knight—and test me!"

Sancho sighed, held the donkey back, and whispered, "Test? Lord, this is not a test. This is your downfall."

The black knight guided his horse closer, his lance still raised, but his voice hard as iron. "Don Quixote, knight of the melancholy countenance—they call you a fool, a buffoon, a shadow of a man. Today you will realize that your deeds were nothing but wind chimes, your victories only lies, your honor only dust."

Quixote trembled, his lips trembling, but his eyes glowing. "Lies? No, stranger! I have defended the innocent, fought robbers, freed ladies—and all in the name of Dulcinea! If I am a fool, then I am God's fool!"

Sancho stepped forward, raising his hands, his voice shaky. "Sir, listen to him. He's right. Your victories were beatings, your ladies were peasant girls, and your opponents... mostly windmills. Save your bones before he breaks them."

But Quixote only heard his enemy.

The knight laughed dully. "Dulcinea? A dream in your head! You hunt ghosts and think you're a king. But today I'll break your mirror—and you with it."

Sancho grabbed Rocinante's reins, begging: "Lord, please. I've dragged you through so much madness, but this is different. This guy means business. And you... you have nothing but a rusty spear and a horse that dies on the spot."

Quixote tore free the reins and struck the ground with his lance, kicking up dust. "No, Sancho! I'd rather die than retreat. The world may call me a fool—but that fool will fall fighting!"

Sancho groaned and muttered, "Shit... and I get to collect the armor afterward."

Quixote urged Rocinante on as if the old horse were a warhorse made of steel. But the animal stumbled at the first stride, its ribs showing, and its breath rattling like an old bellows.

Quixote leaned forward, his lance tilted, his eyes glowing with madness. "For Dulcinea! For honor! For the realm of knights!" he roared, his voice croaking as if it were breaking in his throat.

The black knight came toward him, strong, confident, his horse powerful, his armor shining. Every hoofbeat sounded like a death sentence.

Sancho called after him, his hands on his head: "Sir! Turn back! This is suicide! You're a sack of bones on a half-dead horse!"

But Quixote heard nothing. The wind whipped his face, dust burned his eyes, and his armor rattled as if it were about to fall apart before the impact.

He raised his lance and aimed, but his arms trembled, his grip weak. His entire figure was a picture of decay, and yet he roared: "Today the world will decide!"

Sancho stamped his feet in despair, cursing: "Shit, sir, the world has long since decided. You're just the clown, and he's the executioner!"

The spears were raised, the horses thundered. The dust rose, the sun dazzled, and the battle began.

The lances clashed. Quixote's spear shattered like rotten wood, splinters flying into his face. The Black Knight struck full force, knocking him from his saddle and crashing to the ground like a sack of iron.

Dust swirled, armor rattled, bones creaked. Quixote tried to stand, staggered, blood pouring from his forehead. "Not... over... yet!" he gasped, reaching for his sword, which was already blunter than a kitchen knife.

The enemy dismounted, raised his shield, and slammed its edge hard against Quixote's helmet. A dull thud, a gasp—and Quixote fell back into the dust.

Sancho screamed, ran forward a few steps, then back again, tearing his hair. "Sir! Stay down! You're dying out there! By God, this isn't a game anymore!"

But Quixote crawled to his knees, spat blood, and raised his sword. "Dulcinea... I will not give in... I will never give in!"

Another blow. This time with the lance across his back. A dull crack, Quixote fell forward, his armor rattling like an empty barrel.

Sancho yelled, tears in his eyes: "Shit, stop it! He's old! He's crazy! But he's also my master!"

The Black Knight remained motionless, hard as stone, while Quixote lay coughing in the dust, unable to lift his legs.

Quixote staggered to his feet, leaning on the sword that was barely a blade anymore. Blood dripped from his mouth, his knees trembled, but his eyes still burned. "No... no, I am not defeated. Knights do not fall—they only kneel to rise stronger."

He swayed, half fell, and picked himself up like a drunk who doesn't want to give up.

The Black Knight raised his shield and slammed it against Quixote's chest with full force. There was an ugly clang, a gasp, and Quixote collapsed again.

Sancho ran forward a few steps, his hands outstretched. "Sir, stop! You have nothing left. Not even pride, only blood and bone dust!"

But Quixote crawled, his fingers in the dirt, wheezing: "For Dulcinea... for justice... I stand... I fight..."

He half-rose, staggering like a ghost, raising his sword in a trembling hand. His opponent took a step forward and struck him across the helmet with his lance. A dull thud, and Quixote toppled over like a felled tree.

Sancho screamed: "Shit! You're killing him!"

But Quixote, half unconscious, muttered with a broken grin: "Not yet... not yet... as long as I breathe... I fight..."

Then he slumped back, his armor crooked, his face bloody, his body twitching.

The Black Knight stepped back, breathing calmly, while Quixote lay motionless in the dust, his sword half-dropped from his hand. Dust clung to his blood, his armor dented like an old barrel.

The enemy raised his lance, his voice cold and clear: "Don Quixote of La Mancha – you are defeated. Your fight is over. Your dreams are nothing but smoke."

Sancho staggered forward, his hands outstretched, tears streaming through the dust on his face. "No... he's old, crazy, but he has heart! You call that a victory? A victory against a man who was already half-broken?"

The knight didn't even look at him. "A fool who calls himself a knight is always a defeated man. He only lives as long as he is allowed to. Today his madness dies—though his body still breathes."

Quixote wheezed, raising his head weakly. "No... I... am not... dead. I have... fallen, yes... but a knight doesn't die of defeat... he lives on in it..."

Sancho knelt beside him, grabbing his shoulders in despair. "Sir, stop! Enough! You've lost. Damn it, you must finally admit it."

Quixote closed his eyes briefly and murmured, "Lost... and yet... triumphed... because I... did not give up."

Sancho gritted his teeth and pounded his fist into the dust. "Shit, sir... you lost. And I lost with you."

Quixote lay in the dust, his armor like a cage, his body broken, his lips bloody. But in his eyes, a trace of that damned madness that had always sustained him still glowed. "Sancho... hear me... I have lost... but I lost honorably. This is... the last great honor... to be defeated... in the name of Dulcinea."

Sancho knelt beside him, rubbed his temples, and murmured, "Honor? Lord, that was no honor. That was a slaughter. You fought like an old dog against a butcher. This is not glory, this is the end."

Quixote coughed, blood on his chin, and smiled twistedly. "An end? No... the true knight never dies... he lives... in stories... in songs... in you, Sancho..."

Sancho snorted and spat in the dust. "Stories? Songs? Shit, people will laugh, not sing. They'll say: There was a madman who thought windmills were giants and let every idiot in a costume punch him in the face."

Quixote closed his eyes briefly and whispered, "Then... let them laugh. As long as Dulcinea knows... that I fell for her..."

Sancho looked at him bitterly, his eyes filled with tears and anger. "Dulcinea doesn't exist, sir. You sold your life to a ghost. And I... I was the idiot who carried you all this way."

The sun set, the light turned red. The Black Knight turned away, leaving them in the dust.

And there they lay – a broken knight hallucinating his defeat as victory, and a squire finally realizing that it was all over.

### Returning home on tired hooves

The sun hung like a rotten lump over La Mancha, and the road home was nothing but dust, stones, and silence. Rocinante trudged along, each step a creaking miracle, as if the animal were about to collapse from exhaustion. Beside him trotted Sancho's donkey, just as worn out, but as tough as an old drunkard who can manage one last beer.

Quixote sat in the saddle, his armor dented, his visor half-torn off, blood crusting his beard. And yet he spoke, with that feverish glory in his eyes:

"Sancho, we return home—not as losers, but as men who have tasted the fight. Defeat is just another word for glory. The world will speak of us."

Sancho lounged on his donkey, his shirt soaked with sweat, his belly empty, his eyes tired. "The world will talk about us, yes. In the tavern. Between a cup of wine and a fart. 'There are those two idiots again who thought windmills were giants.' Nothing more."

Quixote raised his hand pathetically, almost slipping from the saddle. "No, Sancho, our dust will become stardust, our scars will become crowns!"

Sancho laughed dryly, scratching his belly. "Stars, crowns... Lord, all I want is a piece of bread, a mug of beer, and my wife telling me to shut up. That would be heaven enough for me."

The animals trudged on, the dust burning their eyes, and the path seemed endless. A knight full of illusions—and a squire who was only thinking about the next meal.

The sun sank lower, the sky glowing red like an open wound. Quixote raised his arm and pointed to the heavens with a trembling finger. "Do you see that, Sancho? The clouds... a sword! A sign! Heaven itself honors our retreat. We return home as knights, blessed by the sunset."

Sancho squinted up, wiping the sweat from his forehead. "Sir, that's not a heavenly blade. It's a cloud. And it looks more like a fart that's been stuck in your pants for too long."

Quixote ignored it, continuing to talk feverishly. "And there, look! That tree there, solitary on the hill... a sentinel, greeting us, encouraging us."

Sancho blinked, coughing in the dust. "Tree? It's a dry oak with more dead wood than branches. If it encourages us, the most it'll say is, 'Die quietly, I'm out of sap either.'"

A swarm of flies buzzed around them, landing on Quixote's wounds, crawling into his ear, buzzing around Sancho's face.

Quixote whispered reverently, "Sancho... do you hear? Fairies singing us songs, little spirits accompanying our journey."

Sancho swatted at the beasts and cursed. "Fairies? Lord, they're flies. Ordinary, shithouse-loving flies. And their song says, 'You stink, and we want some.'"

Quixote smiled blissfully, his eyes shining in the sunset. "Ah, Sancho... you only hear the filth. I hear the poetry."

Sancho snorted and spat in the dust. "Fuck poetry. Poetry doesn't satisfy anyone. I'd rather have a piece of cheese than a thousand fly songs."

And so they rode on: one in the omen, the other in the stench.

Sancho squatted crookedly on his donkey, his rear end sore, his legs numb. Every step the animal took vibrated in his bones like a bad joke. He looked at the dust of the country road and thought of something a thousand times more beautiful: his kitchen.

The image came clearly before his eyes—his wife, potbellied, grumpy, with hands that smelled of bread and garlic. A roughly hewn table, on it a jug of wine, a piece of cheese, a loaf of bread, a bowl of beans. No magic garden, no jousting—just honest food, honest sweat, honest sleep.

"Shit..." he muttered, "why did I even leave? I should have stayed with her. Whining, cursing, eating, sleeping—that was my life. And now? Now I'm sitting here, my ass sore, my stomach empty, listening to the sermons of a fool."

Quixote beside him continued to babble about Dulcinea, about honor, about the stars that wrote her name.

Sancho growled, staring straight ahead. *Dulcinea... pff. A peasant girl who never knew she was the muse of a madman. And I gave my ass up for that dream. For what? For dust and shame.*

He rubbed his growling stomach. "Holy Mother, I'd give anything for a bowl of beans right now. Anything. Even cold porridge."

His gaze glazed over; he no longer saw the street, but his bed at home, hard, but his. And he wondered if his wife would even open the door for him—or if she would greet him with a rolling pin.

"Damn," he muttered, "maybe she deserves to beat me up. I dumped her for an old nut. Who does that? Only an idiot. Only me."

And he laughed, short, dry, a bitter bark that was immediately smothered in the dust.

Quixote stood upright in the saddle, as dignified as a battered, battered knight on a half-dead horse could. "Sancho," he began in that pathetic, shaky voice, "chivalry is a flame that never goes out. Even if I have fallen, it burns on. Every step we take is history. Every pain is a song that will one day be sung."

Sancho glanced over at him, eyes red with dust, face blank with fatigue. "A song? Lord, if anyone sings, it's probably the innkeeper when he asks me for my money. 'Sancho, you bastard, pay your bill now!' – that'll be my song."

Quixote raised his hand, trembling, solemn. "No, Sancho! Our names will be carried across the centuries, like the heroes of antiquity, whose glory never ends."

Sancho grinned crookedly and scratched his butt. "Glory? The only glory I see is the rash on my ass from that ride. If history mentions that, I'll laugh myself to death—assuming I'm still here."

Quixote stared at the horizon as if listening to an invisible fanfare. "It will be said: Here rode Don Quixote and his faithful Sancho, defenders of the weak, champions of truth."

Sancho snorted dryly and belched. "People say: Here came those two idiots, missed all the fun, and rode to their deaths with empty stomachs. That's all."

Quixote smiled blissfully, as if he were listening to hymns of praise. Sancho snorted, spat in the dust, and muttered, "Sir, if you give one more monologue, I'll fall off my donkey. Not from awe, but from boredom."

And they dragged themselves on, each in his own world – one in a dream, the other in the dust.

Halfway through a dusty village, Rocinante almost stopped, so tired that even the flies were no longer interested. A few peasants squatted by the well, wine cups in hand, and saw the two figures approaching: a rickety knight in dented armor, a fat squire with a drooping face, both so shabby that they could hardly be taken seriously.

The first farmer laughed loudly, almost spitting out his wine. "Holy Mother—look! The famous knight! The conqueror of windmills! He looks like an old beggar in a rusty tin can!"

The others snorted and slapped their thighs. One shouted: "Sancho, the great governor of the island—have you lost your crown or just your brain?"

Sancho gritted his teeth, his stomach growled, his face turned red. "Holy shit, always these jokes..." he muttered, his hands clenched into fists.

Quixote raised his hand wearily, his voice shaky but still pathetic. "Sneer, ignorant ones! Your laughter echoes empty—my fame remains immortal."

The peasants laughed even louder. "Immortal? You'll die just sitting down, old man! And your squire drinks more than he knows!"

Sancho almost jumped off the donkey, his eyes filled with rage. "Shut up, you filthy bastards! You have no idea what we've been through! I've eaten more dust than you bread! I..." He broke off, his voice trembling, his breathing heavy. "Damn it... I just want to go home."

The farmers giggled, shook their heads, and continued drinking.

Quixote smiled blissfully, as if he wasn't listening at all. "Sancho, let them laugh. Laughter is the world's tribute to the hero."

Sancho spat in the dust. "Tribute? Lord, that's not tribute. That's humiliation. And I'm getting tired of being treated like a monkey."

As soon as they left the village, Quixote slumped forward in the saddle. Rocinante stumbled and stopped, as if to say: *Not one more step or I'll fall over.* Don Quixote hung crookedly like a sack of bones, his face gray, his lips dry.

"Sancho..." he murmured in a shaky voice, "my body... it no longer obeys me. But the soul, Sancho, the soul is stronger than..."

Before he could finish, he slipped halfway out of the saddle. Sancho jumped off, just in time to catch him. The armor was heavy, rusty, and Sancho cursed like he'd hugged a millstone. "Shit, sir! You weigh more than a pig in a barrel! And you're just bones in iron. Why the hell am I doing this to myself?"

He pulled Quixote off his horse, dragged him a short distance, and then set him down in the ditch. Quixote smiled weakly, as if he had just landed in a royal palace. "Thank you, Sancho... a true squire... a brother in battle."

Sancho panted, wiping the sweat from his forehead. "Brother in battle? Screw it. I'm your packhorse. If anyone's fighting here, it's me—with your weight, your madness, and my damned back."

Quixote tried to stand up, wheezing: "Just a little further, Sancho. Just a little further... home is calling."

Sancho shook his head, raised it again, and cursed loudly. "Home is calling, yes. And my bones are screaming louder. Lord, if I survive this, I'll drink so much I'll never have to think straight again."

And so they stumbled on: Quixote half-dead in the squire's arms, Sancho cursing like a drunk without beer.

After endless hours, the silhouette of La Mancha emerged—flat fields, a few humble houses, the village from which they had once set out. No fanfare, no cheering, only the barking of a dog, the cawing of a crow, and the smell of dust that never faded.

Quixote raised his head wearily, his eyes glazed over, but full of that damned gleam that never faded. "Sancho... we have returned home. Look! Home welcomes us, not as beggars, no—as knights returning from battle. The dust on our boots is proof of our journey. We wear crowns, invisible but eternal."

Sancho squinted over, his back bent, his stomach empty, his face wrinkled from cursing. "Crowns? Lord, I don't see any crowns. I only see dust. Dust on my boots, dust in my eyes, dust in my mouth. If that's glory, that barking dog will eat me right now."

Quixote sighed, smiling faintly, as if the words were balm. "Sancho, the dog barks because he recognizes that heroes return home."

Sancho laughed bitterly and shook his head. "Heroes? Lord, if we're heroes, then I'd rather be a coward. At least then I'll get bread and sleep."

Rocinante stumbled, the donkey trotted wearily, and the two men, one in madness, one in truth, reached the village—not like victors, but like shadows.

And Sancho murmured softly, barely audibly: "I no longer see a beginning. I only see dust... and the end."

### Sancho and his master – a conversation between friends

They weren't far from the village, but the animals' legs were giving out, so they settled down by the side of the road. A dry patch of earth, a shadow that was barely a shadow. Sancho rummaged in his bag, pulled out a piece of hard bread that was more stone than food, and a sip of water from the jug that tasted of warm iron.

He chewed, crunched, belched, spat out a crumb and looked at Quixote, who held his bread in his hands like a sacred host.

"Sir," Sancho began, his voice hoarse, "is this the damned glory you promised me? Hard bread, warm water, an ass full of blisters, and a head full of laughter from people making us laugh? If that's glory, then I don't give a damn. I'd rather be at home. My wife would complain, but I'd have wine in my belly and a bed under my ass."

He tossed a crumb into the dusty grass and shook his head. "Shit, sir, I've dragged you through gardens, inns, flocks of sheep, and mirrors. And what do I have now? Nothing. Not even half of a decent dinner."

Quixote sat beside him, hunched over, his armor dented, but his eyes shining like those of a child who still believes in fairy tales. He smiled faintly and murmured, "Sancho... we are sharing no ordinary meal. This is the bread of adventure, the water of valor. Every bite is history."

Sancho snorted and belched again. "Story? Yes, the story of two idiots sitting in the dust chewing dry bread while the world laughs. Lord, I'm sick of your damned story."

Quixote raised his piece of bread as if it were a chalice. "Sancho, we sit here not as beggars, but as knights and squires who have passed trials. Every crumb we eat is imbued with honor. Every sip of water is sweeter than wine when it comes from the hands of fate."

Sancho stared at it, chewed slowly, crunched loudly, then spat a morsel into the dust. "Honor, sir? I only taste mold. And the water isn't sweet—it tastes of the donkey that carried the jug. You call it glory, I call it trash."

Quixote closed his eyes and raised his voice as if preaching. "A knight doesn't live by his gut, Sancho, but by his ideal! The pain we endure is the price of an immortal legacy."

Sancho slapped his fist against his stomach, which growled like an old dog. "My stomach doesn't give a damn about a legacy. It wants beans, wine, and bacon. And if it doesn't get that, then I'll give a damn about your ideal. What good is immortality if I starve to death on the way?"

Quixote looked at him, serious, almost sad. "Sancho, your mind must become bigger than your stomach."

Sancho laughed dryly and bitterly. "Sir, my mind has long since grown bigger than my stomach. Otherwise, I wouldn't be here anymore. But at some point, enough's enough. You fight for castles in the air – I fight for a full plate."

He belched, took another bite, and muttered, "And guess who wins more often: hunger or your honor."

Sancho pushed the hard bread away and rubbed his hands clean on his trousers, even though they were long gone. Then, breathing heavily, he began to speak without looking at Quixote:

"Lord, do you know what I really want? No fame, no stories, no bullshit about glory. I want my house. My wife who yells at me for coming home late. My kids who search my pockets to see if I brought them candy. The smell of soup boiling over and the smacking of our lips as we all eat from the same bowl. I want the bed that's too hard, but mine. My wife's snoring, which annoys me—but it's real, and then I know I'm not alone."

He paused, swallowed, and looked down at the dust. "And instead I'm sitting here, in the dirt, with a half-dead knight babbling about a woman who probably doesn't even exist. Dulcinea... pff. I have my Dulcinea at home. She wears an apron, smells of cabbage, and she tells me every day that I'm an idiot. But damn it—this is real. Not some pipe dream."

Sancho laughed hoarsely, almost like a bark. "And I miss that, sir. I even miss her rants. I miss her taking my cup of wine and telling me to chop wood. I miss the damned mundane. And you? You chase after the invisible and drag me along. I was a peasant—and now? Now I'm just a hungry peasant who looks even more stupid."

He wiped his face with his hand, dust smearing across his cheeks. "Shit, sir... I wish I were home."

Quixote placed his hand, bloody and trembling, on Sancho's shoulder. His voice was shaky, but still full of that old madness. "Sancho... I understand your longing. But what is a bed compared to glory? What is soup compared to the fire of history? Your wife may love you—but Dulcinea makes you immortal. We suffer, yes, but we suffer like heroes. And suffering is merely the coin with which greatness is paid."

Sancho looked at him, blinked, then laughed briefly, hoarsely, as if he had a splinter in his throat. "Coin? Lord, that's not a coin. That's a kick in the balls, and we pay for it every day. You call it greatness—I call it idiocy. And you know what? The story you have in your head, no one buys it. You eat bread. You drink wine. Everything else is bullshit."

Quixote stood up as dignified as he could and murmured, "Oh Sancho, you are blind to the great. But one day you will understand: our journey is worth more than a hundred bowls of beans."

Sancho snorted and spat in the dust. "A hundred bowls of beans? Lord, I'd sell you and your fame for half a gallon. And if it were still burnt, I'd still take it."

He grinned crookedly, his eyes tired. "You want to comfort me? Then give me wine, not cloud chatter. You can keep everything else."

The words hung in the air, then silence fell. No wind, no birds, only the distant creaking of donkey hooves as the animal pawed the dust.

Quixote sat hunched over, his hand still on Sancho's shoulder, as if afraid to let go. His gaze was distant, fixed on nothing, as if he were looking into a world only he could see.

Sancho chewed mindlessly on a crumb, even though it had long since tasted of dust. He saw the old man beside him, his armor dented, his face bruised, his eyes filled with madness—and somehow... loyalty.

"Lord," he said quietly, harshly, "I swear, sometimes I hate you. Hate you for dragging me out into this shit. For every beating, every night without a bed, every laugh I had to listen to."

Quixote turned his head, his lips bloody, but a smile in them.

Sancho snorted and looked away, almost ashamed. "But without you, I wouldn't be me anymore. Damn... maybe I'm just as crazy as you for still sitting here."

A silence followed that lasted longer than any words. Only dust blowing into their faces and two men who knew they couldn't live without each other—no matter how much they dragged each other down.

Sancho rubbed his stomach, which had almost sunk in from the empty feeling. Then he grinned crookedly. "Sir, look at us. You—a rickety knight with more dents than a rusty watering can. I—a fat squire, so sore from riding that my ass whistles when I fart. If these are the heroes of La Mancha, then good night."

He laughed hoarsely, coughing immediately afterward because the dust scratched his throat. "People will tell stories, yes—stories about two idiots who thought they could save the world, but in the end couldn't even conquer a tavern. I swear, they'll sing: 'Don Quixote, Knight of the Broken Helmet, and Sancho, King of Flatulence.'"

Quixote straightened, his voice weak but solemn. "If they sing this, Sancho, then we have won. For a song, whether mocking or honoring, is a seal of immortality. Laughter or praise—both feed glory."

Sancho snorted and wiped his tears. "Glory? Lord, if I fart and they laugh, am I immortal too?"

Quixote nodded seriously. "Yes, Sancho. Even a fart can last forever if it stays in people's hearts."

Sancho stared at him for a moment, then burst into filthy laughter. "Holy shit, sir... you guys are crazy. But sometimes it's even fun to listen to you."

Quixote smiled wearily. "Then we both win, my friend."

Sancho sat there, his legs stretched out, his back leaning against a stone. He breathed heavily, staring into the dust before him, then at the old man beside him, who was more shadow than knight.

"Sir," he began, harshly, without mockery, "I should hate you. Really. You've rubbed my skin raw, emptied my stomach, and brittled my bones. You've ridiculed me, in every village, in every tavern. I could have been at home, with wine in my belly and my wife yelling at me. Instead, I sit here with you—sore, hungry, laughed at."

He snorted and spat in the dust. "I should hate you. But I don't. Because... because without you, I would have remained just a farmer who would never have gotten beyond the fence of his field. With you, all I got was dust and beatings—but at least I saw something."

Quixote slowly turned his head, his eyes glazed over but full of brilliance. "Sancho... this is friendship. Greater than glory, greater than honor. Two men who support each other, even in adversity."

Sancho laughed bitterly, scratching his beard. "Friendship, yes. That's what they say. But honestly: I'm staying here because I'm too lazy to leave. And because someone has to look after you, otherwise you'll end up eating poison and calling it a magic potion."

They sat side by side, wordless, as evening crept over La Mancha. A knight without victories and a peasant without peace—two fools who nevertheless remained side by side.

Sancho sighed quietly: "Screw it... I'm staying. Whether I want to or not."

### The return to the old homeland

The path wound through the land like an old scar, and at the end of it lay their village—small, crooked, familiar, yet so foreign. No banners, no welcome, no song. Just a few puny fields rattling in the wind, and the smell of manure wafting toward them as if they had never left.

Rocinante dragged himself through the gate, so tired that every step sounded like a groan. Beside him was the donkey, head bowed, ears drooping like wet rags. Sancho hung crooked in the saddle, Quixote held himself stiffly, as if he were still on a knight's expedition.

The first they saw were children, barefoot, with snot on their noses. They stopped, stared, then started laughing. One shouted, "Here comes the fool in the tin bucket!" Another yelled, "And his fat servant, who didn't become king!" Then they ran away, shrieking with laughter.

Dogs barked, chased them, and growled as if they were stray strangers. No one welcomed them. No woman, no man, no neighbor came out. Only shutters closed, as if people didn't even want to watch the spectacle anymore.

Sancho stared at the ground, his ears burning with shame. *So you return home*, he thought. *Not like heroes, but like beaten dogs.*

Quixote, however, raised his hand and smiled faintly. "You see, Sancho? Silence. No noise, no cheering. That is the highest respect—that is how the people honor the knight, by silently acknowledging his greatness."

Sancho snorted and spat in the dust. "Respect? Lord, that's indifference. Or mockery. You're not listening properly. They're laughing, and the dogs are barking at us because they think we're strangers. That's not glory—that's filth."

But Quixote remained upright, his smile transfigured as if he were in triumph.

Quixote rode slowly on, his head held high, the reins loose in his weak hands. "Sancho," he said in that shaky, yet still pathetic voice, "do you hear that? No fanfares, no shouts. Only silence. That is the way a people honors the true knight—silently, reverently, as before a grave. They know that words are not enough."

Sancho raised his eyebrows and stared at the closed shutters. "Awe? Lord, they closed the shutters so they don't have to see your face. If that's awe, then my ass has always been a temple."

Quixote smiled faintly, almost transfigured. "Your tongue mocks, but your heart knows: they are silent because they feel that we have seen greater things than they could ever imagine."

Sancho laughed hoarsely, scratching the back of his neck. "Greater? Yes. Greater beatings, greater hunger, greater ridicule. We've seen everything greater, but nothing that has satisfied us."

Quixote nodded solemnly, as if Sancho's mockery were proof of his thesis. "That's right, Sancho: greatness is too difficult to be understood. That's why children laugh, dogs bark, and the elderly are silent. They sense that we are no longer like them."

Sancho spat in the dust, his voice harsh. "Damn right—we're poorer, hungrier, and more broken than they are. No wonder they stare at us like ghosts. And nobody wants ghosts in their house."

But Quixote remained upright, his eyes shining as if he were marching through triumphal arches that only he could see.

In the village square, a few old men squatted on their benches, pipes in their mouths, their faces wrinkled like dried apples. They looked up as Quixote and Sancho passed by—slow, battered, dusty, a picture of misery.

"Holy Mother," murmured one, "he's still alive? I thought the windmills had turned him to mush long ago." "To mush?" giggled the other, "look at him. That's no knight. That's a scarecrow they forgot to bring down from the field."

A third spat, grinning toothlessly. "And his Sancho—our great governor! Was it nice on your island, boy? How does it taste to be back in the dirt?"

They laughed, dryly, harshly, without pity.

Sancho gritted his teeth, sweat pouring down his neck, his ears burning. He wanted to dismount and smack their whistles out of their mouths. Instead, he muttered, "Shitty villagers... poor themselves, but laughing at those who fell."

Quixote heard the whispering and bowed his head dignifiedly, as if accepting it as a greeting. "They are not mocking, Sancho," he whispered. "They are testing us. Their words are like thorns—but even thorns crown the rose."

Sancho half-turned to him, his eyes filled with anger. "Sir, they call you a scarecrow. If that's a rose, I'll eat dirt for the rest of my life."

The laughter of the old men echoed behind them like rusty bells as the two rode on—one with his head held high, the other with his eyes lowered.

Sancho ducked his head so low that he almost slipped off the donkey. Every glance, every chuckle from the villagers pierced his skin like needles. He wanted to pull his hat down over his face, to disappear, to simply ride through without anyone recognizing him. *Shit... if my wife sees this, I'll definitely be the village idiot.*

Quixote, on the other hand, sat crookedly but proudly in the saddle. He nodded at every whisper as if it were hymns of praise and raised his hand as if distributing a blessing. "Sancho," he murmured, transfixed, "do you hear their voices? That is the language of the people. They laugh, yes, but in laughter there is reverence. They know that we have experienced more than they could ever dream of."

Sancho pressed his lips together, anger creeping into his throat. "Awe? Lord, they're practically spitting in our faces. I don't see astonishment, I see only

mockery. They don't see us as heroes—they see us as two poor bastards who fell on their faces."

Quixote nodded seriously, as if Sancho were confirming him. "That's precisely what greatness is: to be laughed at, mocked, and yet still ride on. They see us, they mock us—but deep in their hearts, they know they couldn't."

Sancho laughed bitterly, almost like a bark. "Couldn't? Damn right—no one wants to be as stupid as us. No one wants to end up like that. They laugh because they're glad they're not."

But Quixote looked up to the sky, his eyes moist, and murmured: "Ah, Sancho... they laugh, and therein lies our glory."

Sancho spat harshly into the dust. "Fucking fame. I want a roof, a bed, and a bowl of soup."

And he drew his head down again, while Quixote continued to nod as if he were riding through triumphal arches of gold.

At the end of the street, where the dust grew thicker and the walls more cracked, stood Quixote's house. Not a palace, not a castle—just a crooked building with crumbling plaster that looked as if the rain had cursed it a hundred times. The roof sagged like a tired back, and the door was so warped you had to kick it open.

Sancho stared at it, snorted. "Holy shit... so this is it? All that dirt, all the beatings, all the days of hunger for this? A hut that looks like it might collapse at the next fart of the wind."

But Quixote rode solemnly up to it, raised his hand, his fingers trembling, and spoke in a shaky voice: "Sancho... look! My castle. My refuge, my home. Here the knight rests after his battles, here memories await, here history is preserved."

Sancho spat in the dust and shook his head. "Castle? Lord, this is a dump. If this is a castle, then my chicken coop back home is the Alhambra."

Quixote smiled faintly, his eyes shining, as if he actually saw towers, battlements, and banners fluttering in the wind. "You see only the shell, Sancho. But I see the walls that protect me, the hall that welcomes me, the throne room where I find my place."

Sancho stepped off the donkey and patted his animal's neck. "Sir, you can see what you like. I just see a door about to collapse. And the neighbors will say tomorrow that the knight has returned to his hovel—with nothing but dust in his pockets."

Quixote nodded, as if even this mockery confirmed his point. "Yes, Sancho... and therein lies the true glory."

Sancho growled, "Fucking shine. The only thing that shines here is my sweat."

Sancho paused in front of Quixote's hovel, but his gaze continued—over to the fields, the small paths that led somewhere to his own house. A lump sat in his throat, heavier than any beating he had ever endured.

*What's waiting there?* he thought. His wife, wide-legged, her apron full of flour, yelling at him: "Where have you been, you donkey? For weeks! Months! Have you forgotten us?" Or is there only silence waiting? A door that won't open because she's fed up with his promises, fed up with his dreams?

He rubbed his empty belly, feeling homesickness weighing on him like a stone. "Damn it," he muttered, "I want to see her face. I want to hear the children. I want the real noise. Not these fairy tales, not this filth of fame."

A part of him feared it more than any battle: returning home and realizing that he was no longer needed. That his wife had learned to get along without him.

Sancho laughed hoarsely, scratching his beard. "Maybe she doesn't miss me at all. Maybe she was glad to have some peace and quiet, without my stench and my cursing. Maybe... I'm the fool who thinks I've missed something."

His eyes burned, and not just from the dust. "Screw it... I'm still going home. Even if she hits me with a pan when I walk through the door. Better a pan on my head than another night in the dust."

He looked at Quixote, who was still staring blissfully at his shack as if it were a fortress. And Sancho thought: *We both come home – but not to the same world.*

The door creaked as Quixote pushed it open. Inside, it smelled of dust, of mold, of years of loneliness. A wobbly table, a couple of chairs, one of them half broken. And in the corner, his old chair—the throne of madness.

Quixote dragged himself inside and sat down heavily, his armor creaking, his chair groaning. He leaned back his head, closed his eyes, and murmured:

"Sancho... we have returned home. The castle welcomes its lord. I have not fallen—I have returned, like a knight after his expedition."

Sancho stood outside, his donkey on a rope, staring into the evening. The house wasn't a castle, but a shack. The knight wasn't a lord, but an old man, battered, with more wounds than teeth. And he himself? A peasant who had given his ass for a dream that was worthless.

He spat into the dust, watched the smoke rising from some neighboring house. "Knight's procession... Shit. That's not a homecoming, that's a ghost. All that's left is dust. Dust in my hair, dust in my mouth, dust in my whole damn life."

Inside, Quixote murmured something about Dulcinea, about honor, about glory. His voice was weak, almost like a prayer.

Sancho shook his head and sighed. "Let him talk. Let him dream. I see the truth. And it's ugly."

Nevertheless, he remained standing outside, next to the donkey, as if nailed to the spot. Because he knew: just as Quixote was nothing without his dreams, he himself was no longer the same without the old man.

The wind swept through the streets. No applause, no cheering. Only dust.

### The last big misunderstanding

Night hadn't quite arrived yet, and the village lay in twilight. Quixote sat in his old chair, his body as crooked as the shack around him. His breath was labored, his hands trembled, but his eyes—they still glowed.

Noises drifted in from outside: children screaming, a dog barking, someone laughing loudly. A farmer cursed because a sack had fallen from his cart. It was nothing—just the normal chaos of a village evening.

But Quixote jerked his head up, listening as if he'd heard a horn call. "Sancho!" he rasped, "do you hear? An attack. Demons in the streets! They want to devour the village. Dulcinea is calling for me!"

Sancho, standing in the doorway, scratched his beard, as tired as a dog after a cartload of stones. "Demons? Lord, those are children. Children playing ball.

That sack that's falling is full of onions, not a magic potion. And the dog is barking because it has fleas."

But Quixote stood shakily, reaching for his dented lance, which was more rust than iron. "No, Sancho. This is the final sign. A test, a final battle. Heaven wants to see if I am still worthy."

Sancho growled and stepped closer. "Worthy? Lord, you are worthy to fall into a bed and never rise again. Stop it. The noise outside is just life, not magic. Stop turning everything into ghosts."

But Quixote smiled weakly, his lips bloody, and whispered, "A knight never stops, Sancho. Not while the world is still making noise."

Quixote staggered to the hook on the wall where his armor hung like an old sack full of tin. The thing had more dents than a marketplace barrel and stank of sweat and rust. With trembling fingers, he pulled the pieces on, one by one, as if preparing for a tournament before kings.

The chest piece rattled, no longer fitting properly, the leather strap had long since broken. The helmet was crooked, with a dent in the middle as big as a fist. He slipped it on, panting as if he'd put a bell over his head.

"Sancho," he wheezed, "help me. Today... today I'll go out once more. Not as a beggar, not as a fool, but as a knight."

Sancho stood there, hands on his hips, face dark. "Knight? Sir, you look like a pile of scrap metal that's just learned to walk. This isn't a departure, this is suicide in a tin suit."

But Quixote stood up, crooked and broken as he was, and swung the old lance, barely tipped. The thing wobbled like a broomstick. Nevertheless, he said in a trembling voice: "For Dulcinea. For honor. For the final test."

Sancho growled and shook his head. "Shit, sir... you can't even pee straight anymore, let alone fight. And yet you put yourselves back in that rusty coffin. You're insane."

Quixote smiled faintly, almost beatifically. "Perhaps. But a knight doesn't die in bed. He dies standing, in battle, even if the battle lies only in the dust."

Sancho stood in front of the door, legs wide apart, hands outstretched, his face as red as the evening sky. "Lord, I swear on everything I hold sacred: you're not

going out there. Not again. Not anymore. You've broken enough bones, lost enough blood. If you run out of there now, you'll be carrying your own coffin under your arm."

Quixote stopped, swaying in the iron, but with that look that drove Sancho mad every time—transfigured, burning, full of nonsense and sanctity. "Sancho... this is my hour. A final test. If I pass it, I will be more than a fool. I will be a knight who will remain in the memory of the world."

Sancho stepped closer, grabbed him by the shoulders, and shook him so hard that the old iron rattled. "Holy crap, sir! Who's going to remember? The neighbors? They're already laughing! The kids who call you 'Fool in a Tin Can'? Nobody writes books about what you're about to do! You'll just end up in the dirt like a dog, and I'll have to save your ass again!"

Quixote gently placed a hand on Sancho's arm, weak but firm. "My friend... I thank you. But I must go. Knights don't die in their sleep—they die trying."

Sancho let go of him, stepped back, his hands in his hair, tears in his eyes from anger. "Sir... if you go out, you'll go out senseless. But I'll still stay by your side. Because I'm just as crazy as you."

Quixote nodded, his helmet askew, his face cracked. "Then, Sancho... accompany me. One last time."

Quixote stumbled out the door, his lance wobbling, his helmet rattling. Outside, there was only the village in the evening: a few children playing with an old rag ball, a farmer cursing because his sack of onions had slipped off the cart, and a pig squealing, having broken free.

But in Quixote's eyes it was an inferno.

"Sancho!" he roared in a shaky voice, "look! Demons playing with death balls! A captured princess's body, bound in a sack! And there—a dragon breathing fire!"

The children paused, stared at the old man, then began to laugh, louder than ever. "The fool in the tin!" one cried, "he's fighting the wind again!"

The farmer shook his head, gathered his onions, and muttered, "Damned madman..."

The pig ran in circles, squealing, while Quixote lowered his lance, trembling, his body barely under control. "For Dulcinea!" he wheezed. "I'll save you, Princess!"

Sancho stumbled after him, shouting, "Sir! These are children, onions, and a pig! No dragon, no demons, no princess—just everyday life, damned everyday life!"

But Quixote saw only the battle. He staggered toward the children, who ran away screaming. Then he stumbled to the sack, stepped on it, almost fell over, and raised his lance at the pig, which squealed as it shot through his legs.

"Die, monster!" he screamed – and fell flat on his face into the dust.

Quixote lay in the dust, then scrambled to his feet like a sack of bones that's forgotten it's long since empty. He leaned on the shaky lance, the tip crooked, the wood splintered. "Not... over... yet," he wheezed. "The dragon lives... I must... defeat him."

He staggered, stumbled two steps forward—his helmet slipped over his face, and he saw nothing but black. Blindly, he punched the air as if fighting shadows. The children laughed louder, one imitating his groaning, another shouting, "The knight fights against the wind! Go on, fall again!"

The pig ran past him again, brushing against his leg. Quixote screamed as if he'd been struck by a monster, stumbled backward—and fell to the ground again, heavy, clattering, dust rising like smoke.

Sancho ran to him and knelt beside the old man, who lay in the dirt like a broken beetle. "Sir! Stay down, damn it! Your body is finished, broken, finished! No dragon, no demon—just you, falling on your face, over and over again!"

Quixote coughed, blood at the corner of his mouth, and attempted a smile. "Sancho... I... hit him... I weakened the monster."

Sancho slapped his hand over his face, tears and sweat mingling with dust. "Shit, sir... you can't hit anything anymore. Not even the truth."

And Quixote tried to rise again – only to immediately collapse into the dust again.

The children were still laughing, practically rolling in the dust. "The fool! The fool in the tin!" one shouted, while another mimed the pig and squealed until

he choked. A few farmers stood nearby, arms crossed, shaking their heads, grinning crookedly.

"Sad," muttered one, "the old fool can't even stand up anymore." "Sad?" laughed another. "This is the best show this town has ever had!"

Sancho felt something tear inside him. He knelt beside Quixote, half-lifted his master, his armor as heavy as a sack of stones, and roared in a hoarse voice: "You swine! You laugh while he dies! You've never understood him, never! Yes, he's mad—mad as an old dog barking at the moon—but he's more of a man than all of you who just sit and grin!"

The children fell silent for a moment, then giggled again. One shouted, "Your master is a fool, Sancho! And you're his court clown!"

Sancho half-jumped to his feet, his fists clenched, saliva flying from his mouth. "Fool, court clown—yes, perhaps! But we fell because we at least tried to be something other than lazy asses on a bench! You never fought, never dreamed—you live and die in the dust, and no one will remember you!"

The farmers murmured, some laughed nervously, others looked away.

Sancho knelt down again and pulled Quixote to his chest, who was gasping for breath, barely conscious. Tears streamed down Sancho's face, he spat in the dust, and growled, "Screw all of you. You'll never understand what it means to be so crazy you're still alive."

Quixote lay heavy in Sancho's arms, the sheet metal of his armor cold and dented, as if he were holding a piece of scrap metal rather than a human being. The old man's breathing was shallow and rattling, every breath a struggle.

"Sancho..." he whispered, his lips full of blood, "don't you see? The dragon... he has fallen... Dulcinea... she is free."

Sancho shook his head, tears in the dirt, his voice broken and full of rage. "Sir... there was no dragon. No demon. Just children, onions, and a pig. You were fighting against air, like always. And this time... it's finished you off for good."

But Quixote smiled faintly, transfigured, his eyes gleaming in the evening light. "No, Sancho... I have triumphed. The world laughs... but Dulcinea knows... I was her knight."

Sancho gritted his teeth and pressed his forehead against his master's helmet. "Shit, sir... you were all sorts of things. A fool, a dreamer, a damned millstone around my neck. But knights? Maybe. In your damned, crazy way."

The villagers stood silent, their laughter hushed, sensing that the old man was at his limit. Only the pig squealed in the distance, as if about to deliver its final mockery.

Quixote took one last deep breath and whispered, "Dulcinea... I'm coming." Then his eyelids drooped, his body slackened.

Sancho held him tight, snorting, tears dripping into the dust. "Shitty world... he'll die the way he lived—in madness. And me? I'll be left behind, with nothing but dust and empty hands."

He laid Quixote down gently, stood up, and stared at the people who stared uncertainly. "Go on, stare. You've had your fun. But remember one thing: even in his madness, he lived more than all of you put together."

Then he turned away, his donkey on a rope, and the dust of La Mancha swallowed his cursing.

### A dream that lives on

The spectacle was over. The children had laughed enough, the farmers had joked around, and one by one they trotted off—back to their homes, to their soup pots, to their small, dirty daily routines. No one stayed. Not a word of sympathy, not a prayer. Only the dust that slowly settled.

And there he lay, Don Quixote, knight of nothing and no one, stretched out in the dirt, his helmet askew, his face pale. A dead dog would have received more attention.

Sancho knelt beside him, his hands trembling, his mouth dry. The noise of the village faded, leaving only his own breathing, heavy and unsteady. He looked at the old man, this fool, this idiot, this crazy friend.

"Shit..." he whispered, his voice shaky. "Shit, sir... now you've really done it. In the end, you'll lie there like a piece of scrap. And I... I'm sitting here with you, alone."

He felt the night approaching, cold, silent, merciless. No applause, no farewell. Just Sancho and the dust.

And for a moment he wished he had lost his mind too – just to avoid having to endure this sight.

Sancho sat in the dust, his back against the lifeless body, and began to speak because silence would tear him apart.

"Lord... you dragged me through hell. Windmills, robbers, flocks of sheep—always the same shit. And I went along with it, why? Because I was too stupid to say no. Because I thought there was more. Something big. But what was it? Beatings. Hunger. Mockery."

He slammed his fist against his thigh, hard, until it hurt. "Damn it! I should have stayed home. I should have eaten beans, drunk wine, insulted my wife. It would have been better than sitting here in the dust with a dead knight no one misses."

His voice broke, he sniffed, and wiped his eyes with his dirty hand, so that tears and dirt became one. "But damn it... I love you. Yes, that's right. I love you, Lord. I love you for your madness, for your stupidity, for believing the world was more than this filth."

Then he suddenly laughed, hoarse, bitter, almost like a cough. "Goddamn shit, we were two idiots on the street. Two clowns. And still... it was better than just being a farmer. Maybe."

He laughed again, then cried. Everything mingled until he no longer knew whether he was cursing, laughing, or simply crying.

Sancho stared into the night, the stars flickering above the village as if even they felt pity. He spoke quietly, more to himself than to the dead man beside him.

"Damn it, sir... you beat the shit out of me. Any idiot on the street was allowed to kick me just for standing next to you. I took more blows than an old whipping boy at a fair. I starved until my stomach thought it would eat itself. I laughed because it was better than crying when we were lying in the dirt again."

He clenched his hands, scratching at the dust with his nails. "And now... now you lie here. Quiet. No chatter about honor, no babble about Dulcinea. And you

know what? I already miss it. Shit, yes. I miss your chatter, your madness. Because without that... it's just empty here."

A gust of wind blew dust over Quixote's helmet, and Sancho leaned forward and brushed it away, almost tenderly. "I could have hit you a thousand times for all your foolishness. But I would never have left you. Not even now. And that probably drives me as crazy as it drives you."

He was breathing heavily, his shoulders shaking. "Shit, Lord... I miss you. I miss you even though you're still warm."

Sancho sat still, his back bent, his hands on his knees. The night hummed, and somewhere a rooster crowed prematurely, as if he himself had lost his mind.

He stared at Quixote, the dead old man in the tin, and whispered, "You were crazy, sir. Crazy to the core. But screw it—maybe you were right. Maybe it's better to believe in giants than just milk cows and peel potatoes."

He snorted, laughed briefly, dryly, without joy. "Damn it, I laughed at you, I cursed you... and yet I rode along. Every damn day. Why? Because I was probably crazy myself. Because I... carry a piece of your madness within me."

He reached into the dust and let it trickle through his fingers. "I never thought I'd say: Maybe I need this. Not dragons or princesses—but something to believe in. Otherwise, life will drain me dry."

A silence, heavy as lead.

Sancho rubbed his eyes and muttered, "Shit... maybe I'm the fool now. Your fool. Only without the armor."

He laughed again, short and bitter, as if he had just pronounced his own condemnation.

Before Quixote lay the old lance, splintered, the tip blunt, little more than a stick. Next to it lay the helmet, dented, a hole in it—a piece of junk that any village blacksmith would have thrown in the trash.

Sancho stared at it for a long time, with a rage that constricted his throat. "Damned things... because of you, I've been beaten, endured hunger, and made a fool of myself. Because of you, I left home. It's your fault. Everything about you stinks of misery."

He reached for the helmet and lifted it. It was heavier than he thought. Dust trickled out, clinging to his fingers. He pressed it to his chest, growling: "I hate you, tin can. But I won't leave you here."

Then he grabbed the lance, too, which rattled as if it were ashamed of itself. He swung it over his shoulder, looking like a farmer carrying home a broken tool. "Shitty inheritance," he muttered. "But if I leave it there, then he'll have dreamed in vain. And that... I can't do that to him."

He looked down at Quixote once more, his face still, almost peaceful. "You fool... you've infected me. Now I'm spreading your crap. Whether I want to or not."

He spat into the dust to swallow the bitterness, but the hand holding the helmet didn't tremble.

Sancho stood up, helmet under his arm, lance over his shoulder. He looked at the dead knight in the dust, snorted, and grinned crookedly—a grin that almost broke.

"Well, sir," he murmured, "so that's how a great knight ends. Not in glory, not with fanfare. No, in the dirt, with a pig as his final opponent. If that isn't epic, I don't know what is."

He laughed hoarsely, short, almost like a cough. "Maybe I'll write it down, yes. 'The Last Battle: Don Quixote vs. Pig and Onion.' It would look good in the books. People would laugh themselves to death."

Then he fell silent, his breath catching. He looked at the old man, at his narrow, peaceful face, and suddenly his own joke tasted like poison. "Shit..." he whispered, "I'd give anything if you'd just say one of your stupid sayings again. Anything. Even if it was the most ridiculous nonsense."

He pressed his lips together and roughly wiped his eyes. "But you won't say anything else. Now I can laugh alone. And it sounds wrong."

He let out a final bitter laugh that was immediately smothered in the dust.

Sancho stood there, helmet under his arm, lance crookedly slung over his shoulder. Behind him lay Don Quixote—still, dust in his beard, eyes closed like an old dog who has finally found peace. No glory, no glory. Only the end.

Sancho looked back one last time. "Farewell, sir... you fools, you knights, you damned dream-eaters." His voice broke, so he spat in the dust to cover it.

Then he pulled the donkey by the rope and set off, his legs heavy, his back bent. Every step sounded like a curse, but something burned in his chest. Not anger. Not hunger. Something else.

He laughed softly, bitterly. "Shit... maybe you've infected me more than I'd like. I'll never ride against dragons. But if someone says life is just plowing and drinking, I'll laugh in their face. Because I know there's madness too. And maybe... that's all we have."

Night closed over him, stars glowed. The village was behind him, the fields before him. No song, no monument. Just a farmer with a donkey, a helmet, and a rusty lance—and a story no one believes.

And as he walked home, he continued to curse—but deep down he knew: Don Quixote was dead. But the dream, crazy as it was, now lived within him.

## imprint

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Author: Michael Lappenbusch

E-mail: [admin@perplex.click](mailto:admin@perplex.click)

Homepage: <https://www.perplex.click>

Year of publication: 2025