Sitting Bull

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Contents

Firewater rain over Dakota

The rain fell dirty and cold from the sky, as if some drunken eagle had emptied its sewer over the prairie. Dakota, land of the Lakota, land of the buffalo, land of bones destined to crash into the dry dust. It was a morning when Sitting Bull gritted his teeth, knowing the world had long been against him. The wind tasted of ash and old sweat, and somewhere in the east, traders' wagons rattled, rattling crates full of firewater, as if they were the damned heartbeat of a new, ugly era.

Firewater. Whiskey. Fermented tears in bottles that stank like a brothel after three days without airing. The whites called it civilization, progress, trade. For the Lakota, it was the beginning of the end: liquid poison that loosened tongues, made fists heavy, and insidiously sucked the soul from the bones. Sitting Bull knew this, had seen it: how men, heads held proudly high, would take three sips in the summer sun and then end up like mangy dogs in the dust, drooling, laughing, dead in the eyes, though their hearts still pumping.

The traders, those bastards, grinned as they did so. Their wagons rolled like mobile coffins, and in every damned barrel lay another nail for the Lakota coffin. They came with false promises, with clinking coins, with rifles with names like "Springfield" or "Henry," and they knew exactly what they were doing. A drunken warrior is easier to buy than a hungry one, and the Lakota were already hungry enough since the buffalo had become rarer. It was like a perfidious game: first shoot the herds, then bring the firewater, then watch as entire tribes crumble like rotten wood.

Sitting Bull stood there, in the middle of a camp that looked like a collection of weary shadows. The teepees had more holes than hope, the children wept with parched throats, and the women looked with a mixture of anger and despair at their men, who chased after the stinking bottles as if they were a promise of something better. He was chief, seer, warrior, all at once—but on nights like these, he felt like an old dog barking at an endless wall.

He remembered the old days, the days when the land was full of buffalo, when one only had to ride to find meat, leather, and pride. Back then, the sky was wider, the earth full of life, and children's laughter didn't sound so thin. Now, in 1870-something, it smelled more of rot than freedom. Every sunrise brought a new batch of white men who wanted more, took more, and ate more. Sitting Bull knew: the land itself was their goal, and they wouldn't stop until the last blade of grass was crushed beneath their boots.

"Firewater raining over the Dakota"—that's what he sometimes thought. Not because it was literally raining, but because this devilish stuff trickled everywhere, into every crack, into every tent, down every throat. It was like a storm, only no plants grew afterward, only corpses. He'd seen men drink their horses dry, women stare at a bottle with greedy eyes as if it were their last lover, and children drain the sweet, burning residue from cups while their mothers slept. It was the kind of death that came slowly but surely.

The traders were pigs in suits. Their teeth gleamed yellow, their breath smelled of mold, and they spoke as if they were bringing the Lakota gifts, presents, miracles. Sitting Bull knew that every "gift" was a stab in the back. They wanted to break the tribes, make them soft, submissive. A drunken warrior no longer goes into battle. A drunken chief signs treaties he would have burned sober. That was their tactic. Cheap firewater in exchange for land, for souls, for the future.

Sitting Bull sometimes laughed about it, but it wasn't a happy laugh. More like a broken, ragged bark that silenced even the dogs in the camp. "If the world's going to die," he once muttered, "at least it's going to die with one eye open, not blind and drunk." But many of his men preferred to be blind, because life in the camp, without hunting, without pride, without buffalo, cut too hard into their bones. The firewater was a band-aid on a leg that had long since rotted away.

He himself never drank. He hated the stuff. It made his tongue heavy, his head empty, and it stole the dreams that came to him in visions. Sitting Bull was a dreamer, a seer, and he knew that the spirit only visited him when he was clear-headed. Drinking was like a dagger into the belly of the gods, and he didn't want to kill any gods. He wanted to hear them, to understand them, and they spoke to him when the smoke from his pipes drifted into the sky, not when the whiskey burned his throat.

But he also knew he couldn't save everyone. Some warriors looked at him when he spoke, their eyes shining like glass. They heard him, nodded, but in their heads the bottles were already dancing, and their hearts beat to the rhythm of a song that no longer came from drums, but from clinking glasses. Sitting Bull hated the emptiness in their eyes. It was worse than death, because it looked so damned alive while it destroyed everything.

Night fell upon Dakota, and with it came the howling of dogs, the panting of drunkards, the crying of children. A few men fought over the last drop in a bottle until one fell to the ground, blood on his face, but no one cared. The

women carried the children into the teepees, and Sitting Bull sat in front of his own, pipe in hand, eyes in the wind. He thought of the visions he'd had—of the great battle, of victory over the tin gods of the East, of a people fighting back. But how could a people fight when they were drowning in their own camp?

The sky rumbled in the distance, as if in pity or anger, and the rain continued to fall. Firewater rain, thought Sitting Bull. Not from the sky, but from the wagons, the white men, the accursed traders. Drop by drop, barrel by barrel. And every drop was a dagger, every barrel a grave.

He drew the smoke deep into his lungs, held it, and slowly released it. "I won't drink," he murmured, "I'll fight." But the voices in the wind laughed, as if they knew more.

And somewhere, beyond the rain, the next wagons full of whiskey were rumbling along.

The night smelled of burnt wood and the cheapest whiskey, which the traders had concocted somewhere in the damned cellars of St. Louis or somewhere else. Dakota was no place for rest—not anymore. It used to be, when the wind blew across the prairie, the buffalo stamped, and the grass grew to the rhythm of the sun. Now it was a brothel of dust, firewater, and broken promises. Sitting Bull saw it, felt it, smelled it in every damned pore: the world was tipping, and no one wanted to notice.

The traders called the stuff "medicine." Some grinned and talked about the warmth that grows in the belly, the strength that burns in the bones. But Sitting Bull knew it was just a different kind of disease. A disease that didn't eat away at the lungs like smallpox, but at the mind. One that left no smallpox behind, just empty eyes and broken voices. He had seen men lie on their stomachs just to lick the last drop from a spilled bottle out of the dirt. Men who yesterday were mounted on horses, proud and straight, and today whined like dogs.

"Firewater rain," he murmured into the night as he filled his pipe. "The rain that doesn't grow, but rots." The old men had been right: The whites bring not only guns, but also oblivion. And oblivion was worse than any bullet, because it was silent. No battle, no cry, no glory. Just a slow sinking into the mire.

A few teepees away, he heard laughter. Loud, crooked, like rusty knives on metal. Men drank, women screamed, children whimpered, and then that dull sound of fists on flesh. Sitting Bull knew what was happening: another one with too much, another woman with too little protection. He gritted his teeth. He

was a chief, yes, but he was no god. He couldn't run into every tent, snatch every drop from their throats. He could only watch his people slowly perish within themselves.

He remembered the words of an old man, long before this misery: "When the white men come, they bring two things. First they kill the buffalo, then they bring you drink. Both will kill you." The old man had been right. The great herds were almost gone. The railroads had cut their tracks like scars across the prairie, and the men from the East shot buffalo like targets. Not for meat, not for want, but for fun and leather and damned bones as souvenirs. What remained was an empty land. And an empty land cries out for replacements. Bottled replacements.

Sitting Bull knew he had to fight. Not just against guns and soldiers, but against the damned thirst for the wrong thing. But how do you fight something that burns sweetly and makes you forget the pain for a moment? Even the strongest warriors looked at him as if he were a fool for forbidding drinking. "A man needs fire in his belly," they said. "A man needs courage." Sitting Bull thought, "You have courage, but you sell it for a cork full of poison." But he mostly remained silent. Words were weak against addiction.

Night slid deeper into the land. The dogs howled as if warning the spirits, the stars gleamed like dull nails in the sky. Sitting Bull thought of the rivers that would soon carry more whiskey than water if things continued like this. Of children growing up with wet lips and dry stomachs. Of women selling themselves for half a bottle because hunger cried louder than shame. He saw the future, and it stank of fermented corn.

And he saw himself. A chief standing between two worlds: one full of spirits, drums, visions; the other full of bottles, treaties, and tin men in uniform. He knew he couldn't save both. He couldn't beat the firewater out of people's heads and fend off the army's bullets at the same time. He had to choose, and he hated knowing it.

"The white people send rain," he murmured. "Not rain that washes. But rain that eats." His laugh was harsh, without joy. It was a laugh that scratched the throat like sandpaper. The gods might send visions, but they didn't send bottles. This was the hell of men. And hell had a new name: Whiskey.

Sitting Bull stood up and looked into the darkness. His shadows were longer than his years, and they danced in the firelight as if they were ghosts. He knew: the real battle had already begun. Not in Little Bighorn, not in some damned

valley. But here, in his own camp, in his own blood. A fight against bottles. A fight against forgetting.

And as the men continued to laugh, the women screamed, and the children cried, Sitting Bull thought, "Tomorrow, when the sun rises, they'll be thirsty again. And drink again. And fall again." He felt the bitterness in his throat like a stone. It was the beginning of the end. And he was right in the middle of it, damn it.

Morning came not like a promise, but like a slap in the face. No golden light, no gentle awakening, just gray skies and a wind that smelled of old smoke and feces. Dakota was hungover, even though Sitting Bull hadn't touched a drop. The whole damned country sagged like a body after a drinking binge, and the sun, slowly creeping over the horizon, looked as if it had itself looked too deep into the barrel.

Sitting Bull knelt by the river, the water cold and dirty, and washed his face. The current carried dead fish by, bellies up, eyes empty, and he wondered if they, too, had suffocated on the firewater or merely the filth of the settlers who dumped their waste into every stream they found. Once, water was life; now, water was memory. A mirror for what they had lost.

Behind him, someone roared. A warrior he knew, a man who had once ridden proudly, his chest covered with battle scars. Now he lay in the mud, drooling, whimpering, and holding an empty bottle in his hand like a sacred object. Sitting Bull didn't turn around. He knew the image too well. It repeated itself every day, like a bad sermon.

He thought of the children. The ones with the thin arms, growing up in tents where whiskey had more room than milk. Their eyes were wide, their stomachs empty, and their future was smaller than a damned cup. He had tried to tell them stories—of buffalo, of courage, of the sun, and of the old gods. But children didn't listen for long when hunger spoke louder. And hunger spoke like a barrage.

The traders came again. Two wagons this time, rattling, smelly, driven by men with greasy hats and grins wider than the damned prairie. They waved, shouted, even threw a few shiny coins into the dust, as if the land were a circus and they were the animal trainers. "Whiskey!" one shouted. "Whiskey for the warriors! Whiskey for the chiefs!" And the men ran. They ran as if they were children and the wagons were Christmas trees. Sitting Bull watched his own brothers throw their dignity into the dust, and he felt sick.

"This isn't rain," he thought. "This is a damned monsoon." He walked over, stood in the way, his eyes burning. "Enough!" he shouted. "You bring death! You bring ruin!" The men laughed. Not his warriors—the traders. "Death?" they said. "Death brings the gun. We bring life in a glass." One held out a bottle, the glass shimmering in the sunlight like some damned lure from hell. Sitting Bull spat in the dust before it.

The warriors behind him murmured. Some looked away, others stared at the bottles as if they were about to jump up and grab them. Sitting Bull knew he couldn't hold onto them all. Some were already lost, long ago. But he could make a statement. He grabbed the bottle, ripped it from the merchant's hand, and hurled it against a rock. The glass shattered, the whiskey ran into the dust, and immediately a smell hit—sweet, putrid, intoxicating. Like perfume from the underworld.

The men gasped as if he'd smashed gold. The trader's face turned red and he wanted to say something, but Sitting Bull took a step closer, his gaze harder than any bullet. "Go," he said. "Go back to your stinking cities. Take your barrels and choke on them." He spoke softly, but the silence that followed was heavy as lead.

The traders laughed again, but this time it was nervous. "You want to drink," one shouted. "Your people are crying out for it." Sitting Bull roared back: "My people are crying out for buffalo, for freedom, for life! You only give them death in their cup!" The children heard it, the women heard it, even the drunks looked up briefly. For a moment, just a damned moment, there was silence.

But silence doesn't last long among a people already half-dead. Soon the men began to murmur. "He's keeping us from thirsting," one said. "He's treating us like dogs." Another nodded. Sitting Bull sensed the rift. It wasn't just him against the whites. It was him against his own people, against the thirst, against the longing to be forgotten.

The traders knew this. They grinned wider, threw a few bottles into the dust, and harnessed the horses. "Take them, warriors! Your chief doesn't like them, but we like you." They laughed as they rode away, the bottles glittering like snakes in the sunlight. Sitting Bull closed his eyes. He knew what would happen. Men would take the bottles, drink, laugh, vomit, sleep. And tomorrow they would scream again.

He sat down, took his pipe, and lit it. The smoke rose, gray and heavy, and he sent it up to heaven like a silent prayer. "Great Spirit," he murmured, "do you

see what's happening here? Do you see your people dying without blood being shed?" His voice was rough, broken, but he continued. "Send me visions. Send me words. Send me weapons stronger than bottles."

But the sky remained silent. Only the wind laughed, and somewhere in the camp another bottle shattered.

Sitting Bull opened his eyes, and he knew: This was only the beginning. The rain fell, incessantly. No water, no blessing. Only firewater. Drop by drop, barrel by barrel. And he had to stand, in the middle of the storm, while everyone else had already been wet for a long time.

The day stank of cheap smoke and that sweet rot that came from the whiskey as it seeped out of the broken bottles in the sun. Sitting Bull crouched in the dust, watching the children poke the slops with sticks, as if they might find a game in it. But there was no game. Only misery. And he wondered how long a people would remain human once they started drinking the leftovers from the puddles.

An old man came over, his legs thin as sticks, his face a map of wrinkles. He held a bundle of fur in his hand, unwrapped it, and inside lay a few bones—small, clean, like a rabbit's. "Yesterday was a hunt," he murmured. Sitting Bull nodded. He knew it wasn't a hunt, it was a search. A desperate rummaging through nothingness. The buffalo were gone. All that remained were bones and bottles.

The women mended dresses that had more holes than fabric. They no longer sang, not even for the children. Their voices had become dull, tired, like a knife that no one sharpens anymore. Sitting Bull saw them and felt a sting harder than any bullet. It wasn't death he feared—death was honest. It was the damned emptiness that came when a people forgot how to sing.

At the edge of the camp sat three traders. They had stayed, their wagons parked in a circle like a fortress. They knew no one could drive them away. Too many men wanted their goods, too few had the courage to say no. They drank themselves, laughed, and told stories of the cities in the East—of stone houses, streets filled with horse-drawn carts, women in dresses that smelled of roses. Sitting Bull listened and thought, "You talk about heaven, but you're bringing hell."

In the afternoon a boy came running by. Barely ten winters old, his ribs like bars beneath his skin, his eyes large and dark. He held a piece of glass in his

hand, sparkling, beautiful like a gemstone. "Look, Chief," he said. Sitting Bull took it and looked at it. It was only a splinter, left over from a broken bottle. But the boy held it as if it were gold. Sitting Bull laid his hand on his head. "This is not treasure," he said. "This is poison. If you put it to your lips, your soul will die." The boy nodded, but did not understand. How could he? In his world, bottles were already more important than buffalo.

The sun burned, the wind tore dust across the plains, and Sitting Bull felt time running against him. Each day brought more traders, more barrels, more thirst. He remembered a dream he'd had years ago: A rain of fire fell on Dakota, and the people ran out, opening their mouths, drinking until their bodies burst. He'd woken up drenched in sweat, having thought it a warning at the time. Now he knew: The dream wasn't a warning. It was a prophecy.

That evening, a warrior came to him, staggering, his face red, his voice loud. "Why do you forbid us to drink?" he roared. "Are you our father? Are you our lord?" His fists clenched. Sitting Bull stood calmly, looking him in the eye. "I'm not forbidding you anything," he said. "I'm only reminding you that you are a warrior, not a dog." The man laughed, a bitter, hollow laugh, and turned away. He staggered back to the tents, where the bottles glittered like little moons.

Sitting Bull felt the chill of the night even before the sun had fully set. It wasn't just the air—it was the cold in the hearts of his people. A fever that couldn't be driven out with sweat. He sat by the fire, smoked, and let the embers dance in his eyes. "Great Spirit," he murmured, "send me a sign. Or send me the courage to be a sign."

But the only sign that came was the clink of another bottle shattering in the dust. And the laughter of the traders wafting over the camp like a mockery.

The night was black as burnt flesh. No star would truly shine, as if even the celestial spirits were tired of the camp. Sitting Bull sat by the fire with his knees drawn up, the smoke stinging his eyes, but he didn't blink. He wanted to feel the burn. It reminded him that he was alive. That he hadn't given up yet. Around him, men snored, wheezed, and choked on their whiskey. Women silently wiped the dirt from faces that could no longer be saved.

A few warriors had been fighting. One of them was still lying in the dust, his nose crooked, blood a black streak down his cheek. No one helped him. Why should they? He hadn't died, so he wasn't important. Sitting Bull shook his head. In the old days, a man would have been celebrated after a battle, his

wounds tended, songs sung. Now, a fight over a bottle was almost the same as a campaign—only without glory, without meaning, without anything.

He thought of the soldiers in the East, approaching with shining uniforms and steaming trains. Men sent from Washington, with orders, maps, and cannons. They were enemies, yes. But at least they were straightforward in their intent. They said, "We want your country, we want your freedom, we want to make you small." That was honest. But the firewater? That was a lie. It came with a smile, with a sweet smell, with promises that weren't kept. It was like a friend who embraces you and then secretly slits your throat.

At the edge of the camp, he heard drums. Hesitant, broken, like the heart of an old man. A few young people tried to play the old songs, but the beats were uneven, powerless. Sitting Bull listened and realized: It wasn't the rhythm of the ancestors. It was the clatter of empty bottles, resonating in time. Even the music was contaminated.

He took his pipe, filled it with dry herb, and lit it. The smoke was bitter, but genuine. No deception, no lie. He closed his eyes, letting the images come. In his visions, he saw the prairie full of buffalo as far as the eye could see, black waves rolling through the grass. He saw warriors, strong, proud, their faces painted, their arrows drawn. And then he saw rain falling—not water, not fire, but whiskey. The buffalo collapsed, the warriors threw down their weapons, the women wept, and the children drank from the earth. Sitting Bull woke with a start, coughed, and wiped away his sweat. It was only a vision, but he knew: it was already reality.

A dog came to him, shaggy, his ribs visible, his eyes dull. He lay down beside him and sighed. Sitting Bull scratched his head. "You have more dignity than many a warrior," he murmured. The dog twitched its ear and fell asleep. A better listener than half the people.

Later that night, the traders returned. They knew the men hadn't had enough. They kept coming, like rats following the scent of carrion. Their wagons squeaked, the barrels clanged. They stood by the fire, laughing, offering bottles. A few men almost crawled, they were so greedy. Sitting Bull stood up. He was tired, but he stood. "Enough," he said. His voice was hoarse, but it carried far. "You bring poison. You are bringing the souls of my people to the grave."

The merchants grinned. "We bring joy," they said. "We bring warmth on cold nights." One threw a bottle at his feet. It rolled in the dust as if it were a snake

seeking a new host. Sitting Bull didn't step back. He stared at it, then kicked with his heel. Glass shattered, liquid seeped into the ground. A few men wailed as if he had broken their hearts.

The traders just laughed. "You're an old fool," they mocked. "Your warriors want to drink. Your women want to forget. Your children want to sleep without hunger. Who are you to take that away from them?" Sitting Bull didn't answer. Words against traders were wasted. He turned around and went back to the fire. The men didn't follow him. They bent down, licking the dust.

That night, Sitting Bull didn't sleep. He heard the smacking, the choking, the babbling. He heard the rain outside, pounding against the teepees as if it were laughing. And he thought, "If we don't fight soon, we'll be defeated."

Morning crept into the camp like a lazy dog. No rooster crow, no call, only that disgusting chortle from the tents where the men vomited their remaining shreds of life into the dust. Sitting Bull had long since stood, his eyes red, but awake. He hadn't slept. Sleep was a luxury, and luxuries were meant for other times, not for a world sinking like a damned stone in water.

The sun came out, timid as a beaten child, and illuminated the dirt: broken bottles, dented cups, men lying in the dust like discarded dolls. A few women carried water, lugging it with slumped shoulders. Children stumbled behind, their mouths dry, their eyes empty. Sitting Bull gritted his teeth. A people who once spoke to the stars now crawled after bottles like a pack of hungry dogs.

He approached a man lying in the dirt, his tongue sticking out, clutching the bottle tightly as if it were his last breath. Sitting Bull nudged him with his foot. "Stand up." The man wheezed, opened one eye, and grinned crookedly. "Let me drink, Chief. I'm better off dreaming." Sitting Bull spat in the dust next to him. "Your dreams are lies." But the man closed his eyes again, as if he had won.

The traders came back. Again and again. They smelled the misery like wolves smell blood. Two new wagons this time, larger, heavier, pulled by horses better fed than the camp children. Sitting Bull saw the men immediately come running together, hands outstretched, voices croaking. He heard the traders shouting, "Cheap today! Big today! Enough for everyone today!" They laughed as if they had already bought the land, and perhaps they had. Barrel by barrel.

Sitting Bull approached them. His back was straight, his gaze hard. "You bring ruin," he said. "You feed us like dogs just so we'll serve you." The traders

shrugged. "You want it," they said. "We only give what you ask for." One lifted a bottle, waving it so that the sun glittered in it like a fake treasure. "Drink, Chief. Drink and forget."

Sitting Bull snorted. "I don't drink. I remember." His voice was so harsh that a few men fell silent. But others reached for the bottles, greedily, trembling. Sitting Bull felt rage building in his gut. Not against the men, but against the damned thirst that was stronger than pride.

He thought of the soldiers. They were approaching, with trains, rifles, cannons. But maybe they weren't the biggest problem. Maybe it was those accursed wagons that killed more souls than any bullet. Sitting Bull knew: A drunken warrior doesn't shoot. A drunken warrior doesn't fight. A drunken warrior falls before the battle begins.

The women saw it too. Their faces were still, hard, like stone. They knew their husbands were no longer the men they had married. They knew their children were growing up in a world where whiskey was more important than courage. They knew they would soon be alone if things continued like this. But they said nothing. What could they say? Words were weaker than bottles.

Sitting Bull sat down on a rock, pulled on his pipe, and smoked. The smoke rose, swirling in the wind, and he thought, "Perhaps this is the real war. Not against soldiers, not against cannons. But against forgetting. Against rain from bottles."

The sky was clear, but Sitting Bull saw it as full of storm. A storm of whiskey sweeping across the land, drop by drop. He knew that if he didn't act soon, his people would die not by gun, but by barrel.

Night came again. The drums beat, weakly, unevenly. Men sang, but their voices wavered, slurred, and broke off. Children slept in strangers' arms, women gazed into the darkness, and Sitting Bull sat alone by the fire. He murmured, "Great Spirit, give me strength. Or give me the courage to watch us fall."

And the wind answered with the clinking of a bottle breaking somewhere in the darkness.

The sky hung heavy over Dakota, a gray shroud stretching across the plains. Sitting Bull stood outside, his feet in the dust, his head full of thoughts as bitter as cold ash. It was the seventh day, the seventh damned morning, that he saw

the same scene: men lying in the dirt, clutching bottles like newborns, women with eyes as empty as hollowed-out trees, children crying until their tears ran dry.

He remembered his childhood, the days when the sun was still a friend and not just a spotlight illuminating shame. Back then, they ran free across the plains, hunting buffalo, singing songs that opened the heavens. No firewater, no traders, no damned stench of foreign poison. Now the land was like a cracked skull, and every drop of whiskey was another blow from the butt.

A young warrior approached him, staggering but with burning eyes. "Chief," he stammered, "I drank, yes. But only because I was hungry. It fills you up. It warms you." Sitting Bull grabbed his arm and squeezed so hard that the boy grimaced. "It'll kill you," he growled. "Dead before your heart even stops beating." The boy tore himself away, laughed hollowly, and went back to the tents, where the bottles glittered like little moons.

Sitting Bull sat down, picked up his pipe, and inhaled the smoke deeply. He sought the spirits, the visions, the answers. But the sky remained silent. Only the wind came, carrying the laughter of the merchants. They sat by their wagons, counting coins, drinking their own poison as if they were invulnerable. "The devils don't ride horses," thought Sitting Bull, "they drive wagons."

The women came to him, several of them. Their faces were hard, their eyes full of questions. "What do we do, Chief?" One of them held a child in her arms, too weak to cry. Sitting Bull looked at her for a long time, then spoke slowly: "We fight. Not with guns. Not yet. We fight by remembering. By not forgetting who we are." His words sounded hollow, even in his own ears. But he had to say them. Someone had to speak words against the storm, even if they were like sand against rain.

That night he dreamed. A dream of blood and fire. He saw a great river turning red, filled with corpses floating in the stream. Bottles floated above the river, countless of them, and smoke rose from each one. Faces formed from the smoke: warriors, women, children—all laughing, all dead. Sitting Bull woke up, drenched in sweat, the scream still in his throat.

Outside, a dog howled. The moon hung cold over the plain, white as bone. Sitting Bull stepped outside, saw the shadows, heard the snoring, the babbling, the clinking. He felt the chill to his bones. "Firewater rains down on Dakota," he murmured. "And we're all standing there with our mouths open."

He raised his head, stared at the sky, and for a moment he thought he heard an answer. Not a word, not a song, just a dull rumble in the distance. Perhaps thunder, perhaps cannons, perhaps just his own heart. But it was enough to make him realize: the fight was coming. Against bottles, against guns, against everything.

And he swore to himself: If this rain continued to fall, he wouldn't stand there with his mouth open. He would scream. He would fight. Even if he was alone.

Dust in the teeth, blood in the throat

The sun was high and merciless, a rusty nail in the sky, burning the skin of all who weren't in the shade. But there were hardly any shadows in Dakota, only flat prairie, grass that had long since become more dust than life, and faces that looked as if they'd been wrapped in sandpaper. Sitting Bull rode slowly, the horse tired beneath him, the animal's tongue hanging out, white with dust. Every breath tasted of earth, dry, hard, like chewing glass. Dust in the teeth, blood in the throat—that's what life felt like now.

The buffalo had disappeared, almost like a bad joke. Once they had been the veins of the land—meat, fur, tools, drums, life. Now they were slaughtered, rotting, piles of bones lying somewhere on the horizon, because white bastards shot out of trains just to amuse themselves. Sitting Bull had seen them laugh when a buffalo fell, how they cut off the tongues and left the rest to rot. He had seen the herds lying on the ground like a black carpet of death. And he had known: Without buffalo, there is no people.

Now there was only dust. Dust in the tents, dust in their throats, dust in their dreams. Even the children had stopped playing. They sat there, wiping their mouths with dirty hands, their lips chapped, and asked, "When will the meat come back?" Sitting Bull couldn't answer. No chief in the world could conjure meat from thin air.

He thought of the army. Men in uniform, crawling ever westward, the railroads dragging behind them like steel worms. They came with rifles, cannons, trumpets. They came with flags and laws. But above all, they came with hunger—hunger for land, for gold, for control. To them, the prairie was nothing more than empty space. To Sitting Bull, it was everything.

His lips were dry, and he felt blood in his throat as he coughed. It wasn't much, just a red drop on the brown ground, but it was enough to remind him: He was mortal. And so were his people. They could fall, not just from bullets, but from thirst, from hunger, from dust.

Behind him rode a small group. Men still sober enough to follow him. Women carrying children on their backs who were too weak to walk. They all looked the same—faces like leather, eyes like hollows. They were a procession of shadows, not an army, not a proud people. Sitting Bull hated the sight. He hated being the chief of a funeral procession.

The traders had their firewater. The soldiers had their cannons. But perhaps the worst was the invisible knife: the emptiness in their stomachs, the scratchiness in their throats. Dust, dust, always dust. They ate roots when they found them, gnawed on leather, cooked soup from bones that had already been boiled twice. And whenever a child died, the elders would say, "It's hunger." As if it were a name, an enemy, a demon. Sitting Bull thought, "Yes, it is a demon. And we can't kill it with arrows."

The day dragged on like damned torture. The sun stung, the wind carried more dust, and every horse stumbled at some point. An old warrior collapsed, falling from his horse, his body an empty shell. No one had the strength to bury him. They left him there, and the vultures would take care of him. Sitting Bull gritted his teeth, tasted blood again. He swore that someday the vultures would also feed on the white men who had turned the land into a graveyard.

In the evening, they reached a river. But the water was low, muddy, and stinking. Children plunged into it, drinking, coughing, and vomiting. Women scooped water with furs, trying to clean it, but you couldn't boil dirt clean. Sitting Bull knelt down, dipped his hands in the water, and let it run over his forehead. It was as warm as urine. He hated that they had to drink. But they had no choice. Dust or dirty water—that was all there was.

He remembered a vision that had haunted him years ago. He had seen warriors fighting men in uniform, seen streams of blood, heard trumpets, gunshots, screams. And in the end, he saw his people survive. At the time, he had believed it was a promise. Now he wondered: Was it just a cruel joke? Visions tasted sweet, but reality tasted of dust.

Night came, cool and full of mosquitoes. They settled into the skin, sucking blood as if they, too, were part of the endless hunger. Men lay down in the dust, women wept quietly, children died silently. Sitting Bull sat by the fire,

staring into the embers and muttering, "Dust in the teeth, blood in the throat. That is what remains of us."

He reached for his pipe, filled it, and lit it. The smoke rose, swirling in the wind. He sent it to heaven like a message. "Great Spirit," he whispered, "do you see us? We're still here. But for how long?"

And the sky didn't answer. Only the dust crept into his throat, and the blood tasted bitter.

The next day began with screams. Not a war cry, not a drum roll, but the thin, plaintive shriek of a mother holding her child in her arms, realizing it was no longer breathing. A boy, barely three winters old, his skin too thin, his ribs too sharp. He had simply fallen asleep and never woken up. Sitting Bull stood there, watching the woman shake the small bundle as if she could beat life back into it. But the child had already moved on, somewhere where there was no dust.

Sitting Bull felt the lump in his chest, hard as a stone. He had seen many men fall, in battle, under bullets, under hooves. But this was worse. Men died with courage in their bellies, children died on empty stomachs. This wasn't a death with dignity; it was a mockery. A slow strangulation by starvation. He saw the women closing their eyes, as if they were digging a hole in their own souls to bury the pain.

The sun rose, a burning ball that showed no mercy. Every step across the prairie was torture. The dust clung to their lips, settled on their tongues, and scraped their teeth. Some warriors spat blood, and no one was surprised anymore. "Dust in the mouth, blood in the throat," murmured Sitting Bull, "and yet we continue." He knew: whoever stood still would fall.

They had a destination. A rumor. A place where there were still buffalo, somewhere farther north. A place where the grass was still taller, where the rivers still rushed. But rumors are like smoke—pleasant to look at, but they vanish as soon as you grasp them. Nevertheless, they marched. Better to follow a rumor than to rot in the dust.

At midday, a horse collapsed. It fell to its knees, wheezing, shaking its head. Its rider dismounted, stroked its neck, whispered words that helped nothing. Then he drew his knife and slit the animal's throat. The blood flowed into the dust, steaming and heavy, and immediately the children rushed to it. They scooped it up with their hands, drinking as if it were water. Women wept, men looked away. Sitting Bull stood still, watched the horse twitch in its death, and

thought: "We drink blood because we have no water. We eat dust because we have no meat. And we call ourselves human."

He remembered a time when a killed horse was a sacrifice, a sign. Today, it was merely a meal, raw, bloody, disgusting. But no one had the strength to condemn it. Hunger made everything permissible. Hunger devoured dignity first, then hope.

The traders didn't come. Not that day. Perhaps they had realized there was no more silver to be had here, no coins, no hides. Or perhaps it was simply too far out. Sitting Bull was glad of that. He didn't want to see their faces, their grinning mouths that scattered more dust into his heart than any wind. But he knew they would come back. Traders were like rats—where there was misery, there was also food.

In the evening, they gathered as much wood as they could find. It wasn't much, just dry brushwood that barely provided any fire. But the fire was important, not for warmth, but for memories. They sat around it, sang faintly, and drummed softly. Sitting Bull heard the voices, heard them break, how they went off-key. He heard the dust scratching in their throats, and he knew: A people who lose their songs will soon lose everything.

He stood up and spoke loudly so everyone could hear. "We are not dust! We are not blood in our throats! We are Lakota! We are warriors, women, children, and we carry the land within us!" A few heads lifted, a few eyes gleamed. But many just stared into the fire, empty, broken. Words alone couldn't fill a stomach.

Sitting Bull sat down again, smoking, and the smoke mingled with the dust, becoming one with the night. "Great Spirit," he murmured, "if this is our path, then give me the strength to walk it. But if there is hope, then show it to us before we all rot."

The wind blew, dry and hot, and brought no answer. Only more dust. More and more dust.

The third day in this hell began without voices. No child cried, no woman called, no drum beat. Only the fluttering of vultures high in the sky, already aware that food would soon be available down here again. Sitting Bull stood alone, his gaze fixed on the horizon. The land was empty, an endless expanse of brown grass and gray dust, and it made no difference whether you walked a mile or a hundred. Everything looked the same. Everything tasted the same of decay.

He felt the dust in his throat like sandpaper. He coughed, and a thin thread of blood trickled across his lips. He wiped it away with the back of his hand without looking up. Blood in his throat was nothing unusual these days. It was like brushing his teeth in the morning—a routine.

Behind him, the camp moved, slowly, reluctantly, like an animal too tired to live. Men saddled horses that could barely carry any more weight. Women tied their last belongings to poles, children hung from their skirts. It wasn't a train of warriors, it was a convoy of refugees. Sitting Bull knew it, even though he hated it.

An old warrior came to him, his skin tanned by the sun, his hair gray, his eyes glassy. "Chief," he said, "when do we fight?" Sitting Bull turned and studied him. "Against what?" he asked. "Against the dust? Against the hunger?" The old man nodded and spat into the sand, red. "Better to die fighting than to perish like this." Sitting Bull looked at him for a long time, and then nodded. He was thinking the same thing. But against whom should he fight? Against vultures? Against the damned sun?

The army was far away, but its shadow reached here. Everyone knew: they would come, sooner or later. And when they came, they needed warriors who could breathe, who could ride, who could shoot. But what were they left with? Men with dust in their throats, blood in their lungs, weak as children.

In the afternoon, they found a dead animal. Not a buffalo, not a deer—a damned dog, half-rotted, already eaten by maggots. Nevertheless, three men fell upon it, cutting off pieces of meat, chewing them, choking them down. Sitting Bull turned away, but he heard the cracking of bones, the smacking. Hunger can kill dignity, he thought. And he hated hunger for that more than any gun.

A few women began slaughtering their own horses. They couldn't stand hearing their children whimper anymore. Sitting Bull saw it and remained silent, but rage burned in his gut. Every horse was a warrior, every hoofbeat a heartbeat of the people. And now they were devouring them like cheap meat. But he couldn't say anything. He knew: hunger speaks louder than pride.

At night, they built a fire, small and pitiful, but enough to make the shadows dance. Sitting Bull sat before it, pipe in hand, and spoke: "We are Lakota. We are not dust, we are not blood in our throats. We are warriors." His voice was scratchy, but it carried. Some nodded, murmured their assent. Others just stared into the fire, eyes empty, minds even emptier.

A child crawled to him and laid its head on his knee. It was as thin as a twig, its skin stretched over its bones. "Chief," it whispered, "when will we eat?" Sitting Bull placed his hand on his head, but he had no answer. His heart was heavy, and he wished he could lie to the child, give it a story, a fairy tale. But fairy tales didn't satisfy hunger.

The night was cold, the wind cut like a knife, and Sitting Bull thought, "Perhaps the dust is the last enemy. And we will eat it with our own teeth until nothing is left of us."

And as he thought this, he saw a light on the horizon. A glimmer, far away, faint, but real. Was it an army encampment? Was it traders? Or a village? He didn't know. But it was a sign. And signs were rare.

He stood up and pointed with his pipe. "There. Tomorrow we'll go there." No one asked what it was. No one asked if there was hope. They saw the light, and that was enough.

But Sitting Bull knew: light could be anything. A fire of friends. Or the hell of enemies.

Morning came with a wind so dry it cut through every throat like an invisible knife. Sitting Bull stood before the sun crept over the horizon and looked for the light he had noticed during the night. It was still there, dim, flickering. A fire. He knew it could mean hope. Or death. But hope was rare, so there was no choice.

The camp slowly broke up. Men staggered, their legs weak, their eyes red. Women tied their children to their shoulders as if they were burdens they could still carry. Sitting Bull led them, step by step, through grass that had long since become more dust than life. Every breath was a mouthful of sand. Dust in their teeth, blood in their throats. No one spoke. Words would have been just dust.

As they got closer, they saw what it was. No village, no soldiers, no traders. Just a small group of travelers. Two wagons pulled by emaciated horses. White men, three of them, with faces like mold and hands full of barrels. Sitting Bull immediately recognized the smell. Whiskey. Firewater. He could have vomited, he hated the stench so much, it was stronger than hunger.

The men smiled as the Lakota approached them. "Friends! Warriors! Women!" one shouted. "We have what you need!" He raised a bottle, the glass glinting in

the sunlight. Sitting Bull felt the men behind him fidget, their eyes glued to the bottles like flies to shit. He knew he had to act now, or they would fall apart like rotten wood.

He stepped forward, chest straight, eyes hard. "We need meat," he said. "We need water. Not poison." The traders just grinned wider. "Meat is rare. Water too. But whiskey—whiskey is life in a glass." One handed over a bottle, and Sitting Bull slapped it from his hand. It shattered in the dust, the liquid seeping into the land like poison. "This is death," he said quietly, but everyone heard him.

The men muttered, a few cursed. One roared, "Why are you destroying what helps us, Chief?" Sitting Bull turned to them, his eyes sharp. "Helps? Helps us forget that we're starving? Helps us forget that we're dying? Whiskey blinds you, and blind warriors die first." His voice cut through the dust, and for a moment there was silence.

But the traders didn't give up. They threw more bottles into the dust, laughing. "Take, take, take!" they cried. "Your chief is old, he wants to deny you your life. But we'll give it to you." Men grabbed for them, greedily, desperately. Sitting Bull closed his eyes. He couldn't hold them all. Not with words, not with his hands. The hunger in his stomach and the thirst in his throat were stronger than any law.

He turned away and went to the women. They stood still, their children at their hips, and they looked at him. Their eyes said, "Do something." He felt the burden, heavy as stones on his back. He was a chief, but he was no magician. He couldn't conjure meat, couldn't draw water from the ground. He could only resist and hope that some would follow him.

The sun rose higher, burning, and the men drank. They laughed, staggered, and screamed. One drew his knife, stabbed the air, and roared at spirits that weren't there. Another fell into the fire, burned himself, screaming and laughing at the same time. Sitting Bull saw it, and his heart clenched like a piece of leather.

"We die like fools," he muttered. "Not by bullets, not by blades. But by bottles."

By evening, the dust lay thicker than ever. The camp was silent, only the wheezing of the drunks could be heard. Sitting Bull sat alone, pipe in hand, staring into the embers. He thought: "Perhaps this is the real war. Not against the soldiers. Not against the traders. But against ourselves."

And he knew: If they lost this war, it didn't matter how many battles they won.

The night was cold, but no one pulled the blankets tighter. They had none. Dust was their cloak, hunger their pillow. Sitting Bull sat awake, listening to the drunks' wheezing, the children's soft crying, the sobs of a woman trying to be quiet. It was a concert of misery, played in a minor key, and heaven was the only listener.

By morning, two men were dead. Not by bullets, not by arrows, but simply because of that. One lay in the dust with his mouth open, his tongue dry as leather. The other had choked on his own vomit in his sleep. The women looked away, the men shrugged. No one had the strength left for burials. They pushed the bodies aside as if they were mere stones. Vultures would do the rest.

Sitting Bull looked at the corpses for a long time. There was no grief in his chest, not even anger. Just a hole. So large that he wondered if it would eventually swallow the whole man whole. He muttered, "Blood in the throat, dust in the teeth. And in the end, nothing."

The sun rose, burning, and the march continued. No song, no shout, no pride. Only footsteps choking in the dust. The children stumbled, the women carried them on. Men supported each other, swaying, but they went. They had to. Standing still was death.

At midday they reached a hill. From there, the plain was wide and empty. And on the horizon: smoke. Not a small, thin thread, but thick, black, as if an entire village were burning. Sitting Bull narrowed his eyes. "Soldiers," he thought. Or traders. Or both. His stomach clenched, but not from fear. From hunger. Maybe there was meat there. Maybe.

They continued walking until the sun nearly burst with heat. The smoke grew closer, the stench of burnt wood and grease filled their nostrils. And then they saw it: a meadow full of bones. Buffalo bones, skulls, torn to pieces, thrown in piles like garbage. White hunters had lived here. They had shot, skinned, cut out the tongues—and simply left the rest to rot. The ground stank of death, the air of shame.

The women wept, the men gritted their teeth. Sitting Bull knelt down and placed his hand on a skull. "Brother," he whispered, "they've taken you. And us along with you." He felt the dust creeping into his throat, and again he tasted blood.

Behind the hill, they found a camp. White hunters, five men, fat and dirty, were sitting around a fire. They had whiskey barrels and buffalo meat, mountains of it. Sitting Bull stopped, his warriors behind him. His eyes burned. He knew: This was it. Here was meat. Here was what his people were crying out for.

The men saw them and laughed. One shouted, "Come on, Indians! Do you want some leftovers? Do you want a drink?" He raised a bottle, and the others laughed as if they'd just told the best joke in the world. Sitting Bull felt his hands shaking. Not from fear. From anger.

His warriors looked at him. Their eyes were hungry, desperate. One whispered, "Chief, let us take." Sitting Bull nodded. "Take, yes. But don't beg."

He stepped forward, loudly, his voice clear. "You have killed, you have wasted. You have taken lives and left filth behind. Now you are taking our people. Today this ends."

The men reached for their rifles, but they were too slow. Hunger makes you quick, anger makes you deadly. Sitting Bull's warriors charged forward, knives flashing, screams blaring. It wasn't a fight. It was a slaughter. In minutes, it was over. Five white bodies lay in the dust, their eyes wide open, whiskey spilled across the ground.

The women pounced on the meat. They cut, cooked, and tore. Children ate raw, blood running down their chins, but they laughed—for the first time in weeks. Sitting Bull stood still, watched them eat, and he felt no pride. Only bitterness.

"We eat flesh," he murmured, "but we also eat their shame." The dust still hung in the air, hunger still gnawed at their bones. Nothing had been won. Just another day.

The stench of slaughtered meat still hung in the air as the next day dawned. A stench that should have smelled of life, of hope. But Sitting Bull knew: it was only a respite, a small morsel of meat against a sea of hunger. The children were still chewing tendons, the women were boiling bones until only murky water remained, and the men were belching blood. A feast in the shadow of death.

Sitting Bull walked through the camp, saw the remains of the dead hunters. No one had buried them. Their bodies lay there, swollen, rigid, their eyes wide open, as if they couldn't believe they had been defeated by men without full

stomachs. Vultures were already perched on their bodies, pecking, tearing, laughing with their beaks. Sitting Bull looked briefly, then spat. "Eat them," he muttered. "Perhaps that will make you wiser."

The sun burned again, as if it had no memory of yesterday. Sitting Bull gathered the men who were still sober and strong enough. "We're moving on," he said. "There's nothing here but death." A few grumbled, wanting to stay, wanting to search more, wanting to drink more. But Sitting Bull's gaze was sharp. "Stay, and you'll rot with them." No one objected.

The march began, more dust, more blood. Every step was a scratch in the throat, a cut in the lungs. Women coughed dryly, men stumbled, children hung from their arms. Sitting Bull felt fatigue creeping into his bones, but he didn't let himself fall. A chief couldn't fall. Not here, not now.

In the afternoon, they found a small stream. Narrow, barely deeper than an ankle, the water brown and stale. Nevertheless, it was a blessing. The children rushed in, drank, splashed. The women scooped, washed their faces. Sitting Bull knelt down and took a sip. It tasted of earth, of iron, of disease. But it was wet, and that was enough.

Then they heard the sound of hooves. Distant, but distinct. Sitting Bull raised his head. Clouds of dust in the south. Soldiers. Not traders, not hunters—soldiers. He knew immediately. The rhythm of the horses was different, orderly, heavy. He saw the faces of his men: fear, tiredness, hope. Some were thinking of food, of prey. Others were thinking of death.

"We hide," one suggested. "We fight," another growled. Sitting Bull raised his hand. "We wait." He stopped, staring in the direction from which the cloud of dust was coming.

The riders appeared: a small unit, perhaps twenty men, blue uniforms, shiny buttons, rifles at the ready. Their faces were hard, burned by the sun, but they grinned. They saw the Lakota like vultures sighting prey. One shouted, "There they are, the damned Indians! Look at them crawling!" Laughter followed.

Sitting Bull stepped forward, alone, arms folded. "This is our land," he said loudly. "Your place is where you came from." His voice echoed, rough, filled with dust. The soldiers just laughed. One spat into the ground. "Your land? Soon it'll be ours. You belong on the reservation, in the hole, in the dust."

Some of his warriors reached for their bows, for old rifles. Sitting Bull raised his hand. "Not yet." He knew they were too weak, too hungry, too tired. A fight here would be a massacre. But he saw the soldiers laughing, and he swore to himself that the day would come. The day when the blood wouldn't just run down his neck, but would run in streams across the grass.

The soldiers rode by, slowly, provocatively, throwing dust at the Lakota. One pulled out his bottle, drank, and poured the rest into the sand. "Look," he cried, "we won't even give you water." Sitting Bull watched, motionless, but a fire burning in his eyes.

When the soldiers had disappeared, they sat down. Women wept, men cursed. Sitting Bull remained silent, his hands clenched into fists. "The dust is our enemy," he thought. "But soon the blood will come. And then it will be our song."

Night fell, cool, with a moon that looked like a damned wound. Sitting Bull smoked, sending the smoke skyward. "Great Spirit," he murmured, "don't let the dust kill us before we can give our blood."

And somewhere in the distance the wolves howled as if they understood him.

The sky was leaden gray, as if someone had stretched an old blanket over Dakota to smother the sun. Sitting Bull stood early, before the first voices could be heard. He felt the heaviness in his bones, the dust in his throat, the burning in his chest. Every breath sounded like a knife being drawn on glass. But he stood. He had to. A chief couldn't stay lying down when his people were crawling in the dust.

The camp was silent, except for the coughing. That constant, dry cough that was worse than any war cry. Children coughed, women coughed, men coughed blood. The dust crept into every lung, into every dream. Sitting Bull thought, "If we die of this dust, no song of ours will remain. Only wind."

They moved on. Step by step, like shadows over scorched earth. Sometimes someone spoke, most of the time not. Words were too heavy; they needed the air to breathe, not to talk. The dust clung to their skin, ate into their eyes. A child stumbled, fell, and couldn't get up. The mother picked it up, pressed it to her chest, and moved on, silent. Sitting Bull saw it, but he said nothing. Words didn't help.

At midday, they found a dead horse, half-devoured by vultures. The men chased the birds away, cutting off any meat that wasn't yet rotten. Children chewed tendons, women cooked the meat in its own blood. Sitting Bull ate nothing. He couldn't. Every bite tasted of dust. But he pretended to eat so the others wouldn't despair.

He thought of earlier times. Of hunts, of songs, of nights when the drums were so loud that even the stars danced. Now the stars were silent, the drums still, and the dust was louder than any song. "We are no longer who we were," he thought. "But we are not dead yet."

In the evening, they saw smoke. More smoke. This time, not a hunters' camp, not a small fire. But thick clouds that smelled of burnt wood. They crept closer, cautiously. And they saw: an abandoned fort, half-burned. An army outpost, attacked by whoever. The walls blackened, the roofs collapsed, but inside: barrels. Water barrels. And supplies.

The women rushed in, scooped, drank, and laughed with joy. The men fetched sacks of corn, beans, even some meat, dry but edible. Children stuffed their bellies, vomited, and kept eating. It was a celebration. A small victory.

Sitting Bull stood still, watching. He knew it wasn't a rescue. Just another break. But breaks could save lives. He let them eat, drink, and laugh, if only for one night.

In the darkness, he sat down by the fire. Pipe in hand, eyes in the smoke. "Dust in our teeth, blood in our throats," he murmured. "So we go on. But we go." He looked at the stars, which were finally breaking through again. "Great Spirit, if you still see us, then you know we won't give up."

And somewhere in the wind, he thought he heard an answer. Not a word, not a song. Just a whisper: "Not yet."

Sitting Bull nodded. Not yet. But soon.

A horse eats the morning light

Morning didn't come quietly. It didn't crawl, it roared. The sun leaped over the horizon like a knife, slicing open the sky and sending the light in shreds across the prairie. Sitting Bull was already standing before the first rays gilded the dust. He saw his horse. Thin, its ribs like ladders, its eyes tired. It lowered its head to the grass, which was little more than a gray carpet, and began to eat as if it were a feast. Dust, dry brush, a bit of greenery glowing in the morning light. A horse ate the morning light—and made nothing more of it than a pile of dung.

Sitting Bull laughed dryly, almost bitterly. "That's how we are," he thought. "We consume the light given to us, and in the end, all that's left is dirt." He went to the horse and placed his hand on its neck. Warm, shivering, exhausted. This animal was his brother in misery. No warrior rode without a horse. No chief could lead if his animal was broken. And he knew: the horse, too, was finished. Like all of them.

The camp slowly awoke. Children coughed, women pulled blankets over their heads, men rose from the dust as if they had slept in graves. Dust everywhere. Dust on their faces, dust in their teeth, dust in their hearts. Sitting Bull thought about the past few weeks. Hunger, whiskey, dead children, dead horses. And yet they still stood. Every breath was a slap in the face of the world that wanted to destroy them.

He sat down and smoked his pipe. The smoke mingled with the morning light, becoming a thin thread rising into the sky. He remembered his visions. Visions in which he saw warriors, strong, unbroken, fighting the Tin Men from the East. Visions in which horses raced like storms across the prairie, the ground shaking with the thunder of their hooves. He saw them, heard them, smelled them. But when he opened his eyes, he saw only emaciated animals, tired men, broken women. A dream that crumbled in the morning light.

“A horse eats the morning light,” he murmured, “and we eat the dreams.”

A few men came to him. Warriors who were not yet broken. Their eyes were red but clear. One spoke: "Chief, we must ride. We must hunt. Perhaps we will still find herds." Sitting Bull nodded. "Yes. But where? The whites drove them away. Or shot them." The man shrugged. "Then we will ride until we have blood in our lungs. Better to die on horseback than to lie in the dust." Sitting Bull looked at him, and he knew: That was precisely the choice. Dust or ride. Die in camp or die hunting.

They saddled their horses. Animals with barely any strength left, but they obeyed. They rode out, out into the void. The sun grew, the light became harsh, cutting their eyes like glass. Dust everywhere, no buffalo, no game, nothing. Just endless expanse, empty, dead. They rode for hours until the sweat dried on their necks and their mouths were full of blood.

Then—movement. Far away, a black dot, a herd, a herd. They stopped, squinted. Buffalo. Not many, maybe twenty, maybe thirty. But buffalo. Sitting Bull's heart beat faster. Finally. Life. Hope. Meat. He raised his hand, the men nodded. They lowered themselves over their horses, drew bows, loaded old rifles. The ride began.

The horses charged as fast as they could, dust swirled, the sun burned. The buffalo raised their heads, bellowed, and ran. A thunder rippled through the ground. Sitting Bull felt it in his bones, in his heart. A rush, a song, a memory. This is what it had once sounded like, when the world was still young.

Arrows flew, rifle shots rang out, blood spurted. One buffalo collapsed, then another. The men screamed, not in fear, but in life. Sitting Bull chased after a large animal, drew his bow, and released the arrow. It struck deep, and the animal fell, thundering into the dust so loudly that the earth shook.

They had prey. Meat. Hope. Blood they could drink, meat they could cook. The men cheered, the horses trembled, but they held on. Sitting Bull dismounted and placed his hand on the animal he had killed. "Brother," he said, "forgive me. But without you, we die."

They cut, they carried, they laughed. For the first time in weeks, they truly laughed. It wasn't a whiskey laugh, not a desperate laugh, not a broken one. It was a laugh that came from the gut. Sitting Bull heard it, and for a moment, he thought: Maybe we can still do it. Maybe we're not dust. Not yet.

But then he saw the horizon. Clouds of dust. Again. Only this time no buffalo. Riders. Lots of them. The sun sparkled on metal. Soldiers.

And Sitting Bull knew: The morning light his horse had eaten was only a small morsel of hope. Beyond it lay darkness.

The cloud of dust on the horizon grew. At first it was just a haze, a shadow, a trembling in the air. Then it became clear lines: horses, many of them. Heavy riders, with rifles in their hands and the damned gleam of tin in the sun. Soldiers. The tin gods from the East, as Sitting Bull called them, with uniforms

that looked like dirty church windows—pretty from a distance, full of broken glass up close.

Sitting Bull wiped the blood from his mouth. The buffalo lay still warm at his feet, its fur covered in flies, its heart still beating. His people needed this meat. But the soldiers wanted something else. They wanted land. They wanted obedience. They wanted a chief to bow his head and say, "Yes, take everything, take us." Sitting Bull thought, "I'd rather eat my own shadow."

The men behind him were exhausted, but the hunt had given them life for a moment. Their eyes burned again. Blood clung to their hands, but it was buffalo blood, honest blood, not their own. Sitting Bull looked at them, knowing that this was perhaps the only strength they had—hunger that could be transformed into rage.

The soldiers approached. Twenty, maybe thirty. Blue uniforms, rifles gleaming. One in the lead, an officer, his hat low, his face arrogant as a statue. When they were within earshot, he shouted: "You have no right to hunt here! This land now belongs to the United States!" His voice was sharp, like a knife that had slit throats many times.

Sitting Bull stepped forward, chest straight, eyes black with rage. "This land belongs to the buffalo. To the wind. To the Lakota. Not to you." His voice was rough, full of dust, but it carried far. The soldiers laughed. A few spat into the ground.

The officer pulled a flask from his pocket and raised it. "You want a drink?" he shouted. "Whiskey for meat. Give us your hunting, and we'll give you what you really want." The laughter of his men was like rusty iron scraping on stone. Sitting Bull felt his warriors growing restless. Some stared at the flask as if it were a treasure. Others growled, clenched their fists.

"Poison," Sitting Bull said loudly. "You give us poison and call it trade. But I tell you: We don't drink. We fight." He raised his arm, pointing at the buffalo still lying on the ground. "This is our life. Not yours. If you take it, you take our hearts. And for that, you will die."

The soldiers stopped laughing. One raised his rifle, but the officer held him back. "Not yet," he murmured. But his eyes said it all: Soon. Very soon.

The sun burned, the dust was sticky, and the buffalo lay among them like sacrifices on an altar. Sitting Bull felt the morning light burning his throat. His horse pawed as if it knew blood was about to flow.

“A horse eats the morning light,” thought Sitting Bull, “and we eat the darkness that comes behind it.”

He drew his bow. And the dust began to shake.

The dust vibrated like a drum, the soldiers' horses stamped in time. The Lakota stood still, their hands on bows, spears, and old rifles that had seen better days. Between them lay the slain buffalo, steaming, covered in flies, and the sun hung over everything like a judge about to pronounce judgment.

The officer in front—a man with a chin like an anvil and eyes as cold as iron—grinned. "You think you can hunt here? On land that now belongs to us?" His voice was loud, confident, the grin of a man accustomed to bullets doing the talking for him. "These animals belong to the United States. Everything belongs to the United States."

Sitting Bull took a step forward, barefoot in the dust, his face impassive, but his eyes glowing. "The buffalo don't belong to you. They belong to the land. And we belong to the land. You belong nowhere." His voice was hard, dry as bone. The soldiers laughed.

A young warrior beside him drew his bow. The creaking of the string was louder than the laughter. The air froze. For a moment, only the wind could be heard. Then—*Bang*A shot, loud, piercing. The warrior next to Sitting Bull fell, blood pouring from his chest, staining the dust. The soldiers' laughter fell silent. They aimed their rifles.

Sitting Bull felt the burning in his throat, the blood in his neck, the dust in his teeth. He screamed, not a word, just a sound, raw, like an animal. And his men answered. Arrows flew, spears whirred, old rifles fired. The soldiers fired back, the thunder of the shots ripping through the air.

A horse reared, a soldier fell, his skull crashing against a rock. A Lakota jumped on him, stabbing him until blood spurted. Another warrior fell, his face torn by lead. Women screamed in the background, children cowered, covering their ears.

Sitting Bull ran, drew his bow, and let go. An arrow pierced the neck of a soldier, who fell from his horse, gasping for breath. His blood mixed with the

dust, instantly turning to mud. Sitting Bull reached for the next arrow, shot again, hit an arm, heard the scream, and saw the rifle fall into the dirt.

The buffalo lay among them, dead, yet they seemed part of the battle. Men stumbled over their bodies, slipped in the blood, and fell. It was as if they were fighting on an altar where the animals were the sacrifices. Sitting Bull thought, "The buffalo have already fallen. Now it's our turn."

A soldier charged him, bayonet first. Sitting Bull dodged, drew his knife, and plunged it deep into the man's stomach. Warm blood spurted over his hands. The soldier gasped, fell, and writhed in the dust. Sitting Bull ripped the knife free, screaming, the veins in his neck like ropes.

The air was filled with smoke, screams, and blood. A horse neighed, pierced by an arrow, and fell with its rider. The dust was thick, sticking to the mouth, tasting of iron. Blood in the throat, dust in the teeth. Sitting Bull knew: that was exactly their song.

He saw his men. Some fell, gasping for breath, others fought like madmen. One jumped onto a horse, pulled the rider off, and screamed like an animal. But the soldiers were numerous, and they had rifles that spoke faster than arrows.

The officer shouted orders, fired himself, and his bullets found bodies. But Sitting Bull saw him and stared at him as if he were the devil himself. "You'll be my target," he thought. "If I can only take one person, it'll be you."

He reached for the last arrow, drew it, and breathed deeply, despite the dust and the blood. The horse beside him snorted, still grazing on dry grass as if blind to the battle. "A horse eats the morning light," murmured Sitting Bull, "and I'll eat your death."

He let go. The arrow flew, cutting through dust and smoke, and time held its breath.

The arrow pierced flesh. Not the officer's chest, not his heart, but just below it, deep in his shoulder. The man screamed, a harsh, angry sound, like an animal being skinned alive. His horse reared, he almost fell over, caught himself, but the rifle fell into the dust.

For a moment, there was chaos. The soldiers screamed, firing wildly, their bullets whizzed through the air, kicking up dust, tearing open bodies. Two Lakota collapsed, one screamed, one fell silent immediately. Blood spurted, dust clung, and the sun laughed above, as if it were all a damn joke.

Sitting Bull lunged forward, knife in hand, dust biting his throat, his heart pounding. He wanted the officer. Just that one. If he fell, the others would stagger at least for a moment. But a soldier jumped in his path, bayonet first. Sitting Bull ducked, felt the draft of the blade, grabbed the man by the belt, and rammed the knife into his ribs. Warm, wet, red. The man gasped, fell, and Sitting Bull kept running.

The buffalo lay like mounds among the combatants. Men leaped over the carcasses, sliding in the blood, stabbing, shooting, screaming. One of the warriors fell over the back of a dead animal, directly into the arms of a soldier, who finished him off with a shot to the head. Brains splattered into the dust. Another Lakota plunged a spear into the belly of a rider, who toppled from his horse and writhed like a worm.

Sitting Bull reached the officer, who had staggered from his horse, his shoulder bleeding, his face contorted. "You bastard!" the man roared, grabbing his rifle in the dust. Sitting Bull jumped, kicked, his boot slammed against the barrel, and the rifle flew away. Both fell to the ground, dust in their mouths, blood in their throats. They wrestled like animals, no room for pride, no room for speech. Only scratching, pushing, choking.

The officer punched him hard in the face, his lip burst, and blood flowed. Sitting Bull felt iron in his mouth and spat redly into the man's face. Then he grabbed his knife and rammed it in, but the officer held his arm, pushed back, and growled like a dog. Dust clung to sweat; both smelled of filth, of death, of madness.

Next to them, shots rang out, arrows flew, horses brayed. A Lakota was pierced by a bullet and fell backward over the carcass of a buffalo, his eyes already blank before he hit the ground. A soldier was speared in the neck, gasped, spat, and fell to his knees. Everything was chaos. Everything was dust.

Sitting Bull screamed, pressed his forehead against the officer's, gritted his teeth. Then he managed to wrench the arm free. He stabbed. The knife slid into flesh, deep, warm. The officer gasped, coughed blood, stared at him, his eyes wide, full of hatred, full of disbelief. Sitting Bull stabbed again, this time deeper. The man twitched, wheezed, and then slumped, the dust greedily absorbing his blood.

For a moment there was silence. As if everyone had seen what had happened. The officer, the leader, lay in the dust, blood staining his blue uniform black.

The soldiers roared, furious, desperate. Some rushed forward, shooting, stabbing, blinding. Others retreated, seeking cover behind their horses.

The Lakota screamed. A wild, raw, angry howl. They charged, with knives, spears, and arrows. The officer's death was like a spark in dry grass. For a few seconds, they were not hungry, not tired, not broken. For a few seconds, they were warriors.

Sitting Bull stood, the knife dripping, his breath rattling, blood running down his chin. He raised his head, saw the sun, saw the cloud of dust swallowing everything. "A horse eats the morning light," he thought, "but we eat your damned blood."

And then all hell broke loose again.

The battle devoured on, like a fire no one could extinguish. Dust and smoke thickened the air, making every breath burn. Shots rang out, arrows hissed, and over everything hung the whinny of horses, shrill and desperate, as if they too had realized that no victors were being born here, only the dead were being made.

Sitting Bull stood in the center, his knife red, his face smeared with blood that wasn't all his. The men around him fought like madmen, driven by hunger and rage, no longer by hope. A Lakota leaped onto a soldier's horse, pulled the rider off, and screamed in his face before slitting his throat. Another was riddled with two bullets, staggered a few more steps, then fell onto one of the slain buffalo and lay there like another carcass.

The soldiers were well-armed and trained, but they had seen the death of their officer. They were angry, but also uncertain. Some fired indiscriminately into the crowd, others retreated, the horses pressed on. Sitting Bull sensed it—this battle was not a clear victory for either side. It was a wallow in the dust, in which everyone shed their share of blood.

He ducked as a bullet whizzed over his head, smelling the burnt powder. A young warrior beside him—little more than a boy—rushed forward, fired an old rifle, and hit a soldier in the stomach. The man doubled over, screamed, and fell. The boy cheered briefly—and at the same moment, took a bullet in the chest. He fell backward, his eyes still wide, a laugh frozen on his lips. Sitting Bull reached for him, but he was already gone.

"Dust in the teeth, blood in the throat," muttered Sitting Bull. "And death laughs at both."

He threw the knife, which plunged deep into a soldier's throat. Then he reached for a rifle lying in the dust. Old, dented, but still loaded. He raised it, aimed, and fired. The recoil jerked his shoulder back, but the shot hit. A rider fell, the horse lumbered in circles, stepped on another soldier, and crushed his chest. Bones cracked, a scream cut through his throat.

The Lakota drew strength from despair. They screamed, they lunged at the soldiers, they bit, they tore. One beat a soldier with his bare hands until his skull split open like a rotten pumpkin. Another screamed at the heavens before falling from a bullet through his back.

It wasn't a fight for victory. It was a dance of death. Every blow, every shot, every breath was just another kick in the dust.

After a while—minutes or hours, no one knew—the soldiers began to retreat. Not all of them. Some lay dead, others were bleeding, others were screaming for help. But the horses pressed on, the ranks broke. They retreated, slowly, cursing, shooting, but retreating.

The Lakota stood still, trembling, blood and dust everywhere. They weren't victors. They were survivors. Nothing more. Sitting Bull stood, his chest heaving, blood running from his forehead. He watched the soldiers disappear, clouds of dust on the horizon, smaller and smaller, until nothing remained.

Silence fell. Only the coughing of the wounded, the whimpering of children, the panting of horses. Sitting Bull looked around. Dead men everywhere. His own men, soldiers, and among them the buffalo. Three peoples, three victims, one in the dust.

He knelt down and placed his hand on the head of a dead warrior. "Brother," he murmured, "you fell for flesh, for land, for pride. But in the end, you simply fell."

He stood, raised his head, and saw the sun still burning mercilessly. "A horse eats the morning light," he said quietly, "but we eat the dust. Again and again."

And he knew: the fight wasn't won. He had only shown that they could still bite. But eventually, the dust would suffocate them all.

The dust settled slowly, heavy as a shroud. The sun still burned, but it had changed color—no longer golden, but red, as if it had itself drunk blood. Sitting Bull stood in the middle of the battlefield, his breath rattling, his face smeared. Bodies lay everywhere, twisted, open, still. Men who had been screaming yesterday now looked like dolls someone had carelessly thrown into the dirt.

The buffalo, the actual prey, lay in the middle. Dead animals, dead people, no difference anymore. Flies danced from one carcass to the next, humming their songs as if it were all just a feast for them. Sitting Bull thought:*The flies are the only winners.*

The women approached cautiously from a distance. They carried children on their backs, their eyes wide, their mouths dry. They saw the dead, the pools of blood, the torn bodies. Some wept, some didn't. Tears, too, eventually turned to dust. A woman knelt beside a fallen warrior, shaking him, calling his name. No response. She bit her wrist to keep from screaming.

Sitting Bull walked slowly among the dead. Every step was heavy, as if the ground were pulling him back. He saw the faces of his warriors, young, old, angry, calm—all the same now. Dust masks. He saw soldiers who, even in death, stared at him with cold eyes, as if they themselves wanted to command from hell. He spat in their faces. "Your land is not ours. Your death is."

He found a boy, barely sixteen winters old. His chest ripped open, his heart half out. Sitting Bull knelt down and closed his eyes. "You've seen the morning light," he murmured. "That must be enough."

Then he heard a faint whimper. He followed the sound and found a horse. A beautiful animal, brown, its flank ripped by bullets. It lay in the dust, wheezing, its eyes wide, filled with pain. Sitting Bull went to it and placed his hand on its throat. Warm, trembling, familiar. "Brother," he whispered, "I'm sorry." He drew his knife, cut deep, and stopped the wheezing. Blood steamed, the dust absorbed it greedily.

He remained kneeling, knife in hand, head bowed. "A horse eats the morning light," he thought, "and we eat the night. A little more every day."

As the sun sank lower, the survivors began collecting the dead. No time for proper burials. They piled the bodies, covering them with earth and stones as best they could. Women sang softly, their voices shaky. Children watched silently, their faces like old masks. Sitting Bull helped, pushing bodies, placing stones. His hands trembled, but he didn't stop.

The supplies, the leftover buffalo meat, were gathered. It wasn't much. Not enough. But it was all they had. Men were still chewing their blood, women stuffing small pieces into the mouths of children who could barely swallow. A feast in the shadow of the dead.

When night came, they sat around a fire. Small, weak, but warm. Sitting Bull smoked. The smoke burned his throat, mingling with the taste of blood. "Today we showed that we still have teeth," he said. "But teeth alone don't feed a stomach." His voice was quiet, raspy, but everyone heard him. "The soldiers are coming back. With more. Always with more. And us? We have dust. We have blood. We are hungry. But we also have the land. And as long as we have that, we live."

No one answered. They just listened. Some nodded, others stared into the fire. Children fell asleep, women rocked them, men sharpened blunt knives.

Sitting Bull looked up at the sky. The moon hung like a doomed eye over the prairie. "Great Spirit," he murmured, "do you still see us? Or are we already dust in your breath?"

A gust of wind came, cold, dry, and carried the last wisps of smoke into the darkness.

The night was black as charred wood. No stars twinkled, no wind sang. Only the crackle of the small fire and the gasps of the survivors filled the air. Sitting Bull sat silently, pipe in hand, his eyes fixed on the embers. His eyes were tired, but they burned. Around him lay the warriors, exhausted, wounded, with faces that looked as if they had been dipped in clay. Women crouched with children on their knees, rocking them to sleep, while their own eyes stared blankly into the darkness.

The smell of battle still lingered in the air: blood, sweat, gunpowder, burnt flesh. It clung to the skin, the hair, the lungs. You couldn't wash it away, sing it away, or suppress it. It was there, like the dust. Always.

Sitting Bull puffed on his pipe. He thought of the officer he had killed. His face still stared back at him, somewhere between anger and disbelief. A man who had believed himself invincible, crushed in the dust. And yet – it didn't feel like a victory. It was just another body, another drop of blood in a river that had long since overflowed its banks.

A horse pawed quietly in the darkness. The animal ate dry grass, bit into the earth, as if trying to taste the light of this morning once more. Sitting Bull smiled bitterly.*A horse eats the morning light,* he thought.*And we eat the remains of the night. We're worse off than the animals.*

He stood up and stepped to the edge of the camp. The sky was a black hole that almost swallowed him. He listened into the distance. Nothing. No hoofbeats, no gunshots, no soldiers. But he knew they would return. Always return. In greater numbers, with more guns, with more hunger for land.

A child approached him, barefoot, thin as a twig, his eyes too wide in his face. "Chief," he whispered, "are we victors?" Sitting Bull knelt down and placed a hand on the boy's shoulder. He wanted to lie, wanted to say, "Yes, we have won." But his lips couldn't bring themselves to speak. Instead, he said, "We're alive. That's enough." The boy nodded slowly, understanding more than a child should.

The women sang a quiet song, almost a hum, a relic from ancient times. A song that spoke of hunting, of stars, of fire. It sounded brittle, thin, but it was a song. Sitting Bull heard it, closed his eyes, and for a moment there was something like peace. Brief. Like a breath. Then it was dust again.

In the morning, the light would creep across the plain again. The horses would once again nibble on the dry grass, the children would once again ask for meat, the men would once again spit in the dust and cough up blood. Everything would continue until nothing remained.

Sitting Bull stood up and watched the embers die. "We are not defeated," he said quietly. "Not yet. But the morning light is being devoured again. Every day, one less bite of hope."

And he knew: the real battle had not even begun yet.

Smoking skies, cursing mothers

The sky hung heavy like a smoky curtain over the prairie. Gray, black, red, as if the spirits themselves had set the world on fire. Sitting Bull stood in the middle of the camp, smelling the stench of burnt wood, old grease, and gunpowder. It wasn't the smoke of a feast, not the smoke of sacred pipes. It was the smoke of doom. A sky that swallowed the last prayers before they even left the ground.

The women cursed. Quietly at first, then louder. They screamed at their men, screamed at the dust, screamed at the sky. "What have you brought us?" cried one, holding her child, thin as a bone. "Meat? No! Death and whiskey! You always bring us death and whiskey!" Her voice cut through the air like a broken knife. Other women joined in, their words harsh, angry, tired. Sitting Bull heard them, and he knew: they were right. Mothers don't curse when there is hope. They curse when everything falls apart.

A few men tried to respond, growling, defending themselves. One shouted: "We're fighting! We're hunting! We're dying for you!" But his voice sounded hollow, like a drum without a skin. The women didn't remain silent. "Die? Yes! But not live! What good is your fighting if our children perish in the dust?"

Sitting Bull raised his hand, but said nothing. Words were thin. The smoke above them was thicker, heavier. It burned their eyes, ate into their throats, and made every curse even louder.

At the edge of the camp, two teepees were burning. An accident, perhaps. Or a soldiers' raid in the night, quick, cowardly, without warning. No one knew for sure. The flames still licked, the smoke rose high as if trying to smother the stars. Children wept, women screamed, men stared into the embers, unable to extinguish the fire. Wood was too scarce to waste, and no one had the strength to build more.

Sitting Bull stepped in front of the burning tents. His eyes burned, and not just from the smoke. "Look," he said aloud. "This is what they want. They want us to suffocate ourselves in the smoke, to curse each other until nothing remains. They don't want any more warriors. They want dust and ashes."

A woman spat into the embers, her lips bloody from biting. "Then let us curse, Chief. But let us also strike. Let us strike back before the sky swallows us whole." Her voice was raw, full of rage and despair. Sitting Bull nodded slowly. "Yes. We will strike back. But not blindly. Not like fools. We will strike when the smoke clears."

Night crept in, heavy with the stench. The sky was black, but it shone intermittently, distantly, as if cannons were tearing apart other lives somewhere. Sitting Bull sat by the fire, pipe in hand, the voices of the cursing women still echoing in his head.*Smoking skies, cursing mothers,*he thought.*This is the music of our people now.*

He inhaled the smoke deeply and let it out slowly. It tasted bitter, like ash, like the end. But he kept smoking. A chief shouldn't cough when the sky was already coughing for everyone.

The smoke hung over the camp like a curse. It burned their eyes, scratched their throats, and settled over every face like a blanket of ash. No one could ignore it. The children coughed, screamed, and rolled around in their blankets while their mothers clutched them to their chests, gasping for air themselves. Sitting Bull saw it and thought:*The sky is smoking and we are suffocating like flies in a pan of embers.*

The women didn't stop cursing. It was no longer a quiet murmur. It was a storm. One stood there, her hands bloody from picking up charred beams, and screamed at her husband: "Your courage is dust, your arrow is blunt, and your belly is full of the white man's poison! What are you worth if your child perishes here in the smoke?" Her husband cast his eyes down, unable to speak. Not a warrior's word, not a pride.

Others joined in. "You hunt, yes—but are you hunting flesh or are you hunting death? You only bring us back corpses, no future!" "You talk of visions, of ghosts—I see only bones, dust, and fire!" "What good is a chief when our children are thinner than the twigs we gather for the fire?"

Sitting Bull stood there, heard everything, and his heart grew heavy. He could have shouted at them. He could have said, "Silence! You insult warriors!" But he knew every word would evaporate like water in hot ash. The mothers cursed because they were the last to speak. Men died in silence, children died silently. But the mothers screamed so that heaven wouldn't pretend it didn't hear.

He raised his hand. "Your cursing is strong," he said. "Stronger than many songs. Stronger than many warriors. Keep running if you must. But remember—it is the smoke that kills us, not ourselves." His voice was rough, brittle, but it echoed throughout the camp. Some women were silent, some weren't. One spat in the dust. "Then make the smoke disappear, Chief. Otherwise, we'll curse you too."

The men heard this and bowed their heads. Some clenched their fists, not against the women, but against themselves. They knew they were standing in the dirt, that they had nothing but old weapons and broken dreams. Sitting Bull saw their shoulders droop and thought:*If mothers are the last voices, then they are also the last drums. And drums don't just beat in time, they also beat with pain.*

In the evening, the sky turned red. The smoke crept deeper, turning the moon into a blur. The women gathered their children, no longer singing lullabies, but still cursing. Some words were so harsh that even the men twisted their faces. But no one stopped them. Curses were their weapons when spears and arrows were no longer an option.

Sitting Bull sat down in front of the embers. The smoke bit his face, and he coughed, but he didn't let it show. "Smoking skies, cursing mothers," he muttered, "and we're in the middle of it, like sparks, not knowing whether to become fire or ash."

The wind picked up, twisting the smoke into spirals, as if the heavens themselves were listening. And Sitting Bull knew: Before the sun returned, new curses would be heard. And perhaps new deaths, too.

The night was filled with smoke. It crept into the teepees, settled over faces, and made every breath difficult. Children cried, then coughed until they lost their voices. Women wiped their mouths, found blood, found dust. Some mothers began to pray, quietly, ancient words that sounded like broken bones. But others stopped praying. They cursed.

"Where are the spirits?" cried a woman, clutching her child, who was too weak to suckle. "Where are the ancestors you men always talk about? Don't any of them see us rotting here?" Her scream was so loud that even the dogs howled.

Another stood up, her eyes red with smoke and anger. "We've beaten drums, we've smoked incense, we've filled our pipes—and what do we get? Smoke in our throats, dust in our stomachs! Your gods are deaf, or they're laughing at us!"

Sitting Bull heard this, and something inside him tightened like a rope about to break. He knew the spirits weren't mute. He had seen, felt, and smelled their visions. But he also couldn't deny that they were silent at the moment. The smoke was louder than any response.

An old warrior wanted to protest. "Don't speak like that! The spirits hear, even if you insult them!" But the woman shouted him down: "Then let them answer, damn it! Let them feed a single child instead of feeding us dreams!" Her voice was raw, full of rage, full of despair.

The men remained silent. They knew they had no weapons against these voices. Arrows killed soldiers, spears pierced flesh—but there was no protection against the curses of mothers. Every curse was a blow to the heart.

Sitting Bull slowly stood up. The smoke burned his eyes, but he allowed it. He raised his hands, his fingers blackened with soot. "Yes," he said, "flee. Flee against the men, against the spirits, against me. Flee against the smoke, if it gives you strength. But don't forget: We're still alive. As long as we're alive, we have teeth. And as long as we have teeth, we can bite."

A few women remained silent. Others continued cursing. One spat in the dust and shouted, "Then bite, Chief! Otherwise you're just a barking dog." Sitting Bull nodded slowly. He took the curse not as an insult, but as a reminder. Dogs bark—but dogs also bit.

The night dragged on. The smoke grew thicker, heavier, as if rising directly from the earth. Men coughed blood, children slept with their mouths open, women sat awake, their eyes burning with rage. Sitting Bull smoked his pipe, the smoke mingling with the smoke of the sky, and he thought:*Perhaps curses are also prayers. Prayers that don't want to rise, but rather return to the dust.*

Shortly before dawn, he heard the drums. Faint, irregular, but there. It wasn't men beating them, but women. Mothers holding their children in their arms, yet still pounding the beat with their free hands. No song, just anger. Drums that sounded like curses, insulting the heavens.

Sitting Bull closed his eyes.*Smoking skies, cursing mothers,*he thought.*Maybe they are the only ones who can force heaven to listen.*

Morning crept slowly across the plain, but the light couldn't dispel the smoke. It hung thick and greasy, like an old blanket, over the camp. The sun was just a red blur, blurred, as if it had set itself on fire while drunk. Sitting Bull sat at the edge, legs crossed, pipe in hand. His eyes were black, not from sleep, but from the smoke that dried up every tear before it could fall.

The women hadn't become quieter. On the contrary. The smoke made them louder. A chorus of curses so raw that even the men bowed their heads.

"Enough of waiting!" one cried, pulling her son by the hand, who could barely walk. "Enough of visions and whistling! We need meat, we need water, we need revenge!"

Others chimed in. "You men always talk about honor—what good is honor if our children die in the dust?" "What good is a chief if he only tells us stories?" "We want to see blood. White blood. Soldiers' blood!"

The men flinched, but no one objected. They had fought, they had bled, but the women's curses were heavier than any rifle. Sitting Bull saw their faces: rage, hunger, pain. Mothers who had lost so much that they no longer knew fear. And he knew: when even the mothers demanded blood, then the time for restraint was over.

An old warrior stood up, thin as a branch, but his eyes burned. "Women's curses are like fire," he said. "They don't warm, they burn. If even mothers call death, then we will take it." He raised his knife, the blade blunt and scratched, but still glinting in the smoke. The men murmured in agreement, the women cursed louder.

Sitting Bull rose. His face was a mask, but his voice cut through the smoke like an arrow. "You want blood? You'll get blood. But not blind. We're not drunks running into knives. We're Lakota. We choose when and where we bite."

A murmur went through the crowd. Some nodded, others hissed. A woman spat in the dust and shouted, "Then choose quickly, Chief. Our children will die faster than you decide!"

Sitting Bull stepped closer to the fire, which flickered small and faintly between them. He stretched out his hands as if to grasp the smoke. "The sky is smoking," he said. "The mothers are cursing. These are signs. Signs that the war isn't being carried on by men alone. When the mothers are cursing, the war is already here."

The women fell silent for a moment. Only the children coughed. Sitting Bull looked at them all. "We'll strike," he said. "We'll drive the smoke back down their throats. We'll suffocate them on their own fire."

A cry rippled through the camp. Men pounded their chests with their fists, women screamed, wept, and laughed with anger. It wasn't a cheer, not a song. It was a curse that turned into a promise.

The sun rose higher, but it was now just a red ball behind the smoke. Sitting Bull turned away, looked at the plain, vast, empty, and dusty. "Smoking skies, cursing mothers," he muttered. "If even the mothers demand war, then the war can no longer be stopped."

And somewhere in the distance, barely audible, dogs barked. Like drums announcing the next bloodshed.

Morning was no longer a promise, only an obligation. People woke up because they needed to breathe, not because they wanted to live. The women had barely calmed down; their curses lay like stones on the men's shoulders. The mothers had taken up the drums, not to beat comfort, but to drum up anger. And anger is louder than any sermon, louder than any promise from merchants or politicians.

Sitting Bull stood in the center, his face hard as a chipped shield. His hands smelled of smoke and blood, his nails dusted. He ran the flat of his hand across his forehead, as if the scraping could wipe away the difficult decision. The women wouldn't let him. They pressed on, with eyes like knives, with voices like revolt. "Now!" they cried. "Now or never!" And the "never" hung heavy, like a drop of black ink.

He felt time running against him. The smoke had something sinister about it: it blinded tired people, but it sharpened the angry. Hunger made men sluggish and mothers dangerous. Mothers can kill with their eyes when words and weapons have failed. They weren't just women, they were judges, and their judgments were swift, infallible as thunderstorms.

A young warrior stepped forward, throbbing with energy, too hungry to show fear. "Chief," he said, "we strike. We set fire to their outposts, we take what they have. We give it back to them." His voice was a knife, but it trembled. It was the voice of those who had nothing left to lose. Sitting Bull looked at the boy: the youth of the people, on the verge of despair, ready to risk everything. He thought of the old laws, of codes of honor, of the roads you don't take when you're too proud. Now the old laws smelled of paper—useless if the children starve.

The women no longer just cried for vengeance—they planned, they counted, they calculated. The smoky skies had made maps of their curses. They knew the paths, the river courses, the wind directions that, if laid correctly, would mislead soldiers and set fire to outposts. No one cried, "Not like that!" No one whispered, "Too brutal." Brutality was already on the menu. They wanted fire,

yes—but not blind arson. "We need supplies, camps, water," said a woman standing beside an old hunter. "Not a slaughter that leaves our children even less to eat."

Sitting Bull listened and nodded because he understood. His mind was a tangle of old customs and sober necessity. If you struck the enemy in his logic, you bit deeper. If you let him stumble in his own ways, you proved the women right—you retrieved supplies without riding yourself to a doom. "We'll strike them where they think they're safe," he said aloud. "Not in their homes, not in their women's tents, but in the supply depots, in the outposts where they stack their consciences in cans and barrels."

This required lists, faces, and names. The elders murmured, the younger listened. Maps were scratched into the dust, lines drawn, paths marked. Men who had been sleeping in the sun yesterday now stood upright, like sawn wood. A plan gives people dignity, even the desperate, and dignity is a rare commodity in times when one must beg.

Preparations were swift, because speed is often the only power left to the underdog. Horses were checked—those that could still run, those that could run, had to run. Arrows were sharpened with a fury that carried more blade than wood. The women tied small packs, strengthened straps, stuffed bags with seeds, with salt, with what couldn't be burned. Things that would have once been ridiculed now became key items: a sack of corn, a leather bag of beans, a hard cheese that still smelled of makeshift flavor. These were things that could buy lives if pried from the enemy's fingers.

The children were hidden somewhere, not out of cowardice, but out of strategy. They were something to die for—not in stupid battles, but in deliberate actions. Sitting Bull, with a feeble hand, took a small knife that had belonged to a boy and stuck it in his belt. Not because he needed it, but as a sign. "We go," he said, "and we take back what was taken from us. Not to satisfy a thirst for revenge, but to live."

They sat down in groups. Men who could run faster, men who could shoot, men who could no longer think with rage, and women whose hands were as nimble as flames. It felt like a marriage of rage and despair. Everyone in the formation knew: if they failed, there was no turning back. No plan, no old trick, would bring back the children, who were already hungry. But if they succeeded, there would be supplies, perhaps a draft of water, perhaps a day when the drums no longer beat lament, but thanks.

They would race off, not all at once—that would be foolish—but like shadows emerging from the twilight. In small groups, like the gusts of wind sweeping across the prairie. Squeaking carts, a foothold, an officer, a camp guard; they would be surprised. Surprise is a hard weapon, not as shiny as tin, but deadly if wielded correctly.

When the riders came into view, you smelled more than just smoke. You smelled the cold metal, the men's fear, the alcohol on their breathholes. The guards were sluggish—for too long they had believed that a safe distance made them immune. They had been sold safety, and thus their senses had been pacified. A mistake. Because you can calm a man, but not his heart.

The first action was precise: an outpost, a storeroom, two shots into the masts, then silence. Men who were asleep opened their eyes, ran, but already the shadows were there—men with short knives, hands stealing things before the dogs could bark. The Lakota didn't take everything. They only took enough, the rations and the barrels, which no one would count until it was too late. They untied the horses, rudimentarily, quickly, and rode off with full pockets, like thieves with a license of necessity.

And outside, on the edge, as the first vanguards returned, Sitting Bull saw something that briefly tightened his throat: a woman returning to the camp before dawn, a sack of corn on her back, her face flushed with exertion, her eyes wild. She had been one of the swearers. But now she carried life. Children ran toward her, hands grabbed for kernels; it was a moment so raw that even the smoke seemed to subside for a second.

Sitting Bull stood there, dusting under his fingers, feeling neither triumph nor relief. Only the bitterness of a man who knows that victory today isn't eternal, that supplies may be lacking tomorrow if the soldiers notice the revenge. But he saw the children breathing louder, and that was enough of an answer for him. Cursing had brought action. Cursing had opened the way.

That night, as the women's drums slowed, as the curses faded into weary songs, and the smoke settled like a thin blanket, Sitting Bull stood before the fire again. He took his pipe, lit it, and breathed deeply. "Smoking skies," he murmured, "you were a judge. Cursing mothers, you were the judgment. We acted as one must act when one brings back life."

And the sky, it seemed, was still breathing. Not reconciled, but still, at least for a second. The children chewed corn, the women bound supplies, the men made plans for the next blow. The battle wasn't over yet. The smoke would rise

again, the mothers would curse again, and Sitting Bull knew: this was a new kind of war—not just guns against guns, but anger against strategy, cursing against planning. And sometimes, he thought, that's just what you need to show your teeth to a smoking sky.

The smoke didn't subside. It didn't drift away, it didn't creep away. It stayed. It hung over the tents like a damned punishment, creeping into the beds, into the blankets, into the bodies. Everything smelled of burnt wood, of grease, of ash. Even the water tasted of smoke, as if the rivers had devoured the fire and spat it out. Sitting Bull got up in the morning, coughing blackly, spitting dust and blood into the ground. His tongue tasted of iron, his lungs like a rusted pipe.

The children had grown thinner. You could almost see them through, small shadows with large eyes. They coughed, they scratched themselves, they slept in their mothers' arms, dreamless. Some never woke up at all. A dead child made no noise, only the mother, who held it as if it were still warm. Sitting Bull saw them. He wanted to go over, say something. But what? Words no longer had teeth. They were like arrows without tips—they flew, but they hurt no one.

The women cursed again. No longer just against the men, no longer just against the spirits. They cursed everything. The smoke, the wind, the sun, which rose every day as if nothing had happened. "Damned sun!" one cried. "You're laughing at us! Every morning you climb over the mountains, but you bring us nothing but dust!" She spat at the sky, and spitting was the only thing that still made her strong.

Sitting Bull heard the curses grow harsher. "The spirits are dead!" cried a woman whose husband had fallen in the last battle. "Dead! Or they're like the whites—deaf, cold, full of lies!" Others nodded, still others shouted at her to be silent. But she didn't remain silent. "I don't pray anymore! I don't pray to stones, nor to smoke, nor to wind. I don't pray to anyone. I spit in their faces!"

The smoke magnified the words. They seemed heavier, thicker, like stones falling from throats. Sitting Bull felt them in his chest, as if every curse were hurled at himself. He was a chief. For them, he was the interpreter of the spirits, the speaker between heaven and earth. When they cursed the spirits, they cursed him too.

An old man, barely able to walk, raised his voice. "Stop!" he croaked. "Stop insulting the spirits, or they'll leave us for good!" But a woman laughed in his face, a bitter, dry laugh. "Abandoned? We've been abandoned for a long time!

Don't you see the corpses? Don't you hear the coughing? What are you trying to tell us? That we should wait until they suffocate us in the night?"

Sitting Bull stepped forward. The smoke burned his eyes, his voice was harsh. "The spirits are not dead," he said. "They are here. They speak through the smoke, through the curses, through our survival. They are not gone. They are within us." He knew he sounded like a man beating a broken drum. But he had to speak. Otherwise, there would be only silence.

A woman approached him, her face covered in soot, her eyes wild. "Then tell them to take away the smoke. Tell them to bring back the meat. Tell them to let our children breathe!" She grabbed his arm, tightly, desperately. Sitting Bull looked at her, and for a moment he couldn't say anything. He only felt her fingers, trembling but stronger than arrows.

He placed his hand on hers. "I say it," he murmured. "Every day. Every night. But the spirits don't answer with words. They answer with signs. We must read them, just as we read smoke."

The woman laughed bitterly and let go of him. "Then you'll only read ashes, Chief."

In the evening, the women drummed again. Not in time, not in song. They beat hard, irregularly, like curses hammered into the dust. Sitting Bull sat silent, pipe in hand. He saw the smoke rising, saw the cursing mothers, and he thought:*Perhaps this is the new song of our people. Smoke and curses. A song no one wants to dance to, but everyone must hear.*

Night crept into the camp like a sick dog. The smoke was still there, thick, greasy, viscous, as if it had come not from the fire but from the bowels of the earth itself. Sitting Bull sat before the embers, which gave off barely any light, only warmth like a last breath. The mothers had cursed all day, and their voices still hung in the air as if the smoke had preserved them. No song, no prayer, just raw words, as hard as stones in the stomach.

A child died in the darkness. Quietly. No scream, no commotion. Just a final cough, then silence. The mother held it for a long time as if it were still alive, rocking it, not singing, not cursing. She simply stared into the darkness, her lips cracking and blood dripping from her biting them. In the morning, she would lay it in the dust, and the dust would swallow it, as it swallows everything. Sitting Bull saw her, wanted to go, but his legs were heavy. Words were worthless, actions impossible. He stayed seated.

The men crouched together, silent. They knew the women would rip their throats out if they did nothing. But they also knew that each new fight resulted in more deaths than it saved lives. They sat there like dogs who know they must bite, even if the bone has long since rotted.

The women were the only ones who still had voices. They no longer cursed only the men, not only the spirits. They cursed the sky itself. "You, damned sky!" one cried. "You give smoke and take air! You give dust and take water! You give us nothing but death!" She raised her fists, punching the air as if she could shut the sky itself up.

Others followed her. A chorus of curses rose, so loud that even the wind stopped. It no longer sounded like words. It was like thunder. Sitting Bull felt it in his chest, in his head, in his bones.*Cursing mothers,*he thought.*They are worse than cannons. For cannons kill the body, but curses devour the soul.*

He rose, slowly, heavily. The smoke burned his eyes, but he let them burn. "Hear me!" he cried. His voice cut through the choir, but not as powerfully as he had hoped. "Your cursing is powerful. Stronger than our weapons. But let's not just shout it into the air. Let's send the smoke to our enemies. Let's curse while we act."

Some women nodded, others spat at his feet. "Then act, Chief!" one cried. "Or we'll curse you into the dust!" Sitting Bull lowered his head. He knew they meant it. He was no longer just a chief. He was now a target.

He went back to the fire, sat down, and picked up his pipe. The smoke rose, mingling with the smoke from the heavens, and he thought:*Perhaps curses are the new language of spirits. Perhaps they only listen when we insult them.*

The sky remained black. No stars, no moon. Only smoke. Sitting Bull blew the smoke from his pipe into the darkness. "If you hear us," he murmured, "then know: We're still alive. We're still cursing. And as long as we're cursing, we're not dead."

The women didn't fall silent. They cursed until morning, when the sun rose pale and weary through the smoke, like an old man who no longer wanted to fight.

And Sitting Bull knew: The mothers had declared war. Not against him, not against the men, not even just against the soldiers. Against everything. Against the world itself.

Roar of the metal gods from the East

The roar came at first like a distant rumble, like thunder gathering in the belly of the earth. But it was not a storm, not a thunderstorm. It was the pounding of engines, the crash of cannons, the metallic laughter of the tin gods from the East. Sitting Bull heard it long before the others. His ear knew the sound—not a natural sound, not a song of the prairie. It was alien, artificial, a growl that smelled of iron and smoke.

The soldiers no longer came as men. They came as machines. Not built of steel, but guided by steel. Their uniforms gleamed in the sun, their buttons like small mirrors that reflected the light like knives. Rifles hung from their shoulders, cannons rolled behind them, pulled by horses that had no idea they were carrying death.

The Lakota camp was silent as the thunder grew louder. Children crawled into blankets, women cursed, men clenched their fists. "Tin gods," one muttered, "they bring their roar all the way here." Another spat in the dust. "They think their guns are their gods. They think the metal makes them immortal."

Sitting Bull stood up, his face hard. "They're not gods," he said. "They're just men barking behind iron bars. But their barking can kill."

And it did. Soon the first shots rang out. No target, just a message:*We are here. We are stronger. We can do it anytime.*The bullets pierced the ground, sending up plumes of dust as if they were laughing at the land itself. Children screamed, women ducked, men grabbed bows and old rifles that sounded like coughs over the roar of the cannons.

The tin gods had learned that fear was a weapon. Their roar wasn't just sound; it was a threat that crept into the bones. Sitting Bull felt it too, deep down, but he didn't let it show. "We won't run away," he said. "We aren't dust to be blown away. We are rocks. And rocks can withstand thunder, too."

But deep down, he knew: rocks break too. Not today, perhaps, not tomorrow. But someday.

The soldiers laughed. Their laughter was a second roar, hollow, metallic, accompanied by the clang of weapons. They sang songs, ugly, off-key songs that smelled of beer and orders. Sitting Bull didn't understand all the words, but he understood the meaning: They sang because they believed they were untouchable. They sang because their guns prayed for them.

The women cursed louder, screaming their rage to the heavens above the thunder. "Your gods are made of tin! Ours are made of blood!" One ripped her breast free, revealing her emaciated skin and screaming: "Look! This is what you leave us with! Skin and bones! But we're still alive, damned dogs!"

The soldiers responded with laughter and bullets. The roar of the tin gods swallowed the mothers' voices, swallowed the drums, swallowed every song. It was as if the machines had devoured the sky itself.

Sitting Bull saw it, heard it, smelled it. "Roar of the tin gods," he muttered, "and we're in the middle of it like ants on a fire." He raised his hand, and his men lined up. "We'll let them roar," he said. "But at some point, all roaring will die down. And then only knives and hands count."

But deep down, he knew that wasn't true. Not anymore.

The roar of the cannons was no longer just a threat – it became a bite. Iron balls flew as if the tin gods had decided to tear the sky itself to pieces. They crashed into the earth, hurling dust and blood, tearing holes in the ground, in teepees, in bodies. An old man was literally vaporized – one moment he was standing there, cursing the soldiers, the next he was nothing but a red mist, disappearing into the smoke.

The women screamed. No longer just curses, now they were screams from the gut, raw, animalistic. Children ran in panic, stumbled, and were pulled back by their mothers' hair to avoid being torn to pieces by a bullet. Dogs howled, horses reared, trampling their own shadows. The camp was a tumult of fear, blood, and smoke.

The men reached for their weapons. Bows, arrows, rusty rifles. They fired back, blindly, desperately, and yet sometimes hit their target. A soldier fell from his horse, the animal tumbled, trampled in the dust before lying still. Another soldier took an arrow in the leg, roared, fired back, and hit a boy standing next to Sitting Bull. The boy fell, his stomach open like a dissected animal. Sitting Bull grabbed him, but the boy's gaze was already gone. Only dust in his eyes.

The roar of the tin gods grew louder. Every shot vibrated through the ground, through the bodies. Sitting Bull felt it in his teeth, in his chest. It was as if the earth itself was rebelling, not for them, but against them. Every shot was a reminder that iron was harder than flesh, that noise was deadlier than any prayer.

He shouted to his men: "Hold the lines! Don't fire blindly, shoot when you can!" But he knew it was a joke. They had no lines, no protection. Only smoke, dust, and the will not to be beaten to death like dogs in the dust.

The soldiers moved closer, in formation, like a single machine. No chaos, no confusion. Every step sounded like a hammer blow, every shot like a clap of thunder. Sitting Bull saw their faces: blank, disciplined, unwavering. Men who had believed themselves to be gods, and who moved like them.

"Roar of the tin gods," he muttered as he drew an arrow. "But we're still human. Humans can scream, curse, bite." He released the arrow. It struck a soldier in the neck. Blood spurted, the man fell, gasping, kicking wildly before falling still. A small victory, but it felt like kicking a mountain.

Beside him, a warrior fell, his chest ripped open by a bullet. A woman leaped onto the corpse, snatched the knife from his hand, and rushed forward, screaming like a fury. She stabbed the first soldier she reached, repeatedly, until she herself was hit by a bullet. Her body fell, but her scream hung in the smoke.

Sitting Bull saw it, and something inside him broke—or was reborn. "Mothers are warriors," he thought. "The tin gods may roar, but they don't know the fury of mothers."

The sky shook, the dust devoured everything, and Sitting Bull knew: This was only the beginning.

The thunder didn't stop. It was no longer a battle, it was a grinding machine. The tin gods roared, and with every shot, a piece of the world vanished. Earth, tent, horse, man—everything became the same, everything became dust, flesh, and splinters. Sitting Bull stood in the midst of the storm, his pipe long forgotten, his face black with smoke, his throat full of iron.

The men fought, but every shot from their old rifles was like a cough against the roar. They fired, sometimes hitting, but their hits were drops in the ocean. The soldiers' cannons spat out whole salvos. A tepee blew apart like paper, the shreds swirling through the air like feathers, only they were burning. A woman inside—gone. Just a scream, then nothing.

The children screamed. But it was no longer the cry of children. It was the cry of beings who understood that the end was near. The women continued to curse, their voices cutting through the air like spears. "Damned gods!" they

screamed. "Damned men! Damned heavens!" Their curses were louder than the drums, but quieter than the cannons. Yet they kept the men standing. Every curse was a blow to the warriors' backs, forcing them to stand up once more, to shoot once more, to run once more.

Sitting Bull shot another arrow. He hit nothing. The smoke was too thick, the soldiers too far away. He felt the futility like a stone in his chest. But he couldn't stop. He had to shoot, like he breathes, even though the air had long since turned to ash.

A horse raced through the camp in panic, its eyes white, its mane burning. It trampled over bodies, over tents, over children. Men tried to grab it and were trampled down. Finally, it crashed into a cannonball and fell, torn to pieces, a lump of flesh. Sitting Bull saw it and thought:*Even the horses are just victims.*

The soldiers continued to advance. Their faces were dusty and sweaty, but they smiled. Not out of joy. Out of conviction. They believed in their tin gods. Every shot was a prayer to them, every bullet an amen. They didn't see the Lakota as people. They saw them as targets, as obstacles, as smoke figures that had to be blown away.

An old man fell next to Sitting Bull, his chest ripped open. He grabbed Sitting Bull's leg and tried to say something else, but blood poured from his mouth and the words drowned. Sitting Bull placed his hand on his forehead, then let him sink into the dust. No time for last words. Not here, not now.

The women had started throwing stones themselves. They hurled them at the soldiers, at the horses, at the sky. Some hit, some missed. One woman hit a soldier on the helmet, he staggered, another pulled him back. It was nothing, but it was all they could do.

Sitting Bull felt the ground vibrate beneath his feet, as if the tin gods themselves were crawling out of the earth. He saw the faces of his men: dusty, bloody, desperate. But they fought. Not to win. Just to avoid dying in silence.

"Roar of the tin gods," muttered Sitting Bull as he drew his knife. "They roar, but we shout back." He ran forward, into the smoke, the thunder, the roar. He knew it was madness. But madness was the only thing they had left.

And in that moment, amidst the noise, he heard something else. Not a gunshot, not a curse, not a scream. It was a soft singing. Women's voices, somewhere

between a curse and a prayer. They sang, raw, off-key, desperate. But they sang.

Sitting Bull heard it, and his heart beat faster.

The singing wasn't a beautiful song. It wasn't a song of the stars, not a song of the hunt, not a song of the ancestors. It was a broken song, rough, desperate, crooked like a rusty knife. Women sang while holding their children in their arms, while the smoke choked their throats, while the roar of the tin gods rolled over them. They sang and cursed at the same time—words that blended together, words that no one could write down. It was a song that sounded like a curse, and a curse that was like a prayer.

Sitting Bull heard it. Between every boom, every thunder, every scream, it reached him. A thin thread that didn't break, no matter how loudly the cannons roared. It made him angry and sad at the same time. Angry because they had to sing to keep the sky awake. Sad because even the sky remained deaf.

The soldiers continued to advance. They were like a masonry of iron, walking on feet. Bullets flew, smoke exploded, the air was a living hell. Men fell, women screamed, children ran, dogs howled. Everything was noise. Only the women's cursing song cut through the cacophony like a thin knife.

A warrior jumped up and ran straight into the line of soldiers. He screamed, raised his knife, and plunged it into a soldier's neck. The man fell, blood spurted, and the formation shook for a moment. Then a bullet tore into the warrior, and he collapsed, his body halfway over the soldier he had killed. Two dead men, wedged together, dust in their mouths, blood on the ground.

Sitting Bull drew an arrow, released, and struck a soldier in the stomach. The man fell, screamed, trampled by his own horses. But there were too many of them. For every one who fell, two more came. They weren't men, they were cogs in a machine. A machine that roared, that ate, that was never satisfied.

The women saw it, and their chant grew louder. "Damned gods! Damned men! Damned land!" They shouted it, they sang it, they hammered it into the sky. Some grabbed stones, sticks, anything they had, and threw it in the direction of the tin gods. One of the stones hit a soldier in the head; he fell, bleeding, and was picked up by another. The cursing song had found a weapon.

Sitting Bull stood in the dust, his arrows almost spent, his knife red, his breathing heavy. He saw the song grow. It wasn't a song for the spirits, it was a

song against death. It was raw, false, full of anger. But it was stronger than anything they'd had in the last few weeks.

"Listen!" he yelled to his men. "Listen to the women singing! That's our drumming! That's our thunder! Let the brass gods roar, we shout louder!"

A few men raised their voices, shouting along. Others beat their chests, howling into the smoke. It wasn't an orderly song. It was chaos, cursing and singing, blood and dust. But it was something that didn't quite drown out the thunder of the cannons.

The soldiers laughed. They heard the song and laughed as if they were witnessing a comedy. One shouted, "They're singing themselves to death! Can you hear them? They sound like dogs!" Bullets flew, dust rose, smoke bit. But the soldiers' laughter was thin, hollow. They had power, but they had no song.

Sitting Bull thought:*The metal gods roar, but they have no soul. We only have curses. But curses are more than emptiness.*

He reached for the last arrow in his quiver, raised it, drew it, and again heard the mothers' voices in the smoke. It sounded like a heartbeat, irregular but alive. He let go. The arrow flew.

And at that moment the roar fell silent for a moment.

The roar of the tin gods was a never-ending torrent. But any torrent can be dammed if one has the courage to jump into it. Sitting Bull sensed that the men were on the edge, between fear and madness. The women screamed their curses, sang their false chants, hammered them into the smoke. It was like a whip tearing the warriors' skin open. No choice left. Only attack or dust.

A young warrior, barely older than a child, leaped forward. He had no rifle, only a knife. He ran as if he had fire in his veins and threw himself into the ranks of soldiers. They saw him coming, they laughed, they aimed their rifles. But he was fast, faster than their metal. He stabbed, tearing open the throat of one, the cheek of another. Then a bullet ripped through his back, and he collapsed—but he took two of them with him into the dust.

His death was the spark. Others jumped up, men who no longer had arrows, men with stones, with clubs, with their bare hands. They ran into the roar, into the smokescreen, into the formation of the tin gods. And for a moment, order tipped.

The soldiers stumbled. One screamed as a stone broke his nose, another fell as a knife ripped open his stomach. Horses neighed, reared, and tore riders from their saddles. The roar of the cannons faltered—not because the metal gods showed mercy, but because they were surprised.

Sitting Bull rushed forward, knife in hand. He saw the soldiers' eyes, cold and empty, and he stabbed. Not with anger, not with lust, but with the clarity of a man who knew that every stab was an extra breath for his people. Blood splashed in his face, he tasted iron, he smelled fear.

The women screamed, sang, and cursed louder than ever. They didn't run. They threw stones, they yanked on rifles, and they pounded with their fists as if their hands were hammers. One woman jumped on a soldier, bit his face, and tore skin with her teeth. He screamed, struck her down, but she died laughing, blood in her mouth.

The roar continued. Cannons fell silent because chaos reigned in the ranks. Men fell, horses trampled, blood flowed. For a moment, it was quiet—not really quiet, but different. No thunder, only screams, only curses, only the shrieks of the dying.

Sitting Bull stood panting, his knife dripping. He saw a soldier trying to reload a cannon. He ran, jumped, pushed him away, and kicked the fuse into the dust. The shot didn't fire. The thunder died.

His heart raced. For a brief moment, it was as if they had smothered the roar of the metal gods. As if the heavens had opened to swallow the noise. Men breathed a sigh of relief, women screamed in triumph, children crawled out of the blankets. It was a moment, raw and wrong, but it felt like victory.

But Sitting Bull knew: It wasn't a victory. It was just a hole in the thunder, a lull in the roar. The tin gods would return, louder, hungrier, more merciless. But he also knew: They could bleed. They could stumble. They could remain silent.

He raised the knife and screamed: "Do you hear?! They are silent! Even their gods can be silent!" A chorus of voices answered: curses, chants, screams. It wasn't a hymn, it was chaos. But it was loud enough that the heavens must have heard it.

The roar of the metal gods returned. But for a moment they were silent. And that moment was like a heartbeat in the darkness.

The silence of the metal gods didn't last long. A breath, maybe two. Then the machine awoke again. The thunder returned, stronger, louder, as if to erase the brief shame. Bullets tore through the smoke, cannons roared again, horses fell, men exploded. The sky vibrated, the ground shook, and the song of the mothers was swallowed up.

Sitting Bull was still standing next to the silenced cannon. His knife was red, his hands black with soot. He saw a soldier aiming at him. He ducked, the bullet tore a lock of his hair, and pierced the body of a warrior behind him. Dust and blood spurted. Sitting Bull rolled to the side, jumped up, and stabbed another in the stomach. But he knew: there were too many of them. Every gesture was a drop against a sea of iron.

The Lakota fought like trapped wolves. They bit, they scratched, they threw stones, they shot when they could. But the soldiers closed ranks, pushing them back, step by step, like a wall of metal. The roar of the tin gods was no longer thunder—it was a song, monotonous, deadly, mechanical. Every shot a beat, every explosion a refrain.

Women screamed, children screamed, men screamed. Everything was drowned out by the roar. A girl ran, stumbled, and fell. Her mother rushed to her, picked her up, and at that moment a bullet devoured them both. Flesh, dust, blood. Sitting Bull saw it, and his heart sank.*This is no longer a war,* he thought.*This is a battle.*

Some men fled. Not out of cowardice—out of the instinct to survive. They dragged women and children with them, running into the dust, into the smoke, anywhere but away from the tin gods. Sitting Bull saw them, and he didn't stop them. Everyone who survived was a victory, even if they weren't heroic. Heroes died. Survivors told their stories.

The soldiers laughed again. Their laughter was the worst. It wasn't human. It was the laughter of men who believed the world belonged to them. One sang a song, loudly, off-key, amidst the roar. A drinking song, while blood spurted. Others joined in. The roar of the tin gods had found a chorus.

Sitting Bull shouted, his voice raw and broken: "Stand! Stand as long as you breathe!" But his men barely heard him. They heard only the thunder, the whistle of bullets, the splintering of bones.

A woman jumped onto a cannon, trying to grab the fuse with her hands. She burned, screamed, and still tugged at it until a bullet struck her down. Her body

fell over the cannon, and for a moment it seemed as if her weight would drown out the roar. But only for a moment.

Sitting Bull fought on, every breath a cough, every blow a twitch. He knew they were losing. But he also knew that every death they handed to the tin gods was a blow to their faith. Because even gods, even those made of tin, didn't like to bleed.

The sun hung pale in the smoke, barely visible. The sky was gray, the earth red, and the roar consumed everything in between. Sitting Bull raised his knife, his hand trembling, his breath rattling. "We are not ants," he whispered. "We are human beings. And human beings die loudly."

He plunged back into the smoke.

The roar was now more than just noise. It was a heaven of its own, a god of its own, that had descended upon the camp. Every shot was a flash, every explosion thunder, and the ground was the drum upon which everything was smashed. Sitting Bull stood in the middle of it, his face covered in soot, his hands covered in blood, his chest covered in dust. He no longer heard with his ears, but with his bones. The roar vibrated within him, as if he himself had become part of the machine.

Men died. Women died. Children died. The Lakota ranks broke, but they broke loudly. No one fell still. Everyone screamed, everyone cursed, everyone sang until the dust swallowed them. It was not a peaceful death, not an honorable one. It was a chaotic, dirty death, full of anger and spit. Exactly what the tin gods didn't understand.

A soldier grabbed a woman and pulled her hair. She hit him in the face, biting a piece of skin from his cheek. He yelled, shot, and she fell. But she fell with the taste of his blood in her mouth. Sitting Bull saw it and nodded.*This is our prayer,*he thought.*Not quiet, not clean. Blood in the mouth, until the very end.*

The cannons continued to thunder. But suddenly, amidst the chaos, an explosion rang out in the ranks of the soldiers themselves. A barrel of gunpowder, lit by a desperate warrior, had exploded. Bodies flew, horses screeched, men bellowed. For a brief moment, the roar of the metal gods sounded like a cough. The machine sputtered.

The Lakota screamed. A chorus of voices, raw, angry, triumphant. They threw themselves forward, knives, stones, sticks, bare hands. They attacked like

wolves biting fire. Men fell, women stabbed, children threw stones. It was a wild dance in the dust, not a victory, but proof that they would not sink silently into the dust.

Sitting Bull was in the thick of it. He rammed his knife into a soldier, felt his ribs break, his flesh give way. The man fell, his rifle cracked, the bullet whistled just past Sitting Bull's ear. A second soldier slammed the butt of his rifle, and Sitting Bull fell to the ground, dust in his teeth. But he rolled, jumped up again, and stabbed the man in the side. Blood spurted, the soldier staggered, and fell.

And then – silence. Not real silence, but a pause. The roar stopped for a few seconds as the soldiers regrouped, because the smoke was too thick, because they needed to sort themselves out. It was like the earth taking a breath before exploding again.

The Lakota took advantage. They gasped for air, they spat blood, they screamed their curses louder. "We're still alive!" a woman cried. "We're alive, you dogs!" Men beat their chests, children howled, dogs barked. It was a chorus of survival, dirty, fragile, but alive.

Sitting Bull raised the knife, dripping, heavy. He saw the smoke, he saw the soldiers, he saw the women. And he thought:*The roar of the metal gods may be loud. But it's only iron. We are flesh. Flesh screams longer.*

Then the thunder returned. Louder, harder, deadlier. But Sitting Bull stood, his face black, his eyes red, his heart pounding. "We will not be silent!" he roared. "We will not die quietly!"

And so the day ended: with roars from both sides, with blood in the dust, with screams in the smoke. The tin gods roared. But the Lakota cursed louder.

Men without souls, guns without names

They came from the East, not as men, but as shadows with guns. Sitting Bull called them men without souls. Their faces were empty, their eyes like two glass beads in dead skulls. They had no voices, only orders. No songs, only marching steps. No dreams, only their fingers on the trigger.

The worst thing wasn't their cannons, not their thunder, not their smoke. The worst thing was the cold in their faces. When they shot a warrior, their eyes remained as still as water. When they trampled a woman, their hands were as steady as if they were holding a glass of whiskey. They had no soul. Or if they did, they had long since sold it—to their generals, to their banners, to their tin gods.

The rifles had more names than their owners. Springfield, Henry, Winchester—each metal barrel was its own legend, its own god, its own death. The men who carried them were interchangeable. No one remembered their faces. Only the sound of them reloading.

Sitting Bull saw them. He stood at the edge of the plain, the camp behind him, the dust before him. A line of uniforms moved slowly across the land like a black knife. The sun glittered on the rifle barrels, as if a thousand eyes were blinking. But they weren't eyes; they were mouths, hungry for flesh.

"Men without souls," he murmured. "Guns without names." He knew the worst thing about them wasn't their weapons. It was that they believed. They believed in their rights, in their country, in their flags. A faith without a heart, but with bullets. And bullets prayed faster than words.

The women in the camp cursed when they saw the line. "They're coming like shadows!" one cried. "Shadows with iron!" The men reached for their weapons, but they knew their bows were mere snarling dogs compared to the roar of the rifles. Nevertheless, they raised them. Because pride doesn't stop bullets, but at least it keeps your back straight.

A child asked, "Do these men have names?" Sitting Bull knelt down and looked into the boy's eyes. "No," he said. "They have no names. Only their guns. And they speak louder than they do."

The line drew closer. Lockstep, drums, commands. Every step was a nail in the ground. Every shot that was about to come was a nail in their bodies. Sitting Bull breathed deeply, his whistle cold in his hand. He knew what was coming.

“Men without souls,” he whispered, “we will write your names in blood if you leave us none.”

The sun slowly set, and the rifles were aimed like a wall of teeth. The click of the locks sounded like the laughter of dead gods.

And then they started shooting.

The first firing wasn't an attack. It was an overture. A beat of iron that cut through the sky. Bullets flew, whistled, and tore holes in the dust, in the teepees, in the bodies that stood there like shadows. The soulless men didn't shoot because they had to. They shot because they could.

Each bullet had no story. No name, no song. Only a target. When it entered a body, it made no sound, only a dull pop, like throwing a sack of meat onto the ground. One warrior collapsed, his chest open like a dismembered animal. Another fell, his head shattering, his name vanishing in the smoke.

The rifles spoke louder than the men. There were no faces, no screams, only the steady crack, the click of the locks, the clang of the cartridge cases. A symphony of the nameless. Sitting Bull saw it and felt how each shot consumed not only bodies but also souls.

The women screamed back, shouting their curses into the dust. "You are not men!" one yelled. "You are shadows! Shadows with iron!" She threw a stone, hitting a soldier on the helmet. He staggered, got up, laughed, and shot back. The woman fell, the child in her arms with her. Two bodies in the dust, one small, one large. Both silent.

The Lakota men shot back, their arrows flying, their old rifles cracking. They hit home. One soldier fell with an arrow in his throat, another gasped with a hole in his chest. But for every one who fell, ten others stood. Men without souls, who didn't even pause when one of their own lay in the dust. They trampled him as if he were a stone.

Sitting Bull drew his bow and released an arrow. It hit. A soldier fell. But what was that worth? A drop of blood in a river of iron. He saw the faces of his men—tired, angry, desperate. Yet they stood. Because you don't kneel before men without souls. You die, but you die standing.

The gunfire thickened the air. Every breath tasted of gunpowder, iron, and blood. Children coughed, women screamed, men gasped. The earth itself seemed to tremble.

An old man fell next to Sitting Bull, his face shattered by the butt of the rifle. His last breath was not a prayer, not a song, but a curse. "Damned soulless creatures." Then he was silent.

Sitting Bull clenched his fists. "They have guns," he muttered, "but we have voices. Let them hear that we're alive." He roared, loud, raw, ugly. His men joined in, women too. A chorus of screams, curses, snatches of song. Not a pretty sound. But loud enough that even the nameless guns seemed briefly smaller.

The soulless men continued shooting. But Sitting Bull knew: as long as voices screamed, they weren't just shadows.

The dust danced like a demon across the plain. It rose with every impact, with every fall, with every horse that crashed down. One could barely see, only hear: the monotonous crack of rifles, the click of locks, the roar of officers. It was no longer a battle; it was a massacre to the beat of a machine.

The soulless men moved like cogs. One loaded, one fired, one stepped forward. No hesitation, no trembling, no scream. They spat lead as if they were vomiting up the sky itself. The bullets flew, and where they struck, there was no turning back. Every hit a hole, every hole an end.

Sitting Bull ran through the dust, ducked, jumped, and fired his bow. It hit a soldier in the shoulder. The man barely flinched, turned his head, and fired back. The bullet bit into the ground next to Sitting Bull, dust rose, and blood from another soldier splattered on him.

A warrior fell beside him, his chest riddled with holes. He gasped, coughed blood, and grabbed at Sitting Bull's leg. "They are not men," he whispered, "they are shadows." Then he died, his eyes open, staring up at the dust-filled sky.

The women screamed, their voices burning like fire. "Damned soulless creatures! Damned dogs!" They threw stones, they threw wood, they threw anything they could grab. One hit a soldier in the chin, he stumbled, fell, another kicked him aside as if he were dirt.

The children no longer screamed. They coughed, crawled, whimpered. Some lay still. Sitting Bull saw a mother holding her child in her arms, blood in her mouth, dust in her eyes. She rocked the child, singing softly, out of tune, raw. A melody that sounded as if it insulted heaven.

The rifles continued to fire, in rhythm, evenly, coldly. Every shot was a step, every step another nail in the Lakota's heart. Sitting Bull heard the rattle like a song without a soul, a song that only kills.

He shouted: "They are men without souls! But we are flesh with anger! Let them taste that we can still bleed!" His voice was raw, brittle, but it penetrated the dust. A few men heard, jumped to their feet, and rushed forward. Knives, arrows, clubs. They struck the rifles, and the dust turned red.

A boy, barely twelve, ran toward the soldiers with a stone. He threw it, hitting one in the face. The man screamed, blood spurted. The boy laughed before a bullet struck him down. His body fell like a bundle of grass.

Sitting Bull saw it, and he felt something inside him break – and grow stronger.*Guns without names,*he thought.*But every one of us who dies has a name. And they will hear it.*

He raised his knife, screamed at the sky, screamed at the soldiers, screamed at the guns. It wasn't a word, not a sentence. Just a scream. But it was louder than anything the soulless men had ever uttered.

The field was no longer a field. It was a maw that devoured everything—dust, blood, bones, screams. Sitting Bull stood in the middle of it, his face black, his throat raw, his arm heavy from beating. He heard the rattle of the rifles like the breathing of a monster. Steady, incessant, heartless. Men without souls, rifles without names—that's not what they called themselves, but that's what they were.

But there was a crack in the chaos. Sitting Bull saw it. One soldier had used up his bullets; he reached back, searching his pocket. His hands trembled. Another fell, an arrow sticking out of his neck, gasping, grasping for air like a fish on land. Blood spurted, red, warm, human. Yes—human.

“They’re bleeding,” muttered Sitting Bull. “They’re bleeding like we are.”

He charged forward, knife in hand. A soldier came toward him, rifle at the ready. Sitting Bull dove, felt the bullet whistle, smelled the gunpowder. He was already there, ramming the blade into the man's stomach. Warm flesh, resistance, then it gave way. The soldier gasped, his eyes wide, full of panic. No God, no tin. Just a man who realized he was going to die. Sitting Bull twisted the knife, pulled it out, and let him fall into the dust.

The Lakota saw it, and something went through their ranks. A spark. A breath. Proof. Men without souls were only men as long as they were kept in their ranks. If they were torn from the ranks, if they were forced to bleed, then they were nothing more than flesh.

The women screamed louder. "They're bleeding! They're bleeding!" Their voices cut through the dust, becoming a song, raw, false, but full of fire. Men leaped to their feet, knives, arrows, sticks. They pounced on the soldiers, not as an army, but like wolves. From the side, from behind, from below.

One soldier fell, his face shattered by a rock. Another was attacked by two women; they scratched, bit, and tore his rifle from his hands. He screamed, not in rage, but in fear. He screamed like a human being.

Sitting Bull saw it. "They're screaming!" he roared. "They're not gods! They're not shadows! They're only men! Men can die!" His voice echoed through the dust, above the rattle of rifles.

The Lakota threw themselves into the attack even more wildly. Every blow, every scream, every knife was proof that even men without souls had blood. The rifles continued to fire, coldly, mechanically. But between the shots, human screams could now be heard. Screams of soldiers, screams filled with pain.

A boy, barely more than thirteen, jumped on a soldier's back, bit his ear, and tore out flesh. The soldier screamed, dropped his rifle, staggered, and was shot by an arrow. The boy laughed, blood in his mouth, before a bullet struck him down. But his laughter fell to the dust.

Sitting Bull felt his heart racing.*Men without souls?*he thought.*No. Men with fear. Men with blood. Men who scream when they die.*

And in that moment, he knew: This was the only way. Not to destroy the guns. Not to break the ranks. But to force them to be human again. Humans who bleed. Humans who are afraid. Humans who die like everyone else.

The guns rattled on, but the song of the soulless was no longer unbroken. Screams, curses, and blood mingled. It was no longer the song of a machine. It was the song of a massacre.

And Sitting Bull swore:*As long as we breathe, we will force them to remain human.*

The dust tasted of iron. Blood, gunpowder, burned skin—everything lay in his mouth like a second tongue. Sitting Bull wiped his face with his forearm, but the red and black remained. He felt his heartbeat in his throat, as if it were about to burst out, he heard the rattle of the rifles like a drum that never stopped. Men without souls. But the longer the battle lasted, the more he saw something that frightened him: the Lakota, too, were beginning to lose their souls.

A warrior beside him fell upon a soldier already lying on the ground, wounded, gasping for breath. Instead of stabbing him and moving on, the warrior remained over him, stabbing again and again, until the soldier's face was nothing but mush. The knife slammed into the flesh like a hammer on soft wood. The warrior's roar was raw, desperate—and empty. Sitting Bull watched and thought:*We'll become like them. Men without souls. Only our guns are knives.*

A woman screamed, ripped a soldier's rifle from his hands, and slammed the butt into his face until his skull cracked like a shell. She laughed as she did so, a laugh that made Sitting Bull shiver. It wasn't the laughter of victory. It was the laughter of someone who had lost everything. A laughter that was no longer of this world.

Children crawled in the dust, collecting cartridge cases like toys. Some threw them in the soldiers' faces, screaming as if they were arrows. Sitting Bull saw it and felt the bitterness.*Children without childhood,*he thought.*They learn war before they can walk. Soon they'll have no souls left.*

The soulless men continued to fire, steady, cold. But something began to flicker in their faces. Not soul—fear. When a knife broke, when a stone struck, when a warrior screamed, Sitting Bull briefly saw the humanity in their eyes. They weren't unbreakable. But it took madness to make them do that.

The Lakota indulged this madness. They bit, they stung, they scratched. One leaped at a rider's neck, ripped him from his horse, and both fell. The warrior repeatedly rammed the soldier's head into the ground until he stopped struggling. Then he jumped up and roared, his face covered in blood, his eyes blank.

Sitting Bull saw all this, and his heart grew heavy. "We're losing ourselves," he murmured. "We're becoming like them." But what was the choice? Die with a soul? Or live without?

He raised the knife, felt the weight, the warmth of the blood. A soldier approached him, rifle raised. Sitting Bull leaped, thrust, and tore the blade through flesh and bone. The soldier fell, his mouth wide open, his eyes empty. Sitting Bull stood over him, breathing heavily.*I don't have a soul anymore either,* he thought.*Just a knife.*

But then he heard the women again. Their curses, their screams, their voices. They were raw, they were brutal, but they were voices. Not machines. Not cold drums. Human voices. And he knew: all was not lost. They still had words. They still had songs, even if they sounded like curses.

He screamed into the dust: "We are not men without souls! We are human beings! We bleed, we scream, we curse! But we are not empty!" His voice broke, but it echoed through the smoke.

For a moment, it was quieter. Not quiet, but less mechanical. More chaos, more humanity. Sitting Bull knew: If they wanted to keep their souls, they had to hold on to them. Even in the dust. Even in the blood.

But deep down he asked himself:*How long until we are all empty?*

The dust was now more blood than earth. Every kick, every horse, every rifle made the plain redder. Sitting Bull stood with his knife in his hand, his breath rattling as if he had coal dust in his lungs. He looked across the field and no longer saw a clear boundary between Lakota and soldiers. Only shadows fighting, only bodies falling. Only rifles speaking, and knives answering.

The soulless men were still a machine, but their machine had developed cracks. A soldier stumbled, dropped his rifle, and frantically grabbed a dagger. His face was suddenly filled with fear, human, vulnerable. He screamed as an arrow struck him. He screamed like any other man, and screaming made him real again.

But at the same time, Sitting Bull saw his own men transforming into machines. A warrior, his face completely black with soot, ran into the line of soldiers, not shouting, not thinking. He simply stabbed. Once, twice, ten times. His movements were smooth, cold, mechanical. Not a human being, just a cog in the blood.

"We're disappearing," thought Sitting Bull. "Our souls are becoming dust. They're becoming smoke."

The rifles rattled. Still. Incessantly. The steady clicking and banging was like a heartbeat without a heart. Sitting Bull heard it louder than the screams. He thought:*This is what it sounds like when the earth itself becomes soulless.*

A woman ran past him, her hair wild, her face covered in soot. She had a stick in her hand, beating a soldier, again and again, until he fell. She continued kicking, even when he had fallen silent. She didn't scream, she didn't curse. She was silent. And that frightened Sitting Bull. Killing silently, without a voice, without anger—that was what the men without a soul did.

A child crawled in the dust and found a rifle, half-loaded and heavy. He tried to lift it, but he could barely do it. But he pulled the trigger, and a bullet flew. It hit no one. But the child laughed. A cold, thin laugh. Sitting Bull saw it and thought:*This is the beginning. Our children, too, are learning the song of the nameless.*

The sun hung like a bloody ball above the smoke. Everything below was chaos. Men fell, soldiers screamed, women bit, children laughed. It was no longer war, no longer resistance. It was a fusion of man and machine, of blood and metal.

Sitting Bull closed his eyes for a moment. He wanted to block out the rattling, wanted to hear the voices. But the voices grew fainter. The curses, the screams, the songs—they were drowned out by the click of the rifles.

He opened his eyes, stabbed, cut, screamed. His voice was rough, raw, full of blood. "We are human!" he roared as he rammed the knife into a soldier's side. "We are not machines!" But his words were drowned out by the thunder.

The sky was gray, the dust red, the voices faint. And Sitting Bull knew: If things continued like this, no one would have a soul left. Neither the men in the tin nor the men in the dust.

Night crept slowly over the battlefield, but it brought no rest. The rattling of rifles had subsided, not because the soulless men were tired, but because the dust and blood had spoken enough. The plain was covered with bodies, horses, and debris. There was no longer ground; it was a carpet of flesh.

Sitting Bull stood in the middle of it, the knife in his hand, blunt, sticky, heavy. His eyes burned, his throat dry as bone. He heard the silence after the thunder—and the silence was worse. For the silence spoke of what remained: half-bodies, open mouths, eyes staring into the sky, which looked nothing back.

The soulless men still stood, in rows, in formations. They breathed, but it didn't sound like breathing. It sounded like the wheezing of a machine, taking a brief pause before starting again. Their rifles hung heavy, but they still gleamed in the last light. No dust could completely swallow the metal.

A soldier laughed. A thin, tired laugh that cut through the silence. Another spat into the blood, kicked a dead warrior aside. They didn't speak. They had no words, no stories. Only orders and pauses. Men without souls. Sitting Bull saw them and knew: they would sleep, they would eat, and tomorrow they would shoot again. They were cogs that kept turning, no matter how much blood dripped.

The Lakota who were still alive huddled together. Women held children, men held knives that no longer meant anything. Their voices were hoarse, their curses brittle. Some sang, softly, out of tune, desperately. Others were silent. Sitting Bull heard the silence and knew it was more dangerous than any bullet. Silence meant surrender. Silence meant the soul slowly fading away.

He stepped forward, raising the knife, even though it no longer cut anything. "We're still alive," he said, his voice harsh, barely above a whisper. "We're still breathing. We have names. They have guns, but we have names."

A boy raised his head, his eyes empty, his face covered in dust. "Names?" he asked. Sitting Bull nodded. "Yes. Each of us has a name. The rifles don't. They speak, but they are forgotten. We are not."

The soulless men stood at the edge, silent, with their rifles. They were shadows against the setting sun, faceless outlines. Sitting Bull looked at them and knew: Perhaps they had won, today, tomorrow, the day after tomorrow. But they would never sing. They would never curse like the Lakota, never laugh with blood in their mouths, never have names that bore the earth.

"We will not die nameless," he murmured. "This is our victory."

Night fell, and the rattle of the rifles fell silent. But the echo remained in the bones. Men without souls, rifles without names.

And Sitting Bull swore:*As long as I stand, my name will be louder than any gun.*

Flies dance on dead buffalo

The stench came first. A sweet, putrid breath of the earth that wafted across the prairie as if someone had caused the sky itself to rot. Sitting Bull rode slowly, his horse shy, nostrils flaring. Before them lay the mass grave of the buffalo. Not a grave, no—a battlefield that had never been a battle. Dead bodies as far as the eye could see. Horns, furs, open mouths. The sun beat down on them, and the flies danced.

It wasn't a dance of joy, not a dance of spirits. It was a dance of devouring. Millions of small, black bodies plunging into the wounds, devouring the eye sockets, the tongues, the soft flesh. They hummed like an endless song, a song louder than the wind. Sitting Bull heard it and knew: This was the song of death, sung by insects.

His men stared in silence. No one said a word. What was there to say? The buffalo wasn't just an animal. It was life, a tent, flesh, skin, bones, tools. It was the heartbeat of the prairie. And now they lay here, thousands, dead, rotting, for nothing. Not for food, not for survival. For the fun of the soulless men who had shot down from the railroad as if it were a game.

A young warrior broke the silence. His voice was hoarse, as if he had eaten dust. "Why?" he asked. Sitting Bull didn't answer immediately. He saw the dance of the flies, heard their song. Then he said, "Because the men without souls don't just want to kill us. They kill our shadows, our gods, our hearts. They know that if the buffalo dies, we die."

A woman clapped her hand over her mouth, tears streaming down her face. "They didn't even take the meat," she whispered. And it was true: the carcasses lay untouched. No one had gutted them, no one had eaten the meat. Just rotted, just gone. A massacre that didn't even satisfy.

Children held their noses and stepped back, but their eyes remained fixed on the carcasses. Some began to cry, others stared silently. Sitting Bull saw their expressions and knew: This was a different kind of massacre. No Lakota blood this time. But worse, because it ate away at the heart.

"Flies are dancing," he murmured. "They're dancing where we should have been living."

An old man stepped forward, knelt down, and placed his hand on the back of a rotting buffalo. "Brother," he whispered. "Forgive us for not being able to

protect you." Then he took some dust and threw it into the wind. A ritual, small, powerless, but more than silence.

Sitting Bull nodded. He felt rage growing within him, hot and bitter. Rage that tasted of blood. But also despair that smelled of ash. "They want to turn us into flies," he thought. "Flies that dance on the scraps that are left over."

The sun set, the shadows lengthened. The buzzing of flies continued. It was a requiem that no one wanted to sing, but that everyone needed to hear.

And Sitting Bull knew: If the buffalo died, they died too.

The plain was a cemetery without crosses. No singing, no prayer, no smoke for the spirits. Only carcasses, flies, and sun. Sitting Bull stood among the piles of corpses, his heart heavy, his stomach empty. He knew: This was no accident, no wild hunt. This was war with a different weapon. No gun to his chest, but hunger in his stomach.

His men were silent. Some stepped back, others stared into the open expanse, as if an explanation might be found there. But there was no explanation, only intent. The soulless men had stood on the trains, pointed their rifles at the herds, shot, laughed. Buffalo after buffalo fell, thousands in one day. Not for meat, not for skin. Only to rip out the Lakota's hearts.

A woman stepped forward, tears streaming down her face, her voice trembling. "My children," she said, "they won't see winter. Without the buffalo, we'll starve." Her words weren't a complaint. They were a statement. As cold as the wind blowing over the carcasses.

The flies buzzed louder, as if mocking the dead. Their black bodies covered eyes, nostrils, and wounds. One could hardly take a step without clouds of insects flying up, only to immediately descend again. The buzzing was like a chant, monotonous, malicious. Sitting Bull hated it more than the roar of the guns.

"They want us to starve," he said quietly. "They want us to dance like flies—without flesh, without soul, without a future."

A young warrior clenched his fists. "Then we'll hunt the soulless men!" he shouted. "We'll beat them, we'll take their meat, since we don't have any buffalo meat!" Some nodded, their eyes filled with anger, but Sitting Bull raised his hand.

"We can beat them," he said, "but we cannot beat hunger. Not with knives, not with arrows. Hunger is the greatest enemy." His words hung heavy in the air, heavier than the stench.

Children crawled around the carcasses, searching for scraps. Some tore shreds from the skin, which was already covered in maggots. They chewed anyway, because hunger knows no choice. Women screamed, ripping the pieces from their hands, but the children cried, bit, and spat flies. Sitting Bull saw it, and his heart sank.*Hunger turns us into animals,*he thought.*And the men without souls know it.*

An old man sat down in the dust and looked out over the plain. "Before," he said, "you could ride for one day, two days, three days—and there were always buffalo. Always. They were the skin of the earth. Now there's only death." His voice broke, he pounded his fist into the ground, weak, desperate.

Sitting Bull knelt beside him, placing his hand on his shoulder. "We will live," he said. But he knew it was a lie. Not everyone would live. Not this winter. Perhaps never again in what they had known.

The sun burned mercilessly, and the flies continued to dance. It was a dance without end, a dance on the grave of a people.

Hunger crept through the camp like an invisible enemy. It came not with guns, not with thunder, not with flags. It came quietly, slowly, in the stomachs of the children, in the hollow faces of the women, in the thinning arms of the men. Sitting Bull saw it every morning: the ribs cutting through skin, the eyes growing dull, the voices growing fainter.

The buffalo were gone. Not vanished, but massacred. Their carcasses lay out in the sun, long since rotted, eaten by flies, torn apart by wolves. They were no longer edible; not even the dogs wanted them. The soulless men had won, without a single shot to the Lakota chest. They had shot through the heart of the prairie, and now those who still breathed were starving.

Sitting Bull sat by a fire that knew no meat, only dry twigs. An old man chewed on a piece of leather, tough and tasteless, but at least there was something in his mouth. Children gnawed on bones that had already been boiled twice. Women gathered roots and boiled them in water that tasted of earth. It was no longer life. It was a survival that was like dying.

A boy cried, holding his stomach. His mother didn't hit him or yell at him. She just cried with him. Two voices, thin, raw, weak. Sitting Bull heard them and knew: Hunger was worse than any bullet. A bullet kills instantly. Hunger slowly tears you apart, day by day, until you're just a shadow.

Some men went out, hunting rabbits, deer, anything that still ran. But the prairie was empty. The animals fled, too; they too felt the death left behind by the buffalo. Sometimes one came back with a rabbit. Fifty mouths waited, and one ate. Forty-four went to sleep hungry.

Desperation brought about things no one wanted to imagine. Women fought over roots, beat each other until blood flowed. Men sneaked at night, stole from pots that weren't theirs. Children stole dog bones. Sitting Bull saw it, and it consumed him more than hunger.*We not only lose meat,*he thought.*We are losing dignity.*

Once, a woman was found lying over a carcass. She had been trying to tear meat from the half-rotting buffalo; flies buzzed, maggots crawled. She ate anyway. Her eyes were wide, empty, as if she were no longer there. They pulled her away; she screamed, bit, and hit. When she let go, her face was black with insects. Sitting Bull turned away, but the image burned into his memory.

The children began catching flies, squashing them, and eating them. They laughed as they did so, but it was a thin, mad laugh. Women watched, cried, and turned away. Hunger turned children into flies, and Sitting Bull knew: This was the real dance. Not the flies over the buffalo. But the children, who pounced on the leftovers like flies.

In the evening, he sat down and smoked his pipe. The smoke tasted bitter, empty, and without power. "The men without souls no longer need their guns," he thought. "They shot us with hunger."

And in the buzzing of the flies he heard the laughter of the railway, the laughter of the men who had shot buffalo for sport.

Hunger was now a constant guest. It sat in every tent, lay in every sleep, stared out of every child's eye socket. It didn't speak, it didn't scream—it gnawed. Silent, constant, cruel. Sitting Bull knew: You could fight bullets, soldiers, cannons. But you could only lose against hunger if you didn't transform it into something else.

He sat by the fire, which was little more than smoke. Men crouched around him, their faces hollow, their voices brittle. "We're dying," one said, without bitterness. It was simply a fact. "Our children are starving, our women are falling down. Winter will consume us all." Another nodded, too tired to argue.

Sitting Bull puffed on his pipe, the smoke scratching his throat. "Yes," he said. "Hunger is here. It is stronger than our knives, stronger than our arrows. But it is also a weapon." The men looked at him, their eyes dull, their bodies like shadows. "If we are hungry," he continued, "then we have nothing to lose. Men without souls fight for land, for flags, for gold. We fight on empty stomachs. That makes us more dangerous."

A young warrior shook his head. "How can hunger make us stronger?" His voice was full of anger, but also weak. Sitting Bull looked at him. "Because hunger forces us to fight, even when we have nothing left. Because hunger reminds us that we are alive. Every breath taken with hunger is a kick against death."

A silence followed. Only the buzzing of flies, which never stopped. Then a woman spoke, her voice soft but sharp: "Hunger is not a weapon. Hunger is a dog that will eat you before you can fight." She held her child in her arms, who was barely breathing. Her eyes were red but dry. "Don't tell me that hunger is our strength. Tell me how to feed my child."

Sitting Bull couldn't answer. He looked into their eyes, and everything he wanted to say was empty. No words fill stomachs. No whistles keep children alive. Only meat could do that. And the meat lay outside, rotten, covered in flies.

The next morning, he went out, alone. He saw the carcasses, still stinking, still humming. He knelt down and placed his hand on the cold hide of a buffalo. "You are our brothers," he murmured. "And you are dead. But your death shall not only bring hunger. It shall bring anger."

He took dust, threw it into the wind, and spoke aloud: "If we're going to be flies, then let's be like flies. Many, annoying, unstoppable. They can kill us, but we'll come back, again and again. We'll dance on them, just as the flies dance on you."

That evening, he told his men what he had seen. "The flies are small," he said. "But they will destroy even the strongest buffalo. They don't stop, they keep coming back. We are like flies. We are hungry, yes. But hunger makes us small and stubborn. We will eat their eyes, their wounds, their souls. Piece by piece."

A murmur went through the group. It wasn't a cheer, not a song. But it was a breath. A small, weak breath that didn't quench the hunger—but made it more bearable.

Sitting Bull knew it was a dirty consolation. But dirty consolation was still better than no consolation at all.

Hunger changed everything. It made the men slower, the women thinner, the children quieter. But it also made thoughts darker, eyes harder, hands greedier. Sitting Bull saw it in every tent: people who had been brothers and sisters just weeks ago now looked at each other like strangers. Sometimes like enemies.

An old man was caught stealing. He had tried to take a piece of leather from a family's pot, which was left there for cooking. There was no meat, just leather, but the woman beat him down as if it were gold. Others jumped at him, kicking, screaming, until the old man lay bleeding in the dust. No one helped him. Hunger makes mercy a word no one knows anymore.

Sitting Bull stood by, watched, and didn't shout. He knew words don't fill stomachs. But something gnawed at his chest.*We become like animals,*he thought.*Or worse – like the men without souls.*

The children crawled in the dust, searching for bones that had long since been boiled twice. Sometimes they gnawed on sticks as if they were pieces of meat. One boy grinned, his mouth full of splinters, blood dripping from his chin. His mother wept, but she let him chew. Better wood in his stomach than nothing at all.

One night, a scream came. Sitting Bull ran out of the tent, men and women alike. They found a warrior kneeling over the carcass of a horse. The animal had died, weakened by hunger. The warrior had ripped it open, the raw meat in his hands, blood on his face. He was eating, greedily, smacking, while flies buzzed around him. "It's still alive!" a woman cried, and sure enough: the horse was still trembling, its eyes rolling. But the man didn't stop. He bit, tore, chewed.

The crowd stared, some shouting for him to stop. Others just stared, drooling, as if they wanted a piece themselves. Sitting Bull stepped forward and slapped the meat from the man's hand. "Enough!" he roared. The warrior looked up, his eyes empty, his mouth red. "Hunger," he whispered. "Hunger."

The next day, the horse was dead, and its meat was gone. No one asked where it had gone. No one wanted to know.

The women began to cook herbs that were actually poison. Bitter and foul, but they made the stomach heavy, even if they made people sick. Some died from them, but with full stomachs. People accepted it. A full stomach was a victory, even if it brought death.

The men dreamed of meat. Sitting Bull heard them groaning in their sleep, their hands grasping for air as if they wanted to tear a piece of it. Sometimes they woke up and looked at their brothers as if they were buffalo. Looks that made Sitting Bull shiver. Looks that said:*If hunger increases, who knows what we will do.*

The flies continued to buzz, over the carcasses outside, over the kettles inside. They were the only ones getting fat. They grew, they buzzed, they ate. They were the new masters of the prairie. Sitting Bull saw them, and he thought:*The flies laugh at us. We are nothing more than their shadows.*

That evening, he spoke to his people. "Hunger devours us," he said, "but it doesn't devour our names. We are not animals. We are not men without souls. We are human beings. And human beings can suffer without losing themselves."

But as he spoke, he heard the chewing of teeth in the darkness, soft, greedy, like the smacking of flies.

The nights were worse than the days. During the day, you could at least pretend to be looking for something—roots, bark, grass, anything. At night, all that remained was your stomach, which growled, growled, growled until it was louder than any rifle. Sitting Bull lay awake, listening to the groans of men, the whimpers of women, the sobs of children. And in between—the buzzing of flies.

At first he thought it was just a memory. But the longer he listened, the clearer it became. They weren't just humming. They were whispering. Small voices, as if from black smoke, as if from the cracks in the earth. "We're dancing," they said. "We're dancing on the flesh that was taken from you. We're dancing while you starve."

Sitting Bull pressed his hands over his ears, but the buzzing persisted. He stood up and went outside. The moon hung pale over the prairie, the buffalo carcasses lay like black mounds in the light. The flies buzzed, danced, flew up, and landed again. And in their buzzing, he heard words.

"You're like us," they hummed. "You live off the scraps. You fly in the dust. You're small, numerous, weak. But you're immortal as long as you eat."

Sitting Bull closed his eyes, his stomach burning, his head pounding. Was it hunger making him hallucinate? Or were the flies really talking? He didn't know. But their voices bored into him.

The next morning, he told the men what he had heard. "The flies are talking," he said. "They say we're like them. Small, weak, but numerous. And immortal, as long as we don't stop eating." Some laughed bitterly, others stared silently. An old man nodded. "Perhaps that's our truth," he said. "Guns kill us, but hunger turns us into flies. And flies survive everything."

The children began to sing songs. Songs about flies that dance, that laugh, that don't die. They sang out of tune, shrilly, but they sang. Women wept, men remained silent. Sitting Bull listened, feeling both shame and hope.

The next night, the voice came again. "Dance with us," buzzed the flies. "Dance on the dead. Dance on the buffalo. Dance on the soulless men." Sitting Bull felt his body become light, as if he were really flying with them. Over the carcasses, over the blood, over the railroad puffing outside in the darkness.

When he awoke, he lay in the dust, his hands full of dirt, his mouth full of blood from his own tongue, which he had bitten in his sleep. Men stood around him, watching in silence. One asked, "Did you have a vision, Chief?" Sitting Bull nodded, his eyes dark. "The flies are dancing," he said. "And we're dancing with them."

He didn't know if it was wisdom or madness. But in times of hunger, it was sometimes the same thing.

Morning came without color. Only gray light, creeping through the dust and revealing the plain like an open wound. Sitting Bull stood at the edge of the camp, his eyes deep, his body weary. Before him lay the carcasses, black and bloated, and the buzzing of flies filled the air as if it were the only music the world still knew.

The children no longer played. They crawled, they were silent, they stared. Some lay still and never got up. Women squatted beside them, rubbing their bellies, weeping without tears. Men sat, their faces blank, their hands on their knees, without the strength to hold their knives. Hunger was the new chief, and he spoke with a thousand voices from empty stomachs.

Sitting Bull went to the buffalo, knelt down, and placed his hand on a rotting back. Flies flew up, then immediately landed again. He felt the cold of the flesh, the warmth of the sun, the stench of death. "Brothers," he murmured, "they killed you so we could die. But we won't die quietly."

Behind him, an old man coughed, spitting blood into the dust. "We die like buffalo," he said. "Slowly, in the dust, for nothing." His voice wasn't a lament, but a statement, as sober as the sky. Sitting Bull looked at him, nodded, but said nothing. Words were too cheap for what they had lost.

The flies danced. On and on, incessantly. They had grown fat from the buffalo meat, from the blood seeping into the dust. They buzzed, they whirred, they laughed. Sitting Bull heard them, even if the others only heard them buzzing. "We'll survive," they said. "We'll survive if you starve. We'll dance if you lie in the dust."

A young warrior collapsed, just like that. No shot, no knife, no blow. Only the hunger that finally consumed him. His body stilled, the flies immediately pounced on him, as if they had been waiting. Women screamed, children whimpered, but Sitting Bull remained standing.*So fast,* he thought.*So quiet.*

He turned toward the camp. "Listen!" he cried, his voice rough and ragged. "Look at the flies! They're dancing on the buffalo's flesh! They're dancing on us! But we won't lie still. We'll dance back until they've killed us all."

Some raised their heads, their eyes glowing faintly. They screamed, as weakly as their bodies allowed. Women screamed louder, their voices filled with rage. It wasn't a cry of victory, it was a cry against nothingness.

The sun rose higher, the flies buzzed, hunger gnawed. Sitting Bull looked up at the empty sky and knew: This was no longer a war for land, for guns, for flags. It was a war for meat. And they had already lost it.

But as long as they still screamed, as long as they still had their voices, they were more than flies.

The vision in the dirt of the river

The river smelled of mud, of death, of old blood. Sitting Bull knelt on the bank, the water dirty, brown, thick with rain and dust. He dipped his hands in, but it wasn't cleansing. It was as if he were washing away dirt with dirt. The current was slow, sluggish, like an old man who could barely breathe.

His men stood silently behind him, their faces sunken, their ribs visible. No one spoke. Hunger had come with them to the river, sat down beside them, and licked their stomachs as if they wanted to drink the water, even though it tasted of rot.

Sitting Bull leaned forward, scooped water, and drank. It burned his throat, bitter, salty, full of earth. He felt it filling his stomach, but it brought no strength. Only heaviness. He coughed, spat, and drank again anyway. Next to him, a boy did the same, his mouth full of mud, his eyes empty.

Then came the buzzing. At first, Sitting Bull thought it was the flies again. But it was the water itself. It murmured, it gurgled, it spoke. He heard voices, deep, rough, as old as the stones. "You are not alone," they said. "We have taken your dead, we have carried their blood. We carry you too."

Sitting Bull closed his eyes. Was it hunger speaking? Or the river? Or his own head, tired of dying, of fighting, of seeing? He didn't know. But he heard the words clearly, like the beating of a drum.

He saw images. Not in the sky, not in the smoke, but in the muck of the water. Men with guns, faces like masks. Women screaming, children crying. Buffalo falling, flies dancing. All of it was there, but it was mixed, twisted. Guns became snakes, women became she-wolves, children became shadows.

"You will fight," murmured the river. "You will die. But you will not be forgotten. Your name will remain long after the guns have rusted."

Sitting Bull breathed heavily, water dripping from his face. His hands trembled, but he felt a strange force. Not one that quenched hunger. Not one that healed wounds. But a force that said:*You are more than dust.*

Behind him, the men murmured. "Chief," one whispered, "do you have a vision?" Sitting Bull nodded, slowly. "Yes," he said. "The river has spoken. It has said we will fall. But our name will not fall."

A silence followed. No cheering, no hope. Only stillness. But in this silence there was something heavy, something hard. More than words, more than flesh. It was the suspicion that even in the dirt there could be truth.

Sitting Bull stood up, water dripping from his hands and his face. "We are weak," he said. "We are hungry. But we are names. And names don't perish, not even in the dirt."

The men nodded, the women wept quietly, the children watched silently. The river gurgled as if it were laughing.

And Sitting Bull knew: His vision didn't come from heaven. It came from the dirt.

Night came, and the river glittered black. Sitting Bull remained sitting on the bank, the water gurgling, swallowing, spitting. He had the impression that he was no longer seeing just a river. It was a mirror, a crack in the world, a mouth that spoke.

He leaned forward and looked inside. At first, only mud and shadows, then faces. The faces of his warriors, his wives, his children. Some he recognized, some already dead, some still alive. But in the water, they all had the same expression: empty, tired, broken.

Then the images distorted. Faces became skulls, skulls became buffalo heads, buffalo became railroad wheels. They spun around, devouring everything in their path. Guns protruded from the wheels, and the guns had teeth. They laughed when they fired.

"This is what's coming," murmured the river. "Men without souls. Iron without hearts. They'll roll over you like wheels over bones."

Sitting Bull closed his eyes, but the images remained. He saw women crying, but in strange beds. Children crying, but wearing uniforms. Men singing, but on their knees, before strange gods.

"No," he whispered, "that won't happen." But the river laughed. "It's already happening. Don't you see? Your people no longer dance to drums, but to guns. Your children no longer play with arrows, but with shell casings. Your blood no longer belongs to the earth, but to the dust."

He felt his stomach churning. He wanted to vomit, but only bile came out. He stared into the dirt, and there he saw himself. Not strong, not as a chief, but as

an old man, broken, with chains on his hands. White men surrounded him, laughing, drinking. And he, Sitting Bull, looked like a circus attraction.

"This is how you end," gurgled the river. "Not with the warrior's cry, but with the public's ridicule. They will print your face in their newspapers, they will eat your story, and they will ridicule you. This is worse than death."

Sitting Bull screamed, threw a stone into the water, and the image shattered. But as soon as it calmed down, he saw more. He saw a volley of gunfire, smoke, blood. Men falling, women screaming, children running. He saw himself again, this time with blood in his mouth, the earth beneath him.

"You will fall," whispered the river. "Not today, not tomorrow. But soon. Your name will remain, yes. But your body will lie in the dust like that of the buffalo."

He closed his eyes and pressed his hands against his eyelids.*A vision,* he thought.*Just a vision.* But he knew there was more. The river hadn't lied to him. It had just shown him too much.

As he walked back to camp, the men looked at him. "Chief," one said, "did you see?" Sitting Bull nodded, his voice rough. "Yes," he said. "I saw that we were going to die. But I also saw that we were not going to be forgotten."

And he knew: That was the only thing they had left.

The fire in the camp was small, almost just embers. Wood was scarce, like everything else. Men and women crouched around it, their faces gaunt, their eyes black from hunger and sleeplessness. Sitting Bull stood before them, the river still in his bones, the buzzing of the vision still in his head.

He remained silent for a long time, and the silence was heavier than the night. Finally, he raised his hand. "I saw," he said. His voice was rough but clear. "I saw what was coming. I saw them overrunning us, with iron, with guns, with hunger. I saw us falling. But I also saw: We remain."

A murmur went through the group. Some raised their heads, others bowed them further. A man laughed dryly. "Stay? What? In the dust? In the flies?" He shook his head. "Names don't fill a stomach."

A woman punched him in the shoulder. "Names are all we have," she snarled. Her eyes burned, her hands trembled. "If our children are going to die, at least they should know their names."

A boy, barely older than ten, raised his hand. "Chief," he said in a thin voice, "did you see us? In your vision?" Sitting Bull nodded. "Yes," he said. "I saw you. You were shadows, but you were there. They can take our bodies, but not our shadows."

Some wept, quietly, into each other's hands, into each other's shoulders. Others stared fixedly into the fire, their faces hard as stone. One of the younger warriors jumped to his feet, his gaze wild. "I don't want visions!" he cried. "I want meat! I want guns, I want blood! Your vision makes us weak!" He spat into the fire, which hissed, then turned away.

Sitting Bull let him go. He knew that hunger spoke more to the warrior than his heart. Hunger made all voices louder, all anger hotter. But he also knew that some would go mad. Hunger was not an enemy that could be defeated. Only one that could be resisted until it devoured you.

An old man raised his voice, hoarse and shaky. "I believe you, Chief," he said. "I believe you because the river has always spoken. If it says we have names, then we will have names. And when we die, we will die with names. That is more than the men without souls ever have."

The crowd murmured. No cheers, no strength, but a breath more, a spark. Women nodded, men grunted, children watched. Sitting Bull knew: This was all he could give. No food, no weapons, just a piece of truth, bitter as mud in water.

Later, when the embers had almost died down, he heard voices in the darkness. Some were crying, some were praying, some were laughing softly—a laughter that sounded like madness. Hunger tore them apart. Hope and fear lay close together, like knives and skin.

Sitting Bull lay down, the river still in his mind.*You need a lie,*he thought.*Or a vision. And sometimes that's the same thing.*

He closed his eyes and the flies buzzed again.

The next morning, fog lay over the river. It crept between the tents, cold and wet, as if the river itself had decided to come into the camp. Sitting Bull stepped out, his face tired, his eyes dark. He felt the gazes. Not just the gazes of the hungry, but the gazes of the seekers—those who wanted answers, those who no longer believed in knives and arrows, but in visions.

A man came to him and fell to his knees. His body was thin, his breath smelled of decay. "Chief," he whispered, "you heard the river. Tell me if my son will survive the winter." His eyes were empty, but his voice clung like a rat to a rotten beam. Sitting Bull was silent, then placed his hand on the man's head. "Your son lives in your name," he said. It wasn't an answer; it was a consolation. But the man nodded, as if he had received a gift.

Others came. Women with children, men with open wounds, old people who could barely stand. "What did you see?" they asked. "What's coming?" "Will my child grow?" "Will my husband come home?" Sitting Bull knew they didn't want the truth. They wanted lies that felt like medicine.

He spoke in images, as the river had spoken. "The iron wheels roll, but they eventually break. The flies dance, but they keep flying long after the flesh has turned to dust. Your children are flies. Small, but immortal." Some wept, some nodded, some even smiled. It was poison that tasted like honey.

But not everyone believed. A young warrior stepped forward, his eyes red with rage. "You are no prophet," he spat. "You are an old man who hears voices because he is starving. Your visions are merely the hunger in your head." Some nodded, murmuring in agreement. "We don't need dreams," he continued. "We need guns. We need meat."

Sitting Bull looked at him, long and silent. Then he said, "Guns won't feed you when the buffalo are dead. Meat rots. But words... words remain." He knew it sounded weak. But it was all he had.

The warrior laughed, a bitter, broken laugh. "Words don't fill a stomach," he said, turned around, and left. The crowd parted—some followed him with their eyes, others looked at Sitting Bull as if he were more than a chief.

There was a danger in this split. Sitting Bull felt it like a knife in his back.*If they make me a prophet,*he thought,*They'll also expect me to perform miracles. But I have no miracles. Only the dirt in the river.*

Later, as the fog lifted, he saw women kneeling on the bank, drinking the water as if it were medicine. They murmured words they thought were prayers. They spoke of him, of Sitting Bull, as if he were the one who had made the river speak. He felt shame and anger.*I'm a man,*he thought.*No God. No prophet. Just a man in the dust.*

But when he saw his reflection in the water, he saw his face. And behind him, faces looking at him, full of hunger and hope. And he knew: They would take him as he was – whether he wanted it or not.

The camp was no longer silent. Once, hunger had been an equal weight on all shoulders, heavy but dull. But now, hunger had been divided by words. Sitting Bull's vision had drawn cracks in the dust: some saw him as the voice of the river, others as a man consumed by madness.

They spoke quietly around the fire, but their voices carried far in the thin night air. Women whispered that the river had sent a sign that Sitting Bull had been chosen. Men nodded, their eyes burning in the shadows as if they had found something stronger than flesh. "He heard the river speak," they said. "The river doesn't lie."

But the boys who were still able to fight laughed mockingly. "The river? The river is dirt and water. It doesn't talk. It only gurgles. Sitting Bull hears voices because his stomach is empty." One spat into the fire, as before. "I don't want a chief who talks to water. I want one who steals guns."

The split was palpable, like lightning rumbling in the darkness. Sitting Bull saw it, heard it, and his heart sank. He knew: No enemy was more dangerous than one growing within one's own camp.

One evening summed it up. Two men were arguing. One, old, his eyes full of fire, said, "Sitting Bull is our seer. The river showed him that our names remain. He is more than a chief." The other, young, hungry, his face filled with anger, shouted, "He's an old man who feeds us fairy tales while we die!"

There were blows, blood, right in the circle of fire. Women screamed, children whimpered. Sitting Bull intervened, his voice loud and harsh. "Enough!" But the fists didn't stop until one man lay unconscious in the dust, his nose broken.

"You see?" said Sitting Bull, his chest heaving. "That's what they want. The soulless men don't need guns when we're tearing ourselves apart." But he knew his words were weak. Words were always weak against hunger and rage.

Later, a woman came to him. Her eyes were red, her voice a whisper. "Chief, keep lying. Tell us we'll live. Even if it's not true. Lies are better than hunger." She knelt before him, and Sitting Bull felt a heaviness in his chest worse than any rifle.

That same night, he heard a few young warriors whispering at the edge of the camp. "We need a chief who fights, not one who prays," they said. "If he continues to tell visions, we'll take up the knife. Not against the whites—against him." Sitting Bull lay in his tent, his eyes open, and he knew: The river had not only shown what was to come. The river had also poured poison into his own ranks.

In the morning, he went back to the river. He knelt, stared into the brown water, and saw his reflection. "What do you want?" he asked. "Do you want to save me? Or do you want to break me?" The water gurgled, murmured, perhaps laughed. And he had no answer.

Hunger continued to gnaw at the camp, but something else was also gnawing at it now—a hunger for meaning. Some clung to Sitting Bull's words as if they were bones with leftover meat. They chewed them until blood ran from their mouths, but they didn't let go. Others looked at him with eyes sharper than knives, as if he were a liar who would soon have to be slit open.

A small circle formed around him. Women, old people, a few men too weak to bear their anger. They called him "the one who hears the river." Some murmured his words like prayers. "We are names," they whispered. "We are flies that do not die." One drew symbols in the dust, circles like waves, as a symbol of the river.

Sitting Bull viewed it with mixed feelings. It was comfort, yes. But it was also poison. For the more they believed in him, the more they demanded. "Tell us, Chief," they begged, "when will the hunger end? When will the buffalo return? When will the men die without souls?" They wanted answers, and he had none.

Others reacted with hatred. Young warriors spat words like poison. "He's making us soft," they said. "He's turning us into women who pray instead of fight." Some spoke of a plan to overthrow Sitting Bull. "We need a chief with steel in his hands, not dirt in his eyes."

One night, things escalated. A man from the circle of believers fell in a fight. He had said that Sitting Bull's vision was more powerful than guns. A young man laughed, knocked him down, and kicked him until his ribs cracked. The crowd dragged him away, but the damage was done. Blood flowed—not from white people, but from Lakota hands.

Sitting Bull stepped in, roaring until his voice was hoarse. "You fools!" he cried. "The soulless men laugh when we tear ourselves apart!" But he saw in the eyes

of both sides that they barely heard him. Hunger deafened them. And hope—or hatred—blinded them.

Later that night, two women came to him. They placed dried herbs in front of his tent, symbols in the dust. "You are our prophet," they said. "Your words are stronger than flesh." Sitting Bull wanted to scream, wanted to say that he was just a man, tired, hungry, and afraid. But he saw their eyes, and he knew: If he took away their hope, they would die before hunger could consume them.

So he remained silent.

At the edge of the camp, the boys continued to whisper. They talked of blood, of silencing Sitting Bull if he continued preaching visions. One said, "If he falls, we'll take our rifles and go. At least we'll die fighting, not in the dust."

Sitting Bull heard them, even when they thought he was asleep. He lay awake, staring into the darkness, hearing the buzzing of flies, hearing the gurgling of the river in the distance. And he thought:*Maybe the vision wasn't a gift. Maybe it was a knife. And I am the flesh it cuts.*

The nights were no longer silent. The camp breathed in two voices: that of the believers and that of the doubters. Between them lay a rift wider than the river. Sitting Bull felt it beneath his feet when he walked, when he spoke, when he remained silent. It was as if every movement decided whether he would remain a chief, become a prophet—or a dead man in the dust.

Women squatted by the river, their hands in the water, murmuring words they considered sacred. "The river speaks," they said. "Sitting Bull hears it." They threw dust into the water as an offering. Children imitated them, laughing shrilly as they threw stones into the water. "Look, Chief," they cried, "the river is dancing!" Sitting Bull smiled faintly, but his heart was heavy.

At the far end of the camp stood the boys, the warriors. Their eyes were hollow, their voices sharp. "The river is filth," they mocked. "The chief is crazy. If he keeps talking, we'll die in the dust like flies." One of them cut lines in the sand with his knife, as if he were slicing a throat. The others laughed, but it was a laugh without joy.

Sitting Bull sat alone, smoking, staring into the embers. His thoughts were a jumble.*Am I a prophet? Am I a liar? Am I just an old man who hears voices because his stomach is empty?*The water gurgled in the distance, as if

answering. "You are both," it murmured. "Truth and delusion. Prophet and flesh."

He remembered the images the river had shown him: wheels, guns, smoke, blood. His own face, ridiculed, bloody in the dust. The vision clung to him like dirt, refusing to let go. He knew it was true—and that it would destroy him.

One night, a man came to him. An old warrior, his hair gray, his eyes red. He knelt down. "Chief," he said, "I believe you. But I beg you: stop talking. Your words are tearing us apart." His voice trembled, but it was honest. "Perhaps it is better if you remain silent."

Sitting Bull looked at him for a long time. Then he nodded. "Perhaps," he said. "But silence is also a lie."

The next day, he spoke again by the river. His voice was hoarse but firm. "I saw that we would die. But I also saw that our name remains." Some cheered weakly, others remained silent with hard faces. And Sitting Bull knew: with every word, he was winning believers—and enemies.

That night he dreamed. He stood in the river, the water up to his chest. Flies buzzed above him, landing on his skin, in his eyes, in his mouth. He wanted to scream, but the water filled him. "You're already dead," buzzed the flies. "But your name continues to dance."

He awoke, his face wet, perhaps from sweat, perhaps from the river. Outside, he heard the voices. The believers were praying. The doubters were making plans. He lay still and knew: The river had made him a prophet—and a victim at the same time.

Bone cracking in the moonlight

The night was clear, the moon hung fat and white in the sky like an eye that saw everything and did nothing. The camp lay silent, but outside in the distance, nothing was quiet. One could hear the cracking. No gunfire, no thunder—bones. Bones that broke as if they were dry wood.

Sitting Bull sat on the edge, knife beside him, whistle cold. He heard it clearly: the dull crack, the howl, the quiet whimper afterward. No fighting in lines, no battlefield like that of the men without souls. This was different. It was the

chaos of the night, when warriors and shadows clashed, with bare hands, with teeth, with sticks. No drumroll, no signal. Just brute force, illuminated by the moon.

He saw a young Lakota who had caught a soldier, separated from his squad. They were rolling in the dust, the boy barefoot, the soldier heavy, still in uniform. The rifle lay discarded, forgotten. It was now just skin against skin, fist against skull. The boy screamed, bit, kicked. The soldier choked, punched, gasped. Then—the crack. A neck, an arm, whatever. The soldier was no longer screaming, his body still. The boy knelt over it, his hands bloody, his face blank, as if the moon had sucked him dry.

Women emerged from the darkness, their hair wild, their voices harsh. One carried a stick, another only stones. They beat a second soldier who had fallen. He begged, he gasped, he raised his hands. But they didn't stop. Stone on skull, stick on ribs, foot on face. There was a cracking sound, again and again, until the moon revealed the whiteness of his bones.

Sitting Bull watched, his heart heavy.*We will be like them,*he thought again.*Or maybe we've always been like this, just without their guns.*He didn't know if it was consolation or condemnation.

The night was full of sounds: cracking, screaming, whispering, whimpering. No drumming, no singing. Only the moonlight, making every deed visible. No shadow was deep enough to hide the blood.

A child, barely older than ten, squatted beside a fallen horse. He pulled on the legs, trying to move the carcass, wanting some meat. When he couldn't, he took a stone and beat on the bones until one broke. He laughed, a thin, mad laugh, as he scraped out the marrow with his fingers. Sitting Bull closed his eyes, but the laughter remained.

"The moon sees everything," he murmured. "And it forgets nothing."

As the night deepened, there were more screams, more cracking sounds. Men returned to camp, bleeding, laughing, gasping. They threw bones into the fire, trophies, splinters, as if they were evidence of life. Women watched, children grabbed the bones as if they were toys.

Sitting Bull puffed on his pipe, which tasted bitter. The smoke settled in his stomach, but not in his heart. His heart was heavy because he knew: the moon

was witnessing. And the moon wasn't laughing. It just watched, cold, silent, relentless.

The moon hung high, cold and clear, and the cracking never stopped. Sitting Bull soon realized that it wasn't just the bones of the soulless men that were breaking that night. His own men were also silencing each other—with fists, with stones, with their bare hands.

An old man had secretly hidden some meat—nothing more than a few tendons from a dead dog. Two younger men caught him and ripped it from his hands. "You tried to cheat us!" they cried. The old man wept, begged, but the young men beat him, kicked him, until his ribs could be heard splintering. Women screamed, children cried, but no one intervened. When they were finished, he lay still, blood running in the dust. The meat had long since been devoured.

Sitting Bull arrived too late. He saw only the body, heard only the breathing of the men, who were still panting in anger. "You fools," he said quietly, "you are worse than the men without souls. They kill us with guns. You kill us with hunger." But the boys just looked at him with empty eyes, and he knew his words were meaningless.

Later, another sound came. A quarrel between two brothers. One had a wife in his tent, the other desired her. Hunger made everything more intense, even the lust. They yelled, hit, wrestled, and again – the cracking sound. This time a skull crashed against a rock. One remained lying there, the other screamed into the night, his hands bloody. Women pulled him away, children stared, wide-eyed. Sitting Bull saw it and thought:*Hunger doesn't just eat stomachs. It eats blood, it eats brothers.*

The night was full of such splinters. A woman who beat a child for secretly sucking bone marrow. A boy who strangled a dog because he heard it barking and then devoured it raw. Bones cracked everywhere, not just from enemies, but from friends.

Sitting Bull sat on the sidelines, the smoke from his pipe bitter. He saw the moon illuminating everything, and he knew: The moon was witnessing. It was no longer a battle. It was a breaking apart from within.

"We crack ourselves," he muttered. "Our bones crack before the guns hit us."

And the worst part wasn't the noise. The worst part was that some people were laughing—quietly, hollowly, insanely.

Sitting Bull stood in the middle of the camp, the smoke from the fires rising thinly, the moon hanging above them like a pale eye. The cracking never stopped. It was as if the night itself wanted to break bones. Every argument, every hand movement could become a blow, a rip, a scream.

"Enough!" roared Sitting Bull, his voice hoarse. "We're not here to tear each other apart! The soulless men will laugh when we eat each other!" But the crowd stared at him with empty eyes, with hungry looks that were barely human. A few nodded, a few bowed their heads. But others looked at him like an enemy.

A boy, barely twenty, spat in the dust. "Talking doesn't make bones whole," he said. "Talking doesn't make flesh." His voice was hard, his hands clenched. Others murmured in agreement. Sitting Bull felt the words crumble between them like dry wood in a fire.

He stepped toward a body on the ground—an old man whose ribs had been broken in a fight over a piece of leather. Sitting Bull knelt down and placed his hand on his chest. No more movement. The dust took him back, without ceremony, without song. "So it ends," murmured Sitting Bull. "Not by bullets, but by starving hands."

Women screamed as two men went for each other's throats again. Sitting Bull jumped in between, tearing them apart. Blood spurted on his hands, the fists hitting him too. He roared, struck back until they stopped. But he knew: tomorrow others would crack. Tomorrow other hands would break.

At the edge of the camp, children squatted, watching men fight, watching bones break. Some laughed, shrilly, madly, as if it were a game. A small boy took a stick and struck it against a stone, imitating the crack. "Do you hear that, Chief?" he called. "That's what the night sounds like!" Sitting Bull turned his head away, but the sound remained in his ears.

The moon shone coldly, saw everything, said nothing. No thunder, no clouds, no mercy. Only light that showed everything, every splinter, every twitch, every piece of humanity shattering into dust.

"The moon never forgets," murmured Sitting Bull, staring into the light. "It records everything we break. And one day it will read it to us."

The bones continued to crack, and the moon was silent.

The night was old, but hunger made it younger, more vicious, more cruel. Sitting Bull sat, his pipe empty, his mind heavy, when the scream came. A shrill, raw sound that cut through the tents. He jumped up and ran toward it.

In front of a tent stood a boy with a drawn knife. Barely fifteen years old, his eyes empty, his body trembling with weakness and rage. Before him knelt a woman, holding a child to her chest. The boy's knife glinted in the moonlight. "Give me the meat," he gasped. "Or I'll take it."

The woman screamed, hugging the child closer. "It's my son!" The boy laughed, an ugly, dry laugh. "Your son is flesh like any other. Hunger doesn't make names."

Sitting Bull intervened. "Put down the knife," he said, his voice harsh. But the boy trembled, stepped back, knife raised. "It's your fault!" he cried. "Your visions, your words—they don't fill my belly! I want meat! I want to live!"

The crowd gathered, staring, breathing heavily. No one intervened. All eyes were glued to the knife, to the woman, to the child. Hunger stood between them, greater than any chieftain.

The boy jumped. Not at the woman—at Sitting Bull. The knife jerked, the blade slicing air. Sitting Bull dodged, yanking his arm, feeling the bony weakness. They wrestled, fell into the dust, the knife flashed, the crowd screamed. Then—the crack.

Sitting Bull had grabbed the boy's arm, twisted it, and squeezed it. A scream, high and bestial, cut through the night. The bone snapped like a dry branch. The knife fell, the boy howled, whimpered, and lay in the dust, his eyes full of hatred and pain.

The crowd gasped. Women held children, men looked away. The cracking sound was in everyone's ears. Sitting Bull stood over the boy, his heart pounding, his hands shaking. He had done it. Not as a warrior, not in battle against the soulless men. But against one of his own.

The boy lay there, spitting words like blood. "You're not a chief. You're a bonebreaker."

Sitting Bull picked up the knife and threw it far into the dust. "I am a man," he said, his voice shaky. "And men break when they must." He turned and looked at the crowd. "But we don't break each other. Not children, not women. If we break bones, it's only those of men without souls."

A silence heavier than dust. Some nodded, others looked at him as if he were a stranger. The cracking hung in the air, the cracking that the moon had seen.

Sitting Bull knew: He hadn't just broken the boy's arm. He had broken something in the night that couldn't be easily put back together.

In the morning, the dust lay still, but the camp hummed softly like a hornet's nest. Everyone had heard the cracking, even those who hadn't been there. It went like a whisper from tent to tent: Sitting Bull had broken a boy's arm. Some told it quietly, with horror in their voices. Others told it loudly, with secret satisfaction. Still others remained silent, but their eyes spoke louder than words.

The woman with the child did not remain silent. She stepped before the crowd, the child at her breast, her voice as hard as stone. "He saved us," she said. "The boy wanted to kill my child. Sitting Bull stopped him." Her words echoed, but they sounded not like jubilation, but like judgment. Some nodded, others shook their heads.

The boy's mother later screamed, her face covered in tears and dust. "My son is not an enemy! He is hungry, he is young, he is desperate! And Sitting Bull is breaking his bones like an enemy." She scratched blood into her face, her voice ripping through the air. Men held her, women wept with her.

Sitting Bull heard everything. He sat in front of his tent, his pipe cold, his gaze into the void. He knew: the boy's arm was just a bone. But in truth, it was more. It was the backbone of his people, cracking in the dust.

They argued around the fire. Some said, "Sitting Bull is a chief. He does what must be done. If bones break, they break so the people live." The others spat back, "A chief who breaks his own is no longer a chief. He is an executioner."

An old man raised his hand, his voice hoarse. "He did what he had to," he said. "A hungry boy is worse than a soldier with a gun. The boy would have killed the child. The chief saved the camp." His words were calm, but they sounded like dust scattering in the wind.

Sitting Bull said nothing. But that night, the boy came to him, his arm in a splint, his eyes full of hatred. "You're no father to us," he spat. "You're a bonebreaker. And bonebreakers die." His voice was weak, but his words were sharp. Sitting Bull looked at him for a long time, then nodded. "Perhaps," he murmured. "But sometimes one must break so that others can live."

As the boy left, the moon lingered over the camp. Sitting Bull looked up, the white face that had seen everything. "You have seen me," he whispered. "And you will judge me."

The moon was silent, but in the silence Sitting Bull still heard the cracking—not only of the arm, but of the souls of his people.

Sitting Bull couldn't stop thinking about the cracking. It wasn't just the boy's arm, not just the old man's ribs, not just the soldiers' skulls. It was a sound greater than any single body. It was as if the moon itself were breaking bones, as if the earth were crunching beneath the Lakota.

He heard it in every step, in every breath. When a child stumbled, when a stick broke into the fire, when a horse stepped—everything sounded like bones. An endless splintering that never ended.

Sitting Bull sat with the elders by the fire. Their faces were shadows, their eyes deep. "The cracking," he said quietly, "is more than hunger. It's our people. It's breaking." The elders nodded slowly, their necks creaking like old branches. "We hear it too," one murmured. "It's the song of our time."

Another coughed blood into the embers. "We used to hear drums, chants, buffalo hooves. Now we hear only bones. This is the music the soulless men left us." His voice sounded bitter, like old leather turning to dust.

Sitting Bull stared into the embers. "But bones aren't just weak," he said. "They're what remains when everything else rots. Flesh rots, blood dries, skin tears. But bones—bones remain. Perhaps that is our truth: We break, but we remain."

The words hung heavy in the air. Some nodded, others remained silent, others wept quietly. But they all heard the crackling in the background—whether real or in their heads, it didn't matter. It was there, incessant.

At the edge of the camp, a man began collecting bones in the dust. Not the large ones, but small ones: finger bones, animal bones, splinters. He threaded them onto strings and wore them around his neck. "These are our drums," he murmured. "These are our songs." Others began to follow suit. Soon, there was a clinking and clicking in the camp, bone chains around necks and wrists.

Sitting Bull saw it and shuddered. But he said nothing. He knew that in times like these, anything that provided comfort was permissible—even if it was sick.

But at night he dreamed again. He stood in the moonlight, and around him bones cracked until the ground was covered with them. Skulls, ribs, legs, fingers—a sea of splinters. He heard the voices of his people, not in songs, but in this cracking. It was their prayer, their cry, their last breath.

When he awoke, he knew: The cracking was no longer a sound. It was a symbol. And symbols were more powerful than flesh.

The night was so silent that every breath sounded like a scream. But then it came again, the sound they all knew. The cracking. It crept through the camp as if it had legs. No storm, no thunder, no gunfire—just the splintering of bones.

Sitting Bull stood in the center, pipe in hand, his gaze fixed on the moon. The moon was cold, white, full—a judge without mercy. "You see everything," he murmured. "You see us break. But you will also see us strike back."

Because he had understood: The cracking wasn't just a sign of decay. It was also a drumming sound. A rhythm beat by the night. Every broken rib, every splintering of arms and skulls was like a drum for what was to come. An announcement. A harbinger.

He remembered past battles. Nights when drums had made the warriors strong, songs that had consumed fear. Now they were no longer drums. Now they were bones. But they didn't sound any weaker. They just sounded more honest.

A child came to him, holding up a small bone. "Chief," he whispered, "do you hear? He speaks." Sitting Bull took the bone and put it to his ear. It cracked softly, as if revealing a secret. He smiled bitterly. "Yes," he said. "He speaks. He says that the night will not consume us as long as we still have bones to break."

The men gathered. No cheers, no songs—only the silence of those who knew more bones would soon crack. But this time, not just their own.

Sitting Bull rose and looked into the faces of his men. "You heard the cracking," he said. "You know what it means. It is the sound of our time. But tomorrow—tomorrow it will be the sound of their bones."

A murmur went through the crowd. No loud shout, no commotion. Just a dull, sinister sound, like the buzzing of flies. Hope was no longer bright. It was black, tenacious, dangerous.

The moon hung above them, silent, cold, and in Sitting Bull's chest beat a drum that wasn't his heart. It was the crack, the symbol, the rhythm. And he knew: the moon was not just a witness. It was a judge. And soon he would see bones not just break in the moonlight—but pay.

Fever dreams and cheap tobacco

The nights were no longer nights. They were blazing deserts filled with voices, sweat, and gnashing teeth. Sitting Bull lay in the tent, his body burning, his head flickering. Hunger had spawned the fever dream, and the cheap tobacco fed him like a demon that never had its fill.

The tobacco was bad, stale, and full of dust. It tasted of ash and earth, scratched his throat, and burned his lungs. But it was all that remained. Sitting Bull inhaled deeply, letting the smoke in as if trying to smother his hunger. The smoke settled like a blanket on his stomach, but it didn't satisfy anything. It was just another poison, deceiving his body.

And then the images came. The drum beat in his head, faster, harder. He saw buffalo with broken horns running through the dust, but their legs were made of bone, hollow, brittle. They cracked and fell, their bodies burst, and flies crawled out. He saw men with guns, their faces without skin—only teeth, laughing as they fired.

Sitting Bull sweated, tossed and turned, heard the voices of flies, heard the cracking of bones, heard the gurgling of the river. Everything blended together, becoming a chorus, an orchestra of misery. "You are a prophet," the voices whispered. "You are a bone-breaker. You are dust. You are a name."

He woke up, gasping, his mouth dry as sand. His pipe and tobacco lay beside him. He reached for them, filled the pipe, lit it, and inhaled the bitter smoke again. Every fiber of his being cried out for food, for flesh, for blood. But he gave her only smoke.

Outside, a child was crying. The mother rocked it, her voice soft and fragile. Sitting Bull heard her singing a song, an old song about the buffalo that once filled the plains. But her voice was weak, and to his ears it sounded as if she were singing about bones, not about life.

He stepped outside, pipe in mouth, smoke curling into the clear sky. Men sat around, their eyes glazed over, their bodies too thin. Some chewed leather, others simply remained silent. One coughed, spitting blood. Another stared into the embers as if they were a gateway to a better world.

"Chief," one murmured, "have you seen again?" Sitting Bull nodded, his face like stone. "Yes," he said. "I saw that we will continue to dream as long as we breathe."

No one laughed, no one cried. They listened the way you listen to a voice you need, even if you don't believe it.

Sitting Bull took another drag on his pipe. The smoke tasted of earth, dust, and blood. It was no consolation, but it was all that remained.

And the fever dreams continued to dance in his head, even in the light of day.

The smoke hung heavy in the tent, a gray blanket that suffocated everything. Sitting Bull sucked it into his lungs until the world shook. He closed his eyes, and immediately he was no longer in the dust, but somewhere in between—between life and death, between skin and bone, between reality and fever.

The faces came. First, those of his dead. Men who had fallen, women who had starved, children who had fallen silent in the dust. They stood in a circle, their eyes empty, their mouths silent. He wanted to speak to them, to embrace them, but they dissolved, like smoke, like dust in the wind.

Then the living came. But they didn't look alive. Their skin hung loose, their ribs cracked when they breathed. Some no longer had eyes, only black holes. They reached for him, whispering: "Feed us, Chief. Feed us with words. Feed us with smoke."

He woke up, drenched in sweat, his pipe in his hand. The fire had long since gone out, but the tobacco still smoldered as if it had ignited itself. He coughed, spitting black phlegm into the dust. But as soon as his breathing cleared, he reached for his pipe again.

Outside it was night. He stepped out, the sky full of stars, but they didn't sparkle. They stared coldly, like the eyes of an enemy. Men crouched by the fire, their faces lifeless. One murmured, talking to someone who wasn't there. Another rhythmically banged stones together, as if trying to replace drums.

Sitting Bull sat down with them. "Do you see, too?" he asked. The men looked at him, silent. One nodded slowly. "Yes," he said. "I see my brother. He's sitting next to me. But he's been dead for three winters." His voice was empty, as if that were nothing special.

Another grinned, his teeth blackened with hunger. "I hear the children laughing," he whispered. "But no children are laughing anymore."

Sitting Bull took a deep drag on his tobacco; the smoke burned, making everything dizzy. "We're all in a dream," he said. "The living, the dead, the flies, the dust. There's no difference anymore."

They nodded, as if they had known he would say that. One began to sing, a song without words, just a whimper, a humming that sounded like the buzzing of flies.

Sitting Bull closed his eyes. He saw faces again, bones again, blood again. But this time he also saw himself—old, broken, laughing like the soulless men. He wanted to scream, but the smoke filled his lungs, silencing him.

When he awoke again, his pipe was empty, his head heavy, his heart black. He no longer knew whether he had been dreaming or not. But he knew: the border was gone.

The dead were among them. The living were already half dead. And the smoke was the only breath they had left.

The nights grew longer, the dreams sharper. Sitting Bull barely slept anymore; he lay in smoke and sweat, the tobacco bitter as poison in his mouth. When he fell asleep, the images came immediately. Not like before, when visions were heavy and sacred—now they came raw, biting, like rabid dogs raging in his head.

He saw soldiers dancing in a circle, naked, their rifles like bones in their hands. They laughed as blood dripped from the ceiling. He saw women throwing children into the river because he asked them to. He saw himself standing over the buffalo carcasses, singing with the flies as if he were one of them.

He woke up screaming, his pipe in his mouth, the embers almost at his lips. Men stared into the tent, their eyes wide. "Chief," one whispered, "you talked to the dead in your sleep." Sitting Bull looked at him, but his voice was a croak: "The dead listen better than you."

From then on, they kept their distance. Even those who worshipped him hardly dared to enter his tent. They brought him tobacco, as if he were a shaman, a god, a madman who had to be fed to keep him from attacking them.

One night, a young warrior came, with wild fear in his eyes. "Chief," he whispered, "you are no longer you. You talk in your sleep, you scream, you laugh like the men without a soul. The children cry when they hear you." His hands trembled, but he held his gaze. "We need you. Not your dreams."

Sitting Bull laughed, a dry, ugly laugh that frightened even him. "You want me without my dreams?" he asked. "Then you want a shadow. Because I am nothing else."

The warrior backed away as if he had seen a demon. And in that moment, Sitting Bull knew that even his own men were afraid—not of the soldiers, not of hunger, but of him.

The tobacco made it worse. It made the dreams not softer, but sharper. Sitting Bull saw fire falling from the sky, saw children with faces like old men, saw the river full of bones instead of water. Sometimes he even saw himself—dead, bloody, but smiling.

And when he awoke, the smoke was always there. It tasted of earth, of dirt, of blood. It filled him, but it also left him empty.

In the distance, a dog barked, hoarse and sickly. Sitting Bull heard it, and in his head it sounded like a drumbeat. He smiled weakly. "Everything is a song," he murmured. "Even the crackling, even the smoke."

But in the eyes of his men, he was no longer a song. He was a fever dream, walking on two legs.

The smoke hung heavy like a cloud over the camp. Sitting Bull had filled his pipe again and again, as if trying to drown his hunger in the smoke. But the more he drew, the sharper the images became. They no longer came only at night. They came in the middle of the day, in the middle of conversation, in the middle of his breath.

He stood up, pipe in hand, face wet with sweat. "They're coming!" he shouted. Men, women, and children wheeled around, their eyes wide. "They're coming with wheels that eat bones, with guns that laugh! I saw them in the smoke!"

A silence hung over the square, heavy as iron. Some stared at him as if he were a prophet. Others looked at each other, shaking their heads. "Hunger is eating away at his brain," one murmured.

But Sitting Bull was unstoppable. He stepped into the center, his pipe in his hand like a weapon. "I saw the buffalo!" he roared. "They stood up, fleshless, boneless, and they ran over the soulless men! They'll trample them until nothing remains but dust! This will happen! I swear it!"

The children screamed, the women cried, some men laughed nervously. One shouted, "He's crazy!" Another, "He's a seer!" They began to argue, while Sitting Bull continued to roar, his voice hoarse, his body trembling.

"Your names remain!" he cried. "Even if your bones break, even if you lie in the dust, your names will continue to fly like flies over carcasses!" He raised his arms as if to grasp the sky, but only the smoke answered, enveloping him like a shadow.

The crowd began to move. Some knelt, praying, murmuring his words. Others grabbed their children, dragging them away as if he were a demon. A warrior stepped forward, his eyes filled with rage. "Enough, Chief!" he cried. "Your screams weaken us! We need calm, not madness!"

Sitting Bull stared at him, his eyes burning like fire. "Quiet?" he gasped. "Quiet is death. I bring you the noise that keeps you alive!"

The warrior reached for his arm, trying to grab him, trying to stop him. Sitting Bull struck—not with his fist, but with words. "You're already dead," he cried, "you just don't know it yet!"

The crowd scattered. Some fled, others came closer, as if they wanted to touch him, as if they could grasp a spark of hope through him. It was chaos. No enemy, no outside attack—just a chieftain shouting out his visions and a people torn between faith and fear.

Later, as night fell, Sitting Bull sat alone, his pipe empty. His heart pounded, his body burned. He still heard voices, heard bones crack, heard flies buzz. He no longer knew what he had said, what was a dream, what was truth.

But he knew: His words had been like fire. They had warmed—and burned.

In the morning, a strange silence hung over the camp. No children's laughter, no arguments, no clinking of bone chains. Only the buzzing of flies and the

growling of empty stomachs. Sitting Bull stepped out of his tent, his head heavy with smoke, his eyes red as hot coals.

People avoided him. Women held their children back as he passed. Men looked away, as if their gaze could no longer bear him. Even the elderly, who usually came to him for words, remained silent. He felt it in every movement: He was no longer just their chief. He was a ghost to be feared.

But there were the others too. A small circle squatted by the river, repeating his words like prayers. "Bones remain," they murmured. "Names fly." Some had rubbed themselves with ash, as if they wanted to become like smoke. One had heated a piece of buffalo bone over the fire and burned the sign into his skin. The stench of burnt flesh still hung in the air. They looked at Sitting Bull as if he were a god born of dust and fever.

He felt the weight of these two camps—those who worshipped him and those who cursed him. Both made him lonely.

He lay awake at night. The fire smoldered, the tobacco burned bitterly. He looked into the darkness and spoke to himself. "I am no prophet. I am no god. I am just a man with hunger and smoke in his head." But his voice sounded strange, even to his own ears.

He began to fear himself. When he smoked his pipe, visions came—rivers filled with bones, flies singing, children with glass eyes. When he didn't smoke, hunger came. A pain, a hole that ate away at him. He was trapped between two poisons: hunger and smoke.

Once he woke up and saw blood on his hands. He didn't know if it had been a dream or not. He looked around—no one was hurt. But the blood was there, dark, sticky. He washed it away in the river; the water was red. "Maybe I'm already dead," he murmured. "Maybe this is all just a dream."

Meanwhile, his warriors whispered in the shadows. Some said he was possessed. Others said he was the only one who could hear the river. Some wanted to follow him into the fire, others wanted to overthrow him before he swept the entire people away.

Sitting Bull heard their voices, heard the buzzing, heard the cracking. He was no longer sure what was outside and what was inside. The smoke had obliterated the border.

He lay back, closed his eyes, and whispered, "I don't fear the men without souls. I fear myself."

And that was worse than any gun.

The night was silent, but Sitting Bull heard them screaming. He heard the river, he heard the flies, he heard bones crack, even though none broke. The smoke from his pipe wrapped itself around him like a second skin. Bitter, scratchy, but stronger than hunger.

He stood up and stepped outside. Men and women saw him and whispered. He went to the fire and sat down in the middle of the light, his pipe in his hand. No one dared to disturb him. He filled his pipe, lit it, and took a deep drag. The smoke crept into his chest, into his head, until his eyes glazed over. Then he began to speak.

Not quietly, not gently. He screamed. Words that sounded like prayers, like curses, like madness. "The rivers speak! The bones sing! I've seen the soulless men suffocate in their own smoke! I've seen the flies dance over their skin until nothing remains!" His voice echoed in the night, the fire crackled, children cried.

Then he stood up. With his pipe, he drew lines, circles, symbols in the dust that he barely understood. He murmured, sang, whimpered. He put ash in his mouth and swallowed it. "Dust we are," he gasped. "Dust we remain. But dust flies when the wind carries it!"

The crowd wavered between fear and awe. Some fell to their knees, beat their foreheads in the dust, and murmured his words. Others pulled their children back, whispering, "He's possessed. He's no longer a chief."

Sitting Bull took a glowing branch from the fire and held it in his hand until the skin hissed, the stench of burnt flesh wafted through the night. He didn't flinch. "Look!" he roared. "Pain is nothing! Hunger is nothing! We are bones, and bones don't break, they last!"

A cry went through the crowd—half cheer, half horror. Men began beating themselves until blood flowed. Women threw ashes into the air. A boy reached into the fire, burned his fingers, and laughed maniacally.

But others fled, crying, screaming that the chief was lost. They said the smoke had taken him, that he was no longer human.

Sitting Bull didn't see them. He stood in the smoke, his hand burned, his pipe still in his teeth, and nothing but embers in his eyes. He didn't know if he was a prophet or a fool, whether he was speaking or just screaming deliriously. But he knew: They were listening. All of them.

And that night, he was more than a chief. He was smoke, fever, dust—and everyone feared him.

The smoke was too thick, too heavy, too bitter. Sitting Bull still stood in the circle of fire, his burned hand like a black mark, his pipe between his teeth. His voice was hoarse, brittle, but he kept shouting. Words no one could understand anymore, words that sounded like bones rubbing together.

Then he toppled over. His body fell forward, directly into the dust, the pipe shattered, and the smoke dispersed in a gray cloud. A cry rippled through the camp. Some ran to him, lifted him up, and laid him on blankets. Others dragged their children away as if he were infected.

He was still breathing, panting, wheezing. Sweat dripped from his forehead, his eyes rolled. Sounds came from his mouth, a jumble of names and curses. "Buffalo... bones... flies... fire..." It didn't sound like speech, but rather like the groan of a dying man.

The believers around him beat their chests, wept, and screamed. "The river speaks through him! The smoke has taken him! He is more than human!" A woman took his burned hand and kissed it, burning herself in the process. She screamed in pain and laughed at the same time.

The doubters stood in the shadows, their faces hard. "He's sick," said one. "He's lost." Another spat in the dust. "He brings us death, not life." The old murmurings were heard again—that he must be overthrown, that he sows madness.

The night dragged on, Sitting Bull lay between fever and faintness, people hovered around him like vultures. Some sang, some wept, some plotted.

In the morning, he was still alive, but weak. He opened his eyes, saw the light, saw the faces staring at him—full of hope, full of hatred, full of fear. He tried to speak, but only smoke came from his throat.

The camp was silent, divided, torn apart. Some knelt when he raised his head, seeing it as a sign. Others turned away, their faces dark, full of suspicion.

Sitting Bull lay in the dust, sweating, trembling, and thought:*I don't have them anymore. Not all of them. Maybe never again.*

And over everything hung the stench of smoke and burnt flesh.

Bullets that eat songs

Morning came with a bang. No clap of thunder, no drum roll—a bullet. It hissed through the air, struck the earth, and kicked up dust. Then a second, a third. The song of the guns began, cold and ugly, without rhythm, without soul.

Sitting Bull sat up, his head still heavy with fever, his whistle broken beside him. He heard the sound, knew it immediately. Bullets. The song of men without souls. A song that sang nothing, but devoured.

Children screamed, women ran, men grabbed weapons that were too old and too weak. Bullets flew, hitting wood, tents, and bodies. Each hit was a staccato, a beat on a drum no one wanted to play.

Sitting Bull stumbled out. The smoke from the rifles mingled with the smoke from the fires, and the sky was filled with noise. He saw a man fall, his chest torn open. Not a scream, just a cough, and then he was silent. His song was gone.

A boy reached for a bow, drew it, and shot blindly into the white clouds of smoke. The arrow flew, lost, and never arrived. A bullet struck him, knocking him backward. His body danced a grotesque dance before he lay in the dust. His song had been too short.

Sitting Bull roared, his voice hoarse. "Take cover! Get off the open ground!" But many didn't hear, ran like startled animals, and the bullets devoured them like wolves.

A woman sang while holding her child in her arms, as if she were trying to use the melody to stop the bullets. But the song was shattered when the bullet hit her. She fell, the child screamed, and Sitting Bull felt the bullets consuming not just bodies, but voices, songs, stories.

He ducked behind a rock, drawing a knife that was useless against bullets. He saw the warriors around him, their faces desperate, their eyes filled with dust. They had no songs left, only screams.

The whistling of the bullets became the only sound on the plain. No drums, no chants, no prayers. Only metal ripping through flesh, through dust, through air.

Sitting Bull narrowed his eyes. "The bullets are eating our songs," he muttered. "But they'll swallow themselves."

He didn't know if it was the truth or just a lie he needed. But he did know: the ground vibrated not from drums, but from gunshots. And the song they were playing was the song of the end.

The bullets didn't stop. They came like rain, like hail, but not from the sky, but from the bellies of the soulless men. Every blow tore something away—flesh, breath, voice. Sitting Bull ducked behind the rock, heard the hiss, the crack, the dull impact.

Beside him lay an old warrior, shot through his chest. His mouth was still moving, singing a song, an ancient one, of the buffalo, of the wind. But in the middle of the verse, the next bullet came, and his voice broke off. Sitting Bull heard the rest of the song hanging in the air, unfinished, unsung. The bullet had consumed it.

A girl cried for her mother, but her mother was already lying still. Her hair blew in the dust, her eyes unblinking. The girl wanted to repeat her mother's song, a lullaby perhaps, but the bullets screamed louder. The song was drowned out, and the child fell silent.

Sitting Bull saw the bullets like mouths. They had no soul, but they ate like demons. They didn't just eat bodies, they ate songs. They ate memories. Every shot was an eraser over history.

He remembered festivals, drumming, and dancing. He heard the voices of his people, singing, screaming, and laughing. Now he heard only metal, only death. The bullets had swallowed all that.

A young warrior beside him raised his bow, singing as he shot, as was tradition. "I sing so the arrow will fly!" But before he could begin the second verse, a bullet ripped through his throat. He fell, blood poured into the dust, and his song was erased as if it had never existed.

Sitting Bull felt anger in his chest. "Our songs are stronger!" he roared, but his voice was drowned out by the explosion. He reached for the knife as if it were a symbol, a sign of resistance. But he knew the knife was nothing against bullets.

The bullets continued to devour. They were insatiable. They knew no melody, only the dull pounding, the snorting of the rifles. It was a new music, cold, metallic, cruel. The music of men without souls.

Sitting Bull pressed his head against the rock, his hands shaking. "You eat our songs," he murmured. "But you also eat yourselves. For without our voices, all you have is your noise."

He didn't know if that was consolation or madness. But in that moment, amid the gunfire, it was the only thing that kept him from screaming in the dust like the others.

The hail of bullets soon no longer sounded like death, but like rhythm. Not the rhythm of the drum, not the heartbeat, not the song of the earth—but the mechanical hammering of the rifles. Sitting Bull heard it as he crouched in the dust: tak-tak-tak, a cold rhythm, soulless, without pauses.

"They have their own drums," he murmured. "Drums of iron, of fire." He felt the sound thrumming through his skull, through his ribcage, until his heart beat almost in time. He hated it, but he knew it was more powerful than any song they could have sung that night.

An old warrior next to him began to beat a drum. He wanted to counteract it, to drown out the noise. Boom-boom-boom – the heartbeat of the Lakota. But the bullets laughed at it, tearing the drum to shreds. The skin shattered, and the man fell, shot in the neck. His song died, the drum fell silent.

Sitting Bull watched as the soulless men sang their song. It wasn't a song of voices, not a song of drums, but of machines. Every gun a singer, every bullet a syllable. It was a chorus of metal, and it was loud enough to drown out the voices of the earth.

The children covered their ears. The women screamed, but they were barely audible. Even the wind sweeping across the plain sounded fainter than the hammering of the rifles. It was as if the sky itself had stopped listening.

Sitting Bull closed his eyes and saw images. He saw the dances by the river, the drums that once called the buffalo. He heard the songs that had ushered the

children into life. All of that was now swallowed up by the rattle of the bullets. He felt the old music lying in the dust, like an animal bleeding to death.

"That's their power," he whispered. "They have no drums, they have no voices. But they have the sound that swallows everything else."

He wanted to stand up, wanted to scream, but he knew the scream would be lost. No one could hear anything but metal anymore.

Then came a moment of silence. Only for seconds. The rifles were silent, the air was heavy, ears buzzed. In that silence, Sitting Bull heard something else—the pounding of his own heart, dull, raw, human. He clung to it as if it were a song he couldn't swallow.

“As long as the heart beats,” he murmured, “we have a song.”

But shortly thereafter, the hammering began again. And the false drums of the soulless men struck down the Lakota's hearts.

The dust was thick with blood, and the sky was filled with bullets. Sitting Bull crouched behind a rock, the smoke from the guns burning in the air, and he sensed it: Not only bodies were dying here. Something invisible was dying with them—faith.

Once, they had sung, even in the face of death. Men had fallen with songs on their lips, drums had slain fear, chants had summoned the spirits. But today? Today, the bullets themselves devoured hope. No more songs came from their throats, only screams, only whimpers, only dust.

An old man rose and began to call out a prayer. His voice trembled, but it held valiantly against the roar of the gunfire. "Great Spirit, hear us!" But before he could finish, a bullet struck him square in the face. He fell, blood spurted into the dust, and the prayer died with him. Sitting Bull heard the words themselves shredded in the echo.

A boy, barely older than twelve, raised his arms, crying out to the ancestors. "Hear me! Hear us!" But the bullets devoured his voice as well. A bullet ripped open his chest, he toppled backward, and his last words gurgled in his blood.

The women saw it, and you could read it in their eyes: faith crumbling like bones in fire. No song, no prayer, no dance could stop the bullets. What were ghosts compared to metal? What was smoke compared to lead?

Sitting Bull felt the questions consuming him. Was he still a prophet? Or just a fool, breathing smoke and spewing words no one believed anymore? His visions had been grand, powerful, full of images. But here, in the dust, the bullets were consuming even the images.

A warrior beside him spat in the dust. "Your dreams are weak, Chief," he growled. "They won't stop bullets." His eyes were hard, filled with dust and anger. Sitting Bull looked at him, about to answer, but the truth stuck in his throat.

He knew: The faith of his people was being shot here. Bullet by bullet, song by song.

But then he raised his voice. Hoarse, cracked, but loud enough to creep over the thunder. "The bullets are eating our songs!" he cried. "But they can't eat our souls!"

Some heard him, nodded, and clung to his words like drowning people. Others laughed bitterly. But Sitting Bull continued to shout, even though he wasn't sure he believed it himself.

The bullets continued to pound, eating away. But a spark remained in their hearts—small, faint, but there. Sitting Bull felt it, the way one feels an ember beneath cold ashes.

And he thought:*Maybe a spark is enough. Maybe.*

The bullets continued to sing, an ugly song of metal. Sitting Bull pressed himself against the rock, feeling each blow vibrate in the earth. Once, fighting had been a shared struggle. Shoulder to shoulder, song to song, breath to breath. But now? Everyone was alone.

He saw it clearly. Men were no longer running to save their brothers, but to save their own lives. One grabbed a horse, jumped on, and left the others behind. A woman screamed because her husband ran away without seeing her. A child stumbled, the mother didn't run back—she only ran forward.

The bullets had torn the bond apart. No song bound them anymore, no prayer held them together. Only fear. Everyone listened to the rhythm of the gunfire, no longer to the voices of others.

Sitting Bull roared, "Stick together!" But his words were weak, lost in the noise. A man turned around, his eyes wide. "Together?" he shouted. "Die together, Chief?" Then he ran on, leaving his brother in the dust.

An old warrior raised his spear, preparing to plunge into the hail of bullets. But no one followed him. In the past, ten would have run with him; today, not one. He fell alone, the spear beside him, his body still. A song that was never sung.

Sitting Bull felt his heart grow heavy.*The bullets not only eat our songs,*he thought.*They are eating us. They are eating the community.*

He saw a boy kneeling with a bow and arrow, his hands trembling. He was alone. No one beside him, no one behind him. He drew, fired, missed. A bullet struck him, and he fell. No warrior carried him back. He remained in the dust, alone.

The women screamed, the children screamed, but everyone screamed for themselves. No chorus, no echo, only individual voices shattered by the noise of the gunfire.

Sitting Bull knew: A people without song is weak. But a people without community is dead.

He raised his voice again and roared: "We are not alone! We are one people! Hear me!"

But in the men's eyes, he saw only fear. Some nodded, others looked away. No one sang.

The bullets continued to pound. Each hit slashed the bonds that had once made them strong.

And Sitting Bull felt that he was fighting two enemies: the men without souls – and the cold that was growing in the hearts of his own people.

The ground trembled. Not like the hooves of buffalo, not like the dances around the fire. It was a different kind of tremor—dull, hard, cold. Every bullet that struck the earth was like a punch to the belly of the world. Sitting Bull felt it beneath his knees. The earth groaned.

He pressed his hand into the dust. It was warm, damp with blood, and with each impact the ground vibrated as if he himself were dying. "The bullets aren't just eating us," he murmured. "They're eating the earth."

A warrior beside him, covered in blood, nodded weakly. "The earth weeps," he whispered before falling himself, a bullet in his chest. His blood seeped into the dust, and Sitting Bull heard it as if it were a drop in a sea of pain.

Bodies lay everywhere, faces down, faces up, some with their eyes open, staring at the sky. Sitting Bull felt as if the dead were looking at him. Not with reproach, but with a kind of quiet expectation.

*We still hear you,*said her eyes.*But not for much longer.*

The living screamed, ran, cried. But it was chaos, a noise without direction. The bullets devoured everything, muffling every voice. But the silence of the dead – it was great. It lay heavy on the plain, heavier than lead, heavier than dust.

Sitting Bull felt like he was suspended between two worlds: that of the living, which was disintegrating, and that of the dead, which seemed quieter, clearer. Perhaps the dead were truly listening. Perhaps they were the only ones who could still listen.

He closed his eyes; the sound of the gunfire continued to roar. But in his head, he heard more than just bullets. He heard voices. The voices of those who had fallen. They no longer sang a song, but they hummed, like wind in the tall grass.

He opened his eyes and saw the warriors still fighting, desperate, alone. He wanted to call out to them that the dead were listening, that the earth was groaning, that they were not alone. But his throat was dry, his voice weak.

He just murmured, "Maybe we're already dead. Maybe we're just fighting so the earth can hear us."

The bullets continued to eat away, but Sitting Bull kept his hand in the dust. He felt the trembling, the groaning, and he swore to himself that he would speak, even if only the dead were listening.

For a people without song was dead. But a people whom even the dead forgot was even deader.

The hail of bullets didn't last forever. Nothing lasts forever, not even killing. At some point, the shots became less frequent, the hammering faltered, the metal drums slowly fell silent. What remained was silence. Not a holy silence, not a peaceful one—but the silence after a meal.

Sitting Bull crawled out of cover, his body sore, his head covered with dust. He barely dared to breathe, as if his very breath could bring back the soulless men. Before him lay the plain covered with bodies, covered with blood, covered with dust. Men, women, children—the bullets had made no difference.

He walked among them, stumbling over arms, spears, and arrows that had never found their target. He saw faces he knew. Brothers, sisters, warriors, children. All silent. Their songs were gone, swallowed up. Only the open mouths still spoke of screams no one heard anymore.

A boy lay there, his hand clenched around a broken bow. Sitting Bull knelt down and touched his forehead. "Your song was short," he whispered. "But it was a song." The wind took the words and carried them away.

He saw women holding their children in their arms, both dead, both silent. Men staring open-eyed into the sun. Old people who had fallen in the middle of prayer. All songs that had been devoured by bullets.

Sitting Bull stood up, his legs weak, his soul even weaker. He knew: This was more than a defeat. It was a severance. A severance through history. The bullets had done something no hunger, no river, no winter had ever achieved: They had extinguished the voices themselves.

The survivors huddled together, their faces gray, their eyes empty. No one sang. No one drummed. No one prayed. They were silent, and the silence was worse than the roar of the gunfire.

Sitting Bull looked at her, his heart heavy.*A people without song,*he thought,*is a people without a soul.*

He raised his voice, wanted to sing, wanted to scream, wanted to do something to break the spell. But nothing came out. His throat was dry, his voice dead. He, too, was silent.

The bullets had won. Not because they had killed more people. But because they had consumed the song that made the Lakota a people.

He looked up at the sky, at the moon hanging pale over the plain. "You saw it," he murmured. "The bullets have won. But not forever."

But deep down, he knew: Even if they drummed again tomorrow, sang again, it would never be the same. The song was corroded. Changed forever.

Children's eyes in empty tents

The camp was no longer the same. The bullets hadn't just consumed bodies, they had also swallowed voices. What remained were children's eyes. Large, empty eyes that had seen too much. Sitting Bull walked through the rows of tents—some half-burned, some toppled, some empty. And everywhere, children stared.

They didn't speak. They didn't scream. They only saw. Eyes that no longer knew sleep, eyes that absorbed the dust like a second life. Some still held the hands of their dead mothers, others silently chewed on pieces of leather to stifle the growling in their stomachs.

A girl sat in the entrance of a tent, her fur torn, the interior empty. Her hair was plastered with dust, her face rigid. In her hands she held a drum, much too large for her. She didn't beat it. She only held it, as if it were a body she wouldn't let go of. Sitting Bull stopped and looked at her for a long time. He wanted to tell her to play, to make the drum speak. But he couldn't speak.

A boy crawled through the dust, searching for something to eat. His fingers found an old bone, and he gnawed on it until blood filled his lips. He didn't cry. His eyes were dry, as if they had already shed too many tears. Sitting Bull knelt down, trying to take the bone from him. But the boy hissed like an animal and bit at his hand. Sitting Bull pulled back.

The same picture everywhere: children who were no longer children. Some were playing with stones, but it wasn't a game—they were throwing them at each other until they shattered, as if imitating bullets. Others sat still, drawing lines in the dust, circles, spirals, symbols that Sitting Bull didn't understand.

The empty tents whispered like ghosts. They were graves without bodies. Sitting Bull stepped into one, saw the remains of blankets, the imprint where people had slept. Now nothing. Only wind. He heard the rustling and thought it was voices, but it was just dust creeping across the ground.

"A nation lives in its children," his grandfather once said. Sitting Bull thought of this phrase and saw the eyes around him—empty, rigid, old. He wondered if there was still a nation here.

A small boy pulled on his leg. Sitting Bull looked down. The child had large eyes, deep, black holes. "Why have the spirits left us?" the boy asked. His voice was thin, barely audible, but it cut like a knife. Sitting Bull wanted to answer,

wanted to say that the spirits were still there. But he couldn't lie. He remained silent, just placed his hand on the boy's head.

The children looked up to him, but not as a chief. More like a man who owed them something. And Sitting Bull knew: He owed them a song, a future. But all he had was smoke, dust, and broken words.

The children's eyes followed him wherever he went. He felt them like needles in his back. And in every look lay the same question:*What now, Chief? What now?*

The days that followed were spooky. No drumming, no singing, no dancing. Just children sitting in the dust, inventing games that weren't games at all. Sitting Bull saw them, and each time it ate a little more out of his chest.

A boy took a piece of wood, held it like a gun, and imitated the sound they all knew:*Tak-tak-tak*He aimed at other children who were falling, laughing, just as they had seen the soulless men fall. But the laughter was hollow, empty, without joy. It sounded like an echo from another world.

A girl had made a doll out of rags. But instead of rocking it, she threw it into the dust, stepped on it, picked it up, and threw it again. "Dead," she murmured, "dead, dead." Every time the doll hit the ground, it was a blow to the heart.

Other children banged stones together as if they were drums. But the rhythms were wrong. No call to the spirits, no dance for the buffalo—just a dull pounding, restless, harsh, like the hammering of rifles. They had learned the wrong beat.

Sitting Bull approached them, wanting to intervene. "These aren't games," he said. "This is poison." But the children just looked at him with those empty eyes. One laughed, a laugh no child should have had. "We're playing like the men without souls," he said. "They won, so we'll play like them."

The words sank deeper than any bullet. Sitting Bull wanted to scream, to break up the game, to force the children to sing again, to dance like they used to. But he knew: You couldn't order them to sing a song.

He watched as a girl drew lines in the dust with her fingers. First circles, then crosses, then shapes that looked like bodies. She lay down next to him, staring up at the sky, pretending to be dead. The others laughed and lay down with them. A whole row of children suddenly lay still in the dust, their eyes closed. They were playing massacre.

Sitting Bull turned away, his hands shaking. "The bullets didn't just eat our songs," he muttered. "They showed the children how to die."

Later, as he walked through the tents, he heard voices again. Children imitating the screams of the dying, miming their whimpers, acting out their last breaths. No song, no prayer—just death as a game.

And Sitting Bull knew: The children were mirrors. What they saw, they imitated. And all they had seen was blood, dust, and bullets.

The children's eyes in the empty tents looked at him as if they wanted to say:*This is our future, Chief. Eat or be eaten. Play or die. What do you want to teach us?*

But Sitting Bull had no answer. Only silence.

The night was cold, the fire small. The adults were silent, as always, each in their own hole of fear and hunger. But the children sat there, their eyes wide, awake, empty. Sitting Bull saw them, and something inside him cried:*If the songs are dead, at least tell the stories.*

He sat down, cleared his burning throat, and inhaled the smoke deeply. Then he began to speak. Of the buffalo that once filled the plains, of the hunts, of the drums that made the heavens themselves tremble. Of the warriors who went into battle with songs and died with songs.

The children listened, but their faces remained rigid. Their eyes didn't flicker, there was no smile, no wonder. They sat there like little stones, unable to believe anything anymore.

He continued his story. Of visions, of ghosts, of times when the earth was full of voices. But the words tasted bitter on his tongue, and he heard themselves sound hollow. Every word was a shadow, not a light.

A boy raised his hand. "Where are the buffalo now, Chief?" His voice was hard, not childlike. Sitting Bull swallowed, searched for an answer, and found none. "The men without souls have taken them," he said. "But their spirits still walk."

A girl laughed, a thin, evil laugh. "Ghosts don't feed a belly." She continued chewing on a dry piece of leather. The others nodded silently.

Sitting Bull ran his hand over his face. His stories were no longer food. They had once empowered children, shown them who they were. Now they bounced off like arrows against stone.

He changed the story. He spoke of heroic deeds, of warriors who stood against all enemies, who never gave up. But then another boy, his voice as cold as the wind, said: "The bullets ate them anyway."

The words cut deep. Sitting Bull knew the boy was right. The bullets had also consumed the stories, turning them to dust before they could be fully told.

Nevertheless, he continued speaking. He spoke until his voice was hoarse, until his pipe was empty, until even the smoke left him. In the end, they all fell silent. The children looked at him, those eyes, black and empty, and he knew: They hadn't believed.

Maybe they hadn't even listened. Maybe they had just watched his lips, like one watches a fire about to go out.

Sitting Bull placed his hands in the dust. He felt the cold of the earth, the silence. "Our stories are weak," he murmured. "Perhaps they will die with us."

The children said nothing. They just looked at him, their eyes full of dust, full of hunger, full of death.

And Sitting Bull felt that his words were no longer enough.

The next evening, Sitting Bull tried again. But this time he didn't speak first. The children sat in a circle, the dust between them, and one of them simply began. A boy, no older than nine, with hollow cheeks and eyes that seemed far too old.

"It was night," he said, "and the soulless men came. They had guns, and the guns were hungry. They ate everything. They ate men, they ate women, they ate children." His voice was monotonous, without trembling, without taking a breath. "And then they ate the sky. The sky was black and full of holes."

Another child, a girl with chapped lips, laughed hoarsely. "No," she said, "the sky was red. Red like blood. The soulless men painted it." She scratched a pattern into the dust with her fingers—lines that looked like balls dancing in circles.

Other children joined in. They didn't tell heroic songs, or myths about buffalo or ghosts. They told stories about massacres. They described how people fell, how bullets flew through bodies, how blood ran into the dust. Some made noises, laughing as if it were a game.

Sitting Bull sat there, his hands in his lap, unable to interrupt them. Their voices were thin but sharp. Each word cut deeper than he expected.

A boy told how he had seen a man get shot through the face. He described it so precisely that the others giggled, as if it were a funny story. Another child told of a horse that fell and how it kicked until its bones cracked. The children's laughter was bright, but fake.

Sitting Bull closed his eyes.*They tell what they saw,*he thought.*But when children talk about death, it becomes a fairy tale. And fairy tales grow.*

When he opened his eyes, a girl told him she had dreamed of the soulless men drowning in the river. "The river was full of blood," she said, "and they drank in it until they burst." The children laughed loudly, shrilly, and a few repeated the words as if it were a rhyme.

Sitting Bull wanted to intervene. He wanted to say that stories should give hope, that they should bring life, not more death. But he couldn't get the words out. Because he knew: hope wasn't what these children knew. They knew only dust, hunger, and bullets.

So he let them talk. They talked through the night, a chorus of children's voices, speaking of blood, dust, and death as if they were songs.

And Sitting Bull listened, his heart heavy, his throat dry. He knew: The children were making up their own stories. But these stories were like the bullets themselves—they devoured everything that had remained a song.

The nights grew colder, the fires smaller, and the children's voices louder. Sitting Bull soon realized that their stories were no longer just stories. They had become rituals—twisted, dark incantations that had nothing to do with the old prayers.

A boy stood up, arms outstretched, and screamed into the night: "Come, ghosts! Come and eat the soulless men!" The other children laughed, screamed along, and stamped in the dust as if they themselves were drums. No rhythm, no order, just noise that sounded like an animal crying for blood.

A girl drew figures in the dust—lines, circles, spirals. "This is a man without a soul," she said. "If I break him, he'll die." Then she stepped on him until the dust was gone. The children cheered, screamed, and repeated the game until the floor was covered with crushed figures.

Sitting Bull watched them. He sensed something was wrong. The old rituals had invoked spirits to provide protection, to bring strength. But this? This was just anger, just an imitation of violence. It was a distorted reflection of the old songs.

One night, the children began playing with bones. They collected them from the edge of the camp—horse bones, dead bones, who knew? They banged them together, clinking them, laughing. "The bones speak!" they cried. "The ghosts are coming!"

A boy held up a skull—too small to have been a horse's. He placed it on his head, bobbing, dancing, and making sounds. The others cheered and shouted as if he were a chief. Sitting Bull felt his skin grow cold.

He wanted to intervene, wanted to tear their bones away, wanted to force them to learn the old songs. But he couldn't. His legs were heavy, his mouth dry. He stood there like a stone, unable to do anything.

The children continued to stomp, scream, and bang bone against bone until the sound echoed through the night. Some adults listened, weeping quietly. Others turned away, as if they couldn't bear what had become of their children.

Sitting Bull knew: This was no future. This was an abyss. But the children no longer knew any other language. Their spirits weren't guardian spirits. They were shadows, born of bullets and hunger.

And he thought:*Maybe they're right. Maybe they're the only spirits still listening to us.*

The children's eyes glowed in the firelight, empty yet full of rage. And Sitting Bull saw in them something that frightened him: the next generation—born of dust and blood, raised by bullets, and accompanied by ghosts who no longer knew song.

Sitting Bull couldn't bear it anymore. Night after night, the same scenes: children beating bones, throwing bones, praying bones. They screamed at the spirits, not with respect, but with hunger and hatred. Their voices were rough, shrill, distorted. It didn't sound like prayer; it sounded like madness.

One evening, he stepped into the middle of their circle. The fire burned low, the children stomped, threw dust into the air, laughed, and shouted. Sitting Bull raised his hands. "Enough," he said. But no one listened. A girl with an animal bone in her hand screamed louder: "The bones are talking! The bones want blood!"

Sitting Bull ripped the bone away from her and threw it into the fire. The children fell silent, their eyes wide and dark. "You're hearing wrong," he said, his voice deep. "Bones don't speak with hate. Bones are what remains when the body is gone. They are memories. Respect."

A boy spat in the dust. "Respect doesn't fill a stomach." The others nodded, some laughed. Sitting Bull felt the words bounce off him like arrows off stone.

He took a deep breath and sat down. "Then listen to the old songs," he said. He began to sing, softly at first, then louder. A song of the river, a song of the buffalo, a song he had learned as a child, a song he had heard in his father's bones.

The children stared at him. Some were silent, others grinned. One of them banged two bones together again, hard, wrong, disturbing. The song shattered like glass under stones. Sitting Bull fell silent.

"Your bone games aren't a song," he said. "It's just imitation. You play death, you play bullets. But you are Lakota. You must play life."

A girl laughed, her laughter dry as dust. "Life? Where do you see life, Chief?" She pointed at the empty tents, the fallen warriors, the smoke still hanging in the air. "All we see is death. So we play what we see."

The words hit harder than any bullet. Sitting Bull felt like he was talking to a wall. But he sang again. This time he closed his eyes, hearing only his own breathing, his own heartbeat.

Slowly, very slowly, a woman joined in. Then an old man. The children fell silent, some looked confused, others angry. But the sound was there—weak, fragile, but there.

Sitting Bull opened his eyes. "That's our song," he said. "Not the clang of bones. Not the laughter of bullets. Our song."

The children looked at him. Some turned away, ran away, back to their games. But a few stayed. They listened. Their eyes were still empty, but deep down, something glowed—small, faint, but there.

Sitting Bull knew: He hadn't won. But perhaps he had brought something back. A thread. A spark.

And sometimes a spark was enough to start a fire.

The night was almost over. The fire was just embers, and the stars hung coldly above the camp. Sitting Bull sat there, his knees heavy in the dust, the smoke from his pipe in his throat, and he looked at them—the children.

They were everywhere. Between the tents, by the river, in the shadows. Some slept curled up like animals, others stared awake into the embers, their eyes black, deep, empty. Eyes that had seen too much. Eyes that were older than their bodies.

He wondered what they saw when they looked at him. A chief? A man? A ghost? Perhaps all of the above. Some looked at him with a kind of hope, faint as smoke. Others looked at him as if he were guilty, as if he had betrayed them all.

Sitting Bull sensed it: These eyes weren't just eyes. They were mirrors. Mirrors of his people. Empty, because the songs had been eaten away. Old, because childhood had died. But still open. Not yet completely closed.

He remembered his own childhood. Of fire, of drums, of stories that were stronger than hunger. Back then, children's eyes had shone. These didn't. But they glowed. A faint, cold glow. Like coals that were almost extinguished.

He stood up, looked over the tents, the emptiness, the dust. "You are the song," he said softly. "Even if it's broken." His voice was weak, little more than a murmur. But a few children heard. Their eyes followed him, dark, heavy.

A boy whispered, “What if we don’t have a song anymore?”

Sitting Bull knelt down and placed his hand on his shoulder. "Then invent one," he said. "But not out of bones and bullets. Out of heart. Out of breath."

The boy nodded, slowly, uncertainly. His eyes were still empty, but something flickered deep within. Not much. But enough.

Sitting Bull knew he couldn't give the children back what the bullets had taken from them. But perhaps they could create something of their own when they were old enough. Perhaps a new sound would grow from this dust.

The embers of the fire sank lower, the stars moved on. Sitting Bull looked at the children—children's eyes in empty tents. And he thought:*If we survive, it's because of them. If we die, it's also because of them.*

It was a small consolation. But consolation was all that remained.

Hunger stinks worse than corpses

The war had torn them apart, but hunger gnawed deeper. Bullets killed quickly, hunger slowly, insidiously, like a dog that never lets go. Sitting Bull woke up and smelled it—not just the dust, not just the smoke, but that sweet-sour stench of empty stomachs. Hunger had a smell, and it was worse than that of corpses.

The corpses smelled of the end. Hunger smelled of rotting hope. Of dreams rotting in the stomach. There was a constant growling, an echo in the tents that never stopped. Children no longer cried loudly—they only whimpered, dry, thin, as if even wailing had no power left.

A man chewed on a leather thong until blood ran from his gums. A woman sucked on a stone just to feel saliva. Some boiled grass, boiled earth, boiled their own shoes. The stench was disgusting—burned leather, wet dirt, bitter herbs that didn't fill you up.

Sitting Bull saw it, and it burned worse than any bullet. Hunger was not an enemy you could draw a knife against. It ate slowly, steadily, inexorably. And it didn't just eat the body—it ate dignity. Men who were once warriors lay there like dogs licking their fingers. Women who once sang stared silently into the dust.

The children looked on with wide, empty eyes, but their gaze had become sharper. They knew that no song fills the stomach. They looked to Sitting Bull as if they expected him to pull buffalo from the dust, meat from the wind. But he had nothing. No magic, no miracle.

One evening, a man came to him, his face sunken, his skin yellowing. "Chief," he said, "hunger stinks worse than death. Do something." His voice was

scratchy, barely human. Sitting Bull looked at him, about to answer, but what could he have said? That the hunger was stronger than he was? That even the spirits were fed up with their screams?

He remained silent, and the man spat at his feet, a thin thread of blood and saliva. "You're nothing," he hissed. "Nothing compared to hunger." Then he walked, staggering, back into the darkness.

Sitting Bull stayed behind, the smell in his nose, the children's eyes on his back. He knew the bullets had eaten their songs. But hunger devoured what remained.

And he stank. He stank worse than any rotting body, worse than blood, worse than smoke. He stank of despair.

Hunger changed everything. It made people smaller, harder, and more evil. Once, they had shared, supported one another. Now, sharing was a myth. Everyone only sought what they could devour themselves.

A boy sat by the river and bit into a dead crow. The feathers stuck to his lips, blood dripped down his chin. He didn't grin, he didn't cry. He just chewed, slowly, determinedly, as if it were meat from a feast. Sitting Bull watched and felt his stomach churn. But he said nothing. What could he have said? That the crow wasn't enough?

A woman was boiling leather. An old boot, boiled in a broken pot, the stench nauseating. She spooned the broth as if it were soup. Her children drank with her, their eyes closed, as if they didn't want to know what they were putting in their mouths.

An old man chewed on bones that had long since been scraped out. He scraped them with a stone until his fingers bled. "There's something more," he murmured. "There must be something more." But there was nothing.

The dogs that remained disappeared quickly. At first, they were seen less often, then not at all. People knew where they had gone, even if no one talked about it. Sitting Bull smelled the grease in the smoke. It was heavy, sweet, treacherous.

One night, he heard a whimpering coming from a tent. He approached, saw shadows, saw hands bending over a small body. He heard the cracking, the tearing. His stomach clenched, his throat burned. He didn't go in. He knew what he had heard, and he knew it was better to remain silent.

The next day, there was one less child in the camp. No one asked. No one spoke. Only the wind blew through the empty tents, and the hunger stank worse than ever.

People avoided Sitting Bull. Some looked at him as if he were responsible for the disappearance of the buffalo. Others demanded he summon spirits, have visions, and perform miracles. But all he had was tobacco, smoke, and a voice no one wanted to hear anymore.

He thought of the soulless men. They had bullets. But bullets only killed once. Hunger killed every day. And Sitting Bull knew: This was the real war. Not against guns, but against the gut.

The stench hung over the camp like a cloud, sweet, sharp, unbearable. It was the stench of despair. It settled into the skin, the hair, the souls.

And Sitting Bull knew: Hunger turned people into animals. And it turned animals into shadows.

Hunger didn't just creep into their stomachs. It crept into their heads. Sitting Bull noticed it himself. He used to have visions, images, dreams that came like thunder from the sky. Now, only shadows appeared.

He closed his eyes, smoked his pipe, waited for spirits to appear. But what came were images of flesh. Buffalo, large and black, but instead of horns they had knives, instead of eyes they had fire. They didn't run across the prairie, they ran into his chest, and he woke up with saliva in his mouth that was as bitter as bile.

His warriors no longer asked him about visions. They knew he had none. One spat in the dust and looked at him harshly. "Chief, your spirits are dead. Hunger has consumed them." Sitting Bull didn't answer. Because he knew it was true.

The women stopped praying. They had no strength. One of them said, "What good are prayers when your stomach growls louder than the drums?" She turned away, her eyes empty, her hands sore from digging for roots that weren't there.

Even the children had stopped dreaming. They used to talk about buffalo, about the sky, about rivers full of fish. Now they only talked about food. About meat they didn't have, about soups that were never cooked. Their dreams stank like hunger itself.

Sitting Bull tried to speak. He spoke of hope, of the future, of strong spirits. But the words crumbled in the air. Everyone looked at him, but no one really listened. One man whispered, "Words don't satisfy." And everyone nodded.

He realized that the hunger was worse than the bullets. Bullets had taken their songs, yes. But hunger was eating away at their souls. Piece by piece. No song, no dream, no faith could overcome the growling in their stomachs.

That night, Sitting Bull tossed and turned in his tent. His stomach burned, his head throbbed. He thought of his visions, of the time when he had thought he could hear the river itself. Now he heard only his stomach. A dull, animalistic sound.

"Perhaps," he murmured into the darkness, "hunger is the last god. The only one that remains."

And he knew that this God was cruel.

Hunger had no friends. It turned brothers into enemies, mothers into wolves, and children into small animals with sharp teeth. Sitting Bull saw it in the camp: people who had once stood shoulder to shoulder were now snarling at each other like dogs over a bone.

Two men were fighting over a piece of leather. Not large, not valuable, just a scrap that one had boiled in water. They screamed, tore, and hit, until one hit his head on a stone and remained silent. The other chewed the leather while blood seeped into the dust beside him. No one intervened.

A woman took the last piece of meat she had saved for her children. But before she could share it, her brother snatched it from her hand and devoured it himself. She jumped at him, scratched, bit, and screamed. He struck her down. The child sat beside him, silent, his eyes wide and empty.

Children stole from the pots before the elders got anything. Elders took what little they had back from the children. Families were no longer families, just stomachs growling against each other.

Sitting Bull tried to bring order. "Divide," he said. "We are one people, not a pack of wolves." But his voice was drowned out. A man shouted back: "Divide? You want to cut open my belly and divide it?" The others laughed, bitterly, ugly.

Once a boy came to Sitting Bull. "My mother says if I die, my little brother will have more to eat." His eyes were dry, unafraid. Sitting Bull grabbed him by the

shoulders, shook him, and yelled, "No! No! Nobody says that!" But he knew it was true.

The hunger was worse than any bullet, worse than any winter. It was invisible, but it devoured souls.

At night, Sitting Bull heard couples arguing, brothers lashing out, children screaming because their parents weren't giving them anything. He heard the tents no longer sound like songs, but like the grinding of teeth.

Hunger wasn't just a stench. It was a poison that rotted love.

Sitting Bull sat alone, his pipe empty, and thought:*A nation can survive bullets. But no nation survives when hunger devours brothers.*

And outside, between the tents, stomachs growled louder than any song.

Sitting Bull thought he was stronger than the others. He was a chief, a warrior, a visionary. He had survived bullets, seen blood, and rivers of corpses. But the hunger was different. The hunger didn't come from without, it came from within. It crept through his bones, scratched at his nerves, whispered in his ears.

First came the taste. He sat there, chewing nothing, and suddenly he tasted meat. Tender, juicy, warm. Buffalo meat, like in the days of hunting. He felt his saliva flow, his stomach scream, as if the food were really there. He bit the air, chewed, swallowed—but there was nothing. Only dust on his tongue.

Then the images came. He saw women skewering meat, turning it over fire. He heard the fat sizzling, smelled the scent, thick and heavy, like a dream from another world. He stood up, reached for it, but his hands caught only smoke. The meat crumbled to dust, which blew into his face.

Sometimes he heard drums. Not balls, not bones, real drums. He saw dancing, he saw children laughing, he saw men drinking, women singing. A celebration. A full, rich celebration. He stepped into the middle of it, felt hands pulling him, heard voices calling him. He laughed—and woke up, alone, with a stone in his arms, clutching it like a child.

The hallucinations came more often. Sometimes they were sweet—feasts, dances, old songs. Sometimes they were gruesome—he saw people tearing flesh, faces covered in blood, children with teeth sharper than knives.

He no longer knew what was true. He heard someone calling his name, but when he turned around, no one was there. He could taste meat on his tongue, but when he swallowed, it was only blood because he had bitten his lip.

The others noticed. They saw how he grasped at nothing, how he laughed for no reason, how he spoke when no one answered. Some whispered that he had gone mad. Others said hunger had taken him.

Sitting Bull knew they were right. Hunger was a spirit, stronger than any other. It was tearing him apart from within.

One night, he saw his father before him. Old, proud, with buffalo horns in his hair. "You have failed," he said. "You cannot feed them. Your visions are dust." Sitting Bull fell to his knees, wept, screamed, and reached for him—but his father was just smoke.

He woke up with dirt in his mouth, his stomach empty, his eyes dry.

And he thought:*Maybe Hunger is right. Maybe he's the last chief. And we're all just his flesh.*

It started quietly. A missing piece of meat here, a missing bone there. But soon it was everywhere: theft. No one trusted each other anymore. Every pot was guarded like a treasure, every bag like a fortress. Even children held onto a piece of leather as if it were gold.

Sitting Bull saw two men fighting over a dead dog. One had found it, the other claimed it. Words turned into screams, screams into fists, fists into knives. In the end, one lay still, the other chewing. The meat was still steaming, while blood flowed across the floor.

A boy was caught stealing a piece of dry bone from an old man's tent. The old man grabbed him, beat him, and continued beating him, even after the boy had long since fallen silent. No one intervened. Hunger had killed the rules.

Women quarreled over worthless roots. They tore each other's hair, scratched each other's faces until both bled. In the end, others took the roots and disappeared, leaving the two of them lying exhausted in the dust.

Some began to sneak around at night. Shadows crawling through the camp, pushing their way into tents, groping with their hands, greedily, desperately. In the morning, something was missing again, sometimes someone. One had

simply vanished—perhaps fallen into the river, perhaps moved into another tent, perhaps wandered into someone else's stomach. No one asked.

Sitting Bull tried to bring order. He assigned men to watch. But who would watch when their stomachs were rumbling? One by one, they disappeared from the watch to search, steal, and eat for themselves.

Soon the tents were no longer refuges, but traps. Screams could be heard at night—a man being strangled for hiding something. A woman screaming at her children for betraying a piece of meat. Children tearing each other's hair until blood flowed.

Hunger was king. He had no crown, no drum, no dance. But he ruled.

Sitting Bull knew he had nothing against it. He couldn't smoke a vision, give a speech, or sing a song. Words didn't satisfy. And those who were hungry didn't listen.

He saw his people disintegrating, not by guns, not by soldiers, but by their own guts. Brothers, sisters, parents, children—everyone against everyone.

And he thought:*The bullets have broken us. But hunger is eating us to the bone.*

And the stench—that sweet, disgusting, rotten smell—hung over everything as if it were the last song they knew.

It wasn't just the stomach that was emptying. It was the head. Sitting Bull saw it in the faces—not just sunken cheeks, not just dark circles under the eyes. It was forgetfulness.

The old men who once preserved the stories now only muttered to themselves. Words like crumbs, incoherent, fragmented. One began to speak of buffalo, of hunts, of songs. But in mid-sentence, he fell asleep, his breath shallow, his stomach empty. When he awoke, he no longer knew what he wanted to tell. Hunger had consumed his memory.

The children no longer asked about the elderly. They had once sat with them to listen to stories. Now they saw them only as weak bodies, easily robbed. Stories didn't satisfy. Stories were worthless.

Sitting Bull himself noticed it. He tried to recall his own visions, images of rivers filled with buffalo, faces of ancestors, dances that moved the sky. But the

images blurred. Instead, he saw only flesh. Flesh he didn't have. Flesh that didn't exist.

Hunger erased memory. Every passing hour was like a hand erasing old songs as if they had never existed.

Once, a child spoke to him. "Chief, tell us about the past." Sitting Bull opened his mouth – and nothing came out. His mind was blank. He knew he knew stories, but they were gone, swallowed, decayed. He stared at the child until it walked away, disappointed.

The women no longer cried. They had forgotten how to cry. The men no longer spoke. They had forgotten how to fight when there was no meat in their bellies. All that remained was the growling. A single, great, collective growl that was louder than any song.

Sitting Bull sat in the dust, his pipe empty, his gaze up at the sky. He tried to form words, but they dissolved before they left his lips. He thought:*Hunger doesn't just eat flesh. It eats time. It eats history.*

He looked at his hands. They trembled, thin as sticks. "Perhaps," he whispered, "we will be forgotten. Perhaps only bones will remain."

And he knew: Bones don't stink. But hunger does.

The drum beats in rusty rhythm

There was a time when the drums were the heart of the camp. Every night, every feast, every battle—the drum beat, and everyone followed. They connected voices, they held the songs together, they were the heartbeat memory of the Lakota.

Now only a drum remained. Scratched, torn, the skin dry like old leather, the edges splintered. But someone was still beating it. Not powerfully, not proudly—weak, rusty, wrong.

Sitting Bull sat in the dust and listened.*Boom. Boom.*Every beat limped, stumbled, sounded like a heart pumping that had been beating for too long. No rhythm, no song. Just a rusty beat.

The people gathered anyway. Not many—most were too weak, too hungry. But a few came. They listened, as if hoping the drum could summon the spirits once more. But the sound wasn't a call. It was a groan.

A girl tried to sing along, her voice thin and broken. It barely held a melody. A boy stomped, but his foot fell off the mark, weak, without strength. It wasn't a dance, it was a twitch.

Sitting Bull closed his eyes. The drum had once been thunder. It had shaken the heavens, made the earth sing. Now it was just a rusty tool, an echo of what it once was.

An old man hit her, his arm trembling. "We have to hit her," he murmured. "If we stop, we'll die faster." Every blow was a fight against forgetting. Every blow was proof that they hadn't completely fallen silent yet.

But Sitting Bull heard it differently. He heard the drum no longer calling for life, but for death. It sounded like a grave pounding on itself.*Boom. Boom.*Like a heart that's about to stop.

The children watched, their eyes dark. Some laughed at the sound, others grimaced. One whispered, "The drum is sick." Sitting Bull heard it and knew: It was the truth. The drum was sick, and with it the people.

But he stood up, placed his hand on the old hide, felt the cracks, the dust. "Keep beating," he said. "Even if the beat is rusty. Even if it sounds wrong. Beat until the last breath falls."

For he knew: as long as the drum beat, rusty or not, the people were not yet completely dead.

The drum continued to beat. Slowly, irregularly, rustily. Each beat was like a rusty nail driven into the flesh.*Boom… boom…*No thunder, no dancing. Just a disjointed beat creeping through the night.

But the longer she beat, the more people crawled toward her. First just a few children, then women, then men, their faces sunken, their eyes hollow. They sat in a circle, listening to the old fur creak, the sound lingering in the dust.

Sitting Bull saw her eyes change. They became glassy, wide. The drum drew her in. No song, no rhythm—just this rusty beating. It made her silent. It made her stare.

A girl began to murmur. Words no one understood. She rocked back and forth, her body as thin as a branch. A boy laughed, but it wasn't a laugh; it was a croak. Others began to sway and moan. Not a prayer, not a dance—more like tumbling into the abyss.

Sitting Bull felt it too. Every blow vibrated in his chest, slow and heavy.*Boom. Boom.*It was as if the drum were taking over his own heart, as if he were beating to the beat of a rusty, dying instrument. He felt his breathing adjust, his thoughts stumble.

The old man who was hitting had tears in his eyes. "They still hear us," he murmured. "The spirits. They hear, even if we hit wrong." But Sitting Bull didn't know if he was right. Perhaps no one was listening anymore. Perhaps they only heard themselves, listening in a circle to a dying heart.

The children fell into a kind of frenzy. Some screamed, shrill, meaningless sounds. Others rocked until they fell over, trembling in the dust as if possessed. Women held their hands up, their faces blank, their mouths open. Some sang ancient words that broke apart before they formed a verse.

It was neither dance nor prayer. It was madness. A rusty madness that ate its way out of the drum and crept into every chest.

Sitting Bull felt himself being drawn in. He wanted to scream, to stop them. But his throat was dry, his tongue heavy. Instead, he placed his hand on the ground and felt the earth itself vibrate to the rusty rhythm.

And he thought:*Perhaps this is our final rhythm. Not beautiful, not proud. A rusty heart that beats until it breaks.*

The drum continued to beat. Rusty, wrong, brittle—but it didn't stop.*Boom. Boom.*A heart that didn't want to die, even though it was already broken.

Sitting Bull saw the people huddled around the fire. They were no longer warriors, no longer singers, no longer storytellers. They were shadows, emaciated, weak, but connected by this rusty rhythm.

It wasn't strength. It was a shared fever dream. The children bobbed as if they were marionettes, the strings invisible, guided by the drum. Women murmured words that came from ancient songs, but sounded shattered, like splinters from a vessel. Men beat their chests in the same rusty rhythm, until their ribs sounded like dull drums of bone.

Sitting Bull looked into her eyes, and he realized something: They were no longer empty. But they weren't full of hope either. They were full of fire. Not bright, not clear—dark, feverish, like sparks shooting from rusty iron.

Hunger, bullets, death—everything had broken them. But the drum still held them fast, not like a song, but like a chain. They were no longer a people; they were a herd, herded together by a rusty blow.

An old warrior fell, in the middle of the circle. His body trembled, foam at the mouth. But no one helped him. They just stared at him, in time, in rhythm, as if his death were part of the ritual. And perhaps it was.

Sitting Bull felt his heart pounding. He heard the rusty beat in his head, in his chest, in his stomach. It made him weak, but also awake. It made him feel that they were still there—not as warriors, not as singers, but as bodies breathing in unison.

"The drum holds us," he murmured. "But it keeps us sick."

A boy suddenly started screaming in the same rhythm as the drum.*Boom. Scream. Boom. Scream.*Other children followed suit, until a chorus of rusty screams filled the night. Women threw ash into the air, men beat the dust with sticks, which vibrated in time.

It wasn't a dance, not a celebration. It was a delirium. A feverish trembling that frightened Sitting Bull – and at the same time gave him hope. Because it was something. Not silence. Not emptiness.

A rusty beat was better than none at all.

Sitting Bull closed his eyes. The rusty rhythm crept into him like poison.*Boom. Boom.*Not loud, not proud, but sick, like a heart that rusts, that stumbles, but still beats.

He felt his thoughts blur. The smoke, the dust, the hunger—everything dissolved. The drum beat, and he was no longer himself. He was part of something bigger and yet more broken.

Images appeared before him. Not a lucid dream, not a pure vision like before, but a distorted theater.

He saw buffalo. But their horns were made of rusty iron, their hide full of holes. They ran across the prairie, but with every step, pieces fell off them—flesh, bones, dust. They were shadows of what they once were.

He saw his people. Men, women, children—but their faces were blank. They had drums in their hands, but the drums were broken, the sound wrong, rusty. They beat nonetheless.*Boom. Boom.*And every time they struck, another star fell from the sky.

He saw the soulless men. They no longer had guns, but steel drums. They laughed as they beat to a rusty rhythm, and the sky itself trembled.

Then he saw himself. He stood in the middle of the circle, his skin cracked, his eyes empty, his hands burned. He beat a drum made of bone. His own heartbeat was the rhythm, rusty, off-key, but loud. And every time he beat, another Lakota fell.

Sitting Bull's eyes widened, sweat on his brow, his breathing heavy. The drum was still beating.*Boom. Boom.*He saw the people in a circle, their bodies swaying, their voices murmuring. He saw the children with their eyes wide open, as if they shared his vision.

"No," he murmured. "That's wrong. That's not the vision."

But deep down, he knew: It was precisely the vision that the rusty beat brought. No more pure images, no more hope. Only rusty shadows, distorted, sick.

The drum continued to beat, and Sitting Bull felt his heart respond. He was no longer sure if it was his heart—or if the drum had taken over his heart.

And he thought:*Perhaps this is the last vision. Not of the Great Spirit. But of the Rust.*

The drum never stopped. Night after night, always the same rusty beat.*Boom. Boom.*No song, no celebration, no dance. Just this limping, false heart.

And yet the people came. Even the weakest crawled toward it, as if the rusty sound were the last thing that drew them. It was as if they had discovered a new religion. No gods, no spirits—just the drum.

They squatted in a circle, their eyes empty, their mouths open, and they listened. Some muttered words they didn't understand. Others rocked until

their bones cracked. The children hit stones with sticks, in unison, rusty and crooked.

The drum became law. Anyone who didn't come was shunned. Anyone who didn't sway to the beat was stared at as if they were dead. Even the sick were dragged here, laid down so they could hear the rusty beat.

An old man said, "The drum keeps us alive." But Sitting Bull knew: It wasn't keeping them alive. It was just keeping them in a circle, like cattle that couldn't run away.

One evening, a woman began to scream as the drum beat. She tore out her hair, ran in circles, laughed, cried, and fell to the ground. The others watched, but no one helped. It had become part of the ritual. A sacrifice to the rusty beat.

The children played games in a circle. They screamed, they fell, they hit each other, always in rhythm. Blood flowed, but no one stopped them. It was the new dance, the dance of the rust.

Sitting Bull watched, his hands heavy, his throat dry. He wanted to stop them, wanted to break the drum. But he couldn't. Because he knew that if the drum fell silent, only silence would remain. And the silence was worse.

The drum wasn't hope. It wasn't a song. It was a cage. But it was all they had left.

"This is no longer a drum," muttered Sitting Bull. "This is a heart of rust. And we're all stuck in it."

And yet he sat down, closed his eyes, and let the rusty rhythm run through his chest. For even he was trapped.

It was the middle of the night when Sitting Bull got up. The rusty clock struck again, dull, off-key, incessant.*Boom. Boom.*He couldn't bear it anymore. Every blow ate into his skull, his stomach, his heart.

He walked to the circle. The people swayed, their eyes empty, the dust swirling to the rusty rhythms. The old man was still beating, his arms shaking, his face wet with sweat. Sitting Bull stepped forward and grabbed the drum.

"Enough," he said. His voice was harsh, but it sounded strange in the air.

The old man protested. "No. If the drum falls silent, we die." His fingers clawed at the wood as if he were holding his own heart.

Sitting Bull snatched it away. The crowd stared at him, their eyes wide, black, feverish. "The drum doesn't keep you alive," he cried. "It keeps you stuck. It makes you sick."

He lifted the drum, wanting to throw it into the fire, wanting to silence the rusty heart.

Then the children screamed. They threw themselves before him, clinging to their small bodies, screaming, hissing. A woman rushed forward, struck him with her fist, and wept. "No, Chief! No! Without the drum, we have nothing."

The men came too. Not strong, not with weapons, but with desperate hands. They tore, pulled, begged, some even bit. Sitting Bull held the drum high, but he felt: He wasn't fighting an instrument. He was fighting the last shred of stability his people had.

He saw their faces. Hungry, empty, desperate. They didn't cling to the drum, they clung to the sound, to the rusty beat, because it was the only thing that still held them together.

He slowly let go of her. The old man grabbed her back, pressed her to his chest, and hit her again.*Boom. Boom.*People breathed a sigh of relief, children stopped screaming, women wiped their tears.

Sitting Bull stepped back. He knew he had lost. Not to the old man. To the rust.

The drum was no longer just an instrument. It had become a god. A false god, sick, rusty, but powerful.

Sitting Bull looked at her, heard the blow, and thought:*If I destroy the drum, I destroy its heart. But if it continues to beat, we'll all rust to dust.*

And he didn't know what was worse.

The drum continued to beat.*Boom. Boom.*Rusty, wrong, broken – but it worked.

Sitting Bull sat at the edge of the circle, his face in shadow, his eyes fixed on the fire. He listened to how the sound held the people. They rocked, they

murmured, they breathed in unison. It wasn't beautiful, not strong, not proud. But it was something.

He thought of earlier times. When the drums were like thunder, when the earth itself trembled when they struck. Back then, they had summoned life, spirits, power. Now, they summoned only rust.

But maybe that was a song too. A song of decay. A song of the end.

The children stomped and screamed in a rusty rhythm until their voices became hoarse. Women sang ancient syllables that crumbled into the dust. Men beat their chests as if their bodies were additional drums. The circle was a single rusty machine, clattering, groaning, alive and dead at once.

Sitting Bull heard his own heart. It beat in unison. He wondered if he heard the drum—or if the drum heard him. Perhaps there was no difference anymore.

He whispered, "This is our last song." No one heard him, but he knew it was true. No buffalo song, no victory song, no prayer to the Great Spirit. Just this rusty beat.

And maybe it was enough. Maybe it was better to end with a rusty blow than to disappear in complete silence.

The drum continued to beat, and Sitting Bull closed his eyes. He saw the people, tired, broken, rusty—but united in that one, false, final heartbeat.

Boom. Boom.

The Song of Rust. The Song of the End.

And no one dared to stop it.

Drunken dealers, bad deals

They didn't come like saviors, they came like vultures. On rickety wagons, the wheels screeching, the barrels clanging, the horses as emaciated as their owners. White traders. Reeking of alcohol, sweat, and cheap tobacco. Their eyes red, their voices loud, their hands greedy.

Sitting Bull saw them from afar and immediately felt the bitterness in his stomach. He knew why they were coming. Not to help. Not to save the people. But to bargain, as one bargains with dying animals.

The wagons opened. Bottles were lifted out, shining, deceptively. "Firewater!" the merchants shouted, as if they had a gift. But Sitting Bull saw the dirt in the bottles, saw the cheap alcohol they were selling like poison.

They offered more: old blankets that smelled of mold. Knives that were blunt. Mirrors in which the Lakota faces looked even emptier than they already were.

And in return, they wanted everything: furs, jewelry, weapons. Anything that was still of value.

A merchant, barely able to stand upright, slurred, "One rifle for ten barrels of firewater. A good deal!" He laughed, his breath stank of liquor and rotten meat.

A few young warriors grabbed it, greedily, desperately. They drank, spat, laughed, and stumbled until they lay in the dust. Women looked away, children stared. Sitting Bull clenched his fists. He knew that every sip destroyed more than a bullet.

He stepped forward, his voice harsh. "You come like scavengers. You bring nothing but poison."

The merchants grinned, their teeth yellow, their faces greasy. "Poison? No. Joy!" One held up a bottle, the glass sparkling in the light. "Your people want to forget. We sell forgetting."

Sitting Bull felt anger in his chest. He wanted to smash the bottles, overturn the wagons, leave the traders in the dust. But he knew that many of his people were weak, that some wanted to be forgotten. That they would take the bottles, even if he forbade them.

The traders knew it too. That's why they laughed, loudly, ugly, until the stench of their voices filled the camp.

And Sitting Bull thought:*This is worse than hunger. Hunger eats away at the stomach. But this eats away at the soul.*

The traders knew exactly what they were doing. Their bottles were half full of firewater, half full of water from rivers filled with dead fish. They mixed sweat and stench into each barrel and sold it as if it were gold.

"Real stuff!" they shouted, their tongues heavy with alcohol, their eyes glazed over. One opened a bottle, drank, and let the stuff run down his chin. He grinned, yellow teeth on his red face. "See? It makes you strong!" But Sitting Bull saw him immediately stagger, his vision blurred.

The blankets they offered stank of mold and feces. They were full of holes, eaten by moths. But they were sold as if they were new. "Only the best for the Lakota!" slurred a fat merchant, spitting into the fire.

The knives were blunt, the blades covered in rust. The mirrors showed faces distorted, like those of demons. This wasn't a trade, this was mockery.

And yet people took it. Because they had no choice. Because hunger was worse than pride. Because the thirst for oblivion was louder than any memory.

Sitting Bull stood by, watching as his people took the scrap, opened the bottles, and drank the poison. He saw men laugh, cry, and collapse. He saw women stagger, pulling children by the arms, and the children themselves drink from the leftovers.

“You sell death,” he said coldly.

A merchant grinned. "Death sells well."

Sitting Bull wanted to draw his knife. But he knew: one dead trader would bring ten more, worse, greedier. And the soulless men would use the death of one trader to send even more lead.

So he remained silent. He remained silent as the bottles circulated, as the poison flowed, as the faces of his people grew even blanker.

The traders counted coins, laughed, belched, and pissed in the dust as if the land were already theirs.

And Sitting Bull thought:*They're taking our land, our meat, our songs. And now they're selling us death, and we're paying for it.*

The firewater flowed like a dirty river. Bottles circulated, mouths burned, stomachs boiled. Men drank until their voices were loud, until they screamed, laughed, cried—all in one night.

Sitting Bull saw it. He saw how the alcohol was stronger than hunger, stronger than pride. He saw men rise, stagger, grab each other. Words became screams, screams became fists. Soon, blood was flying through the air, faster than any song.

A warrior pushed his brother to the ground because he took a bottle from him. They rolled in the dust, hitting and biting, until one of them couldn't get up. The bottle broke, the firewater seeped into the ground, and children licked it from the dirt.

A woman laughed, her eyes glazed over, her hands clutching a bottle. She danced naked in front of the fire until a man grabbed her, rough, hungry, drunk. Others screamed, grabbed, and Sitting Bull had to look away because he knew there was no order here anymore.

The merchants watched, laughed, and belched. One clapped his hands as if it were a performance. "Look at them!" he shouted. "The great warriors! Now they're dancing for my bottles."

Sitting Bull clenched his fists, his teeth gritted. But there was nothing he could do. If he intervened, if he drove the traders away, they would only come back, with soldiers behind them. And his people would still crave them.

An old man plunged into the fire, stumbled, and fell. His blanket caught fire, he screamed, rolled, and burned. No one helped him. Everyone stared, laughed, and continued drinking. When he was quiet, someone pulled the charred bottle from his hand and drank the rest.

Sitting Bull saw it and felt his heart break. Not from hunger, not from bullets—but from the poison his people poured into their own mouths.

“Firewater,” he muttered, “is worse than death.”

But the fire crackled, the bottles clinked, the merchants grinned. And the people's drum now beat rustily to the beat of the poison.

The next morning, the camp smelled of vomit, urine, and blood. Empty bottles lay scattered like dead snakes, broken, sharp, glistening in the sun. Men lay in

the dust, groaning; others slept as if dead. Women held children who had drunk too much and shook them until their small bodies gasped again.

Sitting Bull stood in the middle of it. He felt shame like fire in his chest. "Enough!" he roared. "This poison is eating us faster than bullets. Not another bottle in this camp!"

A few raised their heads, their faces tired, etched with intoxication. Others looked at him with hatred in their eyes, red and puffy. One spat in the dust. "You want to take the only thing we have left?"

"The only thing?" Sitting Bull stepped closer. "The only thing you have is yourselves. Your children. Your voices. Not these bottles full of death."

But the voices grew louder. "The poison makes us forget." - "It warms us." - "It silences hunger." Everyone had an excuse, everyone had a justification.

A man stood up, staggering, his face covered in dirt and tears. "Chief," he slurred, "you talk about ghosts. But the bottle is the only ghost that still comes when we call."

The crowd laughed, a bitter, ugly laugh. Sitting Bull felt his words fall into the void, like arrows striking iron.

He reached for a bottle lying on the ground and picked it up. "See? Poison!" he shouted, and hurled it against a rock. The glass shattered, and the liquid ran into the dust.

But instead of approval, there was a scream. Men jumped up, grabbed him, and tugged at his arms. "Not the last bit!" they yelled. "Not that!" Women howled, children grabbed at the broken pieces, licked the wet dust.

Sitting Bull stood there, his chest heavy, his throat dry. He wanted to save them, but they didn't want to be saved.

The traders grinned from afar, their hands on their barrels. They knew they had won. Sitting Bull could fight hunger, fight bullets. But he was powerless against the oblivion the bottles promised.

“You want to die,” he murmured, “and you want to do it laughing.”

And he knew that the poison didn't just fill stomachs. It filled the emptiness left by hunger. It was an illusion. But illusion was all they wanted.

The traders smelled decay like wolves smell blood. It wasn't enough for them to trade a few bottles for a few furs. They wanted more—and they knew how to get it.

"You don't have anything? It doesn't matter," slurred one, a fat man with sweat stains under his arms. "We'll give you credit. You'll pay tomorrow." His grin was as greasy as lard.

And so the shady deals began. Men received bottles, women old blankets, children rusty knives – and they didn't sign anything for it, they just gave their word. But the traders knew: A word from the starving is worth as much as dust.

The next day they came back, demanding payment. "You owe me two hides." - "You owe me jewelry." - "You owe me your horse." And if someone didn't have anything, they took something else. Anything that glittered, anything that would last.

Once, they pulled the blanket off a woman's shoulders because her husband hadn't paid. She screamed and cried, but they didn't give it back. A trader wrapped the blanket around his stomach and laughed as if he were a chief.

A boy had taken a bottle. The next day, the traders demanded his knife, the only one he had. He cried and begged. They took it anyway.

So they piled debt upon debt. They knew the people had nothing left. But that was precisely their trick: They wanted them to give up everything, until they were naked, until they were nothing but bodies in the dust.

Sitting Bull saw it. His hands trembled with anger. "You are thieves," he said.

A merchant grinned broadly. "No. We're merchants. You agree, you take, you drink, you lose. That's trade."

But Sitting Bull knew: This wasn't a trade. This was robbery with a smile.

But his people could not resist. Hunger was stronger than pride. Desperation was louder than reason. They gave, they took, they lost.

The traders didn't write anything down; they didn't need paper. They memorized faces, debts, names. And if someone didn't pay, they took whatever they wanted. Horses. Weapons. Women.

"Bad deals," muttered Sitting Bull. "Deals that make us rot."

And he knew that each of these contracts was not written in ink, but in blood.

Sitting Bull had always distrusted them, but only now did he see the full extent of their corruption. The traders weren't lonely drunks on wagons full of poison. They were eyes and ears, sycophants in filthy vests who sold more than firewater.

They sold information.

He saw it when they came into camp. They talked too much. They asked questions, too many questions. "How many warriors do you have left?" - "Where are the horses?" - "Which families still have weapons?" They asked while distributing bottles as if they were harmless words, but their gaze was sharper than knives.

Sitting Bull watched them standing together in the evenings, their heads close together, their laughter fake. One of them pulled out a notebook and wrote crooked lines. He thought no one was watching. But Sitting Bull saw everything.

Later, the traders disappeared, rode east, and a few weeks later, soldiers arrived. They always knew where the weak were, where the supplies were, where resistance was thinnest.

It was no coincidence. The merchants were their spies, their harbingers. They came with bottles and left with secrets. And every sip the people took was a piece of information that returned in uniform.

Sitting Bull confronted one of them. "You are not traders. You are spies."

The man grinned broadly, his teeth black. "Spies? No. Businessmen. We sell you death, we sell them knowledge. We're rich, while you're just hungry."

Sitting Bull wanted to kill him. But he didn't. Because he knew that ten others would come, worse, more sober, better armed.

But the people didn't notice. They were too numb from the firewater, too broken by hunger. They took the bottles while the merchants laughed and saw everything.

"They trade our bones," muttered Sitting Bull. "And we're still paying for it."

He knew the uniformed officers' bullets would soon fall again. And that, thanks to the traders, they knew exactly where to go.

Sitting Bull stood at the edge of the camp, arms folded, looking at the traders' wagons. They laughed, drank, and spat in the dust, while his people, eyes blank, raised their bottles to their mouths.

He saw it clearly: These weren't traders. These were Trojan horses on rickety wheels. They needed no uniforms, no flag, no drums. They came with bottles and left with the very core of his people.

He used to think that men in uniform were the worst enemies. With their rifles, their cannons, their cold faces. But now he knew: the traders were worse. Because they didn't shoot bullets. They made you drink until you shot your own soul.

"You're destroying us," he said quietly, almost to himself. "And we thank you for it."

He saw a child raise a bottle to his lips, even though the liquid burned, even though he coughed and choked. The mother laughed, dazed, and didn't pull him away. The dealer grinned, rubbing his stomach as if he had already won.

And in a way, he did.

Because every sip weakened the people. Every shady deal took more from them than it gave. Every trade was a step closer to the uniformed officers who were already waiting, rifles at the ready, while the merchants held the doors open for them.

Sitting Bull clenched his fists. He wanted to set fire to the wagons, to let the traders rot in the dust. But he knew his own people would hate him for it. They would stand before their poisons like warriors before their drums.

And so he just stood there, his throat dry, his eyes heavy, his heart rusty. He heard the bottles clinking, the merchants laughing, his people staggering.

"They're not traders," he muttered. "They're horses. Trojan horses. And we pulled them into the camp ourselves."

The drum still beat rustily in the background, but its rhythm was fainter than the clinking of the bottles.

And Sitting Bull knew: with every sip, with every deal, the uniformed officers came closer.

The chief vomits into the night

The night was black, the fire small, the bottles empty. Sitting Bull sat at the edge of the camp, his head heavy, his stomach burning. He hadn't wanted to drink, but someone had pressed a bottle into his hand, and at some point, thirst had overpowered his pride.

Now he crouched in the dust, his fingers in the dirt, his body writhing. At first, only stomach acid came, bitter and burning. Then everything came: the cheap alcohol, the smoke, the hunger, the rage. He vomited as if he were spitting out his entire soul.

The sound was ugly, a gurgling, a wheezing. His vomit steamed in the moonlight, stank of fermentation, of disease, of the traders' poison.

He spat, coughed, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. His body trembled, his head throbbed. And yet, for a moment, he felt lighter. As if he had truly beaten the poison out of himself.

But the truth remained: The hunger was there. The traders were there. The uniformed men were there. He could vomit as much as he wanted – the world remained rotten.

He leaned back and looked up at the sky. The stars gazed down, cold and indifferent. "See?" he murmured. "Your chief is vomiting in the dust. This is what's left of pride."

In the distance, he heard laughter. Men, still drunk, staggered through the camp. Children screamed, women whispered, traders snored. And Sitting Bull sat there, his stomach empty, his head full.

He remembered the days when he was strong, when he had visions, when men followed him. Now they followed bottles, not him. He vomited again, dry vomit, until only bile came out. It tasted of metal, of blood.

"Maybe," he murmured, "I should vomit it all out. Until there's nothing left. Until I'm empty. Then no one can take anything from me."

The wind blew over him, cold and harsh. He pulled his knees to his chest, his eyes half-closed. And he knew: This night would not end. Not for him, not for his people.

The chief vomited into the night – and the night vomited back.

Sitting Bull hung over the dust, his hands dug deep into the earth. His stomach was empty, but he continued to choke, as if trying to get rid of more than just alcohol. Nothing came out but bile—yellow, bitter, burning. It trickled to the ground in thin threads, mingling with the dust, becoming a dark stain that glinted in the moonlight.

He stared at it. And suddenly he saw things in it.

At first, only blurry shapes, then moving images. Faces grew out of the vomit stain—the faces of his ancestors. They looked at him, serious, sad. Their eyes sparkled like stars, but they were cold, without warmth.

"You betrayed us," they whispered. "You drank. You weakened."

Sitting Bull shook his head, his lips trembling. "No... I... I just wanted to forget."

But the faces were laughing, not a friendly laugh, but a dry, cruel one. "Forgetting is for the dead. The living remember."

He blinked, and the faces transformed. Now he saw soldiers. Men in uniform, with rifles. They marched straight through the vomit, their boots in the slime, the clang of their weapons like a drumbeat. But their heads were empty—only skulls beneath their hats.

Sitting Bull choked again, spat, as if he could drive them away. But they didn't disappear.

Then he saw children. Lakota children, laughing, dancing. But their dancing was wrong, crooked, rusty. They held bottles in their hands, banging them against each other like drums. Their laughter sounded like breaking glass.

He squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head. "Go away," he muttered. "You're not real."

When he opened his eyes again, he saw something else. A buffalo. Large, black, powerful—but its flesh hung in shreds, its belly empty. He knelt down as if to drink, but instead of water, only fire came out of the river.

Sitting Bull screamed, his body shaking, his throat burning. He spat again until he tasted blood.

Then he collapsed, gasping, his forehead in the dust. His vision dissolved, leaving only vomit, only stench.

“Perhaps,” he whispered, “this is all that remains of the Great Spirit—faces in the bile.”

The night was silent. Only his breathing could be heard, heavy, rattling, rusty like the drum that still beat in the distance.

Sitting Bull wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, tasting blood and bile. His stomach was empty, but a storm raged in his head. The images he had seen in the vomit haunted him. Faces, bones, empty eyes. Everything wavered between delusion and truth.

He looked around. They were lying everywhere, his people. Some were snoring, their mouths open, bottles beside them. Others were still staggering through the darkness, slurring, laughing, crying. The children were crouching on the remains of the bottles, licking the shards as if they were candy.

Sitting Bull felt his heart sink. "This isn't intoxication," he murmured. "This is a curse."

He knew: The firewater was worse than any bullet, worse than hunger, worse than rust. It crept into people, corroding not only their livers but also their spirits. It left them empty, dull, and without willpower. It didn't just take away their strength—it took away their faith.

A man stumbled by, his face covered in dirt, his eyes glassy. "Chief," he slurred, "I saw the Great Spirit. He was in the bottle." Then he laughed, toppled over, hit his face in the dust, and lay there.

Sitting Bull knelt beside him and shook him. Nothing. Just shallow breath, stinking of alcohol.

He felt rage rising within him. He wanted to grab them all, to rip the bottles from their hands, to force them to see clearly. But he knew it was pointless. They would snatch the bottles back from him, would tear him down if he dared.

He thought of the children, of their empty eyes. Already they knew the taste of alcohol more than the sound of the old songs. Already their first dream was not of a buffalo, not of a river, not of an eagle—but of a bottle burning in their throats.

"The poison eats our spirits," muttered Sitting Bull. "And when the spirit is dead, the people are dead."

He spat again, blood and mucus in the dust. He felt weak, older than he was. But he knew he couldn't just give up. Not as long as someone was still breathing.

The night was silent, interrupted only by choking, laughter, and the clinking of bottles. Sitting Bull closed his eyes, heard the rusty drum in the distance, and thought:*Maybe we're no longer fighting guns. Maybe we're fighting the poison within ourselves.*

And he knew that this fight was the hardest.

The bile still burned in his throat as Sitting Bull rose. His legs trembled, but his vision was clearer than it had been in days. He sensed that he stood at the end of a long line—and behind him was only an abyss.

The traders. They were always there, like rats. They came with their carts, with their bottles, with their bad deals. They laughed while his people lay in the dust. They drank while his children starved. They wrote up invisible debts while the blood of warriors seeped into the river.

He couldn't bear it anymore.

He walked through the camp, past the bodies lying in the dust. Men who were still slurring their words. Women who were silent. Children who were dreaming with their eyes open. No one followed him. No one stopped him. They were too numb, too tired, too empty.

He saw the wagons at the edge of the camp. The traders were snoring loudly, reeking of sweat and cheap tobacco. One was even laughing in his sleep, as if he were still haggling in his dreams.

Sitting Bull clenched his fists. He saw the barrels, the bottles, the sacks of moldy flour. All the poison that was dragging his people into the dirt.

Part of him wanted to set everything on fire immediately. The wagons, the barrels, the men. Everything. He wanted to fill the sky with smoke until the spirits themselves could smell the stench.

But he paused. He knew: If he did it, if he touched the traders, the men in uniform would come. They would respond with bullets. And his people, numb and weak, wouldn't even be able to fight back.

His hands trembled. Rage, powerlessness, anger—everything boiled within him. He fell to his knees, digging his fingers into the dust. "Great Spirit," he murmured, "give me the strength to break them. Or give me the coldness not to."

But the sky was silent.

So he swore to himself. "I'll talk to them," he growled. "No bargaining. No poison. No more lies."

His voice was rough, scratchy, but firm. For the first time in a long time, he felt something like clarity again.

He knew it would cost blood. He knew it might be his own. But better to die in the dust with clear eyes than to rot alive with a bottle in his hand.

Sitting Bull sat up, the night cold around him. He looked at the wagons, at the traders, and his heart beat hard, rusty, but steadfast.

"Tomorrow," he murmured. "Tomorrow I'll ask them."

And then he spat into the dust one last time, as if he wanted to leave the bile itself behind as an oath.

The sun rose across the plain like a knife. It burned, it stung, it made the stench of vomit, sweat, and cheap alcohol even more intense. The camp was silent, except for the growling of empty stomachs and the gasping of those still drunk.

Sitting Bull stood up. His stomach was empty, his head heavy, but his steps were firm. He knew what he had to do.

He approached the traders' carts. They stood there, heavy, ugly, like fat animals resting in the shade. The men were awake—some already drunk again, others with shifty eyes that saw everything.

"Here he comes," one shouted, grinning broadly. "The chief, he vomits more than he fights." Laughter followed, dull, dirty, full of scorn.

Sitting Bull stopped and looked at them without blinking. "No trade today," he said. His voice was rough, but it cut through the air like a stone through thin ice.

The traders grinned, their teeth yellow, their lips greasy. "No trade? Chief, your people want us. They want our firewater, our blankets, our knives. They're begging for it." One held up a bottle, waving it so that the sun sparkled inside. "Do you see that? This is your god now. And we are his priests."

A murmur went through the camp. Women approached, children stared, men crept forward, swaying. Everyone watched as Sitting Bull stood before the traders.

"You only bring poison," he growled. "You take more than you give. You don't feed us, you poison us."

The merchants laughed. One stepped forward and spat in the dust. "Poison? You call it poison, but they call it peace. They call it oblivion. You can't force them to suffer sober."

The crowd was silent. Some nodded to the traders, others looked down in shame. Sitting Bull felt the weight—he stood alone.

"I say: No more bottles in this camp," he shouted, loudly and clearly, so everyone could hear. "No more poison! Those of you who still buy are not only selling themselves, but also their children!"

The people stirred, whispered, murmured. Some nodded at him, others grimaced. One shouted: "And then what, Chief? Shall we drink only when we're hungry? Shall we chew on your pride when our stomachs are empty?"

Laughter erupted, this time from his own people. Sitting Bull felt it hit him, like a bullet made not of iron, but of disappointment.

The traders enjoyed the spectacle. "Look, Chief," one cried, "they're no longer following you. They're following thirst."

Sitting Bull clenched his fists. He knew that if he gave in now, it would all be over. But if he continued, he risked his own people betraying him.

He took a step closer, standing directly in front of the wagon, his eyes fixed on the traders. "Then I'll drive you away myself," he growled.

The crowd gasped. The merchants grinned. One put his hand to his knife, slowly, as if threatening.

And Sitting Bull stood there, alone, while the whole camp watched.

The air was thick as old blood. The camp stood in a semicircle, silent, tense. Children clung to their mothers' skirts, men crept closer with folded arms. Everyone waited.

The traders grinned broadly, but their eyes were cold. One, a broad-shouldered dog with greasy hair, stepped forward. "Drive us out, you say?" he slurred, but his voice was sharp. "Then start, Chief. We're here. Come on, throw us out."

He stood wide-legged, pulled a knife from his belt, the blade blunt but shiny enough to catch the sun. He deliberately let it dance in the light as he laughed.

Sitting Bull didn't move. He stood there, firm, his eyes narrowed. His hands trembled, but he didn't show it. He knew: one false step, and the whole thing would end in blood.

The traders played their tricks. One pulled out a bottle, held it up, and shook it so that the firewater splashed. "Look!" he shouted to the crowd. "The chief wants to take this from you. He wants you to die dry! Do you want that?"

A murmur went through the crowd. Some nodded, others shook their heads. A woman screamed, "Give it here, I need it!" A man pushed her back, growling, "Let the chief speak!" The people swayed like a tree in a storm, undecided.

Sitting Bull took a step forward, his voice deep. "They sell you death. Every swallow takes a piece of your soul. Look at you!" He pointed at the bodies in the dust, those who were vomiting, those who were sleeping as if they were already dead. "That's your price! Is that how you want to die?"

For a moment there was silence. Only the clinking of the bottle in the wind, only the growling of the dogs at the edge.

Then a merchant laughed loudly, harshly, as if trying to break the silence. "Die? You'll die anyway. With or without us. But with us, you'll die laughing."

Laughter. First from the traders, then from a few drunken warriors among the people. The laughter was filthy, contagious, cutting through Sitting Bull's words.

The merchant with the knife stepped closer. "So, Chief. Do you want to fight? Or just vomit in the dust again?"

Sitting Bull felt anger rising within him. His throat burned, his heart pounded. He knew if he backed down now, he would be lost—and with him, his people.

He flexed his muscles, ready to stand against her even alone. His gaze was a knife, sharper than the iron in the merchant's hand.

The crowd held its breath. Everything hinged on this moment.

And Sitting Bull thought:*If I have to die, then not in a frenzy, not in the dust. Then with clear eyes, in the face of these bastards.*

The merchant with the knife grinned broadly, smacking his lips as if he already had meat in his mouth. "Come on, Chief. Show me you still have teeth." He spat into the dust, the blade glittering in the sun, and the camp held its breath.

Sitting Bull moved slowly. No twitch, no trembling. Just a step forward. His gaze was hard, his hands empty—but empty didn't mean powerless.

The merchant lunged, staggering, more in threat than attack. But Sitting Bull didn't retreat. He grabbed the arm, twisted it around, and with a movement faster than his age suggested, slammed his fist into the man's face. Bones cracked. Blood spurted.

The merchant fell, the knife flying into the dust. A scream rippled through the crowd. Children shrieked, women threw their hands over their faces.

The other traders immediately moved. One pulled a rusty rifle from the cart, another grabbed a bottle and brandished it like a weapon. "You dog!" one yelled. "You'll pay for this!"

Sitting Bull picked up the knife from the ground, holding it as if he'd been fighting with it for a hundred years. "Come," he growled, "but I'm not going alone."

The crowd swayed. Men murmured, women screamed, children howled. A few warriors stepped forward, uncertain, their hands empty, their eyes between fear and fire.

The traders hesitated. They were drunk, but not stupid. They saw that Sitting Bull was willing to take blood for blood. They knew that even a starving people still had teeth when forced.

One of them, the one with the rifle, aimed, his face red with rage. "I'll shoot you, Chief."

But a young warrior from the crowd leaped forward, flinging his rifle aside. The shot rang out, the sky shattered, and dust flew into the air. A child screamed, and the crowd scattered.

Now chaos ensued. Fists flew, bottles shattered, knives flashed. Blood dripped into the dust, screams echoed through the camp.

Sitting Bull fought like in the old days, knife in hand, eyes clear, breath rusty but firm. He rammed it into one trader's arm, kicked another in the chest until he fell.

And the people? One part intervened, stood by his side, shouted, hit, and fought back. Another part fled, clinging to bottles, hiding in the dust. They were divided—between poison and pride, between death and survival.

When the dust settled, two merchants lay bleeding on the ground. One was gasping, one was motionless. The others fled, abandoning their carts, tipping their barrels, and pouring firewater into the dirt.

Sitting Bull stood there, panting, covered in blood, the knife still in his hand. His people stared at him. Some with fear, some with hatred, some with a spark of respect.

He spat into the dust, his mouth full of blood and bile. "That," he growled, "is the price you pay for selling poison."

Silence fell over the camp. Only the rusty beat of the drum could still be heard—muffled, limping, like a heart that continued to beat despite everything.

Horse hooves like thunderclaps in the head

It began with a tremor in the ground. Barely noticeable, as if a giant were drumming his finger somewhere deep underground. Sitting Bull was sitting in the dust, his hands on his knees, when he noticed it. At first, he thought it was his own heartbeat, still rusty from the previous night. But then it grew stronger.

Dull. Dull. Dull.

Horse hooves.

The sound crept through the ground, rising into the legs, the stomach, the head. It wasn't the gallop of wild horses, not a free race. It was the steady rhythm of discipline, of uniform. Thunderclaps that heralded more than just dust.

The people raised their heads. Children stopped playing, women dropped their clay pots, men flexed what little muscle they had left. Everyone knew what that meant. Soldiers.

Sitting Bull closed his eyes and listened more closely. The rhythm was steady, cold, calculated. No dance, no song—it was the pounding of a machine made of flesh and iron.

“They’re coming,” he murmured.

Dust rose on the horizon. A line, sharp, straight, as if drawn with a knife. The closer it came, the clearer the shadows became. Horses, heavy, with men on their backs. Their hats were wide, their uniforms gray in the dust. The glint of metal flashed like lightning in a thunderstorm.

The people fell silent. No one moved. It was as if the horses' hooves had taken over their own hearts. Every beat was a clap of thunder in the head. Every beat was a threat.

Sitting Bull stood up, slowly, his knees heavy, but his eyes clear. "Do you hear?" he cried. "This is not a dance. This is not a song. This is death riding."

The children began to cry, the women whispered prayers, the men grabbed whatever they had left—blunt knives, old bows, broken spears. But everyone knew it wasn't enough.

The soldiers approached. The horses' hooves thundered, making the ground vibrate and the dust tremble. It was as if the sky itself was holding its breath.

Sitting Bull felt the blow in his head.*Dull. Dull. Dull.*Every hoof a blow to his brain, a drumming that grew louder the closer they came.

He knew this was no coincidence. The traders had spoken, the uniformed men were listening. Now they rode forward, with their horses, with their lead, with their cold.

And Sitting Bull thought:*Perhaps the horse's hooves beat louder than our rusty drum. Perhaps this is the new rhythm that crushes us.*

The dust on the horizon grew until it swallowed the sun. The horses came closer, the men on them upright, rigid, as if cast from iron. Every hoofbeat was like a punch to the chest, dull, rhythmic, merciless.

Thunder. Thunder. Thunder.

The camp stood silent. No one spoke. No one dared to breathe. Even the children, who usually screamed, sat with their eyes wide open, as if they had understood that this sound was greater than any screaming.

The first horses entered the camp. Their hooves stirred up dust that hung like fog between the tents. The animals snorted, their mouths foamed, the riders sat still, their eyes cold, their rifles slung across their saddles.

It wasn't an attack. Not yet. It was a demonstration. Every step said:*We could crush you if we wanted to.*

The Lakota retreated, making room, but they couldn't escape the noise. The horses' hooves pounded, pounding, as if they were trying to break the ground itself.

Sitting Bull stood in the middle, arms folded, gaze fixed. He let the thunder rumble in his head, but he didn't retreat. "You ride like death itself," he said quietly, more to himself than to the others.

An officer—cleaner, tauter than the traders, but with the same cold eyes—rode forward. His horse stamped, the ground shook. He spoke in a voice louder than necessary, a voice that rang through the camp like a rifle shot.

"This land does not belong to you!" he cried. "You will leave. You will obey. Or we will ride you into the ground."

The words echoed, but they were almost drowned out by the thunder of the hooves. Each blow amplified the threat, made it physical. It was as if the command crept right through the ground into the people's bones.

A child began to cry. A soldier laughed harshly, bent down from his horse, ripped a blanket from the boy, and threw it into the dust. No one intervened. No one dared.

Sitting Bull saw it. His heart pounded in time with the horse's hooves. But it wasn't fear that grew within him—it was anger.

"You tread in our dust," he murmured. "But you forget that this dust carries our ancestors."

The hooves continued to pound, like a drum announcing death. The camp trembled, and each blow pierced the skulls.

And Sitting Bull knew: These were the drums of war. No song, no dance—just the announcement of the blood that would soon be shed.

Sitting Bull took a step forward. The ground vibrated, every hoofbeat thundered through his skull, but he refused to give in. He raised his voice, deep, firm, and rough, like a stone that had lain for a long time in a river.

"You ride on our land," he cried. "You breathe our air, you drink from our rivers. You come with your thunder, but you forget: this land is alive. And it is not yours."

The soldiers laughed. Hard, cold, like iron striking iron. One spat in the dust. Another slapped his saddle with the flat of his hand, making the horse snort.

The officer rode closer, his horse stamping directly in front of Sitting Bull, so close that the dust covered his clothes. He leaned forward, his face twisted into a grin that showed more teeth than a wolf's.

"This land belongs to us," he growled. "Because we say it belongs to us. Your words are dust. Our horses turn dust into mud."

He nodded, and the soldiers laughed again. One had his horse circle Sitting Bull, its hooves pounding, dust flying, the rhythm getting louder, faster, like a drum mocking its people.

Sitting Bull stood still. His heart pounded, but he didn't show it. He looked into the soldiers' faces, and he knew: They didn't hear him. They never would. To them, he was just a shadow, an obstacle, a remnant that could be trampled underfoot.

"You ride like gods," he cried, his voice rising, "but you're just men with horses. Horses die. Men die too."

A few Lakota in the camp murmured in agreement, their eyes flashing. But the soldiers responded with derision. One pulled out a bottle—one of the traders' bottles—and raised it. "Here, Chief! Drink! Then maybe you'll talk less nonsense!"

Laughter. A filthy chorus that was louder than any prayer.

Sitting Bull felt anger rising within him. But he swallowed it down, heavy as bile. He knew that a single blow, a single false move—and the horses would trample, the guns would speak.

The hooves continued to thunder, in his head, in his chest, in the ground. It was like a constant blow against his words, a pounding mocking song.

And Sitting Bull thought:*Words bounce off when the ear is only open to thunder.*

It began with a small movement. A soldier, young in face but already hardened in eyes, urged his horse forward. Just a step, just a stampede, but it was enough to throw dust into Sitting Bull's face.

The camp gasped. Children screamed, women pulled them back. Men clenched their fists, but they hesitated. Everyone knew: one wrong move, and the thunder would turn into a storm.

The officer grinned. "See?" he shouted. "Your chief talks big, but just one hoof makes him smaller."

Laughter erupted. Another soldier urged his horse to the side, tackling an old woman to the ground just to show he could. Her scream pierced the air, her body lay in the dust, the blanket beneath her shredded.

The crowd erupted. A young Lakota warrior leaped forward, screamed, ripped a stone from the ground, and hurled it. It struck the soldier in the arm, who swayed in his saddle. The laughter died down, the thunder fell silent for a heartbeat.

Then it exploded.

A soldier fired. The bang was like lightning in a thunderstorm, smoke rose, and the horse beneath him reared. The stone thrower fell, blood spurting into the dust, his chest a gaping hole.

The horses' hooves pounded away, this time not as a threat, but as an attack. They trampled, kicked up dust, and shook the ground. Men screamed, women screamed, children screamed. Chaos, chaos everywhere.

A horse tore down a tent, another trampled over a jug, water splashed, dust clung to it, and it turned into mud. A soldier laughed like a madman as he hit everything that moved with his rifle butt.

Sitting Bull stood in the middle of the storm. His heart pounded like his hooves, but he didn't retreat. He grabbed a child who had almost been caught among the horses, pulled him up, and pressed him into a woman's arms.

"Back!" he yelled. "Go back!" His voice was almost drowned out by the thunder, but some heard. They ran, crawled, stumbled.

A horse came straight at him. The animal's eyes rolled, its mouth foaming. Sitting Bull jumped to the side, grabbed its mane, pulled himself up, a jerk, a curse. The soldier above tried to strike him, but Sitting Bull rammed his fist into his face. Blood spurted, the man fell from the saddle, and crashed into the dust.

The crowd roared, but not in triumph. It was panic, sheer, screaming. Horse hooves pounded through the camp like thunderclaps, each blow a new scream, a new victim.

Sitting Bull stood on his horse, his breath short, his hands covered in blood and dust. The sky exploded around him, and he knew: This was no longer a threat. This was war.

The horses' hooves continued to pound, like a heartbeat of death. Each blow sent dust into the air, and in the dust, the people lost their minds.

Some fled. Women grabbed their children by the arms, stumbled between the tents, screamed, cried, and ran into nothingness. The dust swallowed them, their voices sounding like distant echoes.

Others took their stand. A few young warriors, barefoot, hungry, but with fire in their eyes, grabbed everything they had—sticks, stones, rusty knives. They screamed, threw themselves at the horses as if they could stop the thunder with their bare hands. Some managed to knock riders to the ground, others were immediately trampled, their bodies cracking like dry wood.

And still others simply stood there. Still, empty, unable to move. They held bottles in their hands, clinging to them as if the glass were stronger than any weapon. They let the thunder roll over them, without screaming, without fighting.

The people were divided. Flight, resistance, paralysis. No unified beat, no song, no drum. Only chaos.

Sitting Bull saw it, and his heart burned. He roared, his voice raw: "Together! Stay together!" But no one listened. The thunder of the hooves was louder, the dust thicker, the fear deeper.

He leaped from the horse he had seized, landed in the dust, and pulled up a fallen warrior. "Stand up! Fight!" But the boy was dead, his eyes open, his mouth full of dust.

A horse raced past him, its hooves brushing his shoulder. He almost fell, then got up. He saw two women knocked down by a rider, a man try to attack with a spear—and be shot, his body thrown back as if thunder itself had crushed him.

Sitting Bull felt the blow in his head, louder than ever before.*Thunder. Thunder. Thunder.*It wasn't just noise. It was a rhythm that tore the people apart.

He thought:*We once had one drum. One voice. One heart. Now we only have hooves to divide us.*

And as the dust thickened, he knew: This was the true victory of the uniformed men. Not the bullets. Not the horses. But the shattering of a people into dust, shards, and silence.

Dust lay heavy as smoke over the camp. Horses brayed, people screamed, shots rang out, hooves pounded. It was no longer a place—it was a mill, evenly chewing flesh, blood, and hope.

Sitting Bull stood in the middle of it all. His chest burned, his heart beat to the beat of the horse's hooves, but he refused to bow his head. Words had no effect. Thunder laughed at words.

So he did the only thing left: He jumped in.

A horse raced straight toward him, its mouth open, foaming at the bit, its eyes wild. Sitting Bull grabbed a spear from the ground—no more than a stick with a blunt tip—and rammed it into the side of its flank. The animal neighed shrilly, fell, and the rider flew in a high arc, crashing into the dust.

Dust, blood, scream.

Sitting Bull leaped at the rider, lifted him up, and slammed him back into the ground until his head sank into the dust. The man gasped, then fell silent.

A second man came, rifle at the ready. Sitting Bull threw the spear like a stone, hitting him in the arm. The shot thundered, but missed, the recoil nearly throwing the man from his saddle. A young Lakota seized the opportunity, jumped up, and pulled the soldier off. Both disappeared into the dust. A scraping, a scream—then silence.

The people began to stir. Men screamed, grabbed sticks, stones, anything they had. Women threw bowls, children screamed like warriors. It was not an organized battle, not a war—it was sheer desperation, a raw rage that suddenly caught fire.

But the thunder was louder. For every rider who fell, two more came to trample on. For every horse that stumbled, five others pounded.

Sitting Bull fought like an animal. His hands were bloody, his throat raw from screaming, his eyes filled with dust. A soldier tried to hit him from behind, but he twisted, grabbed the barrel of his rifle, and yanked on it until the man fell. He took the rifle, swung it like a club, and struck until wood splintered and bones cracked.

Blood spurted, children screamed, horses neighed. Chaos consumed everything.

Sitting Bull felt nothing but the thunder in his head. Every hoofbeat was a blow to his temples, every scream an echo within them. He no longer knew whether he was standing, whether he was falling, or whether he was still alive.

But he knew he wouldn't go down in silence. If thunder was his song, he would sing with blood in it.

The battle burned out like a fire that consumes too much wood at once. First a blazing inferno, then nothing but smoke, ash, and the stench of burnt flesh.

The horses still neighed, but more faintly. Their hooves continued to pound, but no longer as a storm—only as an afterthought. A dull echo that ran across the ground and lingered in people's heads like a tinnitus of death.

Sitting Bull stood there, bloody, dusty, his face like stone. His hands trembled, but he didn't let it show. Bodies lay around him—men, women, children, soldiers. The dust had made everything the same. Red, gray, and black.

A few soldiers rode back, their horses tired, their faces cold. They had shown what they wanted to show: that they were stronger. That they could return at any time. They didn't have to win. The thunder alone was victory enough.

The people crawled out of the dust. Some on their knees, some with wounds, some with empty eyes. Women searched for children and found only blankets. Men searched for weapons and found only corpses.

Sitting Bull looked at them, his heart beating harder than thunder ever could. He knew he had fought, as he always had. But he also knew: Thunder was not defeated. It would return.

"Do you hear that?" he asked, his voice hoarse, barely audible. "The thunder still rings in our heads. Even when the horses are gone."

And it was true. The ground no longer vibrated, but every Lakota still felt it. The hooves reverberated, like an echo that refused to die.

A child came to him, eyes wide, face covered in dust. "Chief," it whispered, "was that the war?"

Sitting Bull looked at it, and there was no answer in his eyes. Only tiredness, only truth, only dust.

"No," he finally said. "That was just the thunder before the storm."

He turned away, looked at the horizon. The dust had settled, but the sky was empty. No buffalo, no eagle, no sign. Only silence.

And Sitting Bull knew: The thunder of the horses' hooves would return. And each time it would penetrate deeper into people's minds, until no song, no drum, no prayer could counter it.

His head hurt. He could still feel every blow. Thunderclaps in his head – a song that never ended.

The white death wears a uniform

The dust had settled, but the silence was worse than the thunder. No more horse's hooves, no more screams, only this empty echo in his head. Sitting Bull was still standing, but he felt like a ghost amidst ruins.

The dead lay scattered like discarded dolls. Some with open eyes, staring at the sky, others with twisted limbs, as if death had mocked them as they fell. Blood seeped into the ground, staining the dust dark red. The wind blew over it, turning it into a dirty crust that stank like old battlefields.

Sitting Bull saw it, and he knew: This wasn't just violence. This wasn't just hunger, not just thirst, not just despair. This was death—but he was now wearing a uniform.

The soldiers had ridden away, but their shadows remained. Everyone knew they would return. With more horses, with more guns, with more cold faces. And each time they would take more, until nothing remained but dust and bones.

He remembered the old stories. Death used to be a hunter who came at night, silent, invisible. A wolf in the shadows, an arrow in the dark. You could fear him, but you could face him like an enemy.

Now death was different. Loud, organized, in ranks. He wore boots, he wore lead, he carried a flag. He didn't come alone—he came as an army.

Sitting Bull felt his stomach tighten. He thought:*That's the difference. We used to fight against death. Now we march for it, in our own dreams.*

An old man in the camp came to him, trembling, his face covered in dust. "Chief," he whispered, "who were they?"

Sitting Bull looked at him, his eyes hard. "You were the White Death," he replied. "And the White Death wears a uniform."

The old man bowed his head and murmured a prayer that no one heard.

Sitting Bull's head continued to pound, but this time it wasn't horse hooves. It was the echo of boots, rifle shots, cold commands. It was the rhythm of death, marching, steady, unstoppable.

And he knew: You could kill a wolf. You could outsmart a hunter. But how do you fight against a death that marches, that has orders, that wears a uniform?

Sitting Bull sat at the edge of the camp, dust still clinging to his lips, the stench of blood and smoke in the air. Before him lay the dead, behind him the living, and between them stood the white death—invisible, but palpable in every wound, in every glance.

He knew: Death in uniform didn't always shoot. Sometimes it came differently. With paper. With pens. With contracts that destroyed more than any bullet.

He had seen it. White men in suits instead of uniforms, with thick books and seals, sat at tables, laughed, and talked of peace. But their words were chains, their treaties nothing but gravestones inked.

They said, "This land belongs to you." And meant, "Only until we need it." They said, "You have rights." And meant, "Only as long as they don't stand in our way." They said, "Peace." And meant, "Your slow death."

Sitting Bull remembered the meetings. Men in uniform stood in the background, rifles at the ready, while the men in suits spoke the words. Sugar on their tongues, poison in their hearts.

"Sign here," they said. "It's for your own good."

Many had signed. Not out of stupidity—out of hunger, out of need, out of hope. But every time the ink dried, the white death drew closer. More land lost, more buffalo dead, more hunger in the camp.

And if someone refused? Then came the uniform, the bullet, the hoof.

Sitting Bull clenched his fists. "The White Death has two faces," he muttered. "One carries a gun. The other carries a pen. But both kill the same."

He felt the truth burning. It wasn't just the noise of the horses, not just the violence of the soldiers. It was the entire system—words, lies, uniforms, laws—everything working together to crush his people into the dust.

A young warrior came to him, his face covered in blood, but his eyes burning. "Chief," he said, "what shall we do? Fight against guns? Or against paper?"

Sitting Bull looked at him for a long time. "Both," he replied. "Because the White Death has two mouths. If you only strike one, the other will eat you."

The words hung in the air, heavy like the dust after a battle.

And Sitting Bull knew: the next attack would not begin with horse hooves, but with a signature.

The wind swept across the camp, carrying the stench of blood, mixing it with the dust. Sitting Bull sat there, staring into the void, and the sound of footsteps—not just horses', but boots'—still echoed in his head. Steady, cold, unstoppable.

He had seen many enemies. Warriors from other tribes, hunters, wolves. All opponents one could understand, fighting out of hunger, pride, or fear. But the men in uniform were different.

They weren't a pack that could be dispersed. They weren't a hunter that could be outsmarted. They were a machine.

They marched in lines, they counted their shots, they even counted their dead. For them, death was not fate, not a ghost—it was a number in a book.

Sitting Bull recalled an encounter. An officer, his face as smooth as a knife, had told him: "We're losing men. But we have more. Always more. And when they fall, we send others."

Back then, Sitting Bull had remained silent. But something inside him had broken. For he knew: No warrior thought like that. No soul thought like that. Only death in uniform thought like that.

It wasn't even hatred that drove the uniformed men. It was indifference. For them, dying was part of the plan. To them, Lakota were merely obstacles, like stones on a path to be crushed with boots.

"You are not an enemy," Sitting Bull muttered into the dust. "You are death that has learned to count."

A few children played nearby, quietly, with broken sticks, not laughing. Their faces were serious, far too serious for their age. Sitting Bull looked at them, and he sensed the coldness of the uniform in their eyes, even though they had never worn one.

That was the true power of the uniform: It was contagious. It turned men into cogs, cogs into a machine, and the machine rolled on until everything was dust.

A young warrior came to him. "Chief, they're like ghosts."

Sitting Bull shook his head. "No. Ghosts have a soul. These only have a beat."

The wind howled, the dust rose, and Sitting Bull knew: You could fight a wolf. You could only hold out against a machine until it fell apart. But the uniform—the uniform was built not to fall apart.

Evening came, but it brought no peace. The camp lay silent, broken only by the growling of empty stomachs. The dead had been removed, but their smell remained. And over everything hung the invisible hand of white death—no longer as a hoof or a bullet, but as hunger.

Sitting Bull knew: This was the real strategy. Don't always shoot. Don't always ride. Instead, empty your stomach until your soul bursts.

The uniformed men had taken the land, driven out the buffalo, blocked the rivers. They had burned forests, destroyed fields, and they called it "order."

“Order,” murmured Sitting Bull, “means to them: we shall die empty.”

He remembered the white people's buffalo hunts. Not out of hunger, not out of need—out of desire. Hundreds of animals, shot, left lying, their flesh rotting in the sun. For the Lakota, every buffalo was a gift, a heartbeat of the land. For the white people, it was merely a target.

And every time a buffalo fell, a piece of his people fell.

Hunger was worse than bullets. Bullets killed the body. Hunger killed first dignity, then faith, then the soul. And when the body finally collapsed, it was only the final step.

Children lay in the dust, their stomachs bloated, their eyes empty. Women searched for roots, for grass, for anything they could chew until their teeth bled. Men sat still, staring into space, because they no longer had the strength to stand up.

And the uniformed officers knew it. They weren't just counting bullets. They were also counting stomachs.

Sitting Bull looked at the sky, the cold stars. "The white death wears a uniform," he said quietly. "But its sharpest weapon is hunger."

An old warrior beside him nodded weakly. "We used to fight with bow and arrow. Now we fight with empty stomachs."

Sitting Bull placed his hand on his shoulder. "And that is the cruellest war. Because you can't hit the enemy. You can't see him. Only feel him—here." He placed his hand on his stomach.

The warrior smiled bitterly. "Then the White Death will win."

Sitting Bull remained silent. Because he knew: Perhaps the man was right.

The night was silent, but not peaceful. No singing, no drumming, only the crackling of small fires around which women sat, who had nothing to cook. The flames licked at empty pots, as if mocking their own uselessness.

Sitting Bull walked slowly through the camp. Each step felt heavy, as if the dust itself were holding him back.

He saw children. Many. Too many. They lay curled up, thin arms around thinner bodies, their eyes open but dull. Their bellies were bloated, not from fullness, but from the hunger that grew inside like a demon.

A small boy looked up at him, his lips dry, his voice barely above a breath. "Chief," he whispered, "when will the buffalo return?"

Sitting Bull felt something inside him break. He wanted to say, "Soon." He wanted to lie to comfort the child. But his throat was dry, his tongue heavy, and the truth pressed too hard.

"They're far," he simply murmured. "Very far."

The child nodded, as if he already knew the answer. He closed his eyes, and his breathing was shallow, almost invisible.

Sitting Bull continued on, saw girls chewing on old leather thongs until their teeth bled. He saw mothers offering their breasts to infants, even though there was nothing left in them except pain. He saw young men clenching their hands into fists but too weak to raise them.

And he saw white death in every face. Not as a uniform. Not as a gun. But as emptiness, as extinction.

"This is worse than bullets," he muttered. "Bullets are fast. This is slow. So slow you see every hope die one by one."

An old man came to him, his eyes dull, his voice raspy. "Chief," he said, "you talk about the White Death. But for the children, it's already here. They know no other."

Sitting Bull wanted to answer, but he remained silent. Because he knew it was true. The children no longer grew up with songs, but with hunger. Their first memories were not of dances, but of emptiness.

He looked to the sky, searching for signs, for visions. But the stars only stared back coldly.

And Sitting Bull thought:*White death wears a uniform, but its true face is the children who die before they even live.*

Sitting Bull sat by the fire, which gave off more smoke than flame. Around him were the faces—haggard, silent, tired. Eyes that no longer asked questions because they already knew the answer: Nothing. No meat. No buffalo. No tomorrow.

He felt the anger growing within him. Not the quick anger of a young warrior raging in a bloodlust. No, it was the slow, painful anger that lay like a stone in his stomach, growing heavier with each hour.

The white death was everywhere. In the uniforms that rode across the plains. In the treaties signed with lies. In the hunger that made the children quieter until they disappeared altogether.

"He wears many faces," murmured Sitting Bull. "But always the same intention."

He clenched his fists, felt the cracks in his skin, the weakness in his muscles. But something still beat in his heart, stronger than dust and hunger.

He remembered his visions. The buffalo that fell, the warriors who sank into the dust, the blood that turned the river red. Back then, he hadn't understood everything. Now he understood more. The visions hadn't just shown the enemy. They had also shown what was necessary: resistance.

"You can't negotiate with the white death," he said loudly, so the men around him could hear. "You can't drink it. You can't sign it. You can only fight it."

The warriors looked up. Their eyes were tired, but a spark flickered in them, as if they needed those words to remind them they were still alive.

“And if he is stronger than us?” one asked, his voice shaky.

Sitting Bull raised his head, his eyes hard, his face sharp in the firelight. "Then we die fighting. Not in dust, not in hunger, not in lies. We die standing, not lying down."

The words fell heavily into the night, like stones into water. But they echoed in every heart that could still beat.

Sitting Bull knew it wouldn't be a victory. Not against this enemy. But there were things more important than victory: dignity. Remembrance. The knowledge that they hadn't simply stood by and watched the white death take everything.

He placed his hand on the ground, feeling the cold dust he hated so much. "If I must fall," he murmured, "then it will be here. On this land. Not in their fields, not on their reservations. Here, where our ancestors lie."

And so Sitting Bull swore to the fire, the dust, the stars—and above all to himself—that he would fight the White Death, even if it ultimately devoured him.

The night was black as pitch. No moon, no stars, only the crackling of the fires that were barely burning anymore. Sitting Bull sat alone, his face hard, his eyes open. Sleep did not come, only the white death marching in his thoughts.

He heard it. Not in the distance—inside himself. Boots, steady, cold.*Tap. Tap. Tap.*No song, no dance. Just a beat that ate into his temples.

He closed his eyes, searching for a vision. Once there had been the buffalo, the eagle, the rivers full of life. Now there was only darkness. And in the darkness, a figure.

A man in uniform, pale, his face blank. No eyes, just two holes. He carried a rifle, but he didn't need it. Every step he took was death enough.

"Why are you coming?" Sitting Bull asked in the vision. His voice sounded strange, like that of an old man who had seen too much.

The White Death was silent. It simply marched, ever closer, until the ground shook beneath Sitting Bull's feet. Every step made children disappear, tents collapse, and rivers dry up.

“You won’t get us all!” shouted Sitting Bull.

Death stopped. He raised his hand as if to count. One. Two. Three. Every finger he raised was a life crumbling to dust.

Sitting Bull jumped up and shouted, but no sound came out. Only the beat.*Tap. Tap. Tap.*

He opened his eyes wide. The fire was almost out. His breathing was heavy, his hands were clenched into fists. Sweat was running down his face, even though the night was cold.

He knew it was only a vision—and yet it was more. The White Death wore a uniform, but it also wore the night, the dreams, the minds of its people. Even in sleep, it gave no rest.

Sitting Bull stood up, took a few steps, and kicked the dust. He looked up at the sky, searching for stars. But the sky was empty. Only blackness, only silence.

"Then I'll stay awake," he murmured. "As long as I can. I won't sleep while he's marching."

And so Sitting Bull sat, alone, in the black night. No song, no drum. Only the thought that the white death was approaching. Step by step, steadily, inexorably.

Lead in the lungs of the warriors

The morning smelled of blood and dust. The sun slowly rose over the plain, but its light was dull, faint, as if even it had lost hope. Sitting Bull walked through the camp, hearing the wheezing everywhere.

The warriors who were still alive lay on blankets, their bodies riddled with holes, their breathing labored. The lead was embedded in them—not just in their bones, but in the air they breathed. Every breath was a struggle.

A young warrior coughed, blood splattering onto the ground. "Chief," he gasped, "it burns in my chest... as if there were a fire inside."

Sitting Bull knelt beside him. He knew what it was. Lead. Once shot into the body, it stayed there, rusting from within, turning his breath into coughs, his lungs into dust.

“Hold on,” he muttered, even though he knew it was a lie.

The boy nodded, but his eyes said something else: that he knew he was going to die.

Everywhere it was the same. Men coughed, gasped, and spat blood. Some tried to stand up, reaching for weapons even though their hands trembled. Others lay still, their eyes open, their mouths full of dust.

Lead. It ate her from the inside out. It wasn't like an arrow you could pull out. Not like a knife you could rip out. It stayed. It was a second lung, but made of metal and death.

Sitting Bull felt his heart grow heavy. "Lead in my lungs," he murmured. "This is their gift. This is their song for us."

An old warrior coughed beside him, his face covered in scars. "We used to die in battle," he gasped. "Now we die in the dust, from coughing." He laughed, but his laughter erupted into blood.

Sitting Bull placed his hand on his shoulder. "You die a warrior. Not in intoxication, not in poison. You die because you stood your ground."

The old man nodded, and for a moment something like pride flashed in his eyes.

But Sitting Bull knew: pride could not pull the lead out of the lungs.

He walked on, looked at the entire camp, and everywhere the same scene. Men gasping for breath. Women crying. Children watching silently, as if they had already learned that this was their morning: breath turning to blood.

And Sitting Bull thought:*Lead is worse than hunger. Hunger slowly drains you. Lead burns you from the inside.*

The day was young, but the camp sounded like a hospital from hell. No singing, no drumming—just coughing, choking, screaming. Sitting Bull walked between the blankets on which his warriors lay, and he felt that the lead wasn't just hitting their lungs. It hit deeper.

A young man, barely old enough to be a warrior, grabbed his hand. His eyes were wide, filled with fear. "Chief," he rasped, "I wanted to fight. I wanted to stand like the ancients. But now... now I can't even breathe."

Sitting Bull squeezed the hand, which was as hot as a glowing stone. He felt the weakness eating through the boy's body, and he knew: lead was stronger than courage. It took his breath, and with that breath, it took his will.

The same scenes were everywhere. Warriors who swore last night that they would fight now lay silent, exhausted, with eyes that said:*It doesn't make sense anymore.*

An old man, covered in scars, coughed blood onto the ground, looked at Sitting Bull, and murmured, "Perhaps the worst thing isn't dying. Perhaps it's dying without having done anything."

These words cut deeper than any knife. Sitting Bull felt anger burning within him, but it was tinged with powerlessness.

The lead wasn't just metal. It was a curse. Every shot fired by the uniformed men hit two people: one in the body and one in the mind. When one man fell, the will of ten others was broken.

Sitting Bull thought:*They don't just shoot to kill. They shoot to remind us that we will die.*

A child came to him, knelt beside a warrior who was wheezing, and placed a small hand on his chest. "Will he sing again?" the child asked quietly.

Sitting Bull swallowed. He wanted to lie, wanted to say, "Yes." But the truth burned in his throat. So he said, "His song will sound different. Not here. Not now."

The child nodded without understanding, and the warrior died with a final gasp, the child's hand still on his chest.

Sitting Bull clenched his fists. He knew: The lead had taken over the warriors' lungs, but worse—it had taken over the hearts of their people.

"That's their weapon," he growled. "Not just killing. Breaking."

The sun rose higher, but the camp remained gloomy. Coughing, wheezing, screams—that was their new song. Sitting Bull saw men who were once proud now lying in the dust, as if they were already half-shadows.

He knew he had to do something. Not for the wounds, not for the lungs—it was too late for that. But for the hearts.

He stood in the middle of the camp. His voice was rough, brittle with dust, but he forced it out, sharper than ever.

"Hear me!" he cried. "You lie in the dust and think the lead has taken you. But it has only struck your bodies. It has not struck your souls!"

Some raised their heads, coughing, weak. Others turned away, unable to listen. But Sitting Bull continued speaking, as if each word were an arrow shot into the sky.

"Remember the days when we hunted the buffalo. When our children laughed, when our women sang, when our men stood strong. Remember! Lead can't take that!"

An old warrior coughed, blood running from his mouth, but he nodded. "I remember."

Sitting Bull moved on, speaking louder. "They want us to forget. They want us to bury ourselves in the dust. But as long as we remember, we are not dead!"

The children looked at him, their eyes wide, full of hunger, but also full of questions. He pointed at them. "Look at the children! If we give up, their first song won't be a drumbeat, but a gunshot. Is that what we want?"

A murmur ran through the camp. Weak, fragile, but it was there. Men tried to sit up, women nodded, tears in their eyes.

"The lead is in our lungs," cried Sitting Bull, "but it must not be in our hearts! As long as we stand, as long as we fight, as long as we remember – we are stronger than their lead!"

His voice almost broke, but he kept it up until he was out of breath. Then he sank to his knees, gasping, his head bowed.

For a moment there was silence. Then someone hit a drum—rusty, weak, but a beat. Then another. And another.

The warriors coughed, spitting blood, but they raised their heads. The women wept, but they sang softly. The children clapped their hands, thin but full of life.

Sitting Bull closed his eyes. It wasn't a victory. But it was something. A spark in the dust.

The rusty drum still beat, weak and brittle, but it echoed. Sitting Bull heard it, and he knew: words had lit the fire, but words alone couldn't keep it burning.

He went from blanket to blanket, kneeling beside the warriors. Some were coughing blood, some were breathing shallowly, some had eyes that were already half in shadow. But he no longer spoke of memory. Now he spoke of battle.

"Listen," he said to a young man who barely had the strength to lift his head. "Your lungs are full of lead, but your arm can still hold a gun. That's enough. Stand with us."

The boy nodded weakly, and something like pride glowed in his eyes.

He moved on to an old warrior whose chest rattled like a broken eardrum. "You're almost at the end," said Sitting Bull. "But even at the end, you can tear an enemy's face off. Don't let him just take you."

The old man coughed and laughed, blood on his lips. "Then at least I'll die laughing."

Sitting Bull nodded. That was what he needed: not victory, not hope, but the promise not to die in silence.

Soon, men gathered, staggering, supporting each other. They no longer had the strength they once had, no chest full of breath, no legs full of strength. But they had anger. And sometimes anger was worth more than any lungs.

Women came, bringing sticks, knives, old arrows, everything left. Children followed, eyes wide, faces serious, as if they had long since lost the right to childhood.

Sitting Bull stood in the middle, looking at them. "The lead is in you," he shouted, "but don't let it have the last word! Let us return their bullets with our breath. If we fall, we won't fall in silence. We'll fall with a scream they'll still hear long after they're gone!"

The warriors screamed back, coughing, choking, but it was a scream. No song, no melody, just raw rage slicing through the sky.

For a moment, the camp didn't seem like a pile of dying people, but rather like a pack seeking its final stand.

Sitting Bull felt it in his blood. He knew that many wouldn't live much longer. But as long as they stood up, as long as they rallied, as long as they were prepared to die with lead in their lungs and fire in their hearts, the white death couldn't simply triumph.

"We fight," he murmured. "Not because we win. But because we don't die like dust."

And in the night the rusty drum sounded louder.

The night dragged on, and the coughing settled over the camp like a second wind. Sitting Bull knew: words had lifted them up, but words alone wouldn't keep them going. They needed a plan. Something more than just dying in the dust.

He called together as many of the men as could still stand. Some came supported by women, some dragging their feet, with faces that looked as if they were already halfway in the grave. But they came.

"Listen," Sitting Bull began, his voice ragged but sharp. "We can't fight a battle like we used to. We can't form ranks against their rifles. The lead is in your lungs, and you hardly have breath for words. But what we can do is what they fear: We strike when they least expect it."

The men looked at him, exhausted but listening.

"We know the land," he continued. "Every hollow, every tree, every ravine. We are dust in the wind, appearing and disappearing before they raise their rifles. We strike their supplies, not their lines. We take from them what they take from us: food, water, sleep."

A warrior raised his head with difficulty. "And if they find us?"

Sitting Bull looked at him hard. "Then we die. But we die showing them that even with lead in our lungs, we are still more valuable than their steel."

A murmur went through the assembly. A faint but affirmative murmur.

Sitting Bull continued: "We'll split up. Small groups. One blow every night. No big battles, no open field. We're not strong enough for that anymore. But we can wear them down. Every scream they hear when they're trying to sleep is our victory."

The men nodded, one after the other. Some coughed blood, but their eyes burned.

A young warrior, barely sixteen, raised his voice: "Chief, I want to go. I don't want to just cough and wait."

Sitting Bull placed his hand on his shoulder. "Then go. But go with your senses. Your courage is fire, but fire burns quickly if it has no direction."

He looked at the assembly and knew: This wasn't an army. This was a mass of broken bodies held together only by anger. But sometimes anger was enough.

“If the white death wears a uniform,” said Sitting Bull, “let him know that even in death, dust can still bite.”

A scream went through the crowd. Croaking, coughing, bloody. But it was a scream.

The night was cold, the wind bit, and a dirty moon hung over the plains. Sitting Bull stood at the edge of the camp, his eyes fixed on the darkness. Beside him were the men he had gathered—not a healthy force, not proud warriors, but a band of scarred men. Some were coughing even before they set out, spitting blood into the dust and wiping it away with their hands. But they went.

"No battle today," Sitting Bull said quietly. "A thorn today. Another tomorrow. Until they sleep thinking we're in their tents."

The men nodded, some weakly, some with eyes that burned brighter than any torch. They set off, quietly, crouching, like shadows who knew the wind was their ally.

They found a uniformed camp not far from the river bend. Fires burned there, large and fierce, as if mocking the darkness. Men in uniform slept beside it, full of food, rifles beside them.

Sitting Bull raised his hand. No shout, no shout, just a gesture.

And then they descended upon the camp. No war dance, no drumbeat. Just the panting of lead-filled lungs and the growling of men who had nothing left to lose.

A warrior crept up to a sleeping soldier, grabbed his rifle, and smashed it across his face. Bones cracked, blood spurted, and the soldier was dead before he could open his eyes.

Another set fire to a barrel of supplies. The fire greedily ate through the wood, the flames licked higher, sparks leaped. This was more than destruction—this was revenge.

Soldiers woke up, screamed, and reached for rifles. But the warriors were already back in the shadows, coughing, bloody, but gone. A shot rang out, a Lakota fell, his blood steaming in the moonlight. But the others dragged him away, leaving no one behind.

The fire grew, the soldiers shouted, ran, searched for enemies, found only wind.

Sitting Bull stood at the sidelines, his heart pounding. He saw the chaos, the flames, the uniformed men stumbling in their own camp like drunken animals. A bitter smile spread across his face.

“You should know,” he murmured, “that even a dying warrior still has poison in his breath.”

When they returned, they were less than they had started. Two men lay dead in the dust, one gasping, the lead in his lungs now mixed with fresh blood. But the eyes of the survivors burned.

“We stung them,” one gasped, coughing, “and we’ll sting them again.”

Sitting Bull nodded. Yes, they were broken. But broken glass still cuts.

The next morning brought no sun, only smoke. The camp smelled of burnt wood, blood, and fear. Sitting Bull knew: The White Death wouldn't sleep after they had stung him.

And he came.

Before noon, they heard the drums of the uniformed men—not made of skin and wood, but of boots and rifles. Lines of men, cold and steady, marched across the plain. Their shadows were long, and their faces were blank.

Sitting Bull lined up with his warriors. It was a pitiful sight: men coughing, blood on their lips, women holding knives, children collecting stones. But they stood their ground.

The uniformed men approached, their rifles gleaming in the light. No anger in their eyes, no fear—just that dead stare, as if they themselves were already part of the white death.

“Now,” murmured Sitting Bull, “now we show that even with lead in our lungs we still have breath for the latest fashion.”

The first salvo rang out. A hail of lead that ripped through tents, bodies, and hearts. Men fell, women screamed, children ran. Dust rose, blood spurted, and the white death marched on.

A warrior next to Sitting Bull coughed so hard he could barely lift the rifle he had captured. He pulled the trigger, the shot missed, and immediately afterward a bullet struck him square in the chest. He fell, blood gushing from his mouth and nose, and his last breath was a rattling gasp.

The same scene everywhere. Men tried to fight, but the lead in their lungs sapped their strength. They raised their arms, lowered them, coughed, spat blood, and fell before they could strike.

Sitting Bull screamed, hit, pushed, pulled a soldier from his horse, and plunged a knife into his neck. Blood spurted, the soldier gasped, and fell. But for every one who fell, three more came.

He saw a child running toward a uniformed officer with a stone, only to be hit by a bullet the next moment. The stone rolled into the dust, and the child remained silent.

“No!” roared Sitting Bull, but his voice was drowned out by the thunder of gunfire.

Lead ate through the bodies, through the lungs, through the hearts of the people. It wasn't just death—it was the certainty that every breath could be the last.

As the uniformed men moved on, only silence remained. Silence and the gasps of the few who were still breathing. Sitting Bull stood amidst the corpses, his hands bloody, his chest heavy, and he knew: the lead hadn't just killed bodies. It had wiped out a part of the people themselves.

“Lead in the lungs,” he muttered, “and dust in history.”

He felt his own heart pounding and wondered how long it would be before his breath tasted of iron too.

Vision in the smoke of the pipes

The night was silent, but not peaceful. The smell of blood and iron hung over the tents, the dust tasted more bitter than ever. Sitting Bull sat by the fire, and around him were the few who were still breathing. Men with rattling lungs, women with empty eyes, children who no longer cried because they had already learned that it was useless.

In the center lay the pipe. Old, carved from bone, decorated with symbols older than any soldier, older than any uniform. An heirloom, a heart of smoke and memory.

Sitting Bull picked it up, slowly, heavily, as if it weighed more than a horse. He filled it, lit it, and took his first breath. The smoke burned his throat, then settled warmly in his chest. For a moment, it pushed away the stench of the camp, the lead, the dust.

He blew the smoke into the sky. Shapes emerged, like shadows, like ghosts. The people around him saw it too. Every puff from the pipe was a piece of hope, a piece of the past, a piece that the uniforms couldn't take away.

"The smoke carries the voices," murmured Sitting Bull. "Hear them. They are not gone."

The men nodded weakly, coughing, but they puffed on their pipes, one after the other. Each breath was heavy, but there was more to the smoke than coughing. There was memory in the smoke.

Sitting Bull closed his eyes. He saw the buffalo, large, mighty, black against the stars. He saw the eagles, high, free, their wings soaring far above the world. He saw rivers that were red, but not just with blood—also with fire, with life.

The vision came, slowly, burning. He saw his people, not dying in the dust, but dancing, singing, free. An image that wasn't the present, but perhaps the future.

He opened his eyes and saw the smoke drifting over the camp. "As long as the pipe is lit," he said, "we are not defeated. They can take our bodies, but not our dreams."

An old warrior coughed, puffed on his pipe, spat blood, but smiled. "Then we'll dream until they take us."

The women nodded, the children looked into the smoke with wide eyes, as if they could see another tomorrow in it.

Sitting Bull knew that visions didn't stop bullets, satisfy hunger, or remove lead from the lungs. But they gave something perhaps even more important: the feeling of not already being dead.

And so the camp smoked while the uniforms slept outside.

The smoke rose, curling into the night like a living thing. Sitting Bull held his pipe tightly, inhaled deeply until his chest burned, and released it again. The smoke settled before his eyes, formless at first, then like a curtain, behind which lay another world.

The voices of the living grew quieter. The coughing, the whimpering, the crackling of the fire—everything disappeared. Instead, he heard drums, strong, deep, as if from a time that no longer existed.

In the smoke, he saw figures. Men, proud, with feathers, their faces full of color. Women, laughing, with children in their arms. Endless herds of buffalo, the earth trembling beneath their hooves. A people who were not hunted, but who hunted.

He felt his heart grow heavy. Was that memory? Or a lie from the smoke?

The figures turned to him. One of them, an old warrior with eyes like fire, stepped forward. "You see us," he said. "We are not gone. We are in the smoke, in the dust, in the blood. You must carry on."

"But how?" asked Sitting Bull, his voice echoing as if it were coming not from his mouth but from deep within his belly. "My people are coughing blood. Children are dying in the dust. The white death marches with guns and hunger. How can I bear this?"

The warrior in the smoke smiled bitterly. "You don't carry to win. You carry so they won't forget. Every song, every word, every beat of the drum is a resistance. Your people may fall—but if they live on in dreams, they have never won."

Sitting Bull wanted to object, but he felt the words gnawing at him. Truth, as sharp as a knife.

Behind the warrior, buffalo appeared, black against the smoke, their eyes shining. They stamped as if to say: We are here, we will return when you call us.

Then came the eagles, high, far, with wings that covered the sky. They screamed, a scream that cut through the smoke like steel.

Sitting Bull fell to his knees, tears in his eyes he didn't see coming. "If that's true," he murmured, "then I won't remain silent. Not in the dust. Not in the hunger. Not in the lead."

The vision began to flicker, the smoke thinned, the crackling of the fire returned, the coughing, the crying. But something was different. Sitting Bull felt it in his chest—a remnant of the drums, a remnant of the cry of the eagles.

He opened his eyes and saw the people around him, weak, bloody, tired. But they also saw him. They had noticed that he had seen something in the smoke.

“Tell us,” whispered a child.

Sitting Bull nodded. "I've seen that we won't disappear. As long as we smoke the pipe, as long as we dream, we are more than their lead."

And he knew: That wasn't a lie. Not entirely.

The smoke still hung over the fire, heavy, sweet, and acrid. Sitting Bull rose, pipe in hand, and the people gathered around him. Their faces were gray with dust, their lips chapped, their eyes tired. But they waited. They wanted to hear what he had seen.

Sitting Bull raised his voice, rough but firm. "I saw in the smoke what they wanted to take from us. And I saw that they couldn't do it."

A murmur went through the crowd, quiet and disbelieving. He raised his hand, letting the smoke stream from his throat like a sign.

"I saw the buffalo," he said, "thousands and thousands, as far as the eye could see. They weren't dead. They were waiting. I saw eagles spreading their wings above us. I saw warriors who had already gone—and they said: We are not gone. We live in you, in your breath, in your songs."

A child clung to his mother's arm, his eyes wide. "Really?" he whispered.

Sitting Bull nodded. "Really. They can kill us, they can starve us, they can fill us with lead. But they can't extinguish us. Not while we smoke, not while we remember."

An old warrior coughed, blood trickling from his mouth, but he smiled faintly. "Then we'll smoke," he murmured, "until our lungs run out of room."

The pipe was passed around the room. Men puffed on it, even if it cut their chests. Women took it and blew smoke over their children. Even the youngest children pretended to puff, as if they were part of the ritual. Every breath was a blow against the white death.

Sitting Bull watched them, and he saw something change. Not the wounds, not the hunger—those remained. But a residue glowed in their eyes. Not victory, but dignity. Not triumph, but remembrance.

"The smoke is our weapon," he said aloud. "Our rifles are weak, our stomachs empty, our bodies full of lead. But the smoke is stronger than their paper, stronger than their uniforms. For it sustains us when all else fails."

The people nodded, some crying, some silently, but everyone held on to the pipe as if it were worth more than any horse, any gun, any meal.

Sitting Bull knew they would still die—one by one, in dust and blood. But they wouldn't die as if they hadn't had anything. They would die with smoke in their lungs, with visions in their heads.

"They march in ranks," he said, "but we march in smoke. And smoke passes through every crack, every heart. It doesn't disappear. It returns."

The drum beat again, slowly, rustily, but still beating. Children clapped to the beat, women sang softly, men closed their eyes and breathed deeply.

And for a moment, the camp was no longer dust and suffering. It was a place where white death stood outside—in front of the wall of smoke.

The smoke hung thicker, as if night itself were creeping through the pipe. Sitting Bull took a deep drag, felt the burning in his chest, and slowly let it out. The figures came again—but this time they weren't friendly.

He saw warriors, yes, but they were bloody, their faces shot to pieces, their bodies riddled with lead. They didn't stand proudly. They lay in the dust, their mouths open, their eyes staring. And they looked at him.

"That's the other truth," muttered Sitting Bull. "Not just eagles and buffalo. Bones in the dirt, too."

The people around him saw the expression on his face, saw the smoke darken, and they fell silent.

He continued, his voice deep and harsh: "I see our future if we remain silent. I see tents burned down. I see children who no longer ask questions. I see our people like shadows, without a drum, without a song."

A murmur went through the crowd, fearful and trembling. Women hugged their children closer. Men clenched their fists, but their eyes flickered.

"They're not just marching against us," said Sitting Bull. "They're marching through us. And if we do nothing, all that'll remain is dust, and the wind will carry us away until no one knows our name anymore."

A young man shouted, "Chief, why are you showing us this? We are already weak, already broken. Why more darkness?"

Sitting Bull looked at him hard. "Because truth is stronger than any lie. If you believe it's only hope, you'll be blindsided. If you see what's coming, you can stand. Even if you fall."

The man remained silent, coughing, and blood dripped onto the floor. But he nodded.

The smoke changed, forming new images. It showed rivers red as fire, but not with victory—with defeat. It showed men throwing away their weapons. It showed women weeping in strangers' beds.

The crowd fell silent, as if they too could see it. No one spoke. Only the fire crackled, only the pipe glowed.

Sitting Bull closed his eyes, and his voice was barely above a whisper: "The smoke shows us what they want—that we disappear. But as long as we see, as long as we talk, as long as we breathe, we won't disappear."

He opened his eyes and looked at the faces around him. "It's not hope that will save us. It's defiance."

The drum beat again, this time slower, heavier, like a heart pumping under load.

And Sitting Bull knew: The smoke had frightened them. But it had also reminded them that fear is sometimes the sharpest weapon—if you don't just swallow it, but throw it back.

The smoke still hung in the air, heavy and bitter, as if it had absorbed the screams itself. The people around Sitting Bull were silent, some with tears in their eyes, others with fists clenched convulsively.

Sitting Bull looked at them, and he knew that if he left them standing there, they would drown in smoke. So he raised his voice, deeper, firmer than before.

"You've seen what's coming," he said. "You've seen what they want. But look more closely. Because even in the images of blood and dust, we weren't silent. We died, yes. But we died screaming, fighting, not like animals who lie down voluntarily."

The warriors raised their heads. One coughed, spitting blood into the dust, but he laughed harshly. "Then my cough shall be their drumbeat."

A faint smile passed through the crowd. Sitting Bull nodded. "Exactly that. Every breath you take, however difficult, is resistance. Every cough, every drop of blood – it tells them: We're still here. They want us to disappear like smoke. But smoke doesn't disappear. It stays, it hangs in the air, it returns."

The women passed the pipe, and the smoke settled over the children, their large eyes wide open. They looked as if they were realizing they were part of something greater than hunger or dust.

Sitting Bull continued: "Take the smoke into your lungs as you had to take the lead. But the lead kills, and the smoke remembers. It makes you more than flesh. It makes you into songs, into stories they cannot kill."

An old man nodded, pipe in hand. "Then we won't just die. Then we'll stay."

"Yes," cried Sitting Bull. "We remain in the smoke, in the drums, in the songs. The white death may take our bodies, but it cannot burn our voices."

The drum beat again, this time faster, louder. Men tapped their chests in time, women sang, children almost screamed, but their voices were clear.

For a moment, it felt like it used to. Not because the buffalo were back or the hunger had disappeared. But because they remembered that they were more than victims.

Sitting Bull raised his pipe, and the smoke curled across the sky like a ghost. "This is our weapon," he said. "Not of iron. Not of lead. But of breath. As long as one of us breathes, even if he coughs, the people live."

And the crowd screamed back, coughing, bloody, but alive.

The fife continued, the drum beat, the voices rose. But Sitting Bull felt the smoke drawing him deeper than the others. It was as if it had a path of its own for him. A path no one else was allowed to see.

He took another drag, deeper than before, and the smoke filled his chest, wrapping itself in his lungs like a second skin. He closed his eyes, and the world tilted.

There was no camp anymore, no dust, no coughing. Only darkness, and within it a figure.

He recognized himself. But not as he was now—not as a man standing. But as a body lying in the dirt, his face bloody, his eyes open, his chest still.

He heard screams, gunshots, the thump of boots. He saw the uniforms, saw the cold faces, saw them trample over him as if he were nothing more than dust.

"This is me," he murmured in the vision. "This is how I will end."

But the figure in the dust slowly raised its head, smiled bloodily, and whispered, "Yes. But not quietly."

Sitting Bull felt a blow in his chest, harder than lead. He understood: his end was certain. Perhaps today, perhaps tomorrow, perhaps later. But it would come, with guns, with uniforms, with betrayal.

And yet there was truth in it. He would not die quietly. Not like those who vanished into the dust, without song, without cry. His death would resound, loud, ugly, so that the earth itself would hear it.

The smoke formed more images. He saw blood on grass, he saw men with guns, he saw women crying. And he saw his people, who, even after his fall, still spoke:*He stood. He fell. But he didn't remain silent.*

Sitting Bull opened his eyes, sweating, his hands shaking. No one had noticed what he had seen—they were too busy with their whistles, their singing, their coughing.

He held his pipe tighter, looking into the still-burning embers. "So be it," he murmured. "If I fall, it won't be quiet. Not in the shadow. But in the smoke."

He looked at the children dancing, weak but alive. And he knew: his end had already been written. But their song wasn't over yet.

The smoke still hung like a veil over the camp, heavy, sweet, and bitter at the same time. Sitting Bull held his pipe in his hands, feeling the warmth of the slowly extinguished embers. He saw the people around him, their faces illuminated by the faint fire.

Men who could barely sit upright but nodded nonetheless. Women who breastfed their children even though their milk was gone. Children who coughed but still laughed because they saw the game in the smoke.

It was an image that hurt and burned at the same time – like wounds that could no longer be bandaged, but that still showed that there was life in them.

Sitting Bull carefully laid down his pipe. It glowed faintly, the last trace of red in the night. "That's enough," he murmured. "For today."

The drum beat once more, a dull thud, then fell silent. No one wept. No one screamed. It was a silence that was not empty, but filled—with the smoke, the voices, the vision.

Sitting Bull rose and looked around. "You saw what I saw," he said quietly. "Not only hope. Also darkness. But both are ours. Both are our song."

An old man nodded. "We're going to die," he said. "But we're going to die with smoke in our lungs, not just lead."

A bitter smile crossed Sitting Bull's face. "So be it."

He stepped out into the cold of the night. The sky was black, with only a few stars flickering, like candles about to go out. He took a deep breath, and even without a pipe, the air tasted of smoke.

In the distance, he thought he heard the marching of the uniformed soldiers. Steady, cold. The white death was never far away. But now he felt that even death couldn't completely dispel the smoke.

He placed his hand on the ground. "You warned me," he murmured to the spirits he had seen in the smoke. "Now warn them. Whisper to them that we won't disappear quietly."

The fire died down. The pipe went out. And the last remnants of smoke still hung over the camp—like an invisible banner, faint but defiant.

People crawled into their blankets and lay down, coughing, hungry, with lead in their lungs. But they didn't sleep in total darkness. They slept in the smoke.

Sitting Bull stayed awake, stared into the night, and knew: The whistle hadn't brought them victory. But it had given them something that even the white death couldn't immediately take away—dignity.

Rivers full of firewater and blood

The river rushed, but it didn't sound like life. No fresh water, no song of nature. It sounded like a gurgling laugh, dirty and heavy. Sitting Bull stood on the bank, looked down, and what he saw was more than a reflection.

The water was murky, dark, and among the waves floated the remnants of war. Blood, diluted but still red. Shreds of cloth, perhaps from uniforms, perhaps from the blankets of one's own men. A piece of wood, burned black, floated like a lost tooth.

And in the middle of it all: bottles. Empty, shattered, some still half-filled. Firewater. The drink that had killed more warriors than any bullet.

Sitting Bull reached for a bottle that had washed up on the shore. He raised it to his lips, smelled the sharp stench, and his face twisted. "Poison," he muttered. "They give us poison and call it trade."

He remembered the traders who came into the camp with carts full of bottles. They laughed, sold a few blankets, a few knives—but it was always the firewater that grabbed the men. One sip, and the hunger seemed to subside. Two sips, and the pain seemed distant. Three sips, and the people forgot they were lying in the dust.

And as they drank, the merchants laughed, counted coins, and outside the uniforms marched on.

Sitting Bull poured the rest of the bottle into the water. The firewater mixed with the blood, swirling, and the river carried both away as if they were one.

"That's their plan," he thought. "To kill us with guns and stun what's left with poison. Dead bodies or dead souls—it makes no difference."

He walked along the shore, saw men lying there who had drunk too much. Their eyes half-closed, their mouths open, drooling, while children pulled at their arms, waking them, begging them. But they didn't move.

Women looked away, their eyes filled with hatred. Hatred for the traders. Hatred for the men. Hatred for everything that weakened them.

Sitting Bull clenched his fists. "Firewater is worse than lead. Lead kills once. Firewater kills every day, slowly, so you don't even notice."

He looked at the river, and it was as if he himself were laughing. A gurgling, dirty laugh that said:*I carry your blood, I carry your poison, and I wash both away until nothing remains.*

Sitting Bull sensed that this was no longer a river. It was a reflection of their fate. And he knew: as long as the firewater flowed, the blood wouldn't stop either.

The next morning, the wagons rolled into the camp. No drums, no guns—just wheels in the dust, clanking crates, snorting horses. The traders arrived, with their fake smiles, their greasy faces, their hands full of bottles.

"Look, friends!" one called, his voice oily like rancid fat. "We'll bring you what you need. Knives, blankets, powder—and this!" He held up a flask, the glass sparkling in the sun as if it were gold. "Firewater for cold nights! Just a few skins, just a little meat."

The men in the camp looked up, hungry, tired, with eyes that showed more despair than anger. A few crept closer, as if they could already smell the stench of alcohol.

Sitting Bull stepped forward, his eyes hard, his hands clenched into fists. "We don't need bottles," he growled. "We need buffalo, we need land, we need air to breathe."

The merchant laughed, an ugly, throaty laugh. "Buffalo? They're gone. Land? That belongs to the whites now. But this—" He shook the bottle, making the liquid inside gurgle. "You have this. As long as you can pay."

A few men hesitated. One reached for a bottle that was handed to him. Sitting Bull pushed it from his hand. The bottle crashed to the ground, shattered, and the pungent smell immediately mingled with the dust.

"Enough!" roared Sitting Bull. "Every swallow is a bullet in your chest, but slower. Every swallow turns you into half-men, into shadows, into dead men before you even fight."

The crowd murmured. Some looked away in shame. Others glared at him—thirsty was stronger than pride.

The merchant shrugged. "If you don't want it, Chief, then don't take it. But your men want it. Your men will pay. Your people want to forget."

Sitting Bull stepped closer, so close that he could smell the stench of sweat and alcohol on the man's breath. "You're not a trader," he hissed. "You're a soldier. Your bottles are weapons. Your crates are rifles. You kill without blood, but you kill faster than bullets."

The merchant smiled coldly, showing rotten teeth. "Maybe. But I make money from it. And your people still buy."

Sitting Bull raised his fist, about to strike. But he stopped. Violence against this man wouldn't change anything—tomorrow another would come along, with more bottles, more lies.

So he did the only thing left. He stepped back, turned to the crowd, and his voice cut like steel: "Whoever drinks, drinks blood. Not the white man's. Our own. Every sip is a betrayal."

The men looked at him, torn between thirst and shame. Some stepped back. Others grabbed him anyway.

Sitting Bull knew this was a battle he couldn't win with fists or spears. It was a war within, and the river of firewater ran deeper than blood.

Night fell, and with it the stench of spilled alcohol filled the camp. Sitting Bull sat at the edge, watching the bottles do their work. No bullets, no guns, just glass and liquid—and yet it was worse.

Men staggered around, tripping over their own feet, laughing open-mouthed, toothless, without dignity. One sang a song, off-key, slurred, a warrior's song that once shook the earth, now sounded like the howl of a dying dog.

Another lay on the ground, arms outstretched as if he were trying to embrace the sky, while the alcohol took his breath away. Children played with the empty bottles, dipping their fingers into them, holding them to their ears, laughing at the sound. They didn't know they were playing with the poison that had already broken their fathers.

Women stood by, faces hard, hands shaking. Some screamed at their husbands, some cried, some tried to knock the bottles away – but there were always more, always someone reaching for the next one.

Sitting Bull felt anger boiling within him. "They drink as if it were water," he muttered. "But they drink blood. Our blood."

He remembered the battles against the uniformed soldiers. There, men died with pride, with cries, with courage. Here, they died laughing, drooling, in the dirt. It wasn't a death—it was a mockery.

A boy came up to him, his eyes wide, holding a half-empty bottle in his hand. "Chief," he said innocently, "why do they drink this? Does it make them strong?"

Sitting Bull took the bottle, sniffed it, and his face twisted. "No," he said harshly. "It makes them weak. It makes them forget they are warriors. Never forget what you saw: A man with firewater is no longer a man."

The boy nodded, but his eyes remained curious, as if he wanted to know what it tasted like.

Sitting Bull smashed the bottle against a rock. Shards flew, and the liquid seeped into the ground. "That's what it's worth," he growled. "Nothing."

But he knew that words alone weren't enough. Thirst was stronger than admonitions, stronger than pride. Everyone who drank bought themselves a brief escape from the dust, from the hunger, from the pain. And who wouldn't want that?

The night dragged on, and the camp didn't sound like a people who wanted to survive. It sounded like a pub full of ghosts. Laughter, screams, slurring, coughing. A chorus of doom.

Sitting Bull saw it and knew: The uniformed men didn't need to shoot anymore. The firewater did their job. Rivers of blood, rivers of poison. And his people drank both until they forgot that there had once been water.

The second night after the trader visit was worse than the first. The camp sounded like a cross between a madhouse and a slaughterhouse. Men laughed while coughing blood. One drew his sword, screamed that he was the spirit of a buffalo, and fell backward into the fire. Women screamed, children cried, and no one intervened.

Sitting Bull sat there, his jaw so tight they ground. He'd had enough.

He rose, stepped into the center of the chaos, and grabbed the first man, who was staggering with a bottle in his hand. With one blow, he ripped the glass from his fingers and hurled it against the floor. The shards sprayed in all directions.

"Enough!" he roared, his voice louder than the babble, louder than the crying. "You want to drink while your children starve? You want to laugh while your women spit blood? You want to die before you even fight?"

A few paused, staring at him like animals seeing the knife for the first time.

One slurred, "It's just a sip, Chief. Just a sip to forget."

Sitting Bull grabbed him by the collar, pulling him so close that the man could feel his breath. "Forgotten? Every sip extinguishes us. Every sip makes you weaker than their bullets. They laugh at you while you kill yourself."

He let go, the man fell into the dust, gasping, and still reached for another bottle.

Sitting Bull grabbed the bottle himself, lifted it up, and smashed it with full force against a rock. The shards flew, the alcohol seeped into the dust. Then he took the next one, and the next one, and the next one.

"Everything!" he yelled. "Everything in the dirt! Not a drop more!"

Some men grumbled, one grabbed his arm. Sitting Bull turned around and struck. His fist against his jaw, a crack, and the man fell to the ground. "Whoever wants to drink, drink my blood first!"

The crowd held its breath. Women nodded, tears in their eyes. Children clung to their mothers. A few men lowered their gaze, dropping their bottles. Others clenched their fists, angry, addicted.

It wasn't a battle against uniforms, but against one's own flesh, against one's own weakness. Sitting Bull knew: There were no heroes here, only betrayal or defiance.

He stood amidst the shards, his hands bloody from the glass, his chest heaving. "Do you want to die?" he cried. "Then die fighting, not like dogs in a frenzy! Do you want to drink? Then drink your blood, drink the dust, drink the smoke—but not this poison!"

A few men shouted back, not out of courage, but out of anger because he had robbed them of their ability to forget. It almost came to blows, knives flashed in the firelight. Women intervened, children screamed.

At the end, the camp was quieter. Not peaceful, not united—but quieter. Broken glass everywhere, the dust wet with firewater. Sitting Bull stood at the center, breathing heavily, and he knew: He hadn't won. He had only prevented them from wiping themselves out faster.

And maybe that was the only thing he could do.

Three days later, the wagons rolled back into the camp. Dust, horses, crates. Men with fat bellies and dirty coats, laughing as if the world were one big carnival.

"Friends!" shouted the leader, a fat dog with yellow teeth. "We bring what you need! Knives, tobacco, blankets—and of course—" He raised a bottle, the sun refracting in the glass, "whatever warms your heart!"

A few men in the camp twitched as if they had heard a voice sweeter than any song. Their eyes were glued to the bottle, their hands twitching restlessly.

Sitting Bull stepped forward, his hands bloody and scarred from the previous night's shards. "Not again," he said harshly.

The merchant grinned broadly. "You can't force your men, Chief. They're thirsty. And we have what they want. One sip, and they'll forget. Isn't that better than dying of hunger?"

A murmur went through the crowd. Some nodded, others looked down in shame.

Sitting Bull stepped closer, so close he almost touched the bottle. His voice was sharper than steel: "One sip, and they'll forget who they are. One sip, and you'll laugh while my people die. You're not a trader. You're an executioner."

The merchant laughed, but his smile flickered. "Executioner? I'm just selling. You're buying voluntarily."

"No," growled Sitting Bull. "They don't buy. They give you their meat, their songs, their children. And you carry them away in boxes like bones. You're worse than their guns, worse than their lead."

He grabbed the bottle, snatched it from the man's hand, and hurled it against the car. The glass shattered, and the alcohol ran into the dust.

"Enough!" he yelled. "Not a drop more in this camp. If any of you see a man drinking here, you know he's selling himself!"

A murmur, both angry and fearful, ran through the crowd. A few men tried to protest, but Sitting Bull raised his hand, and the silence was as hard as stone.

"Everyone who drinks," he said, "doesn't just drink his own end. He drinks the end of his children, his wife, his people. And I tell you, I'd rather drink blood than see this poison in the camp again."

The traders looked at each other. One spat and muttered, "You won't be able to hold them forever, Chief."

Sitting Bull approached, his gaze cold, his voice a growl: "Perhaps not. But as long as I'm breathing, you'll only bring poison into the camp over my dead body."

Tension hung heavy in the air. Men trembled between thirst and pride. Women held back their children as if blood were about to flow.

In the end, the traders turned the horses around. Not out of respect, but because they saw that Sitting Bull was ready to take them on right then and there. They were still laughing, but their laughter sounded faint.

As the wagons disappeared into the dust, Sitting Bull breathed heavily. He knew they would return. Always. As long as there was thirst, as long as there was weakness.

But for this day, he had won. A small victory, dirty, brittle, but a victory.

And maybe that was all that remained.

The traders had disappeared, but the firewater hadn't. Like snakes in the dust, the bottles still found their way back. Men secretly traded them for furs, for knives, for anything else they had left. Not in broad daylight, but at night, between tents, as if it were a sacred ritual—a ritual of forgetting.

Sitting Bull smelled it first. This sweet, sharp stench that settled into the camp like a stranger. He knew immediately what it was.

He found the men by the fire, three of them, laughing, slurring their words, with bottles in their hands. One was singing, one was vomiting, one was trying to draw circles in the sand with a knife and kept missing.

"You dogs," growled Sitting Bull, stepping forward. "You bring the poison back after I threw it out of the camp?"

The men looked up, one grinning crookedly. "Chief, we just wanted a little... a little forgetfulness. A little warmth."

"Warmth?" cried Sitting Bull. "Your fire warms the white people, not you! With every sip, you laugh in their faces and spit down your people's throats."

One man stood unsteadily, holding the bottle like a weapon. "You're not my father, Sitting Bull. I drink when I want."

For a moment there was silence. Then Sitting Bull moved faster than his age suggested. He ripped the bottle from the man's hand and smashed it against his skull. The man fell into the dust, dazed, his face bloody.

"You want to drink?" roared Sitting Bull across the circle. "Then drink your own blood!"

The others froze. One coughed and lowered his gaze, the other held up his hands as if to say: enough.

Sitting Bull looked at them, his chest heaving, his eyes glowing. "Anyone I see with a bottle again will be chased from the camp. No tent, no fire, no drum. You drink, you die alone."

Women stood at the sidelines, some crying, some nodding. Children clung to their mothers' arms.

The men in the dust didn't move. One began to shiver, not from cold, but from shame.

Sitting Bull turned away, but his voice was like a blade: "You can choose. Death with dignity. Or death in intoxication. But if you choose intoxication, you are no longer Lakota."

The night remained quieter than before. No laughter, no out-of-tune song, only the crackling of the fire.

And Sitting Bull knew: He had just started a war against his own people. But perhaps this was the only war he could still win.

In the morning, Sitting Bull stood by the river again. The water flowed indifferently, murky and heavy, as if it knew it carried more than just earth and stones. Between the waves floated shards of bottles, empty corks, splinters of wood, and in between a shimmer of red.

Blood and firewater – united as if they had the same origin.

Sitting Bull knelt on the bank and dipped his hand into the water. It felt cold, but a pungent smell lingered on his skin, like alcohol and iron. He pulled his hand back, saw the drops clinging to it, and murmured, "This is our river. No more water. Only poison."

Children gathered behind him. They held stones, threw them into the water, and laughed briefly as the waves splashed. Their laughter was thin, broken, but it was there. Sitting Bull looked at them and thought:*They are playing in a river that is killing them and they don't know it.*

Women came forward, filling jugs because they had to. They knew the water was bad, that it contained more blood than life. But they had no choice.

Men stood at the edge, silent, some with downcast eyes, some with eyes still searching for a bottle, even though Sitting Bull had banished them.

He stood up and spoke loudly so everyone could hear: "Look at this river! It carries our blood, it carries their poison. It reflects us. We are like it—we rush, we move, but we are no longer pure."

A murmur went through the crowd. No one objected.

"We can't clean the water," Sitting Bull continued. "Just as we can't clean our bodies of lead, of hunger, of bullets. But we can do one thing: We can remember that this river was once clear. That we were once clear."

He clenched his fists. "The whites want us to forget. They want us to drink, to laugh, to die without songs. But I tell you: anyone who remembers, anyone who doesn't forget the taste of water, is stronger than their firewater."

An old warrior nodded, his eyes dull but bright enough to show a trace of pride. "Then we drink blood, but we don't forget."

Sitting Bull gazed into the waves. He knew they would swallow many more. Men, women, children—the river would carry them all, until the people lived more in the water than on the land.

But as long as he stood, as long as he spoke, the blood wouldn't disappear without a trace. The story would be told.

The river gurgled, laughed filthily, and carried away the broken pieces. Sitting Bull turned around, saw his people—broken, coughing, starving—and knew: He couldn't save them. But he wouldn't let them be forgotten either.

"We are the river," he murmured. "And even full of blood and poison, we rush on."

Men fall like flies into shit

The summer brought no blessings, only heat. The sun burned down on the plain, making the dust dry as bones and the air thick as soup. Flies buzzed everywhere, fat, greedy, like little black vultures.

In the camp, death wasn't part of battles, but part of everyday life. Men didn't fall from bullets, but simply like that – while coughing, while walking, while standing up. A step, a gasp, a fall. Then someone lay there, his chest still, his eyes open.

It was as if life itself had enough.

The flies were the first to notice. As soon as one fell, they settled on eyes, lips, and open mouths. They buzzed, they crawled, they ate. And the living looked away, because they were used to it.

Sitting Bull stood in the middle of the camp, his hands clenched into fists. He watched as one of his warriors, a young man with a scar across his cheek, stood up, only to immediately collapse. No scream, no fight—just dead. Within minutes, he was covered in black spots, buzzing and crawling.

“Men fall like flies to shit,” muttered Sitting Bull, and he knew it was not a saying, but the truth.

Children ran through the camp, jumping over the bodies as if it were a game. Women pulled the dead aside and laid them in the shade, without tears, without words. They had seen too many to cry every time.

The men still standing looked down, coughed, and spat blood. Everyone knew: they could be next.

Sitting Bull approached the dead and swatted away the flies with his hand. They scattered briefly, then immediately returned. He looked into the empty eyes, then up at the sky. "Is that your plan?" he asked quietly. "That we don't die in battle, but in the dust, eaten by flies?"

No answer, just the burning sun and the humming that sounded like laughter.

He turned around and saw the faces of his people. "We are warriors," he cried, his voice sharp. "But we die like animals! Do you want your last breath to be food for flies?"

A few raised their heads, their eyes dull. One whispered, "We have no more strength, Chief."

Sitting Bull clenched his fists. "Then at least die standing! Die with a scream, not in the dust like dirt! Everyone who falls should let heaven know that he didn't walk silently."

The flies continued to buzz, fat, black, indifferent.

And Sitting Bull knew: Even if they screamed, the flies would be louder.

In the beginning, they had still dug graves. Shallow, narrow, surrounded by stones, sometimes decorated with feathers, sometimes accompanied by songs. It was arduous digging in the hard earth, but at least it gave death a name.

But now... now the bodies simply lay there. Some were dragged aside, under a tree, into the tall grass, to the edge of the camp. Others remained where they fell.

The earth was too dry, too hard, and their hands too weak. Every blow with the spade felt like a cough in their chest. So they stopped.

The flies celebrated. They crawled into the nostrils, into the open mouths, and laid eggs in wounds. Within hours, the bodies were full of movement, as if they were breathing again—but they were only maggots.

Women covered the bodies with blankets, if they had any. But soon, even the fabric for that was scarce. Children played beside them, throwing stones, drawing lines in the dust, as if the bodies were merely obstacles in the game.

Sitting Bull watched this with a face harder than stone. He wanted to scream, to hit, to force the earth itself to take the dead. But he knew: it wasn't laziness, it was exhaustion. His people no longer had the strength for dignity.

One night, he sat next to three bodies lying at the edge of the camp. An old warrior, a boy barely sixteen, and a woman no one claimed anymore. Their faces were rigid, their lips covered with flies.

He spoke quietly, just for her: "Forgive us. We should have honored you. But the dust has more power than we do."

He raised his eyes to the sky, saw the stars flickering. "If the spirits take you, don't tell them we forgot. Tell them we were just too tired to bury you."

He knew it was a lie. But perhaps one they were allowed to hear.

The next morning, he coughed up blood, spat it into the dust, and watched as the sun burned mercilessly again. Men fell like flies, and no one had hands left to bury them.

It was as if the camp itself became a cemetery.

And Sitting Bull knew: The worst death was not that of the body, but that of dignity.

The sun was high as Sitting Bull walked to the edge of the camp. From there, he could see far across the plains, and in the distance: clouds of dust. No buffalo, no storms. There were wagons, horses, and uniformed men.

They didn't come any closer. They kept their distance.

It was like this for days. They marched in a circle around the camp, not too far, not too close. They fired no volleys, no cavalry, no attacks. They waited.

Sitting Bull understood. They didn't have to fight at all. They only had to watch the people die in their own dust.

“You know,” he muttered, “that we eat ourselves.”

He watched as an old warrior collapsed in the camp, his face in the dust, his lungs empty. Flies immediately settled on him, as if on a feast. No one moved. No one sang. No one cried.

In the distance, on a hill, the uniformed men stood and watched. Perhaps they laughed, perhaps their faces remained cold—but they stood there like spectators at a play they themselves had written.

Sitting Bull clenched his fists. "They don't need bullets. They're hungry. They're sick. They have our own poison. We're their battle, without them having to fight."

He thought of the flies, who were always there first, faster than any human. They crawled into the corpses, into the wounds, into the flesh. And the uniformed men were like the flies—waiting, patient, certain that their prey would rot on its own.

He turned toward the camp, saw the children playing weakly in the dust, saw the women too thin to give milk, saw the men coughing, too weak for arrow or spear.

"We don't fall like warriors," he thought. "We fall like flies. And they wait until the last wing flutters."

He stepped back, sat down in the tent, picked up his pipe, and took a deep drag, even though it cut his chest. The smoke burned, but it reminded him:*We are more than flies. We are more.*

But he also knew that the uniformed officers would wait until even the smoke was just dust.

Night came, but it brought no rest. A buzzing sound filled the camp, a constant song of flies. Sitting Bull sat by the fire, pipe in hand, staring into the embers. He knew that if he remained silent now, the people would rot like corpses in the dust.

So he stood up. His voice was hoarse, but it cut through the humming.

"You hear them, don't you?" he cried. "The flies! They're everywhere. They're waiting for us, they'll eat us before we even get cold."

People looked up. Children stopped playing, women placed their hands in their laps, men raised their heads wearily.

"Yes," Sitting Bull continued, "we fall like flies on shit. That's what they say. That's what we see. But listen to me: Even flies are stronger than they think. A fly is nothing. But a swarm? A swarm will drive any animal crazy."

A murmur went through the crowd. Men coughed, nodded, women whispered.

"They wait for us to rot," said Sitting Bull. "But what if we don't give them the pleasure? What if we gather like flies—small, numerous, everywhere, and bite until they can't sleep?"

A young warrior, barely a beard on his face, cried: "But we are weak, Chief. Our lungs are full of blood."

Sitting Bull nodded firmly. "Yes. But even with blood in your lungs, you still have teeth. You have hands. You have voices. Flies are small, but they don't stop. They buzz, they sting, they crawl into every crack. That's what we must be. Not an army. A swarm."

The drum was beaten, slowly, faintly, but it echoed. Children began to beat their hands together in the dust as if they were wings. Women began a song, fragile but still there.

Sitting Bull saw it, and his heart burned. "They'll think we're flies," he cried. "Then we'll show them that flies won't leave them alone! Every cough, every scream, every blow is our buzzing. They'll lose sleep until they realize we won't rot without biting them!"

The crowd screamed back, not strongly, not loudly, but with a defiance that drowned out even the buzzing of real flies.

And Sitting Bull knew: They would fall anyway. But maybe, just maybe, they would gnaw the flesh from the bones of the uniformed men in the process.

The days that followed were different. Not stronger, not healthier—but different. Sitting Bull's words had pierced their hearts like thorns:*If we're flies, then we buzz.*

So they began.

No major battles, no open fighting. Just stabbings. A horse disappeared in the night. A wagon overturned because the wheel had been secretly loosened. A tent burst into flames as a torch flew through the darkness.

The uniformed men woke up, found traces, found devastation, but no enemies. They cursed, shouted, sent patrols, but all they found was dust and the buzzing of flies.

Men with weak lungs dragged themselves out at night, crawled on their bellies, stabbed a horse, or stole a rifle. They returned coughing, blood on their lips, but with burning eyes.

Women helped, tying traps, laying out poisoned meat. Children threw stones into the darkness, screaming as loudly as they could, just to keep the soldiers awake.

It wasn't a war. It was a swarm.

Sitting Bull saw the effect. The uniformed men slept worse, their faces became harder, their eyes deeper. They began to shoot nervously, into the darkness, at shadows, at trees. Sometimes they shot each other.

“You see?” murmured Sitting Bull. “Even flies can bring madness.”

But he also saw the cost. Every small blow claimed victims. One didn't return, two were shot while fleeing, and three died in the dust before they even reached the camp again.

The people accepted it without complaint. It was better to die in the desert than to rot in the dust.

One night, Sitting Bull watched from the hill as five of his men crawled through the grass. They attacked a watch fire, killed two soldiers, and stole a sack of provisions—and none of them returned alive.

In the morning, their bodies were brought home. Women wept, children stared, men nodded. It wasn't a victory. But it wasn't a silent death either.

Sitting Bull stood before the corpses, which were already buzzing with flies, and spoke loudly: "They fell like flies. But they stung, until their last breath. That is our song. No silence. Only humming."

The camp nodded, weak, exhausted, but in agreement.

And outside, in the circle surrounding the camp, the uniformed men began to look nervous. Flies, thought Sitting Bull, even the largest animals hate them.

It began with gunfire in the night. First just single shots, then full salvos. The uniformed men fired into the darkness, at shadows, at grass, at the wind. They weren't shooting at enemies, but at the humming that robbed them of sleep.

The next morning they came closer. Rows of blue and gray, rifles at the ready, faces hard, eyes red with fatigue. They were angry, not hungry. Angry because flies were biting them.

They didn't come like hunters, they came like butchers. They shot at tents, even if only women and children were inside. They lit fires, left blankets burning, and let smoke creep through the camps.

Sitting Bull ran through the dust, shouting, "Take the children away! Take the old people away!" But where to? The plain was vast, bare, and without protection.

An old man hobbled out of the tent, both hands raised, shouting: “We have no weapons!” A shot rang out, his chest burst, and he fell in the dust.

Children screamed, women shrieked, men grabbed spears, bows, anything they could find. An arrow flew, hitting a soldier in the shoulder. Ten bullets answered, and the archer fell, his head bursting like a melon.

Sitting Bull grabbed a boy and pulled him into the grass, bullets whizzing overhead. "Stop them screaming!" he panted. "Only scream if you fall. Not now."

The uniformed men were no longer laughing. They fired with anger, with hatred, as if they wanted to finally squash the buzzing of the flies.

A tent caught fire, the flames licked high, smoke and screams rose. Women ran into the fire with their bare hands, pulling children out, and burning themselves in the process.

Sitting Bull knew: This wasn't a battle. It was a punishment. They wanted to show: Flies aren't allowed to bite. Flies are only allowed to die.

He raised the spear he still carried and shouted, "Stab until you fall! Stab until they realize we're not shit, but a swarm!"

The men ran as fast as they could. Arrows flew, spears struck, one soldier fell, two more bled. But for every uniformed man who fell, ten Lakota died.

The buzzing of flies mingled with the thunder of gunfire.

In the end, the camp lay in smoke, bodies in the dust, blood in the grass. The uniformed men retreated, not because they had to, but because they had destroyed enough to sleep again.

Sitting Bull stood among the corpses, blood on his hands, and heard the buzzing. Louder than the gunshots. Louder than anything.

“They beat us,” he muttered, “but they didn’t stop the buzzing.”

The camp was silent as the sun rose again. No song, no drumbeat, just smoke, dust, and the buzzing of flies. Bodies lay everywhere, some still warm, some already covered by swarms.

Sitting Bull walked through the rubble, each step heavy as a blow to his chest. He saw the children who survived—with wide eyes that bore more age than childhood. He saw the women pulling blankets over the dead while they themselves were barely standing. He saw the men who were still breathing, weak, coughing, but standing.

"Come," he called, his voice rough but firm. "Come here."

They gathered, not many, not strong. But they came.

Sitting Bull stood amidst the ruins, blood on his hands, smoke in his hair. He looked at her for a long time, until her eyes held his.

"You've seen how they treat us," he said. "Like shit in the dust. Men fall, children fall, women fall—and they don't even laugh anymore. They shoot, they burn, and then they leave as if we were nothing."

He paused, clenched his fists. "But we are not nothing. We are not silent. Do you hear?" He pointed to the air, which was full of buzzing. "The flies are here. They feed, they buzz, they don't stop. Even if they are crushed, they come back. That is us. That remains of us."

A murmur went through the crowd. Someone coughed up blood and nodded. A woman lifted her child, thin as a twig, but alive.

"We may die," Sitting Bull continued. "Perhaps today, perhaps tomorrow. But we won't die like shit in the dust. We'll die humming. Every scream, every blow, every breath will stay in their ears. They shall never forget us."

He raised his hands to the sky, his fingers trembling, but they were raised. "We're flies, they say. Good. Then we won't let them sleep. Then we'll let them bleed, even if we're already lying in the dirt ourselves."

The crowd nodded, weakly but defiantly. Some began to hum, first quietly, then louder. A sound, brittle but sharp as a knife. Children joined in, women hummed, men too.

It wasn't a song, not a prayer. It was a hum. A swarm.

Sitting Bull closed his eyes. "So be it," he murmured. "We fall. But we hum until the last thing falls silent."

And for a moment, amidst the blood, dust, and corpses, the humming sounded louder than the guns of the world.

The sun laughs over burnt skin

The sun hung high, merciless, a white scorch in the sky. No wind, no shadow, only light that cut like a knife. Sitting Bull stood in the dust, head bowed, eyes narrowed. Sweat burned his forehead, running into his eyes, tasting bitter.

Around him, the camp lay like a pile of dried bones. Tents leaning, some burned down, corpses half in the sand, half under sheets. But the worst thing wasn't death. It was the stench of burned skin.

The uniformed men had set fires during the night, and many hadn't been quick enough. Tents went up in flames, blankets turned into torches, and those who couldn't get out were left behind in the smoke. Now they lay there, blackened, charred, arms outstretched, as if they had grabbed for air at the last moment.

The sun shone on them, bright, clear, mocking. Every body shone as if the light itself were laughing.

Sitting Bull knelt beside a woman whose face was half burned. One eye still open, the other black and empty. Her child lay beside her, a small body, rigid, its skin like leather.

He closed his eyes and murmured, "Great Spirit, why does the sun laugh at our flesh?"

But he knew there was no answer. The sun was not a friend, not a mother. It was an executioner who watched without mercy.

The children who were still alive crawled into the shade of the remaining tents. But even there it was hot and stuffy. Women fanned them with rags, but it didn't help. The air was still, and every breath tasted of smoke, ash, and burnt flesh.

An old man hobbled through the camp, barefoot, his soles covered in blisters. He laughed, a mad, hoarse laugh. "The sun is laughing!" he cried. "See? It's laughing! We're its feast!" Then he coughed up blood, fell over, and the flies immediately found him.

Sitting Bull clenched his fists. "We're fighting against uniforms, against hunger, against fire—and even the sun is on their side."

He looked up at the sky, blinking against the bright light that threatened to blind him. "Laugh," he murmured. "But we'll laugh back. Even with our skin burned."

His face was wet with sweat, his breathing heavy, but his eyes glowed. And as the sun burned, he knew: If even the sun laughed, then the people had to laugh back—even if it was the last laugh.

The morning after the fire didn't smell of earth, nor of rain, nor of life. It smelled of burnt flesh. A sweet, nauseating stench that drove away even hunger. Sitting Bull walked through the camp, every breath like a slap in the face.

The dead lay scattered, some black as coal, others half-charred, their skin blistered, peeling, and open. Arms clenched, fingers twisted into claws. Children's bodies, small as bundles of wood, with faces no one recognized.

The sun shone down on everything, bright, clear, merciless. It made no distinction between life and death—it burned on both.

Sitting Bull called the men together. "We must bury them," he said. "We can't leave them lying there like burnt branches."

The men nodded, weak, coughing, but they came. They took sticks, bones, everything they had, and began to dig in the hard ground. But the earth was dry, cracked, almost like stone. Each blow produced little more than dust.

Sweat dripped from their faces, running into the wounds on their hands. Blood mixed with dust, turning into mud. One fell into the pit, coughed, and stayed there. Two others pulled him out, cursed, and continued working.

Women stood by, holding cloths over their mouths and noses, but the stench permeated everything. Children covered their eyes, crying as the sun beat down on their heads.

Sitting Bull himself stepped in, his hands bloody from digging, his chest heaving. "Faster!" he cried. "Before the sun consumes them all."

But the sun continued to laugh. Every body they carried into the pit shone as if mocked by the light. Flies immediately landed on it, even before the earth covered it.

A man dropped a body and sank to the ground himself. "I can't go on," he gasped. "My lungs are on fire."

Sitting Bull grabbed him and pulled him up. "Then die later," he growled. "Now you dig."

The men worked until they could no longer. In the end, the pit was shallow, barely large enough for so many dead. They laid them in, one on top of the other, charred, rigid, some still with their mouths open, as if they were about to scream.

Then they shoveled dust and dirt over it. Not much, just enough to keep the flies from coming back immediately.

The sun was high, burning mercilessly, and Sitting Bull looked up. "You laugh," he muttered, "but we haven't forgotten them. Even if all we could do was throw dust over them."

His voice broke, but he raised his fists. "We didn't leave them lying there like dogs."

The sun continued to burn, indifferent, mocking. But the camp knew: for one day, for one moment, they had contradicted it.

The pits had barely been filled when the sun began to scorch the living. No shadow was large enough, no tent dense enough. The light penetrated everywhere, resting on skin as if it wanted to extinguish it.

Men crawled out of the tents, their faces reddened, their lips chapped. Women wrapped their children in rags, but the fabric was thin, full of holes, burned from the last attack. Their little faces were crying, tearful, their skin blistered.

Sitting Bull walked through the camp, saw the burned marks on arms and legs, and smelled the stench of meat that had not been cooked but grilled—right on the bone.

An old man lay in the dust, his hands over his face, muttering, "The sun burns away the soul... it takes us before the guns do."

Women tried to pour water over children, but there was hardly any. The few drops evaporated before reaching their skin. The sun devoured them greedily, as if laughing:*You may drink, but your body gets nothing.*

A boy, barely twelve, ran out of the tent, the skin on his shoulders blistered. He screamed, fell into the dust, and rolled around as if he could escape the fire. Sitting Bull knelt beside him, grabbed him, and squeezed him to his chest. "Breathe, little one," he murmured. "Breathe while you can."

But the boy continued screaming until his voice broke. Only a cough remained, dry and full of blood.

Sitting Bull looked up at the sky, his eyes narrowed. "You're laughing, sun," he said softly. "You burn us, you cook us, you turn us to ash before we even fall. But you know what? We laugh back."

He turned to the camp and shouted: “Laugh!”

The people stared at him in disbelief. He shouted again: "Laugh! When they burn us, we laugh! When the sun eats our skin, we give it voices it can't silence!"

And so they laughed. First hesitantly, brokenly, then louder. Women with burned lips, men with sore throats, children with blisters on their arms. It wasn't a happy laugh. It was mocking, defiant, a laugh that hurt like open wounds.

The sun stood still, still burning, but laughter echoed through the camp.

Sitting Bull knew they would burn anyway. But they wouldn't do it quietly.

The laughter echoed among the tents for a while longer, rough, broken, but defiant. But the sun didn't stop. It continued to burn, as if to prove that no human could withstand it for long.

Soon the laughter faded. Women held their stomachs because every sound hurt like fire in their throats. Men doubled over, coughed, blood trickled from their lips, and the laughter stopped. Children stopped laughing, they just screamed.

The sun stood high and motionless, as if it had frozen time itself. No clouds, no wind, no shadows. Only light that cut like knives and burned like coals.

Sitting Bull stood in the dust, his chest heaving, his skin covered in red blotches. His own laughter had died away, and he looked around: men with burned faces, women with chapped lips, children crying until they lost their voices.

"So that's how it is," he murmured. "Even our defiance evaporates in the light."

An old warrior came to him, the skin on his arms blistered, his eyes milky. "Chief," he whispered, "I wanted to laugh. But the sun took it away from me." Then he collapsed, his face in the dust, and remained silent.

Sitting Bull knelt beside him and placed his hand on his shoulder. It felt hot, as if it were still burning. "He laughed," murmured Sitting Bull. "Even if only for a breath."

But he knew that wasn't enough. The sky was stronger, the sun merciless. It continued to laugh at her burned skin, at her screams, at her weakness.

People crawled back into their tents, even though the air was even more stifling there. Some pressed damp rags to their skin, others lay down in the dust, as if trying to crawl deeper into the earth, away from the light.

Sitting Bull stopped, his gaze fixed on the sky. His lips were dry, chapped, and bloody. "You can burn us," he whispered, "but you won't silence us. Our cries are also a song."

But he knew: This song was no longer defiant. It was pain, raw and ugly.

The sun continued to shine, indifferent. It didn't need an answer. Its laughter was light itself.

The heat no longer just settled on the skin; it crept into the throats, the tongues, the bones. Thirst came like a second death, slower, more persistent, more relentless.

The few jugs that still contained water were half empty, the rest warm, stale, almost sweet—like piss. Women held them out to their children, drop by drop, but it wasn't enough. The little ones' lips were chapped, full of blood, their tongues thick and dry.

Men crawled to the river, hoping to find salvation there. But the water was murky, tasted of iron and rot, of blood and alcohol. Anyone who drank it immediately vomited, writhed, or died. Nevertheless, they knelt on the bank, sipping greedily, because thirst overcame reason.

Sitting Bull stood there, watching as one after another drank, choked, and collapsed. He felt his own throat burning, like sand in his throat. But he didn't drink. "I'd rather die with dust in my throat," he muttered, "than with this poison inside me."

In the camp, voices became hoarse, brittle. No one spoke aloud anymore; every breath was too precious. Children cried without tears, only dry sobs that sounded worse than any screaming. Women knelt in the dust, licking their own skin to reclaim the sun's sweat.

A man cut his hand and licked his own blood. He grinned madly and shouted, "Better blood than dust!" Then he laughed until he fell over.

Sitting Bull grabbed him, shook him, but his eyes were already blank. He let go, stepped back, and clenched his fists. "Thirst is worse than lead," he growled. "Lead kills once. Thirst kills every breath."

The sun continued to shine, fiercely, mercilessly. Every drop that fell in the dust evaporated instantly. Even tears didn't stand a chance—they evaporated before they could even run down the cheeks.

Sitting Bull raised his voice, so hoarse it barely sounded like speech: "Hear me! You may lose the water, you may lose the blood, but don't lose your song! Sing, even if your throats are dust! Sing, even if it's only a whisper!"

A few women whispered. A song, broken, barely audible, but it was there. Men hummed, coughed in between, children squeaked faintly. It wasn't singing. It was an echo.

And Sitting Bull knew: Thirst would kill them. But as long as voices remained in the dust, even the sun wouldn't have its last laugh alone.

The night brought no coolness. Only darkness, burning as much as the day. Thirst crept into every throat, turning men into animals, women into shadows, children into ghosts.

At first, it was a whisper: someone was stealing another's pitcher. A fight, a shove, a blow. Then Sitting Bull heard screams. He ran as fast as his tired legs could carry him and saw two men struggling on the ground. Between them was a pitcher, barely half full. They bit each other, scratched each other, their faces bloody, their throats choking. One got hold of the pitcher and drank greedily, even as the other broke his ribs.

When Sitting Bull intervened, it was too late – one lay still, the other drooling water and blood from his mouth, his hands still clenched around the jug.

"You're eating each other," growled Sitting Bull. "Like dogs without a bone."

But it didn't stop.

A boy stole a bag containing a few drops from a girl. She screamed, hit him, he bit her, drank, and she was left crying in the dust.

A woman cut her hand and forced the blood into her child's mouth. It drank greedily and desperately, while she herself fainted.

An old man crawled to a corpse, tore open the wound with his teeth, and licked the still warm blood. When he was pulled away, he screamed like an animal, bit, spat, and cursed.

The camp was no longer a people. It was a pack, shattered by madness.

Sitting Bull stood in the middle, his fists clenched, his heart burning. He shouted, "Enough!" His voice echoed, harsh, like an iron command. "You want water? You want blood? Then listen to me: We only drink together. We share, even if it's dust. Whoever steals, whoever eats like a dog, is no longer a Lakota!"

His words cut through the air; some paused, looking down in shame. Others growled, their eyes glazed over, driven mad by thirst.

Sitting Bull approached the man, who was still licking his hand, his face smeared with blood. "You are no better than flies," he said quietly, then louder so everyone could hear: "Whoever drinks blood like an animal shall die outside, away from the people."

He grabbed him, dragged him to the edge of the camp, and pushed him out into the dust. The man fell, crawled, looked back with eyes full of hatred—and disappeared into the darkness.

The camp remained silent. Only the buzzing of flies, the wheezing of children, the dry coughs of the elderly.

Sitting Bull raised his arms. "We are weak. We are thirsty. But we die together. Not against each other. Not like dogs."

His voice was rough, but it held the camp together for a moment. A last shred of order amidst the madness.

But he knew the thirst would return. And perhaps the worst part was that it came anew every day – like the sun itself.

Night came late, so late that it seemed as if the sun would never set. Sitting Bull sat at the edge of the camp, the skin on his arms red and blistered, his face hard as stone. Around him, men coughed, children cried, women moaned. The thirst hadn't diminished, only quenched.

He stared at the horizon, where the sun was slowly setting. Finally. But even in its setting, it laughed, a giant red ball that bathed the entire plain in a sickly blood-red light. Every body, every wound, every patch of burned skin glowed once more, as if the sun wanted to set its cruelty ablaze as a farewell.

Sitting Bull closed his eyes. The smoke from the pipe crept into his lungs, burning, but he needed it. He sucked deeper until he could barely feel the ground beneath him.

And then he saw the vision.

The sun hung over the plain, enormous, laughing, its face aflame, its teeth ablaze. It stretched out its rays like arms, grabbing men, tearing their skin from their bodies, burning them even as they screamed. Women screamed, children ran, but they too were caught, their bodies turned into torches.

The people burned – not in fire, but in mere light.

But in the vision, he also saw how the sun finally grew weary. Slowly, heavily, it sank behind the mountains, grew weaker, smaller, and disappeared. Darkness came, cold, silent, full of stars.

And the people? They lay in the dust, charred, burned, like ash in the wind. But their voices were still there. Not loud, not clear, but like a hum, a whisper. An echo that never died.

Sitting Bull opened his eyes, the smoke burned in his chest, tears running down his cheeks, hotter than sweat.

He murmured, "The sun is laughing. But it's setting. We burn, but our song remains."

He looked at the children who could barely open their eyes, and at the women who held them tight, even though they themselves were at their limits. He saw the men who were still grasping their weapons, even though their hands were shaking.

"We will fall," he said quietly, "but not quietly. Even if the sun laughs upon us, it will hear our humming before it dies."

Night finally fell over the camp. Cool, black, silent. The sun was gone. But its scars burned on every body.

And Sitting Bull knew: Tomorrow she would laugh again. But he would hum again.

Shadows of vultures, shadows of gods

The morning was gray, not cool, not friendly—just a dirty veil over the plain. Sitting Bull stepped out of the tent, and the first thing he saw were the shadows of the vultures. They circled over the camp, slowly, patiently, as if they knew the prey was already waiting.

The vultures weren't like flies, small and annoying. They were large, black, with wings that cut through the air like blades. Every beat of their wings sounded like mockery.

Sitting Bull watched them descend. One perched on a tent pole, its eyes shining, its neck bare, its beak yellow, full of hunger. Children screamed,

women chased it away with stones. But the bird didn't fly far—it just perched on a rock and waited.

"They wait like white men," muttered Sitting Bull. "They know we're going to fall."

He walked through the camp, and everywhere lay bodies, not even cold. Some were under blankets, others just in the dust. Vultures perched above some, tearing at skin and flesh with their beaks before anyone chased them away.

An old man cried, "They're eating our brothers! They're eating while we're still breathing!"

Sitting Bull raised his spear and threw it at a bird. The shaft narrowly missed, and the vulture rose screeching, soared, and circled again.

The people looked up, their faces dusty and fearful. "They are the shadows of the gods," a woman whispered. "Perhaps they're sending the vultures to get us."

Sitting Bull snorted and spat in the dust. "If these are the gods, then they're laughing with the vultures. Then they're not sending us visions, but beaks."

He raised his arms to the sky and cried out loudly: "Great Spirit, if you see us, why are you silent? Why do you allow the vultures to approach while we rot here?"

No answer. Just the beating of wings, just screeching.

Sitting Bull looked again into the faces of his people. "Then we won't listen to the gods," he said quietly but firmly. "Then we'll listen to ourselves. To our humming. To our laughter. To our blood."

Above them, vultures circled. And in the dust below, the people crawled, as small as flies, as weak as dust—and yet not silent.

The vultures became bolder. At first, they only approached the dead, pecking their beaks into flesh, tearing out strips until the bones were bare. But soon, that was no longer enough for them.

A child lay in the shade of a tent, too weak to cry. A vulture perched beside her, its eyes shining, and pecked gently at her shoulder. The girl cried, weakly,

barely audibly, until her mother came with a stick and hit the bird. It screeched, flew up—but didn't leave. It only flew higher, waited.

That evening, an old man crawled out of the tent and collapsed in the dust. Before anyone could reach him, three vultures were above him, pecking and tearing. They fed while he was still gasping for breath, and his cries mingled with the beating of his wings.

Women ran, screamed, threw stones, and chased the animals away. But they always returned, patiently hungry.

Sitting Bull stood there, his face hard, his hands bloody from the spear. He threw and hit a bird. The bird fell screaming, fluttering, flapping its wings until he crushed its skull. Blood and feathers spurted.

"Look!" he cried, his chest heaving. "This is how a vulture dies. No god, just a scavenger!"

The people cheered briefly, weakly, but the other vultures continued circling. For every one that fell, three returned.

The night brought no rest. Vultures perched on the poles, on rocks, even on tents. Their shadows danced in the firelight like mocking figures, larger than men, larger than gods.

A boy whispered, “Are these the ghosts coming to get us?”

Sitting Bull shook his head and growled, "No. They're not ghosts. They're just mouths. And we live as long as we beat them."

But deep down, he knew: The vultures were waiting, more patient than soldiers, more cruel than bullets. And perhaps they were the messengers of the gods after all—gods who had long since abandoned the people.

The sun had barely risen when the sky was already black with wings. The vultures circled so densely that they seemed like a blanket. Shadows fell over the camp, large, fluttering shadows that made the tents look like gravestones.

Sitting Bull looked up, his eyes narrowed, his face like stone. He whispered, "Perhaps they are more than animals. Perhaps they are the hands of the gods."

He remembered the old stories. How the Great Spirit sent signs, how birds brought messages. Eagles signified strength, crows signified cunning. But what did vultures mean? Only hunger, only death.

"Perhaps," he murmured, "vultures are the true language of the gods. Not eagles. Not crows. Just carrion."

He walked through the camp, saw the women covering the children, the men weakly shooting arrows into the sky that never hit. Each arrow fell back, useless, and the vultures continued to circle, unmoved.

An old man crawled toward him, his voice rough, his breath thin. "Chief... why don't the gods help us?"

Sitting Bull looked at him, hard but not cruel. "Because they never helped. Because the gods are vultures. They wait until we fall, and then they eat."

The words burned, but they were true. The faces around him became rigid, blank, as if they had already known it but never spoken it.

That evening, a vulture landed right in front of Sitting Bull's tent. It stared at him, motionless, its eyes cold, its neck bare, its beak glistening. They gazed at each other for a long time, man and bird, chief and shadow.

"Are you God?" Sitting Bull asked quietly. "Or are you just his dog?"

The vulture cawed, spread its wings, and rose – leaving a shadow that passed over Sitting Bull's face.

He felt it in his bones: Perhaps the vultures and the gods were two names for the same indifference.

And the question was no longer whether they would fall. It was only how long they would flutter before the shadows swallowed them whole.

The night was filled with flapping wings, screeching, and shadows that hung over the tents like a black curtain. Sitting Bull sat by the fire, spear beside him, pipe in his mouth, staring into the darkness. He had decided: If the vultures were the gods, then he would strike them like any flesh-and-blood enemy.

In the morning, he gathered the men who were still standing. They were few, weak, thin, their faces sunken, their hands shaking. But their eyes burned, like his.

"Look up there," he said, his voice rough as dry wood. "They're waiting, they're laughing, they're circling. They think we're already dead. They're the shadows of the gods. And I tell you: Then we'll stab the gods in the stomach."

The men murmured, women nodded, children clung to their mothers' arms.

"Today," Sitting Bull continued, "the shadows do not belong to them. Today we pluck out their wings."

They built traps as best they could—sticks in the dust, nets made of tattered blankets, spears sticking up like teeth. They laid out meat—not much, a few pieces of corpses, their skin already eaten by flies. The stench was strong enough to draw the birds closer.

At midday they came. First hesitantly, then eagerly. Two vultures landed on the ground and pecked at the meat. A third fluttered lower, curious.

Sitting Bull waited, his muscles tensed. Then he shouted, "Now!"

The men jumped, threw nets, and thrust spears. A bird screeched, fluttered, and the net pulled it to the ground. Blood spurted as a spear pierced its body. A second was struck with stones, its wings snapping like dry wood. The third escaped, but it rose, staggering and injured, higher and higher until it disappeared.

The children screamed, women cheered weakly, men coughed and laughed simultaneously. It wasn't a great victory. It was just two dead vultures. But in that moment, it felt like they had spat in the face of heaven itself.

Sitting Bull approached the carcasses and kicked the wings, which were still twitching. "Look," he cried, "these aren't gods. They're just scavengers! And as long as we stand, we'll slay the shadows ourselves!"

But deep down, he knew: tomorrow, twice as many would return. For every bird killed, another flock would return. The sky was inexhaustible.

But for this day—just for this day—they had shown the Shadows that they were not just prey.

The next morning, the sky was black. Not from clouds, not from smoke—but from wings. A flock of vultures, so numerous that the sun disappeared behind them. Their shadows danced across the camp, as large as demons, endless, unstoppable.

Sitting Bull stepped outside, spear in hand, and stared upwards. "There's the answer," he murmured. "For two dead, they send a hundred."

People emerged from their tents, blinking into the darkness of wings. Children screamed, women hugged them. Men held their weapons tightly, though their hands trembled.

Then the vultures began to descend.

They no longer came one at a time, no longer cautiously. They swooped down, screaming, pecking. One landed on a man, ripping open his throat before he could draw his knife. Another lunged at a child, pecking with its beak until the mother grabbed it with her bare hands and flung it away—her arms covered in wounds.

There was screaming, blood, and dust everywhere. Nets ripped, spears broke, men screamed, women hit with stones, children threw sticks. But it was a battle against the sky itself.

Sitting Bull stood in the midst of the chaos, spear in hand, and stabbed. A bird screeched, twitched, and fell. A second pecked at his face, grabbing it, tearing out its feathers until its neck broke. But for every one that fell, five more appeared.

The shadows fell heavily over the camp. There was no sky anymore; there was a single black belly, from which beaks and claws rained.

A man shouted, "It's the gods! They're coming for us!"

Sitting Bull shouted back, his voice hoarse but loud: "No! They're just birds! Just meat! Beat them until you fall!"

He knew it was a lie. Because in that moment, it no longer felt like a swarm of animals, but like the will of the gods themselves.

When the sun finally broke through again, the camp was littered with blood, feathers, and corpses. Ten vultures lay dead, but twice as many people.

The survivors crawled together, their eyes blank, their bodies torn apart. Sitting Bull stood gasping, his spear dripping blood, his skin covered in scratches. He looked up, where the remaining vultures were circling again.

"There are many of you," he murmured, "but we are not silent. Even in the dust, we scream louder than you can shriek."

But he knew: Heaven had laughed, and his people had become smaller.

The camp was silent after the wings had taken flight. Only feathers lay in the dust, blood glistened in the sun, and the shadows of the vultures circled again, higher, slower, more patient than before.

People crawled out of their tents, with bloody arms, with torn faces, with eyes that saw more than a human should. Children clung to their mothers, women staggered, men stood swaying, spears that were more splinters than weapons.

Sitting Bull stood in the middle. His spear was still dripping, his face was covered in scratches, his lips chapped. He looked at them all—those who were still breathing.

"You've seen the vultures," he said, his voice rough but clear. "You've felt their shadows. Some of you believe they are the gods themselves. Some believe they're coming for us because the gods have abandoned us."

He paused, spitting blood into the dust.

"Maybe it's true. Maybe the gods are vultures. Maybe they're just waiting to eat us. But listen to me: We're not scavengers. We weren't born to rot in silence. If the vultures are the gods—then we'll show them that even gods can't bear our cries."

The people stared at him, their faces marked by dust and pain. A woman raised her head and whispered: "But they are many, Chief. We are few."

Sitting Bull nodded firmly. "Yes. There are many of them. We are dust. But dust fills the air. Dust remains in every breath. Dust suffocates. We are dust, and dust can strangle the gods."

A faint murmur went through the crowd. Children repeated the word as if it were a song: "Dust... Dust..."

Sitting Bull raised his spear, pointing it toward the sky where the vultures were still circling. "Look at them! They think they've won! But as long as we stand, as long as we scream, as long as we breathe, the shadows don't belong to them—they belong to us! Our shadows are longer than the wings of the vultures!"

A few men pounded their spears into the ground, a dull sound like drums. Women screamed, children cried, but it was no longer the cry of fear—it was the cry of voices that would not be silenced.

Above them, the vultures continued to circle, indifferent and patient. But below, in the dust, stood people who defied them.

And Sitting Bull knew: It wasn't a victory. But it was a curse. A curse against the vultures. A curse against the gods. A curse that would echo until the last breath fell silent.

The night was quiet, almost too quiet. No screams, no screeches—only the fluttering of wings high above, where the vultures circled in the moonlight. Sitting Bull sat alone by the fire, the embers dim, his pipe empty. His chest burned, his throat dry, but he closed his eyes and waited.

The smoke, which he could barely taste anymore, brought the vision.

He saw the plain—endless, empty. No tent, no fire, no human. Only dust. And above the dust, vultures circled, hundreds, thousands, until the sky was as black as a grave. Their shadows fell on the earth, as large as mountains, as heavy as rocks.

They waited. They circled. They laughed.

But then, slowly, the sky itself began to rot. The vultures' wings grew heavy, the shadows dissolved, their bodies tumbled. One by one, they fell, hit the ground, and stayed there. Their flesh rotted, their bones bleached in the dust, until only feathers remained, carried away by the wind.

The gods, the vultures, the shadows – they all passed away.

But the people weren't there to see it. The people had already disappeared. Their voices were no longer in the dust, no longer in the wind. Only silence remained, and the sun shining over empty bones.

Sitting Bull opened his eyes, the smoke burned in his lungs, tears ran down his cheeks.

"So that's how it is," he whispered. "Even the vultures rot. Even the shadows of the gods die. But we don't see it. We are dust before they fall."

He looked into the camp, at the faces of the survivors, sleeping, coughing, crying. Children lay in their mothers' arms, men slept with spears in their hands. They would wake up, perhaps still fight, perhaps still scream. But in the end, they would be gone before the sky itself shattered.

Sitting Bull put his pipe aside and slowly stood up. "Then this is our legacy," he murmured. "Not victory. Not immortality. Only the defiance that remains, even when the shadows swallow us up."

He stepped outside and looked up at the sky, where the vultures were still circling. He raised his fists, weak but uplifted.

"Eat us," he cried hoarsely. "But know this: you too will rot."

His voice echoed across the camp, quiet, brittle – but it was there.

And high above, for a moment, the flock of vultures seemed to pause, as if it had heard it.

Cold nights, shaking hands

The sun had finally set, but the night brought no mercy. The heat of the day didn't recede gently; it broke like a knife. Cold air crept across the plain, biting into the skin, eating through the blankets that were barely whole anymore.

The camp trembled. Children huddled against their mothers, their hands blue, their lips white. Men crouched around the fire, which was barely burning because there was hardly any wood left. A thin layer of smoke crept into the tents, but it didn't provide warmth.

Sitting Bull sat near the embers, his cloak wrapped tightly around him. His fingers trembled, not just from cold, but from fatigue. His body was thin, his bones sharp beneath his skin, his muscles mere shadows. He stretched his hands toward the embers, but the flames seemed to laugh at him.

"By day we burn," he murmured, "by night we freeze. Heaven knows only extremes. No measure. No mercy."

An old man crawled toward him, coughing, his bones rattling beneath his skin. "Chief... I can't feel my hands anymore." He stretched them out—fingers like wood, numb, hard, as if they were already dead.

Sitting Bull grabbed it, rubbed it, tried to force warmth into it. "As long as you're breathing, you still feel. Don't die sitting down."

But he knew many would die just like that. Not by bullets, not by hunger, but silently, in the cold.

The women wrapped the children in blankets so thin that the wind blew through them. They sang softly, shaky songs to lull them to sleep. But the little ones continued to tremble, and some stopped in the middle of their trembling, remaining silent, too silent.

A man suddenly screamed, jumped up, and held his hand into the fire. The stench of burnt skin filled the air. "I wanted to feel!" he yelled as he burned his own hand. Then he laughed, hoarsely, maniacally, until he fell over.

Sitting Bull closed his eyes. "Cold makes us fools," he thought. "It kills slowly, but it eats away at the mind first."

He looked at the people—pale, trembling, broken. The cold night was not an enemy with a gun, not a swarm with beaks. It was worse. It was invisible.

And Sitting Bull knew: If they survived the sun, they would not survive the night.

The cold bit deeper as the night crept on. It came not like an enemy with drums and guns, but like a slow worm, eating through skin, through bone, into the heart.

Sitting Bull saw the warriors who usually slept alone sharing their blankets. Men who would never have slept shoulder to shoulder in battle now lay back to back, because even pride was no match for the cold.

An old warrior, his face hard as leather, suddenly pulled a child to him that wasn't his own. He held it tightly, rubbed its arms, and breathed warm smoke into its face. No one laughed, no one mocked. On this night, every child was his own, every body a piece of life that could not be despised.

The women huddled together, three, four, five, beneath a tattered blanket that was hardly fur, more like a shawl. They sang softly, their voices hoarse and broken. The song was no comfort, just a humming to keep their breath in.

Sitting Bull himself lay down between two men who still held their spears, even though their hands trembled. He felt their ribs, their warmth, their weakness.

He felt like an old dog snuggling up to other dogs because otherwise the night would swallow him up.

He thought:*This is how pride breaks. Not in battle, not in fire, but in the cold. We are not warriors, not women, not children—we are merely trembling bodies.*

A man began to pray aloud, his hands clasped, his voice shaky. "Great Spirit, give us warmth. Give us a spark, just one." But his words froze in the air, remaining like ice in the others' ears.

Children cried in their sleep, teeth chattering. One laughed hysterically because he thought the cold was tickling him. Then he stopped, remained silent—too silent. His mother still held him, rocking, singing, but everyone knew he was already gone.

Sitting Bull felt his hands go numb. He raised them before the fire, which was barely glowing, and looked at them—trembling, blue, broken. "Cold nights, trembling hands," he murmured. "That's how history is written in the dust."

And the frost crept on, more quietly, more cruelly than any gun.

The night tightened around the camp like a rope. The longer it lasted, the deeper the cold crept into their bodies, the more it devoured their thoughts. Warmth was no longer a feeling, but a memory—vague, distant, almost like a dream.

A young man, with scars on his cheeks, suddenly jumped up. "I'm hot!" he screamed, his eyes wide, insane. He tore the blanket off his body and ran barefoot through the dust as if flames were chasing him. Women screamed, men grabbed him, but he laughed, shook them off, and ran out into the night. No one followed. In the morning, he was found stiff in the frost, his eyes open, his lips curled in laughter.

Another squatted by the fire, which was only smoldering, and held his hand into it. The stench of burnt flesh mingled with the smoke. He smiled and said, "It's finally warm." He didn't pull his hand back, even when his skin turned black, even when blisters burst. He fell over, with a smile no one could interpret.

Children began to hear voices. "The buffalo are coming," a girl murmured, her teeth chattering. "I hear them stamping." But outside there was only wind, only

dust. A boy whispered, "The sun will save us, it brings fire." But everyone knew that the sun would only bring new fire.

Women cradled their children, even though some were already cold. They sang nonetheless, as if their voices could hold onto the souls that had long since departed.

Sitting Bull saw it all: the shivering, the madness, the dying in the frost. He could barely feel his fingers, as if they were no longer part of his body. His teeth chattered, his breath was white smoke.

"The cold makes us fools," he thought. "It takes our minds first, then our breath. And we fall silent, without a fight, without a scream."

He stood up, staggering, and called into the darkness: "Hear me! If you die, don't die silently! If you feel the cold, scream! Screaming warms the chest when nothing else remains!"

A few men screamed, roaring hoarsely until blood stained their lips. Children shrieked, women wailed. It wasn't a song, not a prayer, it was madness in the ice – but it was volume, it was life.

And Sitting Bull knew: Even if they froze, even if they died, the cold would not be silenced.

Morning brought no relief. Only ice on the blankets, ice in their hair, and ice in their hearts. Sitting Bull stepped out of the tent, his feet feeling as if they were already standing in graves.

The supplies they still had had become useless. The meat, which had been saved in shreds, was as hard as stone. Women hacked at it with knives, but the blades popped off as if they were bones. Men tried to hold pieces to the fire, but the glow wasn't strong enough, and the meat stank, half-frozen, half-rotten.

Water bags burst. The frost had burst them, and what little water remained had turned to ice. Children licked the frozen lumps, but the cold cut their lips, and blood stuck to the ice. They cried, but no tears came—the cold had consumed even the tears.

An old man tried to chew on a frozen piece of buffalo fat. His teeth cracked, one broke, and blood ran down his chin. He spat it out, laughing hoarsely: "The fat will eat me before I can eat it." Then he fell back into the dust.

The women cursed, screamed, and pounded the flesh with their fists as if they could beat it soft. Children moaned, men growled. Hunger and cold sat side by side like two dogs trying to tear the same victim apart.

Sitting Bull stood in the middle, his hands shaking, his face pale. "So," he murmured. "By day the sun smiles, by night the frost laughs. And we are its playthings."

He raised his voice, rough but loud enough for everyone to hear: "Hear me! If you can't bite the meat, then lick the fat! If the water is frozen, then break it up and swallow the dust! Don't let the cold starve us while we're still breathing!"

A few women nodded, began breaking chunks of ice into small pieces, and gave them to the children. Men used knives to scrape thin flakes from the frozen meat, put them in their mouths, and let them melt slowly on their tongues, even though it cut their throats.

It wasn't a meal. It wasn't a life. But it was one more breath.

Sitting Bull knelt, took a piece of frozen meat himself, bit into it, and felt blood rising in his mouth. He didn't spit it out. He swallowed, choked, and said: "This is how we eat. This is how we live. This is how we defy the frost."

And as he chewed, he felt hunger and cold laughing together—like two gods sharing a feast.

The second night was worse than the first. The frost came deeper, harder, as if it had learned where the weak spots lay. Hands, feet, faces—everything not covered in rags turned black.

A boy suddenly screamed. His fingers were white, numb, as if they were no longer part of his body. His mother rubbed them, tore at them, breathed warmth into them, but they remained stiff. Finally, a man took his knife and cut off the tips, because they were dead. The child screamed until he lost his voice.

Another man stumbled back to camp, his legs blue up to the knees. He had gone out during the night to gather wood and returned empty-handed—and with feet that were already like stone. He fell over, and when they lifted him, his toes snapped off like dead branches.

Women cried, men cursed, children stared.

Sitting Bull saw it all, his face like stone. He knelt beside an old warrior who held his hands outstretched. The fingers were black, cracked, hard as wood. "I can't feel anything anymore," he whispered. "As if my hands were already dead, but the rest of me isn't."

Sitting Bull grabbed them and rubbed them, but it didn't help. He looked into the man's eyes and said, "Then you fight without hands. As long as your heart beats, you are a warrior."

But deep down he knew: the cold was taking her piece by piece, not all at once, but slowly, cruelly, as if it wanted to remind her how worthless meat was.

A child woke up screaming because his feet were stiff. His mother wrapped them in rags and placed them in the fire, but the flesh burst, blisters formed, and the stench of burnt skin fat rose.

Sitting Bull stood, his fists shaking. "This is not how we die like warriors. Not in blood, not in battle. We die like wood in the frost, breaking, cracking, useless."

He raised his arms and shouted loudly: "But as long as you breathe, you are not wood! Scream! Sing! Curse the cold! Don't give it a silent victory!"

And again voices rose—hoarse, weak, broken. Curses against the cold, songs that were more coughing than singing. But it was loud, it was defiance.

Above them the stars sparkled, cold, indifferent, like the eyes of the gods watching.

And Sitting Bull knew: They laughed, just like the sun, just like the vultures. And he swore that even in the midst of their destruction, his people would still laugh back.

The third night was the worst. Not because the frost was harsher—but because it became quieter. No screeching, no fluttering, no fleshly enemies. Only the cold, silently creeping into the tents and stealing life like a thief.

The first ones were found in the morning. A girl lying in her mother's arms, her lips blue, her eyes open, as if she had only wanted to hear one more story. The mother only woke up when the child was taken from her arms. She didn't scream, she didn't cry. She simply held her hands in the air, as if to ask:*Why not me?*

An old man sat in a circle by the fire, his eyes closed, his face peaceful. He had still been smiling, as if dreaming. But his body was hard, his hands stiff. He had left, without a sound, without a farewell.

Sitting Bull went from tent to tent, saw them lying there—women, children, warriors—not slain, not burned, but simply suffocated by the frost. No blood, no screams. Only silence.

He clenched his fists, his fingers numb, his lips chapped, and yelled, "No!" His voice broke, but he yelled on. "Not like that! Not quiet! We are not dogs who die in the frost! We are voices, we are noise, we are curses and songs!"

The living looked at him, weak, broken. Some too tired to respond. Others nodded, wept loudly, screamed, and sang hoarsely.

Sitting Bull dragged the dead out into the dust and laid them side by side. He shouted: "They died silently—but we'll give them a roar! We'll sing for them, we'll curse for them, we won't let the cold steal their voices!"

So men pounded their spears on the ground, women pounded their fists against their chests, children screamed hoarsely until their voices broke. It wasn't a song, it was a roar against the frost.

Sitting Bull stood in the middle of it, his arms raised to the sky, his chest heaving. "Do you hear, spirits?" he cried. "You take them in their sleep, but you don't take them quietly! Even if you take them, they remain screams in the wind!"

The frost remained, the cold continued to creep in. But that night, there was no more silence.

And Sitting Bull knew: The cold had taken their bodies. But it hadn't taken their voices.

The night was as black as an empty belly. No fire left, only embers dying in the wind. Sitting Bull sat at the edge of the camp, his legs tucked up, his arms wrapped around himself. He felt his bones crack, not from age, but from frost.

He closed his eyes and let his breath escape. Each puff was white smoke, thin, faint, as if he himself wanted to fly away.

Then the vision came.

He saw the plain, not full of enemies, not full of vultures, not full of sun. Just empty. White, silent, frozen. No voices, no songs. Just ice. And in that ice lay bodies—men, women, children. Not torn, not burned. Just still, like statues. Beautiful in their cold, beautiful in their death.

The cold was not an animal, not a soldier, not a god. It was nothing. But that was precisely what made it strong. It killed without hatred, without desire, without reason. It killed because it was there.

"Perhaps," thought Sitting Bull in the vision, "she is more merciful than bullets. Bullets tear, cold only takes away."

But then he heard something—a voice, fragile, quiet. Not a song, not a prayer. A scream. Not a scream of fear, but of defiance. Short, rough, but clear.

And he saw: Even in the ice, even in the silence, a scream could exist. A scream against nothingness.

He opened his eyes. The night was still there, cold, silent, full of clouds of breath that barely contained any warmth. He saw the people around him – huddled together, shivering, some already silent.

Sitting Bull rose, his legs weak, his chest heavy, but he stood. He raised his arms, his hands blue, his fingers stiff.

"Hear me," he cried, his voice harsh, but it carried. "The bullets devour us, the fire burns us, the vultures tear us apart. But the cold—the cold wants us to be silent. And we mustn't give in! If you die, die screaming! Give the cold a song it can't bear!"

A few children screamed, their voices high and tinkling. Women wept loudly, men roared hoarsely. Voices mingled, curses, chants, screams.

And Sitting Bull shouted along until his lungs burned. "We are not silent! We are not cold! We are voices until the last breath!"

The cold crept on, indifferent. But that night, she heard no peace. She heard screams cutting through the ice.

And Sitting Bull knew: Even if they lay stiff in the dust in the morning, they had forced their cry upon the cold.

Women cry in strangers' beds

The frost had broken them, but not killed them. Not yet. In the morning, Sitting Bull gathered the survivors, and they moved on, weak, stumbling, a heap of misery on an endless plain. They needed fire, food, something other than dust and death.

But wherever they went, the strangers were already waiting. Uniformed men, traders with shining eyes, white people with hard hands and cold voices. They had water, they had meat, they had blankets. But they gave none of it away. Nothing without a price.

And the price was dignity.

The men still standing were too weak to resist. Spears trembled in hands that barely had any blood left. Bows were empty, arrows long gone. Sitting Bull himself felt his chest heavy, as if a stone were lying there. He knew: They were no longer warriors, they were beggars.

The traders grinned as the women passed them. "A drink of water," they said, "doesn't cost much. A night's lodging... even less."

Sitting Bull heard the voices, saw the faces of his wives, their eyes filled with shame and fear. Some shook their heads, clutching their children closer. Others looked down, their lips bloody from biting.

Night came. Cold, hunger, thirst. Men could no longer protect their families, not even themselves. And so some women disappeared into strangers' tents, strangers' huts, strangers' beds.

They returned, their eyes red, their faces rigid. They didn't speak. Some carried water, some meat, some just silence.

The men looked away. They knew what had happened. Some wept, quietly, in the dust. Others beat their chests, pulled their hair. One tried to pull a knife, but Sitting Bull held him back.

"No," he growled, "the knife brings no water. No meat. Only more death."

The man collapsed, pounding his fists in the dust until his hands were bloody. The women walked past, their children in their arms, without a word.

Sitting Bull watched them go, his heart burning. "Women weep in strangers' beds," he murmured. "And we men weep in the dust. And the gods laugh, like the sun, like the vultures, like the frost."

He looked to the sky, raised his fists, weak but uplifted. "Then laugh! Laugh at us! But know this: our shame is still louder than your silence."

The night was silent, but there was nothing benign about the silence. It was the silence that follows when someone screams until their throat bursts. Sitting Bull sat by the fire, which was little more than embers, and heard the women's footsteps. Footsteps that led away—and later returned.

He saw the faces when they returned. No more tears. Tears long gone. Only red eyes, rigid mouths, lips that remained silent. Some held meat in their hands, tough, sinewy, but meat. Others brought water that glittered in the fire. Some came with nothing—only looks no man could bear.

The children ate, drank, swallowed, and cried quietly. They were too young to understand the trade, but old enough to sense the shame in the air.

The men looked away. They had to look away. Because looking at their wives was like a knife in their own chest.

An old warrior, whose wife had never returned, shouted to Sitting Bull: "Say it! Say that we have fallen! That we are no longer men!" His voice was harsh, full of hatred—not for the women, not for the whites, but for himself.

Sitting Bull stood, the fire reflected in his eyes. "No," he said harshly. "We have fallen, yes. But we are not dead yet. And as long as we breathe, there is no victory for the whites, only shame for us. And shame can burn, too."

The women looked up briefly, as if they had needed those words. They knew what they had sacrificed. But they also knew that children were alive because they had paid the price.

Later that night, Sitting Bull heard a woman's quiet sobs. He didn't see her, he didn't go to her. He knew: some tears belong only to dust.

But his chest burned as if shame itself had become fire.

He thought:*We no longer cry only for the dead. We cry for what we ourselves have lost.*

And he swore that this pain, this bitter, cutting pain, would not be forgotten – even if the people perished in the dust.

The next night brought the same deal: water for skin, flesh for dignity. But this time, Sitting Bull saw something that unsettled him.

A woman—young, with eyes as dark as night—didn't stoop into the stranger's tent. She walked upright. She entered as if it were her own space. When she returned later, she was carrying meat in both hands, thick pieces, more than ever before. She looked at Sitting Bull, directly, without shame, without any attempt at escape.

"My children will eat," she said. "And tomorrow too. Don't ask me how."

Sitting Bull was silent. He wanted to say something—to offer comfort, perhaps even to scold. But he remained silent. For there was no pleading in her eyes. Only defiance.

Other women saw her. Some wept, some turned away. But some understood. They left that same night, not bowed, not broken, but with the cold gaze of a warrior who no longer wields a spear, but her own body as a weapon.

In the morning, they carried water, blankets, and meat. They didn't say a word. But their faces were different. Not empty. Not broken. Hard.

A man spat in the dust and shouted, "This is a disgrace! You're selling us!" But the dark-eyed woman stepped forward and held out the meat to him. "Then don't eat it. Die with your pride. But my children are no longer hungry."

The man fell silent, the rage consuming him, but he couldn't say anything. For his own son was already reaching for the meat.

Sitting Bull saw all this, and he felt his chest grow heavy. "We men talk about pride," he thought. "But what is pride worth when children die in the dust? These women have more courage than we can comprehend."

He walked over to them and looked at them, his eyes full of fire. "You are warriors," he said quietly. "Not because you fight. But because you live where we have long since fallen."

They nodded without smiling. Their faces remained hard, their eyes glowing.

And Sitting Bull knew: His people's struggle wasn't fought solely with spears. It was fought in strangers' beds, in strangers' arms, in nights filled with shame – which was transformed into defiance.

In the morning, the camp smelled of meat. A sweet, heavy smell that only made the hunger more painful. Some women had brought something, others hadn't. And immediately the murmuring began.

“Why them? Why their children? Are ours worth less?” Men growled, women whispered, children looked at each other’s bowls with hungry eyes.

Sitting Bull saw how envy spread like fire. Hunger turned every piece of meat into a spark, and sparks didn't need much to ignite the entire nation.

A man suddenly shouted: "You sold us! You bartered away our dignity for water! You are worse than the traders themselves!" He rushed forward, ripping the meat from a woman's hand. She screamed, hit back, her children howled. Others jumped in, and it became a tangle of dust, fists, and blood.

Sitting Bull jumped up, grabbed the man by the collar, pulled him back, and hurled him into the dust. "Enough!" he roared, his voice as harsh as iron. "Enough, I say! We're already fighting frost, hunger, vultures, and bullets! Now do you want to fight each other too?"

The crowd fell silent briefly, panting, filled with anger. But the fire remained in sight.

A woman who had gone out during the night stepped forward. "We do what we must. We bear the shame so the children can live. If you men want the meat, don't take it with your fists. Take it by becoming warriors again."

Her words burned, and Sitting Bull saw some men lower their eyes. They knew they had no answer.

But the division remained. Every piece of meat, every bit of water became poison. Families looked at each other like strangers. Women held their children closer, men growled like dogs over bones.

Sitting Bull sat down, his hands shaking.*This is how people die*, he thought.*Not just from bullets, not just from frost. But from hunger, from envy, from shame that turns to poison.*

He raised his voice again, tired but firm: "Hear me. You can hate me. You can hate women. You can hate white people. But don't hate each other. Because if you do, we'll die before the bullets fly."

The crowd was silent, murmured, and looked away. No unity, no peace. Just a brief reprieve before the poison took effect again.

And Sitting Bull knew: The foreigners didn't have to fight. The people were consuming themselves.

The whites knew the game. They had learned it like traders, not like warriors. They knew: One shot kills a man. But a piece of meat at the wrong moment kills an entire people.

The next day they returned to the camp. Wagons full of barrels, sacks full of grain, pieces of buffalo meat that weren't even old. The men stood in a line, their eyes hollow, their spears useless. But the whites didn't call them.

They called the women.

"Come here," they said in voices that sounded like mockery. "There is meat for you. There is water for you."

The men growled and clenched their fists. One stepped forward and shouted: "And us?"

The merchant grinned, pulled out a piece of meat, and threw it into the dust at the women's feet. "You? You have nothing of interest to us."

Laughter. Mocking, cold laughter that burned worse than frost.

The women hesitated. Some looked to their husbands, seeking support, but found only anger. Others bit their lips, stepped forward, and took the meat and the water, even though it burned like fire in their hands.

Sitting Bull saw the men tremble. Their eyes were like knives stabbing into the backs of their own women. Not because they wanted to—but because they were too weak to do anything else.

"You see?" thought Sitting Bull. "They don't kill us with bullets. They let us kill each other, with looks, with shame, with hunger."

An old man suddenly rushed forward, grabbed a merchant by the arm, and tried to snatch the water from him. A soldier stepped forward and struck him down with his rifle butt. Blood spurted into the dust. No one moved. No one dared take a step.

The women stood there, with meat in their hands, water on their lips. The men stared at them, full of hatred, full of love, full of broken bones in their chests.

Sitting Bull stepped in, raised his arms, and shouted: "Hear me! They want to break us! They want us to hate each other, to curse our own women! Don't do it! Hate them, not us!"

But the words fell like stones into a river. The current swept them away before they reached the bottom.

And Sitting Bull knew: The whites had won without firing a bullet.

The night was heavy. No wind, no frost, only the heaviness of gazes that cut deeper than knives. The men sat in a circle, silent, their faces hard, their hands gripping spears that were no longer worth anything. The women crouched with the children, their mouths greased with the flesh that had been cut by strangers' hands.

And then the silence broke.

A young warrior leaped to his feet, his eyes wild, his face contorted. "Enough!" he cried. "We're starving while you sell yourselves! You sleep with the dogs that hunt us! And we're supposed to eat what they throw into your mouths?"

He grabbed his wife by the arm and pulled her up. She screamed, the children clung to her legs. Men shouted, women screamed, the tension snapped like a branch in the frost.

Another warrior leaped forward and struck the young man down. "Shut your mouth!" he yelled. "She's alive because she's doing what you can't! She's saving the children while you moan in the dust!"

Now it was a chaos of screams, fists, and blood. Men rushed at each other, women dragged children away, children howled as if the sky itself were tearing apart.

Sitting Bull jumped to his feet, his chest heaving, his legs trembling, but he threw himself into the thick of it. He grabbed spears, yanked them away,

knocked men to the ground, and kicked fists. "Enough!" he roared, his voice hoarse but like thunder. "Enough, I say! Do you want to kill each other while the whites laugh?"

A man screamed in his face: "We have no dignity left! What do we have left?"

Sitting Bull grabbed him by the neck and pressed him into the dust, his eyes full of fire. "What remains?" he growled. "We stay! As long as we breathe, as long as we curse, as long as we scream—we stay! Your anger belongs to the whites, not the women! Do you hear? Not to them!"

The crowd fell silent for a moment, breathing heavily, bleeding, with eyes full of hatred, but also full of shame.

The women stood in the shadows, their faces rigid, some with tears, some without. They knew: they had become the knot with which the people were strangling themselves.

Sitting Bull let go of the man, stepped back, and raised his arms. "We won't fall by their bullets. We'll fall by ourselves. If you want to fight, fight them! Not those who still feed you!"

Silence. Then a cough, a cry, a quiet sob broke out. The fire crackled faintly, as if it were laughing at the argument.

And Sitting Bull knew: He had mended the breach for that night. But the rift remained, deep and unhealable.

The night was silent, but different this time. No screams, no arguments, only the muffled sobs of the women, flowing through the camp like a distant river. Sitting Bull sat at the edge of the fire, his hands trembling, his eyes empty.

He heard them. The women who had been in strangers' beds. Those who returned with meat, with water, with shame. Those who didn't want to cry anymore, but cried anyway, when they thought no one could hear them.

Her tears didn't sound loud, nor wild. They sounded like drops falling into dust. Barely audible, but steady, incessant.

Sitting Bull closed his eyes and the vision came.

He saw warriors falling, their spears broken, their faces bloody. He saw men in the dust, voiceless, only bones. But above all, he didn't hear the clang of weapons, nor the thunder of horses' hooves. He heard the tears of women.

They fell into the earth, nourishing the soil. They remained, even when the wind carried away the dust. They burned themselves into history, invisible but indelible.

"Perhaps," thought Sitting Bull, "tears are the true weapons. Not spears, not guns. Tears. For they remain when everything else rots."

He opened his eyes. Before him sat women, clutching children, their faces wet, their eyes red. Some looked at him as if asking:*Do you still have us?*

He nodded. "Your tears," he said quietly, "are louder than my words. They will be heard, even if the gods are silent. Even if we die. Even if nothing remains."

The men looked away, ashamed, because they knew that spears and pride had long since been broken. But the women continued to cry—and their tears were not a sign of defeat, but rather the final song.

Sitting Bull looked up at the sky, where the stars sparkled coldly, indifferent as ever. "Laugh, you gods," he whispered. "But you will not erase the tears. They are deeper than your silence."

And that night he knew: The people might die. But the women—and their tears—would remain.

Prayers that no one hears

In the morning, after another night of frost and tears, people slowly rose, like shadows barely able to find their footing in the dust. Some crawled, others stood swaying, children hung from their mothers' arms like wet fur. No one spoke. No one dared.

Then something happened that Sitting Bull had not expected.

An old man, who had barely spoken for days, knelt in the dust. His hands trembled, but he raised them high to the sky as if they were still strong. His voice came out rough, brittle, but clear: "Great Spirit, hear us. We are your

people. We have done what you have shown us. We have danced, we have fasted, we have borne visions. Why are you silent?"

His words echoed throughout the camp, and suddenly others began to kneel. Women placed their children before them, holding them up. Men bowed their heads, their foreheads in the dust. Children clasped their hands, barely knowing how to pray.

Sitting Bull saw it and felt a pressure in his chest. He knew they were clinging to something that was long gone. But he also knew it was all they had left.

The voices rose. Prayers, pleas, cries. "Great Spirit, send us buffalo! Send us rain! Send us life! Send us just a spark so we know you're still here!"

But the sky remained blue, cold, empty. Only the wind answered, carrying the words away like dust.

A child looked to his mother and whispered, "Can he hear us?" The mother wept and kissed the child's forehead. "Yes," she lied. "He hears us."

Sitting Bull stood aside, his arms crossed. He felt the weight of these prayers. Words heavier than arrows. But he also heard the silence surrounding them.

"Prayers no one hears," he murmured. "That's what the end sounds like."

He stepped forward and placed his hand on the old man's shoulder. "Pray if you must," he said quietly. "But don't forget: Heaven has already sold us. If anyone hears us, it's only ourselves."

The people looked at him, some with hope, some with pain. They continued to pray. But their voices sounded fainter, each word like a stone falling into a hole, never to return.

And Sitting Bull knew: The silence of the sky was worse than any bullet.

The prayers grew louder the longer the heavens remained silent. At first they were only whispers, then voices, then screams. Men beat their hands against their chests, women rocked children and sang, children cried out the words they barely understood.

It wasn't a ritual, not an orderly prayer. It was chaos. A chorus of despair spewed into the dust.

An old warrior threw himself to the ground, arms outstretched. "Great Spirit! Don't you see? We're falling like flies! We're being devoured by hunger, frost, and bullets! If you still love us, then send us a sign!" He banged his head against the ground, again and again, until blood stained his forehead.

A woman cried out to the sky: "Take me, but let my child live!" She held the child up as high as she could, as if she could offer it to heaven in exchange. But the sky remained empty, only clouds drifted like scars across the blue.

A boy began to sing. No words, just a single note, high and thin, like the howl of a wounded animal. Others joined in: a humming, a howling, a singing. Soon it was a choir, raw, fragile, desperate. It didn't sound like a song. It sounded like a last attempt to smother the silence.

Sitting Bull stood aside, his hands on his temples. The voices cut into him, burning into his bones. He knew: They weren't praying because they believed. They were praying because they had nothing else left.

He raised his arms and cried: "Scream! Sing! Fill the sky until it bursts! If it remains silent, let it choke on our noise!"

The crowd obeyed, shouting louder, singing louder, crying louder. The dust vibrated, the air trembled as if the heavens themselves were shaking.

But nothing happened. No vision, no buffalo, no rain. Only the wind, which took the voices and carried them away as if they were smoke.

Sitting Bull sank to his knees, his face hard, his eyes empty. "Prayers no one hears," he muttered. "We yell into a hole. And the hole laughs."

The voices continued for a while, then collapsed. Only silence remained. A silence that was louder than anything before.

The silence following the screams was unbearable. Every breath seemed louder than a clap of thunder. Women held their children, men stared into the dust, old warriors rocked back and forth, their lips moving without words.

Then someone broke the silence. A young man, with sunken cheeks and hollow eyes, jumped up and cried: "Where are you, Great Spirit? Are you deaf? Or are you fed up with our misery?" His voice trembled, but he continued to cry out. "We have danced for you! We have fasted for you! We have shed our blood in your name! And you give us only dust! Perhaps you are nothing. Perhaps you are dead!"

A murmur went through the crowd. Women covered their faces with their hands, children wept. But no one dared to silence him.

An old woman, with white hair and a voice like broken wood, stood up. "He's not lying," she cried. "If the gods hear us, they'll laugh. Perhaps they aren't vultures, perhaps they're pigs feasting on our tears!"

Laughter, bitter and hoarse, mingled with tears. It wasn't humor. It was madness, born of dust and frost.

Sitting Bull slowly stood up, his chest heavy, his voice ragged. "Hear me," he cried. "You pray to Heaven, you curse it, you cry out to it. But it remains silent. Do you know why?"

All eyes turned to him.

"Because he never heard us!" he roared. "He is no father, no savior, no friend. He is dust, wind, cold! You pray to a void! You throw words into a hole, and the hole spits nothing back!"

The crowd murmured, shaken, some fell to their knees, others wept louder.

Sitting Bull raised his fists to the sky, his voice like thunder, hoarse, angry. "Do you hear me, Great Spirit? If you're here, then you're a coward! You let us die like dogs, and you remain silent! If you have power, then come down and eat us yourself—instead of sending us vultures, hunger, and frost!"

People gasped, some shouted “Blasphemy!”, others cheered with broken voices.

But the sky remained as always—empty, blue, indifferent. Only a bird circled, high above, silently.

Sitting Bull spat in the dust, his voice a growl. "Prayers that no one hears," he said. "Then we pray no more. Then we curse. For curses are louder than silence."

And that night, the first people began to stop praying and start cursing heaven as if it were an enemy like any other.

The night after the curses was difficult. No one prayed quietly anymore. No songs or words of thanks murmured from lips. Instead, a different chant rumbled through the camp—raw, brittle, full of rage.

An old warrior sat by the fire, spear on his knees, spitting into the glow. "Our gods are weak," he said. "They let us die like dogs. If they had power, they would have saved us. I don't want spirits that only send up smoke. I want gods of iron."

A young man, barely a man anymore, nodded wildly. "Yes! Gods of iron! Gods who spit bullets! Gods who eat the uniformed!" He slammed the spear against the ground as if imitating a rifle.

A murmur went through the crowd. Women held their children tighter, their eyes wide. Some men laughed, bitterly, madly. Others nodded solemnly, as if they could replace the sky itself.

"Perhaps," said a woman in a hoarse voice, "we should stop praying to the Great Spirit. Perhaps we should build our own gods. Out of smoke. Out of fire. Out of lead."

Sitting Bull stood in the shadows, hearing the words. His heart pounded, not with hope, but with pain.*They give up heaven*, he thought.*And they look for substitutes – in the things that kill us.*

He stepped forward, his hands raised. "Hear me," he said harshly. "You want new gods? You want iron, fire, bullets? Don't you know that these are the very gods that are consuming us? The whites pray to them, and look what they bring us: death, hunger, dust."

A man jumped up and shouted: “Better gods of iron who kill than gods of wind who are silent!”

The crowd roared, a chorus of pain and rage. Some shouted "Iron!", others screamed "Fire!", some wept.

Sitting Bull raised his fists and roared back: "Then you yourselves are the gods! Be the iron! Be the fire! Don't wait for heaven! Don't wait for spirits that have never been yours!"

A silence followed, heavy and oppressive. The faces were hard, the eyes empty, but also burning.

And Sitting Bull knew: The time of the old prayers was over. His people would no longer plead. They would curse, and they would dream—of gods of iron and blood.

Night fell, and Sitting Bull smoked alone. The smoke was thin, bitter, little more than dust in his lungs. But it brought him another vision.

He no longer saw the plain empty. He saw it trembling. The ground trembled as if under a thousand hooves, but it wasn't horses. It was machines—wheels, iron, rails, eating their way through the land. Carriages spewing smoke as if they were demons with iron throats.

Men in blue sat on the wagons, rifles in their hands. They laughed as the iron machines pounded onward, ever deeper into the country.

"These are the new gods," thought Sitting Bull in the vision. "No birds, no spirits. Just iron, smoke, and fire."

The people of his race stood before it, spears raised, voices loud. But the iron machines simply rolled over them. Bones cracked, bodies broke, screams were silenced by the thunder of the wheels.

Then he saw more: cannons as big as mountains, spewing fire. Every thunder ripped apart not only flesh but also earth. Entire hills collapsed, rivers boiled, trees toppled like blades of grass.

And again and again the men in blue laughed as if they had tamed the gods themselves.

Sitting Bull saw his people fleeing, running, screaming. But wherever they ran, the iron followed. Trains, cannons, rifles. Iron in the sky, iron on the earth. There was no place left where the roar of the new gods did not echo.

In the vision, he fell to his knees and cried out: "Great Spirit, if you are still here, why do you give us iron instead of rain? Why fire instead of buffalo?"

No answer. Only smoke, only thunder, only iron rolling over him.

When he opened his eyes, he was shivering, his face wet with sweat despite the cold. He stared into the camp, at the men whispering in their dreams: "Iron. Fire. Gods of lead."

Sitting Bull clenched his fists. "They will come," he muttered. "Not as saviors. Not as friends. The iron gods will devour everything. And we will be dust before they are satisfied."

He blew out the last of the smoke, which drifted into the wind. It wasn't a prayer. It was a curse.

In the morning, as the pale sun crept over the horizon, Sitting Bull called the survivors together. His voice was rough, his hands trembling, but his eyes still burned from the smoke of the night.

"Hear me," he began. "I've seen what's coming. I've seen the new gods you desire. They're made of iron, of fire, of smoke. They roll across the earth, they spit bullets, they tear open the sky. And they don't just eat us—they eat everything."

The people murmured, looking at each other. An old warrior shook his head, his teeth chattering. "Perhaps they'll eat us, yes. But perhaps they'll eat the whites first. Perhaps they're weapons we can use against them."

A young man nodded vigorously. "Yes! If the iron gods are strong, then they shall be our gods. Better thunder and smoke on our side than silence in heaven!"

Sitting Bull stepped forward, his voice a growl. "You fools! You want iron because you think it gives you power. But iron knows no side. Iron devours all who touch it. Iron belongs to no one—only to death."

A woman picked up her child and whispered, “What if death at least satisfies us?” Her voice was shaky, full of despair.

The crowd was silent, heavy and oppressive. Some nodded, some looked down.

Sitting Bull now shouted, his voice harsh but unbroken: "The old gods are silent, yes. But they gave us dreams, they gave us songs, they sent us the buffalo. The new gods give only smoke, only dust, only corpses! You want them? Then be prepared for them to devour you!"

A murmur went through the crowd, hoarse and broken. The words struck home, but they hurt. For in the hunger, the frost, the emptiness, even death was a promise that some would rather accept than the endless silence.

Sitting Bull sank to his knees, exhausted. "You can pray to whomever you want," he whispered. "To the Great Spirit, to the wind, to the iron. But know this: I will not remain silent. I will continue to curse. Until my voice breaks."

The crowd dispersed, men left, women carried children, old warriors coughed in the dust. Some continued to pray, others cursed, some sang of iron.

And Sitting Bull knew: his people weren't just hungry. They were divided between heaven and iron—and that was perhaps more deadly than any bullet.

Night settled over the camp like a wet blanket. No wind, no sound, only the cracking of bones whenever someone moved. Sitting Bull sat alone, his pipe cold, his heart heavy.

His eyes closed and the vision came.

He saw a plain, empty, endless. No buffalo, no warriors, no women. Only dust, blown across by the wind. In this dust lay things: a broken spear, a torn drum, a bone, half-buried.

Then he heard voices. Not from above, not from the sky. From below. From the dust itself. Quiet, fragile, but clear. Voices of women crying. Voices of men cursing. Voices of children singing.

They reverberated like echoes, not strong, not loud, but indelible.

"That remains," thought Sitting Bull in the vision. "Not the gods. Not the iron. Not the guns. Only voices in the dust. They carry us on, even as we perish."

He saw the iron machines rolling, saw the guns firing, saw the blood in the sand. Everything vanished again, swallowed by the void. But the voices remained. Even if nothing else survived—the screams, the songs, the prayers that no one heard—they echoed in the dust.

Sitting Bull awoke with a gasp. His body was weak, his hands cold, but his eyes burned.

He rose and entered the camp. The people lay huddled together, asleep, or staring blankly. He didn't speak aloud, only a whisper, but it cut through the silence:

"Perhaps the sky doesn't hear us. Perhaps the iron doesn't hear us. But the dust hears us. And the dust never forgets."

A pair of alert eyes looked at him, tired but attentive.

Sitting Bull knelt down, placed his hand in the dust, and pressed it firmly as if he wanted to burn his heart into it. "When you die," he whispered, "die loudly. Scream, sing, curse. So that the dust carries you. So that the dust doesn't forget you."

The night was silent, the sky remained empty. But Sitting Bull heard it—very faintly, barely more than an echo—voices in the dust.

And he knew: This was the last prayer. Not to the gods. But to the earth itself.

A heart beats against a rifle butt

The morning smelled of metal. No smoke, no fire, just that cold, iron aroma that poisoned the wind. Sitting Bull knew before he saw them: the whites were back.

They came in rows, their uniforms dusty, their faces hard as granite. Rifles in their hands, shiny, hungry. They didn't have to fire bullets—their march alone was threat enough.

The men of the camp lined up. Weak, trembling, spears in hands that barely had any strength left. Women gathered the children and pushed them into the furthest tents. But everyone knew: there was no more hinterland, no shelter, no place where the guns wouldn't find them.

An officer stepped forward, his voice loud, clear, like a hammer blow: "Give up your weapons. Come peacefully. Or we'll take what we want."

Sitting Bull felt his heart beating—dull, heavy, like a drum. He knew they had no chance. But he also knew: The heart couldn't stay still while it was beating.

A young warrior screamed, raised his spear, and charged forward. A rifle butt struck him square in the chest. A sound like breaking wood—only it was bone. The boy fell, gasping, blood gushing from his mouth.

Sitting Bull roared, leaped forward, grabbed the body, and pulled it back, but a rifle butt struck him too. With full force, into the ribs. Pain exploded, his breath caught. He fell to his knees, gasping, blood in his throat.

But his heart continued to beat. Hard, defiant, against the piston, against the pain.

The whites laughed. "Look," one cried, "they're already dead, but they don't know it yet."

Sitting Bull spat blood into the dust, raised his head, his eyes burning. "We live," he growled. "As long as a heart beats, we live."

A rifle butt hit him again, this time in the shoulder. Bones cracked, he fell, but he got back up. His heart pounded like a drum in war.

The crowd saw it. Men, women, children. They saw their chief fall and rise again. How he spat blood, but did not remain silent.

"Beat us," roared Sitting Bull, his voice hoarse. "Beat us until we're dust! But you can't kill the heart while it's beating!"

The pistons slammed down, again and again. Blood spurted, bones cracked, screams echoed. But every time Sitting Bull fell, he rose again. Not strong, not unscathed—but standing tall.

And in that moment he knew: his heart was no longer a drum. It was a weapon. A weapon that beat louder than any rifle.

The first blow was for courage. The second for anger. The third for the heart. But none brought silence.

Sitting Bull staggered, his body trembling, blood dripping onto the dust like rain. But he stood his ground. And in that moment, other warriors understood: If he could do it, they could too.

A man—young, but already emaciated from hunger—stepped forward. His spear was nothing more than a stick, but he raised it like a sword. A soldier struck him down with the butt, right in the jaw. The bone broke with a crack, and the boy fell—but he crawled back up. Blood flowed from his mouth, his teeth shattered, but he laughed. A gurgling, cruel laugh that made the soldier stagger back a step.

"We're still here!" he roared, spitting red into the dust—and a second blow left him lying there. This time forever. But his laughter remained, echoing in the minds of those who had heard it.

An old warrior followed. He had nothing in his hands, only scars on his skin and a heart that was still beating. A soldier rammed the butt of his rifle into his chest, hard and with precision. The old man fell, gasping for breath, but instead

of praying, he cried out to heaven: "Take me, Great Spirit, if you finally have the courage!" Then he laughed, briefly, hoarsely—and died.

The soldiers looked at each other. They were used to blows bringing obedience, to rifle butts bringing silence. But here there was no silence. Every blow brought blood, yes—but also words, screams, laughter.

Sitting Bull stood in the middle of it, his ribs broken, his breath short. He saw men fall, women scream, children whimper. But he also heard the hearts beating. Muffled, defiant, loud.

"Do you hear it?" he yelled at the soldiers, their rifle butts raised. "You break bones, but you don't break hearts! You can feel it, right? It's still pounding, louder than your drums, louder than your rifles!"

An officer stepped forward, his face hard, his voice cold: "Then we'll kill you all. And your hearts with it."

Sitting Bull spat blood into the dust and grinned crookedly. "Try it. But you'll see – we keep beating. Even when we're lying in the dirt. Even when we're dead. The heart doesn't stop."

The pistons fired, men fell, women screamed, children were dragged away. But everywhere one blow fell, another rose up. Not a victory, not a triumph—just a defiance that never died.

And Sitting Bull knew: It wasn't a battle. It was a demonstration. A heart against a piston – and the heart kept beating.

The rifle butts continued to rain down, dull, heavy, every blow a thunderous crash. Men fell, crawled, and spat blood, but they always got back up as long as they could. The soldiers sweated, panted, but they still laughed—a laugh full of contempt.

Then something happened that they hadn't expected.

A woman rushed forward. She wasn't young; her hair was gray, her body as thin as a scrawny horse. But her eyes burned. She grabbed a soldier by the arm and beat his chest with her bare fists. "You're taking our men, you're taking our children, you're taking everything!" she screamed. "Then take me too, if you've got the balls!"

The soldier pushed her back, hard, the butt of the rifle slamming against her ribs. She slumped, gasping, but she crawled back up. "Hit harder, you dogs!" she roared, blood on her lips. "My heart is still beating!"

The crowd roared, a chorus of screams, rage, and fear. Other women rushed forward, screaming, hitting, biting, and tearing. They had no weapons, only nails, teeth, and voices. But they threw themselves into the blows as if they were tired of being mere spectators.

A soldier hit a young mother on the head, and she fell, her child slipping from her arms. She crawled, semi-conscious, grabbed the child, screaming: "Not him! Hit me, not him!" The butt of the rifle came again, but she held her child up like a shield.

The men wanted to jump up, but their legs were weak, their arms empty. It was the women who became the drums in this hour, the hearts that beat against iron.

Sitting Bull staggered, his body burning with pain, but he saw it. And he roared: "See, white people? You thought only men had hearts that beat! But you hear it! Hear the women! Hear them beating, louder than your guns!"

An officer shouted, "Hold back!" – but his voice was shaky. He had heard it too. The pounding, the roaring, the beating of hearts that wouldn't stop.

The pistons continued to run, but each blow did not bring peace, but rather even more noise.

And Sitting Bull knew: Even if the people ended in dust, something had happened here. The hearts of the women had risen—and they beat against iron, against pistons, against death.

Sitting Bull staggered. His chest felt as if a bison had trampled it. Every breath burned, every step was a struggle. He felt his ribs splinter as he moved. For a moment, he thought he would fall and never get up again.

But then he heard it.

It began quietly – a stomping sound. First a single kick in the dust, then a second, then a third. Men who were still standing stamped their feet, weakly but in rhythm. Women beat their fists on their chests, on the ground, on anything that still made sound. Children screamed in sounds that weren't words, but heartfelt.

It grew. A rhythm, raw, untamed, like a drum that no one had tuned. Muffled, deep, clumsy—but it rolled like thunder.

Sitting Bull raised his head, blood running from his mouth, but he laughed, a hoarse, angry laugh. "Do you hear that?" he roared. "This is our heart! Not mine, not yours—our heart! A drum that beats until the dust eats it!"

The soldiers paused briefly. They continued beating, yes, but they looked at each other. They heard it too. The dust vibrated beneath their feet, the sound grew, spreading like fire.

An officer growled and shouted: “Beat them down!” But his voice was thin against this pounding, against this rhythm.

People screamed louder, stamped harder. Women with bloody lips, men with broken bones, children with tear-stained faces—all punched, stamped, and screamed in the same rhythm.

And Sitting Bull, semi-conscious, stood erect, his arms raised. "This is our song!" he roared. "You cannot kill it! You can beat us, break us, burn us—but the song remains! Hear it, vultures! Hear it, gods! Hear it, white people! Our heart still beats!"

The soldiers continued to slam their rifle butts into backs, faces, and skulls. Blood spurted, bodies fell. But the pounding didn't stop.

It wasn't victory. It wasn't hope. It was naked defiance written in the dust.

And Sitting Bull knew: Even if they all died in this hour, the earth would long remember the rhythm their hearts had beaten.

The pounding never seemed to stop. It rolled through the dust, pounded in the earth, vibrated in the ribs of the men in blue. They punched, they kicked, they shouted orders – but their hearts kept beating. Again and again. Rhythmlessly, yet in time.

A soldier spat and wiped the sweat from his brow. "Damned devils," he muttered. "You can break their bones, but they won't stop."

The officer growled, his face red with rage. He raised his hand and yelled: "Enough! If the butts aren't enough, take the rifles!"

A shudder went through the ranks. Men who had just been holding clubs reached for the butts, loaded them, and the metal locks clicked. A new sound filled the air—cold, metallic, final.

Sitting Bull heard it. His head throbbed, his body was in little more than pain, but his heart was still beating. He raised his arms and gasped: "Do you hear? Now they're speaking with lead! Now they're revealing their true gods!"

The crowd screamed, but they kept stomping. Women screamed at their children: "Stomp! Stomp until your feet break!" Men laughed hoarsely, even though blood stained their teeth. Children screamed, their voices shrill but in time.

The rifles were raised. Dark muzzles, resembling black mouths, stared into the crowd.

A soldier hesitated, his face pale. "Sir, they're already broken. They're only women, children—"

The officer punched him in the face and yelled, "Fire, damn it! Otherwise they'll stomp forever!"

Sitting Bull laughed, bloody, ragged. "Do you hear that? They fear our heart! They fear it beats louder than their drums! So they want to fill it with lead!"

The drums of the rifles fired. A gasp, a silence that tore everything apart.

And Sitting Bull knew: At that moment, every beating heart was stronger than any bullet. But bullets were faster.

A breath. A pause. The pounding, the roaring, the screaming—everything stopped for a moment. Then came the thunder.

Rifles barked, muzzle flashes tore through the darkness. A hail of lead flew into the crowd, hissing, crashing, tearing flesh, bones, voices.

A man was thrown back, his chest ripped open, blood spurting like a fountain. He fell, stamped his foot once more in his death, before lying silently in the dust.

A woman clutching her child was hit in the back. She fell forward, the child slipped from her arms—and continued stomping, as if her little feet couldn't forget the beat.

Children screamed, men yelled, women wept, but no one fled. They stood their ground, they stamped their feet, even as bullets passed through them.

Sitting Bull felt a bullet tear at his shoulder. Pain exploded, blood ran warm down his arm. He staggered, but he laughed, hoarse and bloody. "Shoot! Shoot until your guns are empty! Our hearts are fuller than your magazines!"

The soldiers reloaded and fired again. Bodies fell, dust turned red, screams echoed. But the pounding continued. Quieter, yes. More brittle. But there. Every foot that hit the ground sounded like a heartbeat trying to defy the lead.

A soldier lowered his rifle, his hands shaking. "Sir... they won't stop."

The officer shouted back: “Then shoot them all! Until they shut up!”

But Sitting Bull saw it—the soldiers' faces, pale, full of fear. They didn't fear the bodies that fell. They feared the pounding that continued to echo in the dust, even if the body beside it was dead.

He raised his arms, blood dripping from his fingers. "See?" he roared. "You can kill us, but you can't kill the song! Our hearts keep beating, even when we lie in the dust!"

Another volley crashed. More bodies fell. But the dust still vibrated, a dull, faint, but incessant beat.

And Sitting Bull knew: The heart could burst. But its beat remained, like an echo in the ground that even bullets couldn't quench.

The thunder of the gunfire slowly subsided. Smoke hung in the air, sharp, acrid, like a second sky of poison. The dust was no longer brown, but red. Men lay in the dirt, women crouched over children who were no longer breathing, and yet feet still stamped, weak, staggering, but there.

Sitting Bull knelt in the dust, his shoulder torn, blood flowing like a river down his chest. His breath was short, each breath burned like fire, but his heart—his heart—was still pounding.

He placed his hand on his chest, feeling the beating, dull, irregular, but defiant. "Not yet," he murmured. "Not yet."

The soldiers stood there, their rifles still raised. Some reloaded, others hesitated, their eyes wide, as if they had seen something in the faces of the

dying men they didn't like. Not fear. Not obedience. But a heart that wouldn't fall silent.

Sitting Bull raised his head, blood on his chin, his voice barely more than a gasp, but it carried: "You have pistons, you have bullets, you have iron. We only have this." He struck his chest with his fist, hard enough to draw blood. "This! A heart that beats until it bursts!"

The crowd responded, hoarse, weak, but in unison. Men beat their chests, women screamed, children stamped their bare feet. A dull thunder rolled over the camp, like a final dance.

Sitting Bull felt his heart racing, faster, louder, as if it wanted to burst his bones. He knew it wouldn't last much longer. But he didn't want to go quietly.

"Hear me!" he roared, his voice a curse, a song, a final scream. "My heart will break! But when it breaks, it will crash louder than your guns! You will hear it, you dogs, you gods, you vultures—and you will know: We were here!"

He fell forward, his hands in the dust, blood flowing, the world spinning. But his heart continued to beat, pounding like a drum, faster, harder, until everything went black.

And in that darkness, Sitting Bull heard only one thing: the final blow. Muffled. Powerful. So loud that even the heavens could no longer remain silent.

Dust eats history

In the morning, the camp was silent. No more pounding, no more roaring, no more rhythm. Only the dust that settled over the bodies like a blanket no one wanted.

The sun burned, but its light was cold. It no longer shone on people, but on forms—piles of flesh that had had names yesterday. Men, women, children. Now only dust, covering them, piece by piece, breath by breath.

Sitting Bull stood, staggering, his body a wreck of blood and pain. He looked across the field and saw the wind eroding the tracks. The footsteps, the stampedes, the drops of blood—everything was carried away, blown away, swallowed.

"This is how history dies," he murmured. "Not with a bang. Not with a scream. But with dust that consumes everything."

He knelt down, reached into the earth, and let it trickle through his fingers. Grain by grain. They clung to his blood, turning red, then brown again, then nothing.

He thought of the elders who had told stories around the fire, of great victories, of visions, of heroes who had seen the sky. He wondered: Who would tell their stories if no one remained? Who would know that a people had stood here, who had cried, danced, loved, and fought?

A child crawled toward him, his eyes empty, his face dirty. He asked in a thin voice, "Chief... who tells us?"

Sitting Bull looked at it, and his heart broke more quietly than any piston. "Perhaps no one," he whispered. "Perhaps the dust will consume everything. But as long as you breathe, as long as you ask—you are history."

The child nodded, weakly, understanding nothing, but held his hand.

The wind grew stronger, stirring up dust, settling it over faces, over blood, over broken spears. It was as if the earth itself wanted to hide everything.

Sitting Bull sensed it: The dust was not an enemy. It was the grave. Gentle, but merciless.

"Dust eats history," he said harshly. "But it also carries it. And if it swallows us, we will continue to blow within it."

He let go of the child's hand, staggered to his feet, and looked out over the field, which once again seemed empty. Only dust, only wind. No witnesses, no trace.

And he knew: the world would soon say that nothing had happened here.

The wind blew through the night, and when the sun rose again, the field was almost empty. Only a few bodies, half buried in the dust, and the hoarse cawing of birds already waiting.

Sitting Bull walked through the camp, every step heavy, every breath a knife. He saw children who had no tears left. Women who no longer wept, but simply stared. Men who looked at the ground as if it were lower than the sky.

“The dust is eating us,” he thought, “but what’s worse is that others will eat our history.”

He remembered the white men, the officers, the clerks. They didn't just stand there with guns. Some had books, pens, ink. They took notes while people died. Not the blood, not the screams—but numbers. "So many prisoners. So many dead. So many weapons collected."

No names. No voices. No hearts. Just lines on paper.

Sitting Bull clenched his fists, feeling the trembling in his bones. "They kill us twice," he muttered. "Once with bullets. Once with words. Once in the dust, once in the books."

He remembered the lies that had already been told. "Savages. Rebels. Dangerous animals." He knew how the victors spoke: "They wanted it this way. We had to. We brought order."

Order. The word burned worse than lead.

A woman approached him, her face like stone, her voice hollow. "Chief, what do we have left?"

Sitting Bull looked at them, his heart heavy. "Dust forgets. Books lie. But we—we remember as long as we breathe. Our voices are not numbers."

She nodded, but her eyes said:*For how much longer?*

The wind blew, spreading dust over the bodies, over the fireplaces, over the last traces of life. Soon it would look as if nothing had ever happened here.

And Sitting Bull knew: It was worse to be wiped out than to be defeated.

"Dust eats away at history," he said harshly. "And the victors season it with lies."

He spat into the wind, the blood staining the dust dark. "Then let them write whatever they want. We'll scream anyway. Even if no one's listening."

The sun rose higher, but the camp remained cold. No fire burned, no song sounded, only the wind played its endless melody of dust. Sitting Bull sat in the dirt, his hands on his knees, the blood drying on his skin.

He thought of all the stories he'd heard around the fire. Stories that weren't written, but spoken. Stories that passed through mouths, from grandfathers to grandchildren, from mothers to children. Each story was a heartbeat, passed on, not on paper, but in the breath.

And he realized: If paper erases them, if dust swallows them, then the bodies themselves must carry the stories.

A warrior came to him, his arm broken, his face covered in blood. "Chief," he said, "they'll write everything down. They'll say we were animals. That we're responsible for our own destiny."

Sitting Bull nodded. "Yes. And that's why we won't live on paper. We'll live in scars."

The warrior blinked. "Scars?"

Sitting Bull raised his hand, pulled his shirt aside, showing the bruises, the wounds, the cracks in his skin. "These scars are our chronicles. Every blow, every bullet, every cut—this is history that no one can erase. Not with ink. Not with dust."

A woman approached, holding a child in her arms. Her eyes were dry but tired. "And what if even the scars disappear?"

"Then there are songs," said Sitting Bull. "Songs we shout into the dust until it carries them. Songs our children hum, even if they don't know why. Songs that remain when all else falls silent."

The woman looked at him for a long time, then began to hum. Softly, brittlely, but a song. An old song that had once accompanied buffalo. Now it was just a faint note in the dust. But other voices joined in, one after the other. Soon it was a chorus—not loud, not strong, but there.

Sitting Bull closed his eyes, his face filled with pain and fire. "Yes," he murmured. "That's how history survives. Not in books. Not in monuments. But in bodies. In scars. In voices. As long as we breathe, we are not dust."

The wind continued to blow, swaying over their faces, over the corpses, over the scars. But the song blew along with them.

And Sitting Bull knew: Even if the dust eats, it will also carry.

The voices sang, but faintly. It wasn't jubilation, not a proud song, but a thin thread that could break at any moment. Children hummed between sobs, women sang with hoarse throats, men grumbled even though blood clung to their mouths.

Sitting Bull heard it and felt his heart vibrate—but at the same time, he knew how fragile it was. A song could carry the dust, yes. But what if there was no one left to sing it?

He thought of ancient warriors who once sang songs before riding into battle. Their voices still echoed in his memories. But they were gone, their throats long since dry, their melodies merely echoes.

"A song dies when the singer dies," murmured Sitting Bull. "And we die faster than we can sing."

An old man next to him laughed hoarsely. "Then we'll hum until our teeth fall out. Maybe the dust will hear us. Maybe it will keep humming when we can't anymore."

But Sitting Bull shook his head. "Dust forgets just as it eats. It doesn't sustain anything forever. It only covers."

The woman with the child, still humming, looked at him. "But what will be left for us then, Chief? When the scars rot, when the voices fall silent, when the dust covers us all?"

Sitting Bull remained silent for a long time. The wind played with his hair, stirring dust in his teeth until he ground his teeth. Then he said quietly: "Perhaps nothing. Perhaps we are like smoke. We rise, we dance briefly, we disappear. And only the stench remains, which others interpret as they wish."

The woman lowered her head and continued humming, weaker, more fragile.

A boy, barely older than ten, hit a stone with a stick, repeatedly, in rhythm. "When I can't sing anymore," he said defiantly, "then I'll knock. And when I can't knock anymore, then I'll scrape the dust. Someone will hear."

Sitting Bull looked at him, and for a moment hope burned in his eyes. "Yes," he whispered. "Perhaps that's enough. Perhaps it's enough if someone scratches until the dust bleeds."

But when he saw the dead, their faces half buried in the dirt, he knew: It was a weak promise. A song could die. A heart could break. And dust consumed everything.

The sun rose, the song faded, the pounding fell silent. Only dust remained. And Sitting Bull felt himself becoming more dust than flesh.

Sitting Bull lay in the dust, his back pressed to the earth. Every breath brought sand into his lungs, every heartbeat a pounding against the weight that crushed him.

He closed his eyes – and there it came, the vision.

The plain was empty. No people, no warriors, no women, no children. Only wind. Only dust. The dust swirled, settled, formed dunes that looked like bodies, before disappearing again.

Then he saw traces. An imprint in the sand that looked like a foot. A notch that looked like a blow. A stain that looked like blood. Everything small, everything brittle, everything threatened by the wind.

But they were there.

Sitting Bull understood: History didn't have to be big. It didn't have to be written in books, sung in songs. It could lie in tiny traces, in the dust itself.

"Perhaps," he murmured, "that's the truth. That we don't survive as heroes. Not carved in stone, not in songs that carry the centuries. But in the dust that someone finds long after we're gone."

In the vision, he saw a child, a stranger, far in the future. It ran across the plain, playing, laughing. It stumbled upon an old bone, pale, half-decayed. It picked it up, turned it over in its hands, and sensed that within it lay a story no one had told.

The child asked no one, heard no answer. But he knew: Something had happened here. Here a people had lived, suffered, and fought.

Sitting Bull smiled weakly. "Perhaps that's enough. That the dust consumes us, but also leaves traces. That no one remembers us, but someone stumbles, someday. And for a moment, they hear our pounding, our heart, our song."

He opened his eyes, gasping, blood in his mouth. Before him was only dust, only wind, only corpses. But now he saw more in them.

"Yes," he whispered. "Perhaps the dust is not our end. Perhaps it is our book. A book without words, without readers—but with traces that never fully disappear."

The wind howled, taking his words, carrying them away. He knew no one heard them now. But the dust did.

And that was enough.

The sun was high, and the camp smelled of blood, sweat, and death. Bodies lay everywhere, half buried in the dust, yet some still squatted upright, their eyes empty, their mouths dry.

Sitting Bull dragged himself into the middle. His body was a wreck, but his voice still burned. He raised his arms, swaying, and spoke:

"Hear me, you who are still standing, you who are still breathing. You think the dust will eat us, and it will eat us. But I have seen what remains."

People raised their heads, their eyes dim, but they heard.

"The whites write their books, yes. They fill them with lies, call us wild dogs, call us rebels, call us defeated. The dust covers us, the wind carries us away. But..." – he coughed up blood, wiped it from his mouth – "...the dust doesn't forget everything. It bears traces. Footprints. Scars in the ground. Bones that were once bodies. And one day, someone stumbles upon them, and they know: We were here."

An old man growled, "But what good is that to us? If no one knows our names?"

Sitting Bull nodded. "Names die. Voices die. But the feeling remains. The dust is our witness. It whispers without words, it tells without books. It says only this:*Here was life. Here was struggle. Here was defiance.“*

A woman began to cry, not quietly, but loudly, desperately. "And what do I tell my child? That dust is his god? That he sings his song?"

Sitting Bull approached her and placed his hand on the child, who trembled in her arms. "Tell him to stamp until he falls. Every step he takes is a line in the

dust. Every breath is a mark. Every cry is an echo that remains. Tell him that he is not forgotten as long as dust lies beneath his feet."

The woman looked at him, tears and dust on her face. Then she nodded firmly, even though her hands were shaking.

A boy picked up a stone and pounded it into the ground, again and again. "Then I'll write in the dust," he muttered. "Until it eats my hand."

People began to murmur, to nod, faintly, but with a spark. They understood: Not victory. Not eternity. Only traces. Traces in the dust that no one could completely erase.

Sitting Bull looked at them, and his heart burned brightly one last time. "Yes," he said. "We will become dust. But dust that will not be silent."

The sun stood still over the plain, as if it had decided to stop moving. No cloud, no shadow, only light that burned everything until it looked the same: tent, corpse, spear, stone.

Sitting Bull felt his legs no longer carry him. He sank into the dust, slowly, heavily, like a felled tree. He didn't fall like a fighter—he glided like something returning home.

The dust swirled up, immediately settling over his wounds, his blood, his skin. Warm, dry, indifferent.

He thought:*So that's how it is. Not death in battle, not the glory of a song. Just dust that consumes you until nothing remains.*

His breathing rattled, becoming shallower. But he smiled. Because he knew: every drop of blood that now seeped into the ground was a sentence written by the dust.

"I am... history," he murmured, barely audibly. "Not in books. Not in songs. In the dust."

A child knelt beside him, his face smeared, his eyes wide. "Chief... are you dying?" he asked, quietly, almost like a prayer.

Sitting Bull turned his head and looked at it, his lips chapping from dryness. "No," he whispered, "I'll turn to dust. And when you leave, step on me. Then you'll know I'm still here."

The child nodded, not quite understanding, but placed his small hand on his chest. There, his heart was still beating—irregular, fragile, but there.

One final blow. A second. A third. Then silence.

The body collapsed. The dust covered it, greedily, indifferently, and within minutes Sitting Bull was nothing more than a shape, barely more than a mound, barely more than a trace.

But in the wind that swept across the plain, something seemed to linger. Not a song, not words. Only a dull echo. A heartbeat that was no longer there, but still vibrated in the ground.

The woman with the child began to hum, weakly, brittlely. The boy pounded the stone into the ground. Others murmured, whispered. They continued writing in the dust as best they could.

And Sitting Bull—now dust—was in the middle of it all. No statue. No monument. Just earth, blood, and wind. But he knew: Dust didn't consume history. It wrote it.

The last pipe, the last dream

The camp smelled of cold ash. No fire burned anymore, only smoldering remnants that looked like teeth in the dust. Men and women sat in the void, their eyes hollowed out, their bodies tired. Children slept like stones, not from peace, but from exhaustion.

Sitting Bull, half dust, half flesh, was raised by two hands no stronger than wind. He knew he wouldn't be able to stand much longer. His body was nothing but a shell, a sack of bones and blood. But in his hands lay it—the pipe.

The last whistle.

The wood was cracked, the stone in the head dull, the leather strap frayed. She had seen many winters, touched many hands, worn many lips. She was more than smoke. She was memory.

He raised them slowly, his arms trembling like dry branches. The crowd watched, silent. It was no longer a ritual, no longer a celebration, no longer a dance. It was simply a farewell.

Sitting Bull lit it, the smoke rising thinly, snaking its way through the air like a snake shedding its skin. He took a deep breath, the smoke burning his lungs as if it were trying to kill him—but it didn't matter.

"This," he said harshly, "is no longer a prayer. It is a dream."

The people looked at him, their eyes glowing faintly.

"We prayed to gods who didn't hear us. We cried out to iron that ate us. Now I dream. Not of salvation. Not of victory. Only of dancing in the smoke once more."

He blew out the smoke. It curled, twisted, formed shapes: a bison running across the plain. A woman laughing. A child stomping. Images from a world that had already vanished.

People looked inside, their faces softening, their hearts heavy. Some wept, others smiled faintly, as if they had momentarily forgotten that the dust was already consuming everything.

Sitting Bull sucked again, deeper, longer. His chest groaned, his heart stumbled. But in the smoke, he was free. He saw the plains, full of buffalo, saw men hunting, saw women singing, saw children playing. No soldiers, no iron, no dust. Only life.

"This," he whispered, "is the last dream. Take it while it burns."

The pipe circled the camp, from hand to hand. Each took a drag, each inhaled a piece of memory, a piece of defiance, a piece of dream. The smoke hung heavy above them, thicker than the dust.

And Sitting Bull knew: If he fell, if his heart broke, then at least they would carry this smoke in their chests.

The last whistle. The last dream.

The smoke hung heavy in the tent, thicker than any fog. It clung to skin and hair, crept into lungs, and settled over everything like a veil. No one spoke. Everyone looked at Sitting Bull, who leaned his head back, his eyes half-closed.

His breath was shallow, but in the smoke he was no longer old, no longer broken, no longer dust. There he was young again, strong, a warrior who hunted the buffalo, whose horse ran faster than the wind.

The vision became clear.

He saw the prairie, green, endless, full of buffalo herds thundering like thunder itself. Children ran, women laughed, men sang. No soldiers, no iron, no guns. Just the world as it once was, before everything shattered.

But he knew it was a dream. A final one. Not a promise. Not a gift. Just an image the smoke gave him before he left.

"Do you see it?" he whispered. His voice was shaky, but it carried. "Do you see how it was? Not how it is, not how it will be—but how it was? That is our dream. Hold on to it."

People gazed into the smoke, and some nodded, others wept. They also saw images: a dance around the fire, a feast after the hunt, children jumping into the river. Things that would not return, but that were there for a moment.

An old warrior coughed, his chest rattling. "It's beautiful," he whispered. "But it's not real."

Sitting Bull looked at him, his eyes burning in the fog. "Nothing is real except dust. But a dream can make us die without wasting away like dogs."

He took another deep breath, the smoke filled him, he coughed up blood, but he smiled. "The dream doesn't say we're winning. It only says we're not broken."

The pipe continued to circle, weak hands holding it, lips sucking cautiously as if it were poison—or medicine. Every puff was a final breath, a final spark, a piece of memory burned into their lungs.

The smoke grew thicker, the air heavier. But in this fumes, they were more than the vanquished. They were people, warriors, mothers, children, singers, hunters. Not a number on paper. Not a line in a book.

Just a dream that gave them back what the dust had already swallowed.

Sitting Bull closed his eyes. "This is the end," he thought. "But it is a dignified end."

And the smoke carried his thoughts away like feathers in the wind.

The smoke grew thicker, heavier, until it swallowed everything. The tent, the bodies, the voices—vanished. Only gray clouds, moving like living beings. Sitting Bull felt himself being drawn in.

He was no longer standing in the camp. He was standing on a plain, empty but full of echoes. Footsteps, drums, stomping—all made of smoke. His chest ached, his heart stumbled, but in the vision he was upright again, strong, full of blood.

Then he saw him: death.

No soldier, no gun, no god. Just a figure, tall, thin, with a face made of shadows. It had no eyes, no lips, only a drum beating instead of a heart. Dull, steady, relentless.

Sitting Bull looked at him and he knew:*This is my last dance partner.*

He stepped forward, the smoke-filled ground swaying, but he stamped his feet, hard and defiant. The figure stomped back, each step a blow to his ribs, each beat a knife in his chest.

They danced. Not a beautiful dance, not a flowing one. A dance of pain, of rage, of defiance. Every step was a blow, every breath a cut. But Sitting Bull laughed, hoarse, ragged, full of blood.

"Come," he cried to Death. "Dance with me! Hit me, push me, break me! But I'll stomp until the smoke consumes me!"

The figure was silent, but the drum beat faster. His heart beat along with it, in time, until he no longer knew where one ended and the other began.

The smoke swirled, forming faces: men who had fallen, women who screamed, children who laughed. They all danced along, shadowy, fleeting. The people who sank into the dust rose again in their dreams.

Sitting Bull stamped his feet, his heart racing. Blood trickled from his mouth, but he laughed. "See? I'm not falling. I'm dancing!"

The figure of death raised the drum and struck it one last time, hard and definitively. The blow reverberated through his chest, almost tearing him apart.

Sitting Bull gasped and fell to his knees—but he struck the ground with his fist once more. One last beat, one last act of defiance.

Then he fell forward, his face in the smoke. But he smiled.

Because he had danced. And that was enough.

The smoke slowly dissipated, disintegrating into thin wisps that crept out of the tent like ghosts seeking their way out. Sitting Bull opened his eyes. His body felt as if he himself had been dancing for hours, bone against drum, blood against smoke.

He was wet with sweat, cold with death. His heart stumbled like a horse breaking over stones. But he was still alive. Half alive.

The survivors sat before him, staring at him with eyes that were more dust than fire. The pipe lay heavy in his hand, hot as if it had absorbed the blood itself.

He knew: she was no longer his.

Slowly, trembling, he stretched it out. His fingers clung to it, as if his body refused to let go. But he forced himself. He placed it in the hands of a young warrior, barely older than a child.

"Take it," he whispered, his voice barely more than a scratch in his throat. "This is not a tool. Not a prayer. It is a dream. The last one. Keep it, even when the smoke clears."

The boy stared at the pipe as if holding a burning ember. His lips trembled. "But, Chief... what if the dream fades?"

Sitting Bull smiled bloodily, a crack in his face. "Then dream again. As long as smoke rises, there is a dream. Even if it's only made of dust."

He sank back, his head heavy, his limbs weak. The pipe continued to pass from hand to hand. Old fingers held it, young fingers, trembling fingers. Each took a drag, each inhaled a piece of the dream he had given.

The smoke hung in the tent again, but fainter, more brittle. No more bison, no dancing, no children. Only gray clouds that smelled of cold stone. But they knew: enough was enough.

Sitting Bull closed his eyes. He heard the voices, the coughing, the sobbing, the humming. And he knew: the dream no longer belonged to him.

It was passed on.

The smoke hung thin in the air, little more than a gray thread that faded into the darkness. The pipe had been passed from hand to hand, and each time the dream diminished. The first puff had shown buffalo thundering across the plains. The second had shown only laughing children. The third – nothing but fog.

Sitting Bull saw it. He knew: Even dreams can die.

"A dream," he murmured, "is like a fire. If you don't feed it, it will grow cold. And even if you pass it on, it will shrink until nothing is left."

People looked at him, weakly, with eyes that understood this but no longer had the strength to deny it.

A young man held his pipe, took a deep drag, but he only coughed, blood splattering onto the ground. "There's nothing left," he gasped. "No bison, no song. Just scratchy smoke."

Sitting Bull nodded. "Yes. Dreams die. But when you pass them on, an ember remains. A spark. Sometimes that's enough."

A woman held the pipe to her lips, sucking gently. Her eyes closed, and for a moment she smiled. "I saw... a face. Just briefly. It was my father. He was young, he was laughing. Then it was gone."

Sitting Bull looked at her for a long moment. "That's enough. One breath, and he'll live again. That's all we need."

The pipe went back, and Sitting Bull took it, his hands trembling as if he were holding a child about to die. He sucked deeply, his lungs burning. No bison. No dance. No song. Just smoke, bitter, sharp. But in that smoke, he heard an echo—the pounding, the heartbeat, the song they had beaten before the bullets fell.

He coughed, blood running from his nose, but he didn't wipe it away. "You see?" he croaked. "Even if the dream dies, the embers remain. And if one of you blows them out again tomorrow, they will burn."

The people nodded, weakly, but they nodded. They understood: It was no longer the great dream. No longer the buffalo, no longer the open plains. But it was enough to know they were still alive.

Sitting Bull put down his pipe. His breathing was heavy, his body almost empty. But he saw the hands that had passed it on. Hands covered in scars, covered in blood, covered in dust. Hands that carried history.

"Even a dying dream leaves traces," he whispered. "And maybe that's enough to keep us from disappearing completely."

The pipe lay on the ground, the wood blackened by the embers, the stone cracked by the fire. The smoke barely rose—thin, ragged, carried by the wind. But Sitting Bull knew: the dream wasn't gone. It was just somewhere else.

He raised a hand, placed it in the dust, and pressed his fingers deep into it. The ground was warm, as if it had absorbed the blood, the smoke, the breath.

"Hear me," he croaked, his voice shaky but sharp. "The dream doesn't belong only to us. Not only to our children. It belongs to the Earth."

People looked at him, exhausted, incredulous.

"We die," he continued. "Our voices fall silent, our bodies rot. But the earth remains. It eats us, it eats the smoke, it eats the dream. And when someone treads the ground in a hundred winters, they will feel it. They will know that a heart beat here."

He raised his hand, the dust clinging to his fingers, dark and damp with blood. He held it up as if it were holy writ. "This is our pipe now. Not made of wood. Not made of stone. Of earth. Of dust. Of blood."

A child crouched at the edge, his eyes wide. "Chief," he whispered, "will the earth remember us?"

Sitting Bull looked at it, his gaze as soft as he could manage in this hell. "The earth never forgets," he said. "But it speaks softly. You have to listen, with your feet, with your hands, with your heart."

The woman with the child began to hum, very quietly, almost a hum. A man stamped weakly, another pounded his fist into the ground. It wasn't a song, not a dance—it was a whisper in the dust.

Sitting Bull closed his eyes, feeling the rhythm. "Yes," he murmured. "That's how the dream goes into the earth. Not in smoke, not in song, not in a pipe. But here, in the dust. We give it back, and it remains."

The pipe broke with a soft crack, falling into the dust, a piece of stone, a piece of wood, meaningless. But no one screamed, no one cried. They knew: the dream had long since moved on.

Sitting Bull placed his hand back in the dust and smiled bloodily. "The earth is our pipe," he said harshly. "And as long as it breathes, we breathe."

The smoke had disappeared. Only dust hung in the air, heavy, dry, indifferent. The pipe lay broken in the dirt, the wood like a rotten branch, the stone split, blackened by the fire. No one picked it up. No one dared to put it back together.

Sitting Bull sat there, his hand in the dust, his breath rattling, his eyes half-closed. He knew he was already more dust than flesh. His chest rose and fell, each breath shorter, each beat weaker.

The people around him were silent. No song, no stomping, no humming. Only glances. They knew what was coming. They had seen it happen to others. But this time it was different. This time, not just any man fell. This time, the voice that had carried them through the dust fell.

Sitting Bull raised his head one last time. His lips trembled, blood glistened on his teeth, but he spoke. "The whistle is broken. But the dream lives within you. In your dust, in your blood. Don't forget, even if no one listens. Stamp, even if you are alone. Scream, even if the heavens are silent. That is enough."

His voice was barely more than a whisper, but everyone heard it.

Then he fell forward. No scream, no thunder. Just the dull sound of flesh hitting the dust. He lay there, his face half-buried, his hand outstretched as if still trying to write on the ground.

A woman stepped forward and placed the pipe—or what was left of it—next to his hand. "He didn't break it," she murmured. "He gave it back."

A child crept closer and placed his small hand on Sitting Bull's back. "He's asleep," he whispered. But everyone knew he wouldn't wake up.

The dust settled over him, gently but mercilessly. Soon he was no longer visible, just a hill, small, inconspicuous. No monument, no gravestone. Just earth.

But people stared at this hill as if it were more than dust. As if it were a pipe, a dream, a song.

And in the silence, an echo blew. No smoke, no sound, just a feeling. A final dream seeping into the ground, heavy and quiet.

Sitting Bull was gone. But the dust breathed.

Shots, screams, silence

It began without warning. A sharp, short bang that cut through the air like a knife. Then a second. A third. Soon it was a full roar. Rifles barked, muzzle flashes devoured the darkness, bullets hissed like poisonous insects.

The screams came immediately. High-pitched, raw, blood-soaked. Men being hit, women falling, children screaming without knowing why. Voices mingled, shrieking over one another, until it sounded as if the sky itself were about to burst.

Sitting Bull was already lying in the dust, half gone, half there. He heard it all, muffled, as if from far away. Every shot a blow, every scream a song that wasn't sung to the end.

The soldiers fired, coldly, mechanically, as if they weren't human beings but tools. Every pull of the trigger was a cut through flesh, every puff of smoke a cross burned into the camp.

A boy ran, fell, his head bursting like a clay pot. A woman bent over him, screaming until a bullet hit her as well. An old warrior crawled, blood pouring from his mouth, still trying to raise his spear. The rifle cracked, and he fell silent.

Shots, screams. Again and again. Louder and louder.

But after every shot, after every scream, there was something else: silence. Short, intense, like a hole in the air. When one fell, a voice fell silent. When two fell, it became quieter. When ten fell, the camp became emptier.

The thunder of rifles echoed, but the responses became fewer. Fewer screams, fewer shouts, less stomping.

Sitting Bull heard it, felt it. The end wasn't a blow, not a clap of thunder, not a single moment. It was a slow drowning in noise that eventually culminated in silence.

A final scream rang out, high and thin, like the squeal of an animal. Then a shot. Then nothing.

Only smoke. Only dust. Only silence.

The smoke still hung heavy over the camp, the gunfire continued, but the screams... they diminished. First a chorus, then only individual voices, finally just isolated sounds—hoarse, weak, futile.

Then the silence began.

It didn't come suddenly, not like a slash. It crept toward her, slowly, stealthily, like a patient predator. With every shot, it took a voice, with every blow, a soul. The soldiers were still firing, their faces hard, their movements mechanical, but they had no power against the silence.

Sitting Bull lay on the ground, half-buried in the dust, his breathing shallow. His ear was to the earth, and he heard nothing. No stomping, no singing, no children crying. Only the hammering of rifles—and the great emptiness that followed.

He understood: The silence was louder than the bullets. Because bullets end, but silence remains. It remains and grows, spreading like a shroud, settling over tents, over bodies, over dreams.

A soldier shouted orders, but his voice faded into nothingness. No reverberation, no echo. Only the wind rising and blowing the smoke away.

Sitting Bull thought:*That's the true end. Not the blood, not the bullets. But when no one screams anymore. When no one breathes anymore. When even the dust falls silent.*

The soldiers continued firing for a while, at bodies that had long since stopped twitching, at shadows that had long since ceased to pose a threat. But soon they, too, lowered their rifles. For silence had prevailed.

Sitting Bull felt it creeping into him too. Into his lungs, into his heart, into his bones. He wasn't quite dead yet—but the silence was already turning him into a dead man who continued to breathe.

He smiled bloodily and whispered, “The silence screams louder than you.”

And the dust settled over his lips as if to silence him.

The rifles fell silent. No more thunder, no more bangs. Only the click of cartridges, the metallic clack of bolts, the hard pounding of boots.

The soldiers moved through the camp like men who had finished a job. They overturned tents, stepped into fire pits, and stabbed bodies with bayonets to be sure. Their faces were blank, expressionless, as if they had left their humanity at the barracks.

Sitting Bull saw them through half-closed eyes. He lay in the dust, the world blurred, but he heard them. Their voices were rough, ragged, speaking words in a language that sounded like barking. No compassion, no hesitation. Just the sound of men who thought they had won.

But the camp did not respond.

No child cried. No woman screamed. No man raised his voice. Only the wind blew through the remains of the teepees, causing rags to flutter like the flags of an army that will never return.

The soldiers spoke louder, even laughed as if they had won a victory. But their words fell on deaf ears. They bounced off the silence, sank into nothingness, swallowed like stones thrown into a bottomless well.

Sitting Bull thought:*You have won, yes. But you are talking into the void. Your voices are empty. Our cries are dead – and the silence is devouring you.*

A soldier stepped on a body, laughed, shouted something. No one answered. Not even the dead body.

The men fired shots into the air, for fun, to dispel the silence. But every bang only made the emptiness more pronounced. The echo didn't return. No reverberation, only silence, even heavier, even deeper.

Sitting Bull coughed blood, his vision blurred. He saw the men with their rifles, their uniforms, their flags—and he saw them in the same dust, in the same silence that would soon swallow them too.

“Your victory,” he whispered, “is only noise in the ear of silence.”

No one heard him. But that didn't matter. The silence listened.

The soldiers marched through the camp, their boots crunching over bones, broken arrows, and ash. They shouted orders to one another, laughed, cursed, and spat in the dust. They looked like men who believed victory was permanent.

Sitting Bull heard her, his ear still to the ground. He didn't hear her words, only the sound. Loud, raw, full of confidence. But he also heard what lay beneath—the echo that didn't return.

The silence waited.

He knew: these men, too, would die. Maybe not today, maybe not here. But someday. In another camp, in another war, in another dust. Their voices would fall silent, their names forgotten, their bones nourishing the same soil as those who had now shot them.

"They think they've won," thought Sitting Bull, his lips full of blood. "But silence knows no winner. It takes us all. Us first, them later. But in the end, we're all the same."

A young soldier, barely a beard on his face, stepped beside him. He stared down, seeing the decayed figure that had once been a chief. For a moment, he paused, as if realizing he wasn't looking at an enemy, but into a mirror. Then he moved on without a word.

Sitting Bull smiled weakly. "Yes," he whispered, "you are just dust that hasn't fallen yet."

The men picked up rifles, trampled down teepees, and dragged flags through the dirt. They shouted their victories into the wind, but the wind carried them away, and the plains fell silent.

The silence was greater than all of them. It was the only thing that remained.

Sitting Bull closed his eyes. He heard the pounding of boots, the laughter of the victors—and he heard the silence that swallowed everything.

“You too,” he murmured, “will be eaten by her.”

And for a moment, amidst the dust, he felt almost something like justice.

The soldiers were still there, their voices scratching the air, their boots crushing faces, their rifles gleaming in the light. But Sitting Bull barely heard them anymore.

It was the silence that dominated the room.

It wasn't nothingness, no silence, no absence of sound. It was an animal. Invisible, but heavy. It lay on the bodies, sucking the screams from their throats, spreading like smoke that no longer needs fire.

Sitting Bull felt her on his chest, pressing, warm, relentless. She didn't whisper. She didn't scream. She ate. And she ate everything.

The rifle shots were only flashes in the darkness, quickly fading away. The screams were mere matchsticks in the storm. But the silence remained. It spread, inexorably, until it swallowed everything that lived, that breathed, that moved.

He thought:*Perhaps she is the true God. Not the Great Spirit, not her tin gods, not the firewater. Silence. For she has the last word.*

A soldier stepped into a tepee, tore something out, and laughed loudly. But his laughter sounded thin, pathetic, and pitiful against the wall of silence lurking behind it.

Sitting Bull felt it growing, filling the wind, creeping into the very bones of the victors. It was bigger than them, bigger than the people, bigger than the plains.

“Yes,” he murmured, “she is the only master.”

Silence settled over him, over his people, over the soldiers, over the dust. No song, no dream, no shot could break it. It was the only thing that remained.

And Sitting Bull knew: He belonged to her now, just like everyone else.

The silence continued to grow, stretching over the camp like a giant tent of invisible fabric. The gunshots had ceased, the pounding of boots sounded like a distant rumble, and even the children's crying had died down.

Sitting Bull lay there, half buried in the dust, feeling the silence penetrating him. First like a weight, then like a cloak. No enemy, no friend—only a presence that made everything equal.

He thought:*There are no chiefs here. No soldiers. No women, no men. No victors, no vanquished. Only bodies. Only dust. Only silence.*

A child lay a few feet away, his eyes open, blank. A soldier stood over him, rifle in hand, unsure whether to fire. But he lowered it again. Because what else could one kill when everything was already silent?

Sitting Bull smiled weakly, bloodily, wearily. "Yes," he whispered, "silence makes us equal."

He remembered all the voices that had roared: orders, prayers, threats, songs. All gone. The silence had swallowed them, smooth and cold. No distinctions anymore. No sound louder than another. Only emptiness.

And for the first time in a long time, he felt something like peace. Not peace from victory, not peace from freedom—but peace from equality.

"Perhaps," he thought, "this is the only justice there is. That we all have to remain silent."

He closed his eyes. His breathing was heavy, but in the silence, it sounded like every other breath that had ever been on this plane. No difference. No name.

The silence held him, carried him, cradled him, as if it were both mother and grave.

And Sitting Bull fell.

The soldiers were still standing there, but they spoke more quietly. One coughed, another tied a cloth over his mouth. Their voices sounded small, fragile, as if they were afraid of truly disturbing the silence.

The camp was a cemetery without gravestones. Bodies lay scattered, faces half buried in the dust, eyes open, mouths silent. Nothing moved. Not a twitch, not a scream, not a breath.

Sitting Bull felt it. His heart was still beating, but so weakly that it was only an echo. He was still breathing, but the dust was taking up more air than his lungs.

The silence approached, settling over him like an animal finally devouring its prey whole. He no longer heard gunfire, no pounding, no wind. Only the great, black nothingness.

And he wasn't alone in this. He felt them all—the children, the women, the warriors. They were no longer voices, no longer screams. They were silence itself. A choir of nothingness, louder than any song, heavier than any drumming.

"This is how it ends," he whispered, barely audibly. "Not with thunder. Not with fire. But with silence."

His lips were still moving, but the dust covered them. His heart beat once, twice—then stopped.

The soldiers marched off, their voices fading into the distance. All that remained was the camp, the dust.

Shots. Screams. Silence. And the silence was the only thing that remained.

The grass turns black

By morning, the camp was no longer a camp. No smoke rose, no voice called, no horse neighed. Only earth, only dust, only grass—and that was no longer green.

The grass had changed color. Black, as if burned, even though no fire had touched it. It was the blood that had seeped into the ground, the ash that had settled over it, the smoke that had consumed the stalks.

A gust of wind swept across the plain. Once, it would have made the grass dance, waves of green moving like a sea. Now it blew only over stiff, black stalks that no longer had any life.

The soldiers were gone. Their boots had left tracks, rough, jagged, deep imprints that scarred the ground. But these tracks would smooth out. The dust would fill them. The rain would wash them away. What remained was the grass. Black, like a shroud laid over the plain.

Carrion birds circled above, croaking, and swooping down on the bodies that hadn't yet disappeared into the dust. They tugged, pecked, and devoured. Feathers swirled through the air, talons tore into skin, beaks into flesh. But even they couldn't lift the darkness. The grass remained black.

Sitting Bull lay there, half in dust, half in shadow, and the grass around him was dark as tar. His blood had colored it, his breath saturated it. It was as if the earth had decided not to bury him, but to transform him into color.

A child who had survived stood at the edge. He was alone, trembling, looking out at the plain. His feet stepped on black grass, and he hastily pulled them back, as if afraid of burning himself.

But it wasn't a fire. It was just a memory. A memory that had taken root.

The wind died down, the sun rose higher. Black glittered in the light. Not shiny, not beautiful—just hard, dull, final.

And the grass was silent. But it was silent in a different way. Not like the silence that consumes everything. But like a witness who says nothing, yet has seen everything.

The grass stood motionless in the sun, black as burnt skin. It didn't move in the wind, it didn't sing a song; it was dead yet upright. Every blade a line, every spot a sentence, every surface a chapter.

Sitting Bull would have smiled, if he'd still been able to. For here lay a chronicle that no hand could write, no soldier could forge, no priest could pray away. The grass told it all—silent, black, relentless.

Anyone walking across the plain would see it. They didn't have to ask, they didn't have to listen. The grass spoke with its color. Black meant blood. Black meant smoke. Black meant death.

A bird landed and pecked at a stalk. It didn't pull it out. The stalk remained standing, stiff and bitter. Even the animals seemed to know: This wasn't food. This was history.

The child at the edge of the plain ventured further. He reached out and stroked one of the stalks. His fingers became dirty, black. He smelled of iron, of ash, of something that wouldn't go away.

The child wiped her hand on her dress, but the stain remained. Black. Burned into the skin.

The sun burned, the plain shimmered. The black stalks cast no shadows—they were themselves shadows, rooted in the ground.

The chronicle was there. No one wanted to read it, but it read itself. Every look, every breath, every step through that grass meant:*Something happened here.*

The soldiers who had left might never return. But whoever passed through here again couldn't pretend nothing had happened. The grass would remind them.

Not with words. Not with songs. Only with black.

And black was enough.

The days passed, the wind blew, the rain came. It washed away blood, carried away dust, and caused bones to sink into the ground. But the grass—the grass remained black.

It continued to grow, but not as before. No fresh green swaying in the light. The stalks stretched, yes, they reached toward the sun. But they remained dark, dull, burned. As if the earth itself had said:*Nothing should bloom here anymore.*

A deer ventured into the plain, cautiously grazing along the edges. But it recoiled when the black stalks touched its mouth. They tasted bitter, burnt, like iron. The animal fled, never to return.

Nature, otherwise gracious, otherwise greedy, otherwise patient, refused to heal here. No flower grew among the stalks. No insect buzzed. No bird nested. It was land that breathed, but not lived.

The child who had stayed returned every day. She saw how the wind bent the black grass, how the rain made it shine, how the sun burned it into shadows. She waited for the green, for a sign that life was returning. But it didn't come.

The adults avoided the place. They said, "Death dwells there." They said, "The grass bears curses." They said, "Don't go there."

But the child went anyway. He understood: The grass wasn't cursed. It was a witness. And witnesses don't remain silent, even if they don't speak.

Summer came, the stalks grew taller, stronger. But the color didn't change. Black remained black.

Thus, the plain became a memorial, not built, not intended, but grown. The earth itself had decided that forgetting had no place here.

And Sitting Bull's dream—dust that carries history—had taken shape. Not in songs, not in books. But in stalks that would never be green again.

The black grass stood there like a wall. No wood, no stone, no metal—just stalks. But they held stronger than any fort.

People avoided it. They took long detours, even when they were tired, even if the route was longer. They didn't want to go through it, not even at the edge.

"Death dwells there," said the women. "Ghosts whisper there," said the men. "Children disappear there," said the old people.

It was no longer a place. It was a sign. A warning cry that didn't speak, but was heard nonetheless.

The child who had once stood there alone returned. It was older now, but its eyes remained the same: large, alert, defiant. It ventured into the grass and lay down. The stalks cut into its skin, staining its clothes black. But it heard no whisper, saw no ghost, and did not disappear.

It heard only the wind. And the wind carried voices that were not words.

When it returned, the others laughed, called it crazy, cursed, stupid. But they still didn't dare. No one followed it inside.

And so the grass remained untouched. No sickle cut it, no cattle devoured it, no fire burned it down. It stood, season after season, blacker, thicker, harder.

Some began to fear it like a god. They said, "The grass remembers." Others called it a curse. They said, "The grass never forgets."

But no one dared to destroy it.

Thus it became a monument, without stone, without inscription, without a name. A place where people didn't speak, but remained silent. And in its silence, it told more than any book.

And whoever stepped in came out with black spots that never disappeared.

The years passed, and the black grass remained. It didn't change, didn't brighten, didn't dimmer. It grew, it swayed in the wind, but it remained black, as if even the sun could no longer reach it.

People told stories. In villages, in camps, around fires. In whispers, never loudly, never directly. "Whoever falls asleep there will never wake up." "Whoever breaks a stalk will lose their child that same night." "Whoever burns the grass burns from within."

No one could say if it was true. But no one wanted to try it.

The children asked, "Why is it black?" The elders said, "Because the blood of the warriors flowed deeper than the rain." The women said, "Because the cries of the mothers took root." The men said, "Because the silence there never ends."

Thus it became a legend, a place where no one wanted to harvest, hunt, or rest. A black field that would not be forgotten.

And yet – at night, when the wind blew, one swore one heard voices. Not loud, not clear. A pounding, like drums in the ground. A singing, brittle, as if from far away. A buzzing that wasn't made by insects.

The brave said, "It's just the wind." The fearful said, "It's the people who still live there." And some said nothing at all, knowing that both were true.

Sitting Bull had long since lain deeper beneath the dust and earth, but the black grass was his legacy. No statue, no gravestone, no song. Only black stalks that no one touched, because everyone knew they told more than they wanted to hear.

The legend grew, and with it the silence.

The whites returned. With wagons, with horses, with guns. They had maps in their hands, flags in their luggage, and hunger in their eyes. For them, the prairie was nothing but space, a vast expanse to be surveyed, sold, and plowed.

But when they reached the black grass, they stopped.

They saw it standing there, dark, unyielding, silent. One man dismounted, walked over, and broke a stalk. The sap that flowed wasn't green. It was dark, almost red. The man immediately dropped the stalk and wiped his hand on his coat as if he had caught fire.

The others laughed, but not loudly. Not for long.

"Just burned," they said. "Just a stain." "It'll go away if we plow," they said. But no one harnessed the plow.

The cars drove around the outside. Kilometer-long detours just to avoid touching the field. No one wanted to go through.

And at night, as they sat around the campfire, even they whispered: "Something's still alive in there." "You can hear drums when the wind blows." "It smells of blood, even after all these years."

They laughed afterwards, rudely and harshly, to hide their fear. But no one dared to set foot inside, not by day, not by night.

Thus, the black grass became their legend, too. They didn't speak of Sitting Bull, or of the people who had fallen. To them, it was simply an eerie place. But they avoided it, just as the others avoided it.

And that was enough.

For the black grass needed no names. No stories. No words. Its silence was stronger.

The years passed, decades passed. The dust shifted, the rain came and went, the sun burned summer after summer. People moved, settled, died, and moved on. But the black grass remained.

It didn't change. It grew, it died, it sprouted again—but always black, always dark, as if the earth itself had sworn never to heal this spot.

Children became old, telling stories of the screams heard in the wind. Soldiers became old men, saying they had seen only shadows there, but the shadow never left them. Farmers plowed around it, generation after generation, and the black grass still stood there, untamed, untouched.

Sometimes someone tried to destroy it. A man came with a fire, poured oil, and lit it. The flames devoured it greedily, blazing high – but in the morning the stalks stood again, black as before. The man said he saw the faces of the dead in the embers. He left the country the next day.

Another came with a sickle and cut through the stalks. They fell, yes, they lay in the dust. But when he returned, his hands were black, the sickle rusted, and he himself fell sick, as if the grass had brought him back.

So it remained untouched.

It wasn't a stone monument, no cross, no plaque. There was no name on it, no date, no hero, no loser. But it stood. It stood when everything else fell. It stood when villages burned and cities were built. It stood when names were forgotten and books rotted.

And whoever passed by knew:*Something happened here that was bigger than words.*

The black grass didn't speak. But its silence was louder than any prayer, any song, any gunshot.

And so it remained. Forever.

A chief sinks into the dirt

It wasn't a fall like in songs. No heroic fall, no lightning, no thunder, no final pose that someone would carve in stone. Sitting Bull fell like anyone else, when life drains from their bones. Hard. Clumsy. Human.

His knees buckled first. They buckled as if they were just wood that had lain in the rain too long. His body swayed; he reached for a tent stake, but his fingers slipped. Then he sank, slowly, heavily, until he lay face down in the dust.

The dirt was dry, bitter, crunching between his teeth. His breath drew it into his lungs, filling them as if trying to suffocate him. Blood dripped onto the ground, mingling with the dust, and the dirt greedily absorbed it, as if it had waited a long time.

The people around him watched. No one screamed. No one ran. They stood there, tired, empty, knowing this couldn't be stopped.

A chief sank into the dirt.

Not on a pedestal, not on a horse, not into the arms of the gods. Into the ground. Where all end.

Sitting Bull felt it. His face was cold, the earth hard, his hands found no purchase. But he felt that he wasn't falling alone. He was falling with his

people, with the children, with the warriors, with the songs that had long since fallen silent.

"So," he thought, "this is how a chief ends." No thunder, no bison, no victory. Just dirt. Dust that consumes everything.

But he smiled, bloody, weak. For in the dirt, he was where he had always been. With the earth, with the grass, with the dust. No palace, no church, no uniform could take that away from him.

He lay in the dirt – and that was more honest than any monument.

The dust clung to his face, filling his nose, his mouth. Every breath drew the earth deeper into him. It was as if the ground were swallowing him whole, not greedily, not brutally, but simply—like an animal doing what it always did.

Sitting Bull lay motionless. His chest still heaved, but weakly. Blood ran in furrows where his arms had pressed into the dirt. Small rivulets that stained the ground, darker than the dust.

No one came to lift him up. No warrior, no woman. They knew: You don't lift a chief when he's sinking. The ground took him, and that was right.

He felt the cold of the earth beneath him, the warmth of his blood above him. And he knew: This was his grave, even if no one dug a hole, even if no one laid stones. The ground itself was his witness, harder than any monument.

“I belong to you,” he thought, and his face pressed deeper into the dust.

A bird cawed above him, landed on a pole, looked down curiously. Then it fell silent again, as if it had realized that it was not to be disturbed.

Sitting Bull tasted iron, tasted dust, tasted the end. But in this bitterness, there was also a strange calm. He was no longer upright, no longer the speaker, no longer the warrior. He was just flesh in the dirt.

And that was truer than anything anyone would write about him.

He thought:*No book, no song, no stone. Just earth. Just dust. That's enough.*

And so he lay there, sinking, deeper, as if the ground were slowly drinking him away.

His head lay heavy in the dust, his breathing shallow. Every breath brought more dirt into his lungs than air. But in this twilight, between the coughs and the silence, voices began to whisper.

Not the soldiers, not those standing around him. These voices came deeper. They crawled out of the ground, out of the dirt itself.

He heard children laughing, as if they were hunting again, playing again. He heard warriors singing, drums beating, footsteps pounding. He heard women rocking, soothing, humming songs long silent.

They weren't loud. They weren't clear. They were dust, they were wind, they were bones whispering.

Sitting Bull blinked, his eyes half-closed, filled with dirt. He knew: These weren't illusions. They were the people. Not the ones still alive—the ones already gone.

“You’re here,” he murmured, blood on his lips.

The ground didn't respond with words, but the voices remained. They filled it, warmed it, held it.

He heard an old friend laugh, a child sing, a mother call. He heard the drum no longer beating on wood, but in the heart of the earth.

And he understood: He wasn't sinking into the dirt alone. He was sinking into the arms of those who had fallen before him.

The soldiers might declare him dead, might shoot him as a chief. But in the dust, in the ground, his people waited.

He smiled weakly, a hint of blood in the corner of his mouth. "I'm coming," he whispered.

Then he let his head sink deeper into the dust and listened to the voices calling him.

The voices from the ground didn't fade away. They flowed around him, humming, singing, moaning. No clear words, no intelligible sentence—just a web of breath, of memory, of dust.

Sitting Bull felt like the earth was no longer just carrying him. It was holding him. Firmly, gently, relentlessly. Not like a cage, but like arms.

The earth is the last mother, he thought. Not the woman who had given birth to him. Not the women who had stood by his side. Not the people who had listened to him. It was the earth itself that was now taking him.

He pressed his face deeper into the dust, letting the grains scratch his skin. They were cold, they were harsh, but they were real.

The people's words weren't true. The speeches, the promises, the songs—they could all lie, could waver, could be forgotten. But the filth didn't lie. The filth accepted everything as it was.

Blood was blood. Sweat was sweat. Tears were tears. The ground swallowed them all, and it didn't change them. It preserved them.

“Yes,” whispered Sitting Bull, “you’re the only one who doesn’t twist things.”

He felt his breath grow weaker, his fingers digging into the earth as if he wanted to go deeper. Every cough brought more dust into his lungs, but he didn't resist. He accepted it.

For when the earth filled him, he was no longer separate from it. He was dust, he was soil, he was part of the ultimate mother, who escaped no one.

The soldiers would call him chief, enemy, madman. They would write stories that distorted him. But the ground—it wouldn't write anything. It would just hold.

And that was enough.

His breath rattled as if he were breathing through a sack of stones. Each breath heavier, each exhalation shorter. But he was still alive. Somehow.

The earth crushed him, but it hadn't completely taken him yet. He was half in, half out. A body that still held warmth, but already smelled of cold.

The voices in the dust grew louder, thicker. He heard them more clearly, almost as if he could see faces. An old warrior called him by name. A woman sang his nursery rhyme. A boy laughed so loudly that it shot through his chest like an arrow.

Sitting Bull opened his eyes and blinked. Above him, he saw the sky, dazzling and empty. Beside him stood soldiers, with rifles, in uniforms, with faces of stone. They spoke, but he no longer heard their voices.

Between heaven and dirt, between soldiers and ghosts, he hung. A rope, taut, about to break.

"Not yet," he mumbled, blood running from the corner of his mouth. "Not yet..."

He wanted to stand up, to plant his hand in the dust. But his muscles wouldn't obey. His body was nothing but weight, sinking deeper.

The earth whispered:*Come.*
The voices cried:*We are waiting.*
His heart beat:*Stay.*

He hung there. Not dead, not alive. A shadow, pulled from both sides.

Sitting Bull laughed, a hoarse, bloody laugh. "So... a chief hangs."

Then he coughed, spitting out dust and blood, and the laughter died away.

He knew it wouldn't be long now. The rope would break, and he would fall completely in one direction.

And he also knew which one it would be.

The rope holding him stretched to the breaking point. His body lay heavy in the dust, his heart beating irregularly, stumbling like a horse sinking into the mud.

A blow. Pause. Another blow. Longer interval. Then another blow, weak, trembling.

His eyes flickered. Heaven and earth blurred. The soldiers' faces were mere shadows, their rifles mere black sticks. And through it all, the voices pierced, clearer, louder, like a choir of bones and wind.

We are waiting.
We are here.
You belong to us.

Sitting Bull raised his hand as if to signal once more, to speak once more. But his fingers only curled, grasping at the dust, crumbling it.

"Now," he whispered. "Now I'm taking the path."

His heart beat once more, hard, as if trying to defy him. Then it stumbled. Another beat. Then nothing.

A brief jolt ran through him, his chest rising one last time. Then he sank. Completely. No breath, no sound. Only the dust settled over him as if it had always been there.

The voices didn't fall silent. They were no longer outside, no longer in the wind. They were within him. He was within them. No difference.

Sitting Bull was no longer a man in the dust. He was dust. He was part of the earth, part of the choir, part of the silence that was louder than any song.

A chief sank into the dirt. And stayed there. Forever.

The body lay still. No more trembling, no more twitching, no more breathing. Just flesh in the dust, slowly growing cold.

The soldiers stared for a moment, then turned away. For them, it was over—one enemy less, a chief who no longer spoke, no longer dreamed, no longer stood. They spat in the dust, polished their rifles, laughed about something else.

But the ground didn't laugh.

The ground absorbed him, just as it had absorbed blood, bones, and tears. The earth closed around him, not quickly, not loudly. Just as if it had always known it would end this way.

The face was half-buried, the eyes open, as if they wanted to see again. But soon, dust settled over it, layer upon layer, until nothing remained but a bulge in the dirt, small, inconspicuous.

No gravestone. No song. No monument. Just dust, which was a chief.

And yet, there was more truth in that dust than in all the books written about him. No heroic pose, no legend, no fairy tale. Just a man who sank into the dirt like any other.

The sun burned, the wind blew, the dust rose, carrying away small grains. Perhaps a piece of skin, perhaps a drop of blood, perhaps a hair. Sitting Bull spread across the plains, grain by grain, until he was everywhere.

A chief sank into the dirt. And the dirt remembered.

Not with words. Not with songs. Only with dust.

And dust never forgot.

Visions before the gunfire

The rifles were raised, cold, rigid, unwavering. The barrels gleamed black in the light, like hungry mouths that knew nothing but food.

Sitting Bull saw them, and he knew what was coming. He knew the bang would be louder than any song, that the fire would be brighter than any dream. But before the metal spoke, something else came.

His head fell back slightly, his eyes half-closed – and there they were: the images. Visions that cut through the dust like knives.

He saw buffalo, thousands of them, running across the plains again. Not dead, not shot, but wild, black, unstoppable. Their hooves thundered, louder than the guns, and the earth shook.

He saw children laughing, playing, hunting. Their faces painted, their hands free, their eyes full of fire. They jumped through rivers that weren't red, but clear, cold, and alive.

He saw women singing, their voices strong, unbroken, higher than the howling of the wind.

And he saw men, warriors, who didn't fall, but stood. Spears in their hands, drums beating in rhythm, eyes full of fire.

For a moment everything was there – the life that seemed lost, reborn in the dust of his thoughts.

But the vision wasn't pure. It was fragile, it flickered. Between the images, he saw smoke, soldiers, firewater, the black shadows of the railways that cut through the land.

The vision fought with reality. A dream against a gun.

Sitting Bull smiled bloodily. He knew who would win. But he also knew: for that brief breath, before the salvo, the dream was stronger.

"You can shoot," he murmured, barely audibly, "but you can't erase what I see."

The guns clicked. The vision burned.

And he held on until the first shot was fired.

The first bang echoed, but Sitting Bull barely heard it. The vision still held him, but it tilted. The light shattered, and what had just been life transformed into something else.

The buffalo continued to run—but their flanks were ripped open, blood spurted, and entrails hung out. They fell, one after the other, hooves breaking, skulls crashing against stones. The ground no longer shook with force, but with carcasses tumbling one upon another.

The children, who had just been laughing, suddenly had holes in their stomachs. They staggered and fell, their eyes fixed, their mouths open. Their laughter turned into screams, high, thin, and piercing.

The women who had been singing were now screaming. Their voices weren't songs, but curses. They tore out their hair, their hands bloody, their clothes torn.

And the men—the warriors who had just stood proud—were riddled with bullets, falling one after another. Spears shattered, drums fell silent. Only blood remained.

The vision flickered, torn back and forth. One breath there was a laughing child, the next a torn-open body. At one point there were drums, then just the hammering of guns.

Sitting Bull saw both life and death at the same time, entwined like two snakes biting each other.

The smoke from the guns crept into the images, covering everything like a black veil.

He tasted blood. Not just in his mouth, but in the air, in the dust, in the vision itself.

“So,” he whispered, “show me the end.”

His gaze flickered. Before him stood the soldiers, rigid, cold, rifles at the ready. But behind them raged the vision—a realm of blood and shadows, where everything he had loved resurfaced, only to die again in the next breath.

He understood: The vision was not consolation. It was truth. Life and death, inseparable, unceasing.

And the volley would only tear the curtain so he could fall right through.

The smoke from the gunfire thickened, and the vision became grotesque. It was no longer a dream, no longer a glimmer of hope. It was a revelation of blood and fire.

The plains he knew were burning. Flames devoured the grass, blazing higher than teepees, higher than trees. Buffalo ran bellowing through the fire, their hides blazing, their eyes white with panic. They fell, burned, and let out cries of pain that hung in the air like rusty nails.

Trains rattled across the scorched earth, black iron monsters that stamped like monsters. They spewed smoke, sparks, and fire, their wheels grinding bones and children's bodies as if they were nothing.

Behind them, figures appeared—tin gods, gigantic, mechanical, with metal faces and stomachs full of fire. Their voices were like cannon shots, their hands spat lead. They trampled through teepees, trampled women, and crushed warriors with their steel feet.

The vision raged, wilder, louder, as if the whole earth were burning.

Sitting Bull stood in the middle of it all, unable to look away. He saw the rivers turn black, filled with oil and blood, fish floating on their backs, their bellies ripped open. He saw the grass crumble to ash, which blew into the children's faces until their eyes burned.

The sun itself laughed, a red ball in the sky, greedily, cruelly, as if it were delighted by the spectacle.

“So this is it,” murmured Sitting Bull, “this is what comes after us.”

The vision was apocalyptic, but it wasn't far off. He knew it showed not a fairy tale, not a threat, but a truth that had already begun.

The tin gods were there—in every gun, in every train, in every barrel of firewater. They needed no wings, no crowns. They only needed smoke and metal.

And the land, his land, would turn to dust beneath their feet.

He laughed hoarsely, with blood in his mouth. "Even the drum couldn't have beaten such an ending."

The salvo hadn't yet fallen, but he already felt it. And the vision laughed as brightly as the sun.

The vision raged on: fire across the plain, railways like black snakes, tin gods roaring and stamping. Everything was noise, everything was destruction.

But Sitting Bull, half in the dust, half in a dream, suddenly had a moment of clarity. Like a hole in the thunder, like a breath in the midst of the smoke.

He saw the trains roll, heard their wheels screech, saw the sparks fly—and then he saw them rust. Metal ate into metal, rails bent, wheels broke. The black monsters rotted, sank into the ground, and turned to dust.

He saw the tin gods, great, mighty, full of fire. Their eyes glowed, their hands spat death. But then he saw their joints creak, their iron shatter, their fire go out. Their voices turned to croaks, their stomping to stumbles, until they fell. And they too lay in the dust, motionless, empty, dead like everything else.

Even the sun, which laughed, shone fainter. He saw it sink, saw it grow pale, saw it die in a darkness that swallowed everything.

And there was only one thing left: dust. Dust that covered everything, made everything the same.

Sitting Bull smiled bloodily, almost toothlessly. "So then..." he whispered. "Even their gods are just dust. Even their machines. Even their fire."

His chest heaved heavily, one last breath. "The dust... consumes everything."

The vision flickered, raged on—but he had seen its core. No victory lasted, no fire burned forever, no metal lasted forever.

Everything ended in dust. Just like he does now.

Between the flames, iron, and the tin gods, another image emerged. No monster, no fire, no thunder. It was his people.

He saw them standing, falling, laughing, dying. Men with spears, women with children on their backs, old men telling stories, young men shooting arrows. He saw faces he had known and faces he would never see. All made of dust, all in the dust, all turning to dust.

But the image didn't disintegrate into blackness. It remained. Not as flesh, not as blood, but as grains rising in the wind.

The wind blew across the plain, and the dust motes flew, danced, and mingled. They settled on horses' backs, in rivers, on the black grass, on the white men's rails, on the faces of children yet to be born.

Sitting Bull understood: Yes, they would become dust. But dust wasn't nothing. Dust was everywhere. Dust settled on every skin, in every breath, in every fire.

“We don’t disappear,” he whispered, “we transform.”

He saw his own face, blurred, crumbling, grains falling away. His forehead crumbled, his eyes crumbled, his lips crumbled. But they didn't go away. They settled on the ground, they flew in the wind, they clung to the hands of the living.

The people he had led, the people who had fallen, would not be forgotten. Not in books, not in songs—but in the dust.

The soldiers might laugh, might write, might defeat them. But in the end, they too would breathe the dust. And with every breath, they would breathe Sitting Bull, his people, the cries, the dreams.

That was comfort, raw, hard, but real.

“We are dust,” he murmured, “and dust… sticks.”

The noise of the vision roared: fire, buffalo, rails, voices, screams—all at once. But above it all lay another sound. Not thunder, not pounding. A click. The sharp metal clang of rifles being cocked.

Sitting Bull heard it more clearly than anything else.
Click.

Another one*Click.*
A choir of cold.

The images flickered faster, like a film starting to race. Children's eyes, buffalo hooves, tongues of flame, warriors' faces, women's faces, the black grass, the laughing sun, the tin gods falling, the dust rising. Everything rushed past him, ever faster, ever brighter, until he could barely distinguish what was.

And between each image: the thought of the gun that was about to spit.

He stood at the center of a whirlwind of past and future. Everything was spinning. Everything was screaming. Everything was falling. And yet there was this rhythm:
Click.
Breath.
Click.
Breath.

He knew the next note would not*Click*It would be a bang. The end, the final sound.

The vision burned into him, as if it had to reveal everything at once before the light went out. It was greedy, it was brutal. It pressed images into his brain until it glowed.

He saw himself, kneeling in the dust. He saw his blood spurt, he saw the earth drink it in. He saw the stalks turn black, children carrying it in their hands, women tying it in their hair, men beating it on drums.

His death wasn't just his death. He was seed.

And then, in that moment, when everything was so clear, he heard the last sound. No*Click*. No breath. No wind.

It was the inhalation of the earth itself, ready to swallow him.

The rifles rose, black, gleaming, merciless. Sitting Bull saw them, but he also saw the other thing: the vision raging like a storm. Buffalo, children, women, warriors, the black grass, the railroads, the tin gods, the dust. Everything was there, everything wanted to be seen, everything roared at once.

Then came the bang.

Not one. Many. A thunderous chorus that tore everything apart.

The vision exploded in an instant. The sun's laughter shattered like glass, the buffalo dissolved into smoke, the children screamed and fell silent, the women smashed their voices like mirrors, the warriors fell to a thousand pieces. The tin gods crashed together, rusting instantly, the trains jumped off the rails, the rivers evaporated.

Everything turned to dust. Everything in a single flash.

Sitting Bull felt his body recoil, bullets ripping through him, blood spurting, warm, heavy, red. But amidst the pain, there was also the light—not bright, not pure, but glaring like burning dust.

He fell, sank, disappeared – and with him the vision.

Only one image remained: black grass standing in the wind. No fire, no blood, no scream. Just stalks, silent, black, unyielding.

Then there was nothing. Only dust. Only silence.

The rifles lowered. The men breathed heavily. A chief had fallen. A vision had been shattered.

And the dust absorbed both.

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