

WINNETOU

What Karl May forgot



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Chapter 1 - Prologue: No hero, just a man with dust in his mouth

The morning smelled of cheap liquor and dead horse. Not that I've smelled much else lately. The dust clung to the roof of my mouth like the memory of a woman who never loved you. I was sitting on an upturned crate in front of a shed so leaning it only stood upright out of respect for gravity. Next to me was a bottle, half empty or half full, depending on how long you'd been drinking. I had plenty of time, so it was half empty.

"You look like a piece of cattle that forgot to die," said the boy with the rabbit head who hung around here every morning. "And you sound like an asshole who thinks he's impressing me." He grinned, showing teeth that looked like they'd been lost in a fight with a saw. I didn't like him, but he sometimes shaded me when the sun was too hot. That's all you could ask of anyone around here.

The street was a wide strip of dirt, flanked by wooden buildings, all painted the same rotten hue: hopelessness. Two whores leaned against the saloon railing, their faces stained with cheap makeup and too many sleepless nights. One had a laugh like rusty nails, the other only one eye. I didn't know which of the two was worse off. Maybe the one with the laughter. Laughter eats you from the inside if it's hollow.

I'm Sam Hawkens, if I'm not mistaken. Except that "not being mistaken" was a while ago. Some days you confuse your name with the direction you're shooting, and both miss the mark. I've known times when morning greeted me with coffee, gun smoke, and a good mood. Today it greets me with this crate and the feeling that the world on the other side of the horizon has ceased to be interesting.

"Sam," said the boy, "the fat guy is looking for you." "Which fat guy?" I asked. In this town, "the fat guy" wasn't a precise description, but a way of life. "The one with the new hat and the old teeth. Said you knew something about gold." "I know something about dust. It sometimes looks like gold when the sun lies."

The fat guy didn't take long to arrive. The door opened, belly first, the rest following. He stood in front of me as if he had rented the street. "Hawkens?" "If I'm not mistaken." "They say you once stood side by side with Apaches." "They say a lot. Some also say the bartender washes the glasses. Look at the glasses."

He didn't grin. People like him don't laugh—they eat. "I need a man to show me a way. A few miles out. A hill, a creek, an old mine." "Sounds like you need

a pocket diary, not a cowboy." He reached for my shirt collar. I looked at his hand—soft, sweaty, the kind of hand that doesn't know what a rein is. I didn't break his fingers. It was too early in the day for honest work. I just picked up the bottle from the ground and gently bumped it against the back of his hand. Glass can be very polite until it breaks.

"Don't touch me, friend," I said. "I have some ugly memories that come back when someone touches me." He let go. His look was the kind of look others do for him. "You'll come back," he murmured, wiping the back of his hand on my jacket as if the dirt were mine.

"Go ahead," I said. "The jacket could use some stories."

He left, not quickly, but resolutely, like a man who'd already decided that someone would bleed today—preferably not him. The one with the glass eye gave me a look that said, "Watch out, old man." And I nodded—not because I needed to, but because you should be polite to people who lose their eyes and still look.

I got up and went into the saloon. Inside, it stank of bad music and even worse decisions. The bartender was a piece of wood in an apron. He rubbed a glass that had already lost the war. "Sam," he said, "you look like yesterday." "Yesterday outlived me," I said. "Whiskey. The one that works faster than bad news."

He placed the requested item in front of me. I took a sip, closed my eyes, and waited for the stuff to do its work: a slow, honest burn that burns down the grass in your head so you can see the jackals more clearly. Next to me sat a pianist without a piano—the keys had been broken for weeks, but he stayed put out of habit. Some people are better able to accompany misery when they pretend they have a purpose.

The swinging doors slammed. Two men carried a third in. No drama. Blood is the kind of curtain that lifts itself. I knew the boy—too young for the kind of holes in his shirt. "Behind the slaughterhouse," one said. "Three stitches." "Again," grumbled the bartender. "Again," I said.

The sheriff came in, short of breath and with a face reeking of excuses. "Nobody saw anything," he announced before anyone had even asked. That's what sheriffs are like when they're part of the decor. "I," said the one with the glass eye from the door, "saw nobody see anything." "That's enough for me," said the sheriff, busily writing "Nothing" in a wet notebook.

Then a shadow fell into the door, taller than the man who cast it. Not because it was broad. Because it stood still. Winnetou has a stillness that blunts knives. I haven't seen him in years, if I'm not mistaken, and yet he stood there, as if the distance between us were merely bad cards in a good hand.

He looked first at the boy, then at me. No greeting. He nodded, and in that nod lay a half-moon and the weight of things not thought through. "Sam," he said. "Yes," I said. My voice sounded like it had slept against a fence at night. "Come."

We stepped out onto the street. The dust knew how to swallow people. It did it daily. "A name?" he asked. "Many," I said. "But the one who smelled of gold this morning is called Ärger." "He'll die," said Winnetou, as if predicting the weather. "Perhaps. Or someone before him."

We walked the distance to the slaughterhouse. Blood flies formed a crown over the backyard. I saw the grooves in the ground where pigs are pulled when they no longer have legs. Next to it lay a shadow that didn't belong to the roof. I knelt down. The shadow was fabric. Black, soft, more expensive than our city deserves. At the hem, a thread as fine as a lie that people readily believe. I brought the fabric to my nose. A perfume lingered in it, floral, clean, false. I saw the small embroidery on the corner: **LM**

"What?" asked Winnetou. "A signature," I said. "From someone who's sure we can read." He nodded once. In his eyes lay a map without paths. "She was here." "Or he stole something from her," I said, "but most men here are just stealing time." "There's a carriage," he said. "Two horses. Black wood. Too elegant for here." "I saw it," I said. "He greeted me without greeting me." "Yes."

I put the piece of cloth in my pocket. It didn't burn. But it made the day feel tighter.

Back in the saloon, the bartender held his breath. That's what he does when he pretends something's serious. "Sam," he said, "the fat guy was here. He asked if you..." "If I'm not mistaken, he asked if I could help him die stupid." "Something like that." "Tell him I'll think about it." "He's not the thinking type, Sam." "Then we'll teach him."

I drank the rest of the glass and raised my hand for a second. Winnetou pushed the glass back with two fingers, as if he were swatting a scorpion into a bush.

"Later." "I'm old," I said. "Later is a bad joke." "You need eyes today." "I have a few. They're just in a bad mood."

The one with the glass eye approached us, pushing her hip against the counter as if she'd just bought it. "I saw the carriage yesterday," she said. "Towards evening. It went out toward Mill Path. Dust lay over it like a sheet. In the window sat a lady who could play checkers." "Hat? Veil?" "Both. And a mouth that says yes when it means no." "She smells of flowers," I said. "She smells of danger," she said, brushing a strand of hair from her forehead. "I like both. One wakes me up, the other pays my rent."

The sheriff came back in, looked at us, looked past us. "Hawkins," he said, "the boy... I mean, the dead man... was playing with the fat guy. Cards. Last night. There was a fight." "Surprise me," I muttered. "I didn't see it," he hurried. "I got... well..."

"Stop breathing if you can't talk," I said. "The carriage. Have you seen it?" "Which carriage?" "The sack," said the glass eye. "The sheriff," he corrected, offended. "The lace on the town's shoe," I said kindly. "Just check if your shoe's still tied while the carriage's running over people."

Winnetou stepped to the door and looked at the sun as if he could be ordered to slow down. "We're riding out," he said. "We?" I asked. "Yes." "I have... certain obligations," I said, tapping my glass. "None that can wait?" "Yes," I said, pushing the glass away. "All of them."

We took the horses out of the shed behind the saloon. Mine was named "Bile." A clever name. It kicked the beam once to tell me what it thought of plans. I patted its neck. "Just a bit," I said. "If I'm not mistaken, it's going to get bad before it gets better." Bile snorted. Horses know when you're lying.

We rode along the mill trail. The river was a thin line of lead, the mill a lame tooth. I noticed hoof prints, fresh, deep, two-horse, and the ridge marks of a heavy wagon. Next to the tracks was that subtle, damned scent of flowers. The wind carried it as if it were carrying a secret like a lady carries a handkerchief.

"She wanted people to notice," I said. "Yes," said Winnetou. "It's a message." "Or bait." "Both."

A few miles further, a bush into which someone had leaned something: a red ribbon, neatly knotted, as if by a practiced hand. Sand clung to the ribbon. Beneath the sand, something metallic gleamed—a small, flat cartridge, not

from around here, clean, cold-friendly. I picked it up. "That's not mercy," I said. "No," said Winnetou. He took the cartridge and weighed it. "A visitor." "One who dresses as if he came from a city where the sidewalks are washed." "And who has people killed." "Yes. Or likes to do it cleanly himself."

We rode on until the path disappeared into pasture and scree. The carriage track curved north, to where the hills pretend to become mountains until they forget. "We're turning," I said. "If I'm not mistaken, the lady has already seen us. I like it when people don't study me too closely." "Tomorrow," said Winnetou. "Tomorrow what?" "Tomorrow we'll talk in the saloon. Out loud. About gold. About roads. We'll expose words like flesh. And see who comes to smell."

I grinned. I like it when plans smell. "Good," I said. "But first, we should visit the fat man. The fat man doesn't like waiting. And I don't like it when men with small hands think they have big shadows."

We rode back. The town didn't seem any better, just older. The one with the glass eye stood in front of the saloon, smoking, inhaling the smoke as if it were medicine. "He's here," she said. "Who?" "The fat one. And the thin one, the trouble he brought with him."

Inside, he sat with two skinny guys who smelled of knives. The fat one held the cards like a man who believes cards are sacred. "Hawkins," he said, "we have a business." "We have nothing," I said. "But we can pretend. You guys like that." "Hold your tongue," said one of the skinny guys. "It holds itself up," I said. "That's the problem."

The fat man laid down a card. Ace of spades. Men who can't do anything like to throw Aces of spades on tables—as if it proves something. "There's a mine," he said. "The way there is..." "Stop it," I interrupted. "I know your mine. It's in your head. And the way there is through my patience account. It's empty." "You're coming with me. Tonight. You show us something. After that, we'll talk about money." "Tonight, sheriffs and children die," I said. "Tonight I'm not talking about money. Tonight I'm talking about perfume and carriages." The fat man blinked slowly, as if his brain were sorting the words. "Perfume?" "Yes, friend. Flowers. Have you ever smelled them, except at funerals?" His thin men laughed too soon. The laughter stopped when Winnetou stepped up behind me and said nothing. Silence strikes faster than fists.

"Hawkins," the fat man finally said, "you're getting yourself into something you shouldn't..." I didn't even wait for the sentence to finish. I grabbed his

forehead, pulled his head forward slightly, and tapped him with two fingers. "Listen, fathead," I said quietly. "I've been into everything. For too many years. And I don't climb out of it for men who think 'business' is another word for 'blackmail.' You want the mine? Buy a shovel. You want to live? Buy some sense."

The thin ones stood. Winnetou didn't move. Neither did I. The bartender cleared his throat, but only out of habit. Finally, one sat down again. The other snorted. The fat one smiled for the first time. It was a smile that insulted his cheeks. "Good," he said. "Then I'll see you later. Sam."

"If I'm not mistaken," I said, "you only see me when I want you to."

They left. The saloon breathed again, as if someone had rescued it from a bad idea. The glass eye approached me. "You collect enemies," she said. "I collect everything," I said. "You never know what it might be used for." "And the name on the piece of cloth?" she asked casually, as if asking for sugar. "What name?" Her cheek twitched. So she had seen him. "All right," she said. "I don't like puzzles with blood in them."

The sheriff staggered in as if he'd just learned to read. "Sam," he said, "I've been told you have proof." "You've been told a lot," I said. "First, get that body out of the church's backyard. It's in a bad place." "Which body?" "Yours," I said. And he didn't understand, but he took off his hat as if he had. Some men are so polite that they greet their own future.

Night fell. The city looked better when you couldn't see it. I sat on my crate again. The bottle was newer, the dust the same. Winnetou stood opposite, shadow in shadow, as if he wanted to teach the darkness a lesson. The one with the glass eye disappeared with a man who didn't know what to expect and was probably happy because of it.

I thought about the letters. **LMI** spoke them silently so they wouldn't run away. Then there was a knock on the side of my shed. Twice, pause, once. Honest language. I stood there, hand on my Colt, not because I wanted to shoot, but because I like talking with old friends.

"Get in," I said. The door remained closed. Instead, something fell through the crack—a thin envelope, clean, with a ribbon that had survived the entire day. I picked it up. Inside was a piece of paper, smooth and neat, that didn't fit in my hands. On it, in pretty writing:

"Morning. Sunrise. Mill Path. All questions. – LM"

I smelled the paper. Flowers. Yes. And something else – metal. Money smells like metal. Murder, too. They only differ in the echo.

I stepped outside. Winnetou was no longer there. I knew he was there. Sometimes presence isn't where you look, but where you hear nothing. I lifted the envelope. "Morning," I said into the night. "Sunrise." Somewhere an owl answered. And somewhere else a person, but more quietly.

I sat back down. My bones protested, my head negotiated, my heart stayed out of it. "No hero," I muttered, "just a man with dust in his mouth." If I'm not mistaken, that's enough to get me through to the next day.

I took one last sip, just to insult the courage. Then I lay down, one hand on the Colt and the other on the envelope. Just because the city slept doesn't mean it rested. But I rested. Briefly. Enough to insult the morning when it comes.

And he will come. With answers. Or with new questions that pretend to be answers. LM will be there, if I'm not mistaken. And the Fat Man will show up, because men like him would rather die in other people's chapters than in their own.

I'm Sam Hawken. I won't fight pretty. I might not fight at all. But I'll be there. And that's enough to make things happen that no one wanted and that everyone deserved.

The moon hung crookedly like a poorly hung sign, and somewhere someone was stealing a horse, saying they'd bring it back when they knew where. Good night, I said to the bottle. And the bottle said nothing because it was better behaved than I was.

Chapter 2 - The Woman with Two Glass Eyes

The day didn't come to town; it slunk along like a dog that knows people here talk with their boots. I sat on my crate in front of the shed, chewing through the taste of stale coffee and bad sleep, waiting for a reason not to just get up and run into the desert until the sun burns out my thoughts. Reasons are rare in these parts. Sometimes a reason is just a sound. Today it was a footstep.

They came slowly, the footsteps. Firm, even, without hesitation. That's suspicious, when everyone else pretends they don't want to be seen, while they want to be seen. I raised my head, spat out dust, which spat back on principle, and saw them coming.

The woman with the two glass eyes.

She wore one on her face—greenish, shiny, clean as a freshly polished lie. The other hung around her neck on a fine, far too clear chain, small as a marble, round as a certainty. It clanged against a silver pendant with every step. *Tick, Tick* as if it were counting the seconds I had left before I fell in love with trouble again.

She wore a dress that was only permitted at funerals in this city—or in stories no one believes. Dark red, barely a trace of dust, as if the air itself kept it away from her. Her hair tied back, nothing promising, everything threatening. Her real eye—gray-blue—had the kind of calm I've only seen in people who know what a night smells like after doing things you don't say out loud.

"Morning, Hawkens," she said.

"If I'm not mistaken, he's the kind who tries to be friendly and changes his mind in the afternoon."

"Kindness is an expensive habit here."

"I never had enough change."

She stopped, not three steps from my box, and didn't look down at me. That makes an impression. Most people throw their noses like a spear. She held them as if you could breathe underneath them. The glass eye on her face remained rigid. The one on her neck swung and glittered as if it were a second, silent mouth.

"They say you know the people here. The ways. The reasons why there are fewer men at night than during the day."

"They also say water heals. It depends on what it's seen before."

"I'm looking for someone."

"Everyone is looking for someone. Some find someone, the wrong ones die."

"I'm looking for you."

"Then you're out of luck."

A shadow stalked into the scene as if he'd been paid. The fat one—the one from yesterday—rolled up, belly first, morals trailing. He wore a hat that looked like a logical error. Sweat trickled down his temples like a debt paid too late.

"Sam," he grinned. "The morning is good."

"Not for you, if I'm not mistaken."

"You're funny."

"You're soft."

He came even closer, his chin jutting out. I just raised my hand and showed him the air between my fingers. "Stay here, scumbag. Otherwise you'll smell my words away."

He grumbled, looked at the woman, and his gaze became more attentive. She placed her fingers on his forearm with a calmness that one only has when one has already calmed others who were no longer standing. "Not yet," she said. He stayed. Fascinating how some men *not yet* hear better than *onno*.

"We'll go and talk," she said to me.

"Talking rarely makes things better here."

"Then we'll talk in a way that makes things worse, if necessary."

I stood up. My back creaked like an old fence. The dust on the road gave way. It always gives way when something comes along that reminds me of tomorrow.

We went to the saloon. Leaning on the balcony were the two remnants of fate who call themselves whores here, although in all these years I've seen more compassion from them than in church. The one with the rusty nails blinked, as if she suddenly had respect for the woman with the chain. The one with the glass eye—my old acquaintance—unconsciously touched the rim of her eye socket, almost as if in greeting. For a moment, two glass eyes sparkled in the same light that hadn't required anyone to become anything great today.

Inside, it smelled of sweat, tobacco, and the kind of hope you drink. The bartender was polishing a glass that had seen so much polish it longed to be

skinned. The pianist again only had three keys, but this time they pretended to have five. Two card tables were working on lies. A third on a truth no one could pay for.

She sat down at the bar, cupping her water as if it were a knife. I took the stool next to her and made it creak so everyone would know where I was. The bartender slid a whiskey toward me without question. I sniffed it. He sniffed back.

"You drink water," I said.

"I want to see clearly."

"With a glass eye?"

"Seeing clearly is not seeing. You know that."

I nodded. Yes. Some clarity only grows when you no longer see enough things.

A thin man detached himself from the back table. He had the figure of bad grass that had been trampled down too often, and a shirt that claimed to have once been white. He stood close to her. Too close. In this city, *too close* another name *for there's work right away*.

"Lady," he said, "if you—"

"If I what?" she asked.

"Need company," he began, and let the *need* fall so low that it could be heard at all the tables.

She simply raised her hand to her chain, wrapped the replacement eye around her fingers once, twice. Then she placed it calmly against his forehead, as if she were showing him a crucifix. "Do you see that?"

"A... glass thing. Jewelry, huh?"

"My second eye. It lets me see which men will become puddles. Your face tells me you're the kind who stands in the shadow of puddles and pretends it's raining."

He laughed, once, too loudly, too briefly. Then he realized that no one was laughing. Not the cards, not the chairs, not the keys. He took two steps backward, stumbled over his own insignificance, and sat down again. A man

who understood for the first time that *Joke* and *Security* do not have the same parents.

"Impressive," I said without turning my head.

"It saves time," she said.

"And men."

"Those who live longer are sometimes those who think shorter."

I let that sink in. Sometimes even a man like me needs a second to realize he's just heard the truth.

"Yesterday you were at the slaughterhouse," she said, as if no one had spent the night.

"If I'm not mistaken, half the city was there. Pigs die louder, men die cleaner."

"You found something."

I said nothing. In this city, nothing is a language you're only allowed to speak after you've already said too much.

"Something that's mine," she continued.

I placed my hand on the counter. Wood is honest. "And if that's the case?"

"Then bring it to me tomorrow. Sunrise. Mill Path."

"You like sunrises?"

"I like agreements that are short."

"And if I don't come?"

"Then I know you're either smart or you want to be dead."

"I was never good at *smart*."

"Then be on time."

It wasn't the threat in the words. It was that there was none.

The swinging doors made their animal noises. Two figures came in, henchmen from the low grass. I'd known their shoes longer than their faces—and the shoes had done more work. They looked first at the counter, then at the chain, then at me.

"Sam Hawkens," said the one with the scar, pretending it was a story. "The fat guy wants you to hand that thing over."

"What thing?" I asked, stretching out my legs so they knew where their place was. "I have many things. Some of them are words."

"What you did yesterday—"

"Aha. Secrets. I love it when *menthesay* because *theis* always something they have no tongue for."

The other, thin as a bad thought, placed his hand on my shoulder. A gentle gesture. Tenderness and violence often begin at the same time. I saw the hand, not the man.

"Take them away," I said calmly.

He left it there to show how brave he was. I took his wrist between my thumb and forefinger and squeezed so gently it was rude. His fingers opened as if they suddenly had an opinion of their own. He pulled back, tried to smile, and lost.

The woman now focused her gaze on the two of them. The real eye – cold, alert – and the glass eye – rigid, but not empty. She lifted the chain, letting the replacement eye swing once more, so that it absorbed light and gave something back. "Sit down."

The one with the scar stayed standing. The thin one sat down automatically. The one with the scar thought about it. Thinking takes time for some people because it's rarely practiced. Then he sat down. The conversation was over, and it hadn't even begun.

The bartender was cleaning a glass as if the bar were an altar and we were the opposite of saints. "Sam," he murmured, "the air is getting thicker than my coffee."

"Your coffee is a crime," I said.

"Better than your whiskey."

"No one's better than my whiskey. At least it doesn't lie."

The woman turned the water glass in her hand, letting the light creep over the rim. "Yesterday. Behind the church. The sheriff."

"He lay like someone who didn't want to lie there." I drank. "The perfume was there. Like at the slaughterhouse."

"Then you have learned to smell."

"I've always been able to do this. I just don't like what I find."

She inclined her head, ever so slightly. "You have the letter."

"Perhaps."

"Morning. Sunrise. Mill Trail."

"You say that as if it were a prayer."

"No. I don't pray."

"No one here prays. And those who do rarely get an answer."

"I don't want an answer. I want to see you there."

I laughed, briefly, harshly. Laughter is a knife—overused, it becomes blunt, but you still want to carry it with you. "Why me?"

"Because you remember."

"What?"

"To people who were once human before they became men."

I remained silent. Sometimes a sentence can carry you more than a mile.

The one with the rusty nail smile walked past us, collecting glances like alms. She stopped by the woman, looked down at the chain, and involuntarily touched the spot where her own glass eye pops out at night. "Beautiful piece," she said quietly.

"Reserve," said the woman.

The whore nodded slowly. "A woman is only as sure as her second eye," she murmured, more to herself. "And men are only as wise as their first."

The pianist attempted a note that sounded like courage. It failed. Outside, a donkey yelped into the silence, as if to remind us what we truly are.

"Tell me something about yourself," I said, without hope.

"I won't tell you anything. I'll show you what I want."

"And what do you want?"

"That you come."

"And if I want to know beforehand, why?"

"Then come first."

I grinned. "I like women who have sentences you can't throw away."

"I like men who don't run away."

"I never walk." I drank. "I fall. That's different."

The swinging doors rocked again. The fat man had decided that we needed to see him more often, or we'd forget he existed. He came in with two new faces—fresh, uncertain, their arms too short for what they were wearing. He stopped in front of us, his gaze lingering on the necklace. "Nice jewelry," he said, sounding as if he were *Pricesay*.

"Tell the men to stay seated," the woman said without looking at him.

"Which men?"

"All."

He laughed, half-turning toward the room. Everyone laughed along, only more quietly. By the time his gaze crept back to her, the laughter had already died down. "Sam," he said, "you've got something of me."

"I have something you'd like. It's not the same."

"You bring it tonight. Out there where the stream divides."

"I'm not doing anything, if I'm not mistaken."

"You're wrong."

He leaned forward. His mouth smelled of old grease and new promises. I saw the pores in his forehead. I saw the trembling in his hand, the one men despise when it's their own. I could have told him the truth: that tonight at the stream, only one thing is going to do, and that's the wind. Instead, I said, "Sit with the others, fat man. As if there were a choice."

He blushed in places I've rarely seen in people. His eyes flickered. Not the glassy kind—he didn't have one. The real kind, remembering that it lives in a mind that lacks patience.

He grabbed my collar.

The woman stood up. She put down her water glass, so quietly that it was louder than a gunshot. She took the spare eye on the chain between her index finger and thumb, turned it once, and it caught the lamp. Light crept over to his fingers. She wasn't looking at him. She was looking at his hand.

"Just once," she said.

He paused. Men rarely pause. When they do, even flies cease to live.

He let go.

"Good," said the woman. "Morning. Sunrise. Mill Path."

He pressed his lips together and took two steps back. His two new faces behind him tried to look threatening, but threats take practice. They looked like children pretending to be knives. That's sometimes more dangerous because they don't know where the blade begins.

"See you later," he growled, pushing the air in front of him until it understood that it should make room.

She watched him go as if she were watching a mosquito that had decided to ride cows. Then she looked at me. "You're coming," she said. No question.

"Maybe I don't want to work for you."

"You're not working for me. You're working against false death."

"Is the right one better?"

"He's more punctual."

I laughed again. Today was a day that demanded a lot of laughter. "And *LM*?" I asked quietly so only the two of us could hear.

She blinked once—her real eye—and not out of tiredness. "Morning, Sam."

"I assume that means: *ask me there*."

"That means: *bring the question*."

We stayed there for a while. I drank, she drank the water as if it were precious. Maybe it was. The bartender pretended not to see us and looked at us as if we'd shown him a bill that would never be paid. The men returned to their cards, but their ears remained on the bar. The whores collected glances that no one paid. The pianist gave up and left his hands on the wood, like two animals that had decided to play dead.

"You used to be different," the woman said after a while.

"If I'm not mistaken, I was younger once."

"No. You were faster with the gun."

"I've slowed down with stupidity. It balances out."

"Perhaps."

She stood up. The replacement eye swung back and forth. I imagined it in her hand, cool and smooth, and wondered how many times she had to show it to teach men to think.

"Morning," she said.

"Yes."

"Come alone."

"I'm always alone. Even when someone is standing next to me."

She nodded. Not friendly. Not cold. Simply like someone who accepts how things are. Then she left, the swinging doors parted, the street took her, the

dust refused to creep over her hem, out of respect or fear, I don't know. Outside, I heard two children arguing about who had stolen whose bread. One was crying because he had the wrong reason.

I stayed until the bottle slowly decided to become pleasant. Winnetou hadn't shown up, which doesn't mean he wasn't there. He's like the second shadow in the evening—sometimes you only see the first, but the second one later explains where you were standing.

"Sam," said the bartender, once the silence could breathe again. "This is going to be bad."

"It's getting bad. We live here."

"The fat man has men."

"The woman has peace."

"And you?"

I looked into the glass until it became a surface that asked no questions. "I have a habit of showing up where I'm not invited."

The one with the scar cleared his throat and approached again, cautiously, as if entering a room that already belonged to someone else. "Sam... we weren't..." He searched for a word that would simultaneously excuse and threaten. There isn't one.

"Just sit back down," I said. "Practice that. Tomorrow will be important."

He sat down. The thin man asked someone if he'd ever seen a woman who could see better with one eye than he could with both. The answer: yes, today.

I eventually went outside because the air inside held too many memories. The sun hung like a poorly secured plate. The street had regained its rhythm: footsteps that mean nothing; looks that lie; voices that took too long to grow up. The one with the rusty nail smile lit a stub and, without a word, held it out to me. I took it, dragged it off, and gave it back.

"Nice necklace," she said, and I knew she didn't mean mine.

"Heavy neck."

"Heavy men."

"Even heavier bills."

She nodded. "Be careful, Sam."

"I never pay attention. And yet I'm still here."

"Yet," she said, and laughed without rust.

In the afternoon, I rode a bit, just to see if the mill path was still where it had been yesterday. It was. The stream was tired, the mill stood still, the shadow was long and friendly, like a dog that has learned not to bite unless you kick it. In the sand at the edge, I found the imprint of a fine boot, small foot, narrow heel. Next to it, the broad, clumsy mark of the fat man. Between the two, the mark of a stick, not supporting, but surrendering—perhaps that of the sheriff when he was still alive.

I knelt, smelling the sand damp from the water. Flowers. More flowers. This perfume, out of place in this landscape, like a fan in a storm.*LM*she wrote. I said it in my head so the air wouldn't steal it.

When I returned, the evening was already looking for a hat. I sat on my box, as I always do when the world pretends to be round. The Scotch had made sure my bones didn't hate me. I chewed on a piece of jerked meat that was better than its reputation and tried not to think about anything. Nothing worked. I thought about tomorrow. About her real eye. About the replacement eye that hung like a silent god over her throat. About the fat man who needed men to feel great. About *LM*, the letters that were stuck in the paper like thin knives.

Later—much later—Winnetou emerged from the night, as if he were being cut from it. He remained in the shadows, I remained in the light. That's how we speak. "You saw her," he said. There was no question mark in his world.

"I saw her."

"And?"

"She makes men sit down."

"Good."

"And tomorrow?"

"Go there."

"You're not coming?"

"You go alone."

"She asked for it."

"And I recommend it."

"Why?"

"Because two shadows are louder than one."

"And the fat one?"

"The fat man is scared. Men who are scared are as dangerous as empty barrels."

"They make noise."

"And roll wherever you push them."

We were silent. The night made the sound of things that didn't want to be helped. He stepped closer, placed his hand on my shoulder, as if calming a bird it still needed. "Take little with you," he said. "Just what you want to carry when you run."

"I'm not running."

"Then take even less."

"And what is *LM*?"

He took a deep breath. "Morning."

"You two with your mornings."

"Today belongs to the city. Tomorrow belongs to you."

"It sounds like you're giving me a gift."

"I'm just giving you directions."

He walked back into the night, which closed behind him as if it were water. I stayed in the light, less out of courage than out of habit. And as the moon

began to fill the road cuts, I realized that I had learned to stop asking if things had to be this way. It had to be. Things are.

I lay down, the box at my back, my hat over my face, my hand on the Colt I don't want to draw tomorrow, and my other hand in my pocket, lest the envelope with the small, neat handwriting decide to simply move on. I wondered if the woman with the two glass eyes was asleep today. If she was putting the spare eye next to her, like some men put their guns. If she was dreaming with one eye or none.

"Morning," I said into the dust. "Sunrise. Mill Path."

The dust said nothing. He'd already heard too much.

And if I am not mistaken – which happens – it will be the beginning of something that will later *Story* calls it when the hands that wrote it are no longer drinking. Until then: I'm Sam Hawken. I have dust in my mouth, a bad relationship with sunrises, and an appointment tomorrow with a woman who sees more with one eye than others with two—and with a second that waits quietly until needed. That's enough to know that tonight won't be friendly.

I lowered my hat. Somewhere a bottle shattered. Somewhere someone laughed too loudly. Somewhere someone prayed to the wrong god. I fell asleep like a man who knows the morning will find him, whether he wants it or not.

Chapter 3 - Three Days of Rain in the Middle of Nowhere

The rain didn't start. It just didn't stop. It didn't come from above; it crept out of everything that had ever been dry. From boards, from bones, from memories. For three days, it fell in threads, in strands, in curtains, as if the sky had something against us personally. The land became a gray river that didn't know where it was going. I trudged along in it like a bad idea that no one thought through.

My hat was so wet it rattled when I moved it. My coat clung to me like a sin that couldn't be shaken off. The Mill Path lay somewhere ahead, a promise the rain was eating away piece by piece. I ran, I cursed, I drank from the bottle, which at least was honest: It warmed me, it didn't lie to me, it hurt when it was empty.

On the second day, everything smelled of wet leather, of cold horse, and of the kind of wood that had ceased to be a tree. I missed the dust. Dust is coarse, dust shortens, dust is an honest enemy. Rain creeps into you until you hear yourself rattling from within. I was hungry for sun. I got water.

Around midday, something emerged in the gray that pretended to be a town. Three small houses, a saloon that, with a bit of good will, could be distinguished from a wet shanty, a store that promised "goods" but had its door closed so wide that the promise wouldn't fall out. A sign hung crookedly and said "Boot Sole." Fitting. Everything here felt like the worn-out end of a trip that no one had enjoyed.

I tied Galle up under the porch—Galle disliked the rain even more than me—and entered the saloon. Inside, it was darker than outside, but warmer. The warmth smelled of sweat, old spitwood, and the kind of soup that recalls meat more than meat itself. Three men sat at a table, waiting for nothing. Two whores in coats, wetter than their eyes, shared a pipe. The bartender, a thin line of man with a heavy rag, rubbed glasses as if he could polish the world clean if he just kept polishing it long enough.

"Whiskey," I said.

"Two coins," he said, "or one and a good story."

"You'll hate history."

"Then I'd rather have two coins."

I put it down, he poured, and I took the first sip like a man who knows it's no good—and that's precisely why. It burned, but not the way it should. More like a memory of fire. I left the bottle. The rain drummed against the roof as if it were practicing to become a musician. The whores looked at me like someone testing whether hope is worth it. I shook my head. You shouldn't lie when everyone can see.

"You're Hawkens," someone said in the corner. Voices have faces, even if you can't see them yet. This one had a face with a scar across the lip and eyes that had seen "almost" too many times. Harlan. That was his name, if I'm not mistaken. I last saw him when he was trying to own the entire West with half a map.

"Harlan," I said without turning around. "You look like the world licked you clean and then left you lying in the dirt."

"You look like someone who's about to run into something that's going to eat you."

"I'm always on the way there."

He stood up, walked over, and sat too close. Rain dripped from the brim of his hat onto the table, making small, dark coins on the wood. He smiled, but only with one side of his face still believing the word. "They say you carry mail."

"People say a lot. Some say rain is good for the fields. Show me one here that's grateful."

"The woman with the eye," he said, as if he'd already won. "She's through. Yesterday. Left something behind."

"An invoice?"

"A warning."

I drank until my mouth no longer knew whether to speak or remain silent. "Harlan, you never understood when a warning applies."

"Is it valid today?"

"Today there's only one thing that counts: I want to get dry before I get wet again."

He laughed briefly, watched the bartender polishing the glass as if there was an answer there, and then flicked a wet matchstick off the table. "Here's the thing: Your name's lying around in the rain. People step on it. Some pocket it. I picked it up."

"Keep it. It's heavy."

"Too heavy for you?"

"Too old for your face."

He curled his upper lip, the scar pinching his words. "You once drank with me, Sam."

"And I once prayed with a cattle driver. Neither worked for me."

He leaned forward. His breath smelled of cheap liquor and a bad mood. "The woman wants you at Mill Path. The fat man wants you at the stream. I want you here."

"Greed is unhealthy," I said, "especially when you eat several dishes at once."

"I only want one thing." He placed his hand on the table, palm up. The skin was hard, rills of water finding their way through. "The envelope."

"Which one?"

He gave a thin grin. "The one with the pretty letters."

I finally looked at him. Nothing about his face was clear. Everything was nailed down, everything bore the marks of decisions that came too soon and went too late. "Harlan, we've shared bad moments before. Don't make it worse."

"It's not my fault, old man."

"It's rarely your fault, is it? You're the kind of person who's never at fault—only bad luck. And bad luck is cheap."

He suddenly slammed his palm down on the table. Not hard. But precisely. The glass shook. One of the whores flinched. The bartender stopped polishing. Rain continued to rap its dull song.

"Outside," Harlan said quietly. "I don't want the ladies getting wet with blood."

"Gentleman."

"Today. Not tomorrow."

I finished my drink, put down the glass, and picked up the bottle. The bartender pretended not to notice.

Outside, it smelled of cold iron and warm mud. The rain turned the street into a row of small mirrors that no one wanted to look at because they were too honest. Harlan stepped into the yard behind the saloon, where there were barrels with more holes than stories, and an old wagon whose wheels looked as if they were only still moving out of habit.

"You always talked too much," he said.

"I know. That's the one thing I've never forgiven myself for."

He pulled his jacket aside and showed me the butt of his gun, as if we had to make it official. I showed him my hands. They were wet, cracked, old—but they still had a reliability that made men suspicious.

“Do you want to count?” he asked.

"I don't count. I memorize."

He laughed again, but the scar made it look bad. "You're not the fastest anymore."

“I’m always as fast as the person who just forgot he has legs.”

“Today that’s not me.”

“Today it’s the rain.”

He narrowed his eyes. "You and your jokes."

I took two steps closer, just enough so he was forced to see my mouth when I spoke. "Harlan," I said, "you want this envelope. You want it so badly that you don't see what you're losing for it."

“What do I lose?”

"The choice."

He tensed his fingers. The rain ran down his temples, making his face softer than it should have been. I felt the pull in my back—old, tough, decent in the wrong. I thought of the woman with the real eye and the fake one, of *LM* By the stream, by the mill path. By Winnetou's hand, which could be so steady that it tired knives. Then I did what men like me do when talking stops being wise.

I took another half step closer to him, so he could count the wrinkles in my hat. His hand went down. Not to the gun. To me. Mistake. And before he could turn the mistake into a second one, I said it—loud enough for the rain to hear:

“You marly sack of meat with bones in it, you’ll be watching yourself rot by the time I’m done with you.”

His eyes flickered toward my Colt, but the muzzle was where his hope was: down, close, ugly. I fired. Not a pretty shot. Not a clean one. One that did the work. The bullet went through his kneecap like an honest god through a lie. Wood splintered behind him, Harlan fell, the rain ripped the scream from his

mouth and poured it onto the ground where it belonged. He reached for the leg, found it, dropped it, reached again, found now only mud, blood, and a lesson.

I took a step back. Not out of pity. Out of habit. I don't like having other people's pain caress my boots. He gasped. There was nothing heroic about the sound. It sounded like an old bellows learning that air knows no mercy.

"Sam," he blurted out, "Sam, you... you..."

"I know." I knelt beside him, pulled the gun from his belt, and threw it far into the yard. "Breathe. If you can still do that."

He wanted to say something, but the words slipped from his face like fish. I reached into his jacket. Not because I'm a thief. Because I already knew that men like Harlan never come with anger alone. I found a small, flat container—silver, clean, unsuitable. Inside: a scrap of paper, softened by the rain, but legible. *Two paths – one answer. M.* No initials. Just the last letter. That was enough.

"Who do you work for, Harlan?"

He laughed, choked, and spat out red. "For me... as always."

"You've never worked for yourself. You always work against yourself."

"She... she said—"

"Yes. Women say a lot. Men hear the wrong things."

He reached for my hand, not to thank me, but to hold onto something. "Sam..."

"Harlan," I said calmly, "you'll live. Maybe. You'll limp. Sure. And you'll understand, if you're smart, that one less knee gives you more time to stay out of trouble."

"I... will... find you..."

"It'll take you halfway to carry that leg. Find someone to carry you. And tell the bartender not to put you on my table. I eat there sometimes."

I stood up. The rain had turned the yard into a bowl. Harlan lay in the middle. A man who had learned to want to be at the edge. I pocketed the can. Not out of greed. Out of duty. It was a piece of a map, drawn with clean fingers.

In the saloon, they stared as if I'd shot the rain. I nodded to the bartender. "He needs a car. And liquor. For the pain. Not the cheap kind. He should know."

The bartender nodded, as if he knew he'd be doing more than cleaning glasses today. The whores looked at me. One with a small, hard-to-bear pride, the other with a question no one could answer without lying. "He'll live," I said. "Unfortunately for him. Good for us."

I drank another, let it smolder warmly within me, took my hat, and left. The rain hadn't learned anything. It continued to fall, steadily, patiently, offended. Galle snorted when he saw me and stepped with his hoof into a puddle that behaved as if it were a lake. I stroked his neck. "We must move on. There are people who like to ask questions tomorrow. And I have answers I don't like."

We rode off. The path wasn't a path, just a series of decisions that looked like ditches. The stream that parted murmured somewhere out there, as if it had secrets to sell. The remaining trees carried the water like shoulders that had been used too often. I thought of the woman with the real eye and the glass eye at her neck. Of her *Tick...Tick*. The sentence that made her leave men sitting there. Winnetou, who knew how to be quiet without being absent.

The rain made the horizon short. Good. Long horizons are lies. Short ones force you to live now. I pulled my coat tighter, the coat laughed at me, I laughed back. We were both right.

Towards evening, I found an old awning on an abandoned barn that looked as if it were still standing. I tied Galle up, sat on an upturned crate—I have a knack for finding them—and reread the note from the can: *Two paths – one answer. M.NoL.*, no further sign. Just one last letter. It could stand for many things. Mill Path. Murder. Magnolia. Morning. Anything was fine with me, as long as it wasn't *Pity* was called.

I drank. The rain played drums on the tin. I heard the grass breathing, I heard my knee crack, I heard my stomach thinking. I thought of Harlan and his leg. I thought of the town of Bootsole, probably already acting like nothing had happened. I thought of the fat man's face, getting too red when it should have been working. I thought of how men say "later" when they mean "never."

Eventually, night came, and I thought it would be a solution. It wasn't. It was just dark rain. I leaned my head against the beam, closed my eyes, and still kept looking. I saw the mill path in the morning—wet, cold, and somewhere in the

gray, her. The real eye steady, the glass eye dead, the chain between her fingers as if it were a prayer you know by heart but don't believe.

"Three days of rain," I muttered. "And enough tomorrow to get the truth straight."

Galle snorted. I nodded. "Yeah, buddy. We're too old for this weather. But too young to let it go."

I slept badly, as always when the skies close. Dreams came, stumbled, fell. In one of them, I was sitting in a saloon, and the pianist suddenly had all the keys, and every note was a question, and every note demanded an answer, and I drank until the music gave up. When I woke up, it was still night, but light rain. I heard an owl ask who else was alive. "Me," I said. "Today."

Morning would come. It always comes. It has bad manners. I stood up, adjusted the saddle, pretended to have faith in the strength of my joints, and mounted. "Mill Path," I said to Galle. Galle pretended he knew where it was. The world pretended it didn't care. Both helped.

We rode into the fourth day of rain, which was maybe the third, maybe the fifth. It doesn't matter when you're wet. You don't count anymore. You're walking. And somewhere ahead of you, someone is waiting, one eye less, yet still seeing more than you with two open.

I lowered my hat. The rain laughed. I laughed back. And we agreed that one of us would lose today. I hoped it would be the rain. But I know myself: I take what comes and drink what burns.

"Tomorrow," I said into the wind, "do something better. I'm coming."

The wind acted as if it had taken note. The rain continued. So did I.

Chapter 4 - Winnetou loses at poker □ and his dignity

That evening, the saloon smelled like a lung that hadn't breathed clean air in twenty years. The smoke hung so low that you had to duck your head or cough for the rest of your life. The lamplight was yellowish, tired—like men who'd worked too long and seen too much to want to see anything new. Dust clung everywhere to the wood, skin, and thoughts.

The floor was a jigsaw puzzle of mud, dust, and dried blood. Some stains told stories no one wanted to hear anymore. It was dripping from the back. Not water, not oil—something else better left unnamed. The bartender, a man with the face of a leather jacket, was polishing glasses whose shine had faded years ago. His rag had seen more alcohol than soap.

I sat on a barstool that was as crooked as an old tooth and drank whiskey that ground down my neck like sandpaper. The pianist played a piano missing several keys, but he pretended they were still there. The patrons were a mix of cattlemen, day laborers, scoundrels, and men who thought they could forget that the world outside wasn't waiting for them.

The swinging doors opened. No bang, no creak—just a quiet, careful push. Winnetou. Without the usual look that changes the air in a room. Without the straight back that usually says: Here I am. Today he was simply a man looking for something. I knew he wouldn't find it here.

"Sam." He nodded curtly.

"If I'm not mistaken, you're in the wrong place," I said and drank.

"I am where the cards lie."

"Cards are like women here—they lie and don't want you to notice."

He walked on without saying anything.

In the corner, under a crooked lamp, sat the group: Mary-Lou, holding her cards like other women hold a love letter. Dress too tight, smile too wide, perfume too strong. Next to her was Silas Crane, the one-eyed man who used his glass eye like a spy and told everyone he'd lost the other eye in a duel—even though he'd only fallen drunk off a barn roof. Old Jim Cutter, a miner who cared for his mustache better than his teeth, sat as broad as a mountain in the corner. Two cattle boys, still green enough to believe happiness was something you could find in a night. And at the head of the room: Billy "Two-Fingers" Malone. Two fingers on his left hand, but ten tricks up his sleeve—and none of them fair.

Winnetou sat down without a word. Billy's gaze was that of a man who already knew how the evening would end.

"Buy in," Billy growled.

Winnetou placed silver on the table. Not much, but enough. The first few rounds went well—small wins, a steady hand. Billy watched. Mary-Lou dropped a card every now and then, only to pick it up again with a smile. The cattle-drivers laughed too loudly, drank too quickly. Silas sipped from his glass, the glass eye staring at Winnetou's hands, the real eye at his coins.

After half an hour, Billy started casting his line. "Nice knife handle. Native American craftsmanship, huh?"

"Apache work," said Winnetou.

"Looks expensive. Would look great in my collection."

Mary-Lou giggled. "Men talk like that when they're losing."

Winnetou remained silent. I stood up, walked over, and leaned against his chair. "If I'm not mistaken, these aren't honest cards."

"I know," he said quietly.

"Then get up."

"Not today."

That's when I knew: This wasn't going to end well. Today wasn't about money. Today was about pride.

Billy bet high, Winnetou held back. First the coins went. Then the knife. Then the feathered headdress. Finally, his horse's reins. Half the town knew what that meant.

"Last mission," said Billy, his grin threatening.

The cards fell. Billy had a straight to the king. Winnetou only had two pairs. Everything was gone.

"That's it, Indian," said Billy. "Now you have nothing."

Winnetou stood up, slowly, with dignity—or the remnant of it. Billy leaned back, enjoying it.

"Admit it: you're just a savage who thinks he can play with men."

I took a step forward. "And you're just a bastard who thinks he can shuffle cards without anyone noticing."

"What do you want to do, Hawkens?" he grinned.

"What do you want to do, Hawkens?" Billy's grin was so wide that I could see how little he brushed his teeth.

I took a step closer, smelling the whiskey and the lies creeping off his breath. "You lumpy, bone-packed sack of meat, you'll be watching yourself rot by the time I'm done with you."

He wanted to say something, but didn't get a chance. My hand drew the Colt as effortlessly as an old drunk draws a glass, and the shot went off before anyone could blink. The sound of the bullet shattering his kneecap was like a piece of fruit hitting the floor—only louder, only more definitive. He roared, fell off his chair, and the table tipped with a crash, cards and coins flying through the air.

Mary-Lou jumped back, her skirt twirling, and she laughed—not a happy laugh, but the laugh of a woman who knows that blood on the floor doubles her chances of getting a tip. Silas Crane raised his glass, drank, and the glass eye continued to stare at the spot where Billy had lain. The cattle boys paused, as if they had just learned how quickly respect dies.

I put the Colt away and stepped over to Billy, who was cursing in pain. "Shut your mouth and practice talking while lying down," I said, kicking his hat aside.

Winnetou stood beside him, the knife and feather headdress in his hand. I took both and handed them to him. "Come," I said. He followed me without a word. We walked through the saloon, and no one stood in our way. Not out of respect—out of self-preservation.

Outside, the rain was pounding like nails from the sky. The ground was a single muddy trap, pulling at his boots. Winnetou stopped and looked back toward the saloon. "I should have beaten him."

"You've defeated him. He won't be able to get up tomorrow."

"But..." He didn't say anything else.

"Pride is like whiskey. Too much of it blinds you."

We walked in silence to the road. Then a figure stepped out of the shadows—slender, with a long coat, raindrops glistening on the brim of his hat. It was one of the cattle drivers. But now he no longer seemed green—more like someone who had suddenly made a decision.

"Hawkins," he said, "the cards today... they were stacked."

"That's not news in this store, boy."

"I mean... not from Billy. From Mary-Lou."

I turned my head, the rain running down my forehead. "And why are you telling me that?"

"Because Billy isn't the only one who lost. And because she's leaving with more than you think."

Winnetou tensed. "What do you mean?"

The boy spat into the mud. "She saw the sheriff three days ago. Alive."

"The sheriff is dead," I said.

"Are you sure?" He pulled a card from his coat pocket—the Ace of Spades—and handed it to me. "I saw it in her apron today, before she slipped it to the old man."

I turned the card between my fingers. It was slightly damp, but the spade stared at me as if it knew more. "Why are you telling us this?"

"Because I don't want to fall out in the rain when it really starts to stink in here."

He pulled his hat down and disappeared into the darkness, as quietly as if he had never existed.

Winnetou and I stood in the rain for a while. "Mary-Lou..." he began.

"She has more knives than both of us combined. And she knows how to use them."

"She will be back at the table."

"Yes. But next time she won't play cards."

The rain grew heavier, the mud heavier. We continued walking until only the dull roar remained in our ears. But the next game was already playing in my head – and I knew: Billy's bad knee was just a warm-up.

Chapter 5 - A dead dog in front of the bar

The dog lay there like an excuse no one wanted to use anymore. At the edge of the boardwalk, right next to the saloon door. His fur was gray with dust, so fed up with flies they were just crouching like guests insulting the landlord.

Someone had placed a piece of burlap over his stomach, not out of pity, but rather so no one would stare into the hole where the warmth had gone. I stopped. The smell was honest: old, wet, gone.

"Put your foot somewhere else," the bartender said from inside, without seeing me. "He's had enough."

I stepped onto the plank on the left and felt it give way. This city has a way of making even wood soften just by looking at it. I bent down, pulled the canvas aside a bit. There was nothing left to save, as if it ever could. Its mouth was half-open, as if it had last tried to bite the night.

"Sam?" The voice had cigarettes on the edges. Mary-Lou, leaning against the door, dress too tight, gripping the frame too tightly, as if she were holding the building from toppling over. "You look like someone about to sue the heavens."

"He always loses," I said, straightening up. "Who left the dog here?"

"Who's leaving something here?" She took a drag on her cigarette, blowing the smoke toward the moon, which no one could see. "He was just here this afternoon." She shrugged. "If you ask me, he's got it no worse here than the living."

I pushed open the door. Inside, it smelled like a poem someone had drowned in the toilet. Wood, sweat, liquor, remnants of food that no longer knew what they once were. The piano stood insulted in the corner, the pianist searching for the keys with the care of a man who's lost more things than he can count. Two lumberjacks stood at the bar, arguing over which arm had struck the other first. A preacher talked of abstinence while his hand searched for a glass. Silas Crane sat at the end of the bar, polishing his glass eye with a handkerchief, as if it could forgive what the real eye didn't forget.

"Firewater," I said.

The bartender placed a bottle in front of me, without a label, without God. "Careful," he said. "It'll bring dead people with it."

"I've already got one foot in the door," I said, pouring myself a glass and burning inside. It tasted like someone had asked me to be polite with turpentine. It wasn't polite. Good liquor doesn't know what manners are. I drank another one because the first one only showed where it hurts.

Mary-Lou moved through the room like a knife in soft bread. Men gave way, better than in church. She laughed when things were expensive and remained silent when someone was poor—from experience. As she passed me, something slipped out of her apron, so small it only fell if you looked. I looked. A tin token, dull, with a notch, like a tooth that's been used too often. I picked it up.

"You lose things," I said.

"I lose men," she said. "I leave things behind."

"What is this?" I let the token dance in my palm.

"A key without a lock." She took it, so lightly that my fingers felt weaker, and put it back in her pocket. "Say, Sam... the dog. Have you been out there yet?"

"I've been everywhere the night stinks."

She lit a new cigarette from the old one. "Someone asked if they could stay there today."

"The dog?"

"No," she said. "The question."

The preacher had finally found a glass. He raised it as if blessing the liquid before consuming it. "Brothers..." he began.

"There are no brothers here," said the bartender, continuing to wipe glasses that weren't getting any cleaner.

"Brothers," insisted the preacher, "Satan has many names, and one of them is... firewater!" He took a sip, tiny, as if practicing. Then another, larger, as if he thought he could now. He reached the third. "See? Poison."

"Then give it back," I said.

He pressed the glass to his chest. "I bear the sin so you don't have to."

"Very selfless." I drank. "Next time, carry them in front of the door, there's more room there."

The lumberjacks stopped counting who was first and started again. The stranger with the red scarf sat alone at a table, as if waiting for a card that never came. He was too sober for this room. It's dangerous. Sober men have plans. Drunks only have the evening.

Silas Crane pushed his glass eye back into place as carefully as if it were an egg. "Hawkins," he said, "you and your friend. You had a... vision yesterday."

"I have an epiphany every day," I said. "Usually in the morning in the mirror."

"The other one," he said, tapping his temple. "The woman with the jewelry."

"It's not called jewelry."

"Me neither." He leaned forward, his breath smelling of metal and fake coins. "That dog out there. Maybe he saw something."

"He can't see anything anymore."

"Some people don't see until they're dead."

"Then he's a good fit for us." I took the bottle and went to the door. "I'll get some fresh air."

"It's been out for months," said the bartender, but I was already outside.

The dog was still lying there, as if he knew he had a job to do. The flies buzzed, not diligently, just contentedly. I squatted down and lifted the burlap all the way up. Someone had tried to position the paws in a way that looked nice. Nice doesn't work here, not even with dead people. Between the front paw and the neck lay something, flat, brown, as if it had just shed skin. I pulled it out. A piece of paper, waxed so it wouldn't turn to mush. No seal, just a scratched M. I smelled it. Flowers, diluted with time.

"If you bring me letters now," I said to the dog, "you'll be better off in business than half the people in there."

I put the note in my pocket and dropped the canvas again, completely. Someone behind me cleared their throat. The stranger with the red scarf stood in the shadows, as inconspicuous as a knife on a plate.

"Nice evening," he said.

"Depends on what for."

"For what you find."

"Do you often find dogs?"

"I find what you lose."

"Then look inside. They're all there."

He stepped closer. "I'm looking for letters."

"Today they will lead you to the grave."

"Get out of him tomorrow." He smiled toothlessly. "Take good care of what's yours, Hawkens. Sometimes they put something in front of you to make you take it."

"I only take what I want to wear."

"You're wearing too much today." He tipped his hat and disappeared back into the room he came from, giving way to the dirt as if he were an invited guest.

I stared for another second at the spot where he'd been standing. Then back to the dog. I don't know why I lifted the canvas again. Maybe because the evening wasn't planning to be kind to me. Maybe because I'm used to dead people telling me more if I'm patient. There was something else: a narrow imprint in the fur, just below the neck, round, with jagged edges—like the tin tag Mary-Lou had called "the key without a lock." I mentally handed the purse to a ghost and stood up.

Inside, the preacher had lost the public eye and was now speaking confidentially to the glass. The lumberjacks had settled their differences by both falling asleep with their faces on the counter. Silas was still sitting there, his fingers on the table like spiders who'd lost their courage. Mary-Lou stood at the end of the counter, counting coins that belonged to someone else.

"He was a good dog," she said without looking up.

"He was a dog," I said. "That's enough."

"Sometimes I envy them."

"Who? The dogs or the dead?"

"Both today."

I pulled the note out of my pocket, holding it so only I could see it. The wax paper shone like a wet lie. I slashed it with my fingernail and opened it. Two words. A number. "Change – Second Sunrise." And underneath: "Mill Path. M."

"You read aloud," said Mary-Lou. "I love men who think their minds are silent."

I closed the note. "And I love women who invent the word 'keyless' when they mean 'guilty.'"

Her eyes were calm. Calm eyes in women are worse than knives in men. "We all carry things," she said. "No one sees the heaviest ones."

"I like to carry lighter things," I said, raising the bottle. "That's why I have this."

"Firewater is a bad mule driver," she muttered.

"He'll still get you over the pass."

"Sometimes he'll tip you off his back and leave you lying there."

"Then I'll get up again." I drank. It hurt, but honestly. The best pain doesn't tell you they love you.

The stranger with the red scarf was now standing next to Silas. They spoke quietly, the glass eye peering in my direction, the real eye pretending to be asleep. I turned away. If you stare into one eye for too long, you forget you have two.

"Sam," said the bartender. "Your dog."

"It doesn't belong to me."

"Just tonight. Tomorrow it belongs to the man with the wheelbarrow."

"Give him a blanket," I said.

"We don't have any blankets."

"Then give him a tablecloth."

"We don't have any tablecloths."

"Then give him some respect."

He shrugged, which here means "I get it," and took an old, torn poster from the wall—"Fast train west—safe connection"—and carried it outside. In this city, lies do have a purpose after all.

The lumberjacks snored in duet. The preacher had defeated the devil by surrendering. Mary-Lou finished counting the coins, tucked three of them into her bodice—memory or precaution, I never know—and walked past me again. The perfume smelled of flowers someone had forgotten to water. "You'll be going back to Mill Path soon," she said. No question mark, no curiosity. A weather report.

"I go where I am needed."

"You go where you think you are needed."

"Rarely enough," I said.

"The dog wasn't lying there by chance," she said quietly. "He was brought in."

"From whom?"

"From a man who wants you to believe it wasn't a man."

"This is ruining my evening."

"You already ruined it."

I could have laughed if my mouth hadn't been needed for more important things today. I drank instead. The stranger with the red scarf approached the bar and ordered milk. The bartender gave him water. No one noticed the difference, except me and the glass.

"What's your name?" I asked him.

"Today?" he said.

"That's enough."

"Today my name is Hal."

"And tomorrow?"

"I'll be gone tomorrow."

"Then drink faster."

He put down the glass, adjusted the knot in his neckerchief, and looked me straight in the forehead, as if afraid of falling into my eyes. "Tell the man with the horse that his reins had better stay in his hand. Men with free hands lose things."

"I'll tell him."

"And tell the woman that her second eye can't fill all the holes."

"She knows."

"Then tell yourself."

He left. The bartender took the glass, examined the rest, and poured it back into the large bottle. Everything is reused here, even water.

I stepped to the window. Through the dirty pane, I saw how the dog looked less terrible beneath the posters. Maybe it was the distance. Maybe it was the lie. I tucked the note deeper into my pocket, as if it had weight. I thought of the two words on it: Change. Second sunrise. I thought of the stream that forks and the sand that holds things entrusted to it. I thought of the glass eye on the woman's neck and her real eye, which saw things we don't like to see.

"Another one?" asked the bartender.

"Two," I said.

He filled the glass to the brim, as if he could drown me. I drank one, the second stood there waiting, like a dog who doesn't understand why you're not taking him with you today. Mary-Lou placed the tin token she'd dropped earlier on the counter for me. "Just borrowing," she said.

"Is she unlocking something?"

"Yes. Men."

"Then keep it."

"I'll lend it to you."

I took it in my hand. It was warm from her skin. The notch matched the imprint in her fur that I had seen. Things fit if you give them time. Outside, the wind picked up again, the door breathed in and out. I heard the sound of hooves that didn't want to be hooves—nervous, wet. I thought of Winnetou's horse, the rein that didn't get lost today because I was faster than Billy's grin. I thought of how close losers and winners often lie—sometimes separated only by a door, sometimes just by smell.

"Sam," said Mary-Lou, "drink less."

"Why?"

"So you can see more tomorrow."

"I see enough."

"You see too much."

"This is my fault, not my bottle's."

"Both are yours." She tapped her finger against the glass. "Firewater is a bad advisor."

"I'm not asking him for advice. I'm asking him for peace."

"All he can do is make noise."

"Then we'll talk louder." I downed the second one. It burned better than the first because my mouth now knew what to expect. That's the trick with bad things: repetition.

The stranger with the red scarf was gone. Silas Crane got up, didn't pay, and no one reminded him. The preacher fell asleep sitting up with his glass in his hand—a miniature saint. The lumberjacks lay across two stools, snoring like saws giving up. The bartender pushed the last glasses together and waited for the night to end so he could start it again.

I took my hat, put the tin badge in my vest pocket, and went out again. The dog lay there, and for the first time, I smelled less. Maybe the wind had done the right thing. Maybe I'd drunk enough. I lifted the blanket one last time, laid the canvas down neatly, and pulled the edge over the muzzle. "Good dog," I said, not sure if he ever was. "Thanks for the mail."

The street was empty. The sign above the saloon squeaked once, as if it were a word. The moon watched without interfering. I walked along the boardwalk, each step a small yes to the night. The note in my pocket crinkled, the tin stamped. Tomorrow I would see the mill path again, hear the creek pretending to know nothing. Tomorrow someone would speak who had remained silent today. And tomorrow we would all find out if "change" meant something would be better—or just different.

Firewater #1 was done. He had done what he always does: He lied and told the truth at the same time. He gave me courage and made my hands tremble. He made everything blur—except for the important things. The dog. The brand. The M. Sometimes that's enough.

I didn't turn around. The saloon door closed behind me, and inside, morning was already beginning, which still wanted to be night. I tucked my hands deep into my pockets so I wouldn't lose anything that had been left for me that day, and headed toward the sound of the creek. He never slept. Neither did I, not really. But sometimes we deceive ourselves so we don't get up too early out of frustration.

Tomorrow. Second sunrise. Change. Yes. If I'm not mistaken, this will be the day things start to bear their proper names. And if not, then I'll just drink Firewater #2. But that's a different sin.

Chapter 6 - Letters to No One

Mary-Lou blew smoke toward the ceiling and read aloud, as if to hurt the letters. "'You're just more honest. And that doesn't make you good—just harder to kill.'" She grinned. "That's the first sentence of yours I'm saving, Sam."

"Save men who won't betray you."

"They're rare. And boring."

I took the stack from her. "Hands off my sins. They have teeth."

"Your sins have a cold."

The door was breathing. Outside, someone was scratching in the gravel. No coincidence. Someone who believes that sounds aren't witnesses. I raised my hand. Mary-Lou fell silent, sitting up straighter, like a cat that suddenly doesn't feel like playing anymore.

I put two letters in—one to myself and one to LM—and shoved the rest deeper into the crack in the beam. The metal stamp above it, as if it were a seal of stupidity.

"Stay here," I whispered.

"And if I don't want to?"

"Then stay anyway."

I reached for the bottle, took a long swig to give the evening an excuse, and stepped outside. The rain had turned into a fine dust, the night smelled of wet wood, which no one likes. To my left, by the fence, stood Hal, the guy with the red scarf, smiling the smile of a man who's decided to act smarter than he is today. To my right, a footstep in the shadow: Silas Crane, One-Eyed, the glass eye in his skull, the real one under his hat.

"Evening, gentlemen," I said. "Who wrote the invitation?"

Silas tapped the glass eye. "This one. It wanted some fresh air."

"Then take it out and put it in the stream."

Hal nodded toward the cabin. "Letters."

"They're shy."

"Shy letters have the dirtiest secrets."

"Right," I said, "that's why they read each other. They don't need you."

I heard Mary-Lou's footsteps behind me. "Sam?"

"Stay inside, doll," I said without turning around. "It's about to get rude outside."

Silas stepped closer. "We'll only take what you don't need."

"I need anything that will keep me out of trouble. That means nothing's left for you."

Hal flexed his fingers as if warming them to an idea. "No one has to die today."

"Then start with yourself," I said, taking the half-step that makes hand-to-hand combat within earshot. Silas's hand went to his jacket. Wrong. I rammed the bottle against his temple, popping the cork and spilling the rest of the whiskey over his ear. The man suddenly smelled of courage that no longer stood a chance.

Hal lunged forward, fast—his boot slipped on the damp gravel, just as men slip who think they're balancing history. I grabbed him by the front edge of his coat, pulled, and simultaneously kned him in the stomach. The air went out, his will was gone. He doubled over, and I brought his shoulder against the post. Wood creaked. His teeth chattered, like bells no one wants to hear.

Silas got back up, his glass eye squinting in offense. He pulled out a knife. "Not nice," I said, and slashed his hand with the remains of the bottle. Blade into the mud, my boots on top. Crunch. Knife story.

"You want letters?" I grabbed Silas by the lapel, pulled him close until I could count his breaths. "I'll write you one: To the man who realized too late that he couldn't read."

He tore himself away, stumbled two steps, and ran. Hal was still standing, doubled over, raising his hands as if prayer were suddenly fashionable.

"Hawkins... we just—"

"I know. You just wanted to see if I was still alive." I twisted his coat collar and gave him a gentle pat on the cheek, which felt like a misstep. "Go home, Hal. Drink milk. Write to your mother. And when you wake up tomorrow and your balls are still there—thank the stream."

He ran after the one-eyed man. Two shadows shrank until the night consumed them.

"Nice welcome." Mary-Lou stood in the doorway, her hip leaning against the wood. "You could have talked."

"I did. With my hands. I'm not being more polite today."

I gathered the broken bottles. One glass remained intact, half-full—goodness me. I placed it on the table. Mary-Lou stepped closer, brushed the mud from my cheek with her finger, and looked at it as if it were gold. "You'll be buried poor, Sam."

"Only if someone pays."

"I'll pay you for a lie," she said, giving me a fleeting, dry, businesslike kiss. "I wasn't the one who delivered the letter today."

"I know," I said. "The lie tastes like water."

She laughed softly. "Take care of yourself."

"I don't even take care of my shoes."

She left. No goodbye. Women who could stay leave without saying a word. Women who should leave talk too much. I stayed, the stove coughed, and the cabin now smelled of whiskey and freshly ignited anger.

I sat down and continued writing, because you should always write after a fight, before your head starts claiming to be smart again.

To the dead dog: You were the best messenger of the evening. No one paid you, no one praised you, but you delivered. If there's a heaven, I hope the angels smell you so they know where they've landed.

To the rain: You're a cowardly thug. You always come in groups and never stop when someone's already down. Still, thank you for rinsing the blood from the crack where Silas had stuck his knife. That was neat of you. Disgusting, but neat.

To God: I know you're not reading this. You have better things to do: sorting through storms, confusing graces, misunderstanding prayers. If you drop something—a little dignity, perhaps—we down here could use it. And if not, at least send us better whiskey.

I heard Galle snorting outside. The horse had finer ears than I did and the bones of a saint. I briefly took the reins and stroked his neck. "One more night," I said. "Tomorrow we'll play postman."

He laid his ears back, which is a horse's yes.

Back in the hut, I picked up the last large piece of paper—the heavy paper that didn't belong there. I wrote the letter that hurt me the most: to LM, this time without the poison glass, but with a decent amount of anger.

You want change. You want men to show up in the right place and disappear in the wrong one. I'll do it tomorrow, but not for your sake. I'll do it because I'm sick of the stupid people dying around here and the smart people changing props. I'll bring what I bring. If you don't like it, you have two options: take it or run. And one more thing: stop sorting men by their scent. The rain makes us all the same—pale and wet and ridiculous. Your shoes are too clean. Step wrong once. Maybe then you'll see what the path really looks like.

I didn't sign. I rarely sign. Signatures are promises, and I wasted too many today.

The stove gave a long, tired crackle. I poured the bottom of the glass into the ash bucket, rolled up the note, dipped the edge in whiskey, lit it, and held the spark until the writing turned black. Not the whole letter—just the last paragraph. A man has a right to torn words. I blew, and smoke that tasted like a bad decision drifted toward the ceiling.

I stepped out the door. The east was still nothing—a dark promise. But the stream had grown louder, as it always does just before the gray. I sat down on the step, which smelled of old wood and new excuses, and let my head fall against the post.

The delivery boy came back. He wasn't as wet anymore, just colder. "I've delivered it," he said.

"To whom?"

"To no one."

"Good man." I gave him the rest of the bottle. "Just smell it."

He smelled it. "It probably tastes like an argument."

"Tastes like peace making mistakes."

"I'll come back tomorrow," he said. "For the second sunrise."

"Don't do it. Children should only see one sunrise a day. More than that is a waste."

He shrugged and disappeared west, where mistakes come from.

I took the letters out of the beam crack, counting them like bad teeth that one keeps in one's mouth anyway. I pocketed two. I left four there. I picked up one—the worst one. The one addressed to me.

I read it aloud so the night would know I wasn't bluffing. Then I tore it into three strips, dipped each one, one at a time, in what remained of the whiskey, and pressed them against the oven door with my thumb until they stuck and became rims. A man is allowed to change when he frightens himself.

Bile pounded. The horizon was now a narrow, grumpy line. I tightened my coat, grabbed my hat, took the metal token from the beam as a weight, and stuck it on the note card. Everything rattled against my chest like three small, rude hearts.

I turned around again. The hut looked as if it was tired of our conversations. I nodded at it. "Thanks, old lady. Keep quiet when they snoop."

I went down to the stream. Cold, fast, without a word. I dipped my fingers in until they no longer felt anything, and wiped my face so the morning wouldn't notice how I smelled. Behind me, the cabin made sounds of wood that had decided not to die today.

With the first gray flag in the sky, Mary-Lou stepped through the door once more, barefoot, the hem in her hand. "Sam!"

"Hm?"

"If you meet her, tell her not to think you're a letter."

"Why?"

"Letters are always torn open."

I nodded. "I'm more of a stone. They can't open it."

"They throw it."

"Then I throw back."

She grinned crookedly. "Watch your knees."

"I'm hitting better."

"I know."

She gave me a look that was worth more than all the money in this dump and closed the door as if she was going to keep her mouth shut until it was over.

I mounted, bile snorting, and we set off, the stream to our right, the path ahead, the second sunrise somewhere in this dirty, indifferent sky. Letters in my jacket, dirt in my mouth, and just enough anger in my stomach to make the day tough.

If anyone ever reads this who wasn't invited: Good. Then you've made your hands dirty. And maybe you'll realize that some mail never arrives because it belongs where it was written—in a night that was too long, and in a man who stops being nice as soon as it gets light.

I rode off. The stream laughed at us. And somewhere ahead, the morning gathered its knives.

Chapter 7 - The Embers Beneath the Cold Ashes

The morning looked like a hangover that had decided to stay late. No wind, just a sky the color of old milk. I rode slowly back to town. Bile ran gnarled, the way a horse runs that's lost its sense of humor but still has the bones to keep it going. From a distance, the town was a pile of smashed-together crates; up close, it was just more honest about it. I smelled the saloon before I saw it: cheap liquor, old grease, men who strip more often than they wash, and somewhere beneath it all, the scent of wood giving up.

At the corner, Winnetou was leaning against the post. He stood so still that even the dust didn't dare rise. I dismounted. He didn't look up. "Sam," he said, and it sounded like a sentence being suspended. "Winnetou," I said, tying on

Galle. His eyes had the expression of a man who rations his patience like tobacco. "You know what they say?" "They say a lot when the day is long." "They say you didn't deliver the letter." I shrugged. "Some letters are nicer when they're burning." He stepped closer. I smelled smoke on him, not campfire smoke, but the heavy, oily kind. "I'm not here to warn you," he said. "I'm just saying: If you're into something, stand in it. If not, get out of here." "And you?" "I'll burn if necessary." "I'll drink until necessary," I said. His mouth twitched, not quite a smile. "Today, men will decide whether they are ashes or embers." He turned and left, and the street acted as if it hadn't understood anything.

The saloon was dark, like the belly of an old animal that had already eaten too much. The bartender was rubbing with a rag that needed cleaning. Two whores at the end of the bar—one with teeth that were too big, the other with a laugh like a rusty hinge. The pianist was searching for notes that wouldn't be found. "Sam," said the bartender, "you look like someone who drinks anger." "Then pour him one right now." He put a glass in front of me, one that knew more stories than I did. I tipped it, let the whiskey do its work, and the evening suddenly felt less distant.

In the corner sat an old gambler, his face like a stack of offended cards. He stared at me as if he'd been waiting a long time for that look. "Hawkins," he growled, "you owe me." "I owe a lot of people. Draw a number." "Night by the river. Two dollars and a brass can." "I won the can fairly. You just forgot how to lose." He stood up, slowly, but in a way that made way for chairs. The whores stopped giggling because they all realize: When things get serious, laughter has to take off its shoes. "You give them back." "Try it."

Then I smelled it. Not in the room, behind it. The smell of burning oil, of wood that doesn't burn of its own accord. The bartender raised his nose like a dog that's realized the stable doesn't just stink, it's on fire. "Damn," he said. I went to the back door, the gambler behind me, the glass still in his hand. In the yard lay a pile of ash that should have been cold. It wasn't. An ember that had remembered that life is possible. Above it, a charred beam that seemed to act as if none of it concerned him. A hooded guy was emptying a bottle. The smell of kerosene cut through my nose. "Hey," I said. He turned around, the face of a man caught before he could form a good line. "Too late, Hawkins." "Too soon, friend." He reached into his jacket. I reached into mine. Not on my heart, on my knees. Men fall better when they remember their knees. I shot. The scream was longer than the shot. The bottle rolled, the yard absorbed it, the smoke coughed in offense. I kicked the bottle into the dung, grabbed the water

bucket, which was too far away because stupidity always gets in the way, and tipped it into the embers. It hissed like an offended cat learning to swim.

"You've made enemies," said the old gambler. "I had enemies before you knew how to shuffle cards," I said. I grabbed the hooded man by the collar. His breath smelled of fear, which was brave yesterday. "For whom?" He spat, hitting my boot leg, which is the polite form of nothingness. I slammed him against the wall, listened as the beam gave way pitifully. "For whom?" He trembled. "For everyone," he gasped, and that was the truth of men without a mandate: They always work for "everyone" if "one" won't pay. "Good," I said, "then pay now." I pulled him up and threw him back into the saloon. No art, a body always wants to go where the warmth is.

Inside, faces did what faces do when they realize the afternoon is over. The whores stepped aside, the bartender wordlessly handed me a second bottle, as if it could extinguish what had started the fire. The gambler braced himself against the wall as if he needed it. "The can," he said. "Later," I said. "When the movie's over."

I dragged the guy to the table, sat him down, and tied his hands with the lamp wick, which isn't ideal, but it's better than trust. "Name." "Kurt." "Your mother's first name doesn't help me. The name of the guy who gave you money." "I have..." "One more lie and I'll teach you to spell by the beam out there." He blinked. Then the name came up. Not the one I expected. Not Billy. Not the fat one. A traveling salesman, smooth as a new coin, who'd spent the past few weeks selling pepper, string, and rumors. "He said one spark and they're all running. One runs the wrong way." "He's right," I said. "I'm rarely the wrong one."

Winnetou suddenly stood in the doorway, so silently that even the smoke forgot to move aside. His eyes darted first to the courtyard, then to the man, then to me. "Embers beneath cold ashes," he said. "I know," I said. "They've learned how to forget, and now they're trying to remember." He nodded. "I'll take him." "What for?" "So he'll still be able to talk tomorrow." "Everyone here talks today when there's a fire." "They'll talk differently tomorrow." I gave Kurt to two men who hadn't been there until they arrived. They took him quietly, as if teaching a child how to get really tired.

The whores breathed again. The bartender refilled my glass because some problems are easier with liquid. The old gambler patted his jacket. "The can," he reminded me. I sighed, pulled it out: flat, shiny, clean, incongruous—the kind of metal that always attracts the wrong fingers in these parts. "It's empty,"

I said. "I know," he said. "But empty is also possession." "You have possession of things that have nothing?" "Otherwise I wouldn't have spoken to you." I threw it to him. He caught it, his hands shaking as if he'd lost even though he'd won.

"Sam," said one of the whores—the one with the hinged laugh—"you burn the city down or you take it back out. In between, you're boring." "I'm never boring," I said, and drank. The pianist found a note that dared to pretend music was possible. Then he stumbled. The whore laughed rustily. The bartender said, "No spark flies alone. The yard wasn't the beginning." "I know," I said. "Embers are everywhere. You just have to settle down and sleep on it." "Sleep is scarce." "Dignity is scarcer."

I stood up and went back out. Behind the saloon, where the ash was now pretending to be good, I saw tracks in the damp dirt. Not just Kurt's. Two pairs of boots that had been there before, the embers pushed around with sticks, like children who don't know that fire can also listen. One of the boots had a dent in the heel, a notch that looked like a teeth mark. I knew the notch. Harlan had one like that before I dislocated his knee. The other print was too fine, too narrow to fit in this yard. A woman's foot? No. A city man. Glove wearer. And I smelled something that didn't belong: perfume that promised flowers and delivered lies. LM was walking in my head, laying a trail that wasn't for me—or maybe it was.

"Sam," said the bartender behind me, "you're thinking too loudly." "I always think too loudly. Otherwise I can't hear myself." "You shouldn't talk to the wrong people today." "I never talk to the right people." He sighed. "Then be careful when you open your mouth. Someone might touch it." "I'll bite."

I walked down the alley where trash piled up like bad decisions. A cat looked at me contemptuously, the way only cats and widows can look. I stepped onto the dock behind the mill. Water ran in two arms, as if it didn't have to choose. I washed my hands until they did something close to cold. Then I heard it—a voice pretending it didn't have one. "Hawkins." I didn't turn around. "Hal." "I just wanted to say..." "Don't say anything the creek hasn't already heard." He stepped up beside me. "The man with the red scarf always feels he owes tomorrow. I owe you something else: advice." "Advice is like straw in soup. It fills and tastes of nothing." "Still: They won't burn down the saloon tonight." "Reassuring." "They'll take the roof from the grocer. And the barn from the coffin maker. Two ends, one middle. Then everyone will run to where they think they're needed." "And me?" "You'll run to where they want you." "I never

run. I fall." "Then fall in the right direction." He disappeared before I could thank him. Or before I reorganized his teeth.

Back on the road, the air had grown thicker. Not from smoke. From words preparing to be spoken. Winnetou came again, this time not alone. Two warriors in the shadows, bringing shadows with them. "The man with the oil has spoken," he said crisply. "He'll speak better tomorrow," I said. "Today his teeth were still in the way." "Two fires last night," he said. "I know," I said. "The grocer, the barn." He nodded. "You might not make it." "I rarely get anything done. I just stop being clever in time." "Sometimes that's enough." "Sometimes it's not enough."

The evening fell without introductions. Lamps flickered as if they'd already heard counterarguments. The street filled with men feigning boredom and women who knew that boredom was a luxury. The preacher stood on a crate and shouted into the liquor until it shut him up. Mary-Lou glided past me, her perfume fainter than yesterday. "I'm glad you're still alive, Sam," she said. "I'm glad you notice," I said. "I notice everything that can die." "Then notice me later. I'm busy." "All men say that before they start fooling around." "Then I'm in good company."

I stood under the grocer's porch. The roof looked like an old saying repeated too often. Next to it was the coffin maker's barn, wood that, by virtue of his profession, was already turning to dust. I waited. The moon was a coin that someone had polished with their tongue for too long. On the street, a drunkard stumbled, hugging a post, whispering to it secrets that only posts like. Everything was ready for a lesson.

The first spark came from the south. A hiss, a short gasp, then a tiny flame that pretended to be accidental. I stepped out of the shadows, saw the shadow with the staff. Not a hooded man. A gloved man. The fine boot. "Good evening," I said, knocking the match out of his hand. "We're closed." He whirled around, eyes that had never learned to sweat. "You—" "I," I said, knocking the wind out of him. Gravel crunched behind me. The second man for the barn at the coffin maker's. I let the first slump, jumped back the few boards, and the second came toward me, knife first, as if space were a gift. I turned sideways, let him pass, gave him my shoulder to the ribs, and his knife sought friends in the doorway. Found them. I took his head, told him where the wood ends, and he understood.

"Fire!" someone shouted—too early, too loudly. The preacher ran to the wrong side, the bartender to the right. Winnetou was nowhere to be seen, which

means he was everywhere. Mary-Lou suddenly stood there, a jug of water in her hand, as if she'd practiced. "Men are matchboxes," she said. "If you shake them, you'll get the sparks." "Not today," I said, and ripped the glove from the glove-wearing man's wrist. Beneath it was a scar in the shape of a circle, like a seal that had forgotten what it stood for. "Who?" He spat, hitting my cheek. I wiped it away, looked him in the eyes until his courage fled. "Say it," I said, "or your knee will." He took a breath. "The woman with two eyes," he said quietly. "She said everyone should see the smoke tonight and you should see the knife." I felt one vein in my head laughing and another crying. "Water!" I yelled. We poured whatever we could, and the shopkeeper cursed as if we'd ruined his prices.

The coffin maker's barn remained. The coffin maker himself stood there as if someone had placed him in the wrong scene. He held a hammer that only seemed to know how to scare nails. "Aside," I said, and pushed open the door. Inside lay hay that had intended to sleep. I kicked dead the spark that intended otherwise. Behind me, someone called my name in a tone I only like when a woman uses it. I turned, and the old gambler was standing there—can in hand, eyes wide. "Hawkins," he stammered. "Behind you." I turned again and saw the glove wearer try one last trick. He didn't throw a knife. He threw dust. Old, dry dust that burns when it finds you. I ducked, kicked him like he was a door being polite, and he fell backward into the trough. The stream laughed once, briefly.

The street was now awake. Men were running, women were screaming, children were smarter than both. I sat down on the barn step and breathed in what was left. Mary-Lou stood beside me, her can empty. "Those two eyes," she said. "She has two. You have one." "One's enough," I said. "If you know where to look with them." "Do you?" "Rarely. But when you do, I can't afford to look away."

Winnetou came quietly. "The gloves?" "Talk to them tomorrow," I said. "Today they're just talking nonsense." He nodded. "The circle on the skin – a sign." "Orders are being picked up," I murmured. "They deliver smoke, we deliver wind." "And you?" "I deliver trouble." "As always." "As always."

By midnight, the city had stopped acting like one. The lamps were tired, the voices harsh, the preacher leaned asleep against his god, whom he hadn't convinced today. I went back to the saloon. The bartender put a glass in front of me without asking. "To the embers," he said. "To the ashes," I said. "She's a better liar." "The glass isn't clean." "Me neither." I drank, and the whiskey did what it does: It gave the world edges.

"Sam," said the old player, who hadn't let himself be sent away, "thank you." "I didn't do anything for you." "Yes, I did. You reminded me that you can keep things that are empty." I looked at him. He stroked the can like a hissing cat. "Emptiness is also possession," he said, and for the first time in days, I liked a sentence I hadn't said.

I went to the back, where the embers had tried to be reborn earlier. I pushed the ashes with the toe of my boot, searching for something that wasn't burned. A staple. A piece of wire. And underneath it—a tiny, black splinter that looked like a tooth from the world. I picked it up. Coal. But scratched into the black heart was a letter. M. Someone had marked the ashes like an animal. I put it away, where things go that later mean more.

Mary-Lou came quietly. "You won't sleep." "Sleep is for those who don't have to pay tomorrow." "And you?" "I've been paying since I could walk." She nodded. "The woman will come." "I know." "She'll look at you like you're her bill." "I'm the line she skips over." "Then write yourself bigger." "I'll write myself dirtier." "Even dirtier?" "Believe me, doll, it's possible."

We walked silently side by side for a while, until the street again felt as if it were made of wood instead of back. "Sam," she said, "if you kill someone today, do it quietly." "I rarely kill." "Then make it look that way." "Why?" "Because the city is tired. And tired cities ignite faster." "I only light cigarettes." "Then don't start being different today."

Around two o'clock the sentences fell from the sky like moths. One of them landed on my shoulder: The man who wore the gloves hadn't lied. The one with two eyes wanted smoke. Not to burn the city - to blur faces. When everyone's staring into the courtyard, no one can see who's walking through the back. I stood up without telling the chair why and walked down the narrow alley between the coffin maker and the grocer. At the back there was a door built only for people who think doors are for others. It was open a crack. I looked in. A figure - small, quick, neat. No standing around, just footsteps that knew when an evening had seen enough. I followed. Not quick. Quick betrays you. Quiet. Quiet betrays everyone.

The figure turned toward the mill path, where the stream explains to the moon how to sing a song without a voice. She stopped by the tree with the split root and placed something in the scar, as tenderly as if it were a child who would benefit nothing from it. I waited until the shadow was a shadow again. Then I went over to it. There was an envelope in the root. Clean, heavy. No seal. Just the smell, which I can no longer get rid of—flowers with a guilty conscience. I

opened it because I rarely look away when words are askew. Inside: three sentences. "Tomorrow, no second sunrise. You come alone. Bring what you can no longer get rid of." No name. Just the M that the embers had carried earlier.

I put the letter in my pocket. The stream acted like it was none of his business. I told him to keep quiet. He was better at it than I was anyway. Back in the city, the moon had put on his hat and acted like he hadn't done enough for us. The bartender had almost closed the door, the whores had almost left, the preacher had almost repented. Winnetou looked at me from a window, the way one looks at a decision one doesn't want to reverse.

I sat down in front of the hut that was once a hut and pulled the splinter out of my pocket. I held it to the light until it was no longer black, but simply honest. "The embers beneath the cold ashes," I said to no one. "You don't have to blow on them to see them. You just have to keep your eyes open until it hurts."

In the distance, a dog barked—lively, discontented. Bile treaded impatiently, as if he knew Morgen was in a bad mood. I picked up the bottle, which was still a third full, and placed it on the step. "For whoever's late tonight," I murmured. Mary-Lou put a hand on my shoulder. "You're dropping it off?" "I'm borrowing," I said. "I'll get it back tomorrow as a problem."

The night didn't pass. It only held its breath. I placed my hand on my jacket, where the letters lay that didn't want to be written, and on the tin token, which now seemed like a slow heartbeat to me. A sentence slumbered in my head that would rise tomorrow: If you're already ash, be hot enough for your fingers to remember it.

Someone stepped out of the shadows, Hal, the boy with the red bandana, without the bandana. "Hawkens," he said. "Thank you." "For what?" "For not teaching me how to die today." "I hate to teach that. The students don't stay long." He nodded. "I'm heading north." "Good direction. You don't care about anyone there." "I want to be indifferent to someone who does matter." "Then you're more of an adult than most of the people here." He walked, his back looking like a promise trying not to be one.

I stayed seated until the moon decided that it only gets paid as long as it works. Then I stood up, because getting up is easier when no one is looking. I walked across the courtyard once more, brushing my boot through the ash until there was only earth beneath. I felt the embers inside me that refused to go out, even though the evening pleaded for it. "Tomorrow," I said to the street. "I'll come alone. And I'll bring what I can't get rid of." The wind, which wasn't one,

nodded, or I imagined it. No matter. Some imaginations are friendlier than people.

I lay down on the box in front of the shed, pulled my hat down, held one hand on the Colt and the other on the envelope. I wasn't asleep, but sleep stood beside me and pretended to be. The city acted as if it were made of wood. And beneath the wood was ash. And beneath the ash was embers. I breathed. It smelled of tomorrow. And that was the worst thing it smelled of.

Chapter 8 - How to Bury a Friend in the Desert

Morning found him first. The stream had stopped talking, and the town acted as if night had never been. I found Hal by the mill, where good advice often dies. He lay half in the shade, as if waiting for someone to explain the sun to him. The wound didn't look large. Large wounds are fairy tales for people with time. Small wounds are more honest. I knelt down and placed my hand on his chest. There was still warmth there, but not for me. I said his name, not loudly, not kindly, just so the air knew where it belonged.

"All right, boy," I muttered, even though nothing was. "I'll get you out. No red ribbons, no strange feet above your head. Just dirt, stones, and me, even dumber than yesterday."

The coffin maker wanted to sell me a box he called a "blessing." I called it "planks with a guilty conscience." We agreed on two narrow planks that promised nothing. Mary-Lou brought the red scarf, neatly folded as if the night hadn't touched it. She pressed it into my hand. "The city eats memories, Sam. The desert chews longer." "The desert spits out too," I said. "Then close your mouth."

I placed Hal on the small wagon, as carefully as I rarely am. His face looked like he'd just learned how to grow up and decided he didn't like it. I tied the bile in front of him, and the horse pulled as if he knew we weren't chasing ourselves today.

We drove out, the main road, as always, a long sentence without a full stop. The preacher pretended to bless us, but forgot the words and found the bottle. The bartender stood in his doorway, his cap in his hand as if it were suddenly heavy. Winnetou wasn't watching us. He was looking where the desert begins. You don't have to look to be there.

The city stayed behind, it likes that. In front of us, the bright, flat land, only pretending to be empty. The sun was still working, but without overtime. I drank sparingly, which was new. Hal didn't like people who made a speech with every sip. "You wanted to go north," I told him, "where no one matters. I'm sorry. I'll take you west. There, none of us matters, just more honest."

The wheel track drew a brown line across a land that forgets lines. Vultures drew circles in the sky, like accountants who don't know how to stop. I told Hal stories he couldn't hear. Of men who had fake cards but real knives. Of women who saw more than we with two eyes. Of a whiskey so bad I drank it out of respect. "I would have gotten you a better one," I said. "Next time." I hate sentences that you realize are too late while you're saying them.

I stopped at a low, rocky ridge. No trees, but two bushes pretended to be. The ground was hard, but not stubborn. I dismounted, took a sip, another, and the third stayed in the bottle. I picked up the shovel. It's amazing how honest a shovel is. It doesn't ask why. It only asks how deep. I hacked away at the top crust, layer by layer. Sweat ran, dust stuck, and my hands told me things about myself I usually forget. After a while, I heard footsteps in the sand. I didn't raise my head. People who want to shoot me rarely wait for me to take a break.

"Sam," said Winnetou. "It's fine." I nodded. "I can tell you now that you don't have to be here. But I'd be lying." He stepped next to me and picked up the second shovel. We didn't speak. Two men who had long known that sentences carry weight, and that everything is already difficult enough today. The sand gave way, slowly but not reluctantly. I made the hole longer than I intended. Men always get longer when they no longer carry a future.

"He was a child," I said, which was wrong. "He was fast," Winnetou said, which was right. "He tried to be grown-up." "That hurts," I said. We lifted him from the wagon. His body was lighter than I wanted to admit. I placed the scarf around his neck, not tight, not loose, so that you could see he was somebody. I slipped the metal token I had borrowed and never intended to give back into his pocket. "You deserve a key, even without a lock, boy."

We placed him in the pit as if we were placing him in an answer no one wants to hear. I took the letter I'd written that night—to no one, to him, to myself—and didn't read it aloud. I tucked it under his wrist. "So you have something in your hand," I murmured. "You shouldn't leave without something."

Dust rose, wanting to be someone, and was just dust. I took a small sip and poured the rest into the sand, not boastfully, more embarrassedly. "It's the bad

one," I said to Winnetou. "He deserved the good one." "He wanted the bad one," he replied. "It burned faster."

"We should—" I didn't say the rest. You don't have to say everything to make it true. Winnetou reached into his bundle, sprinkled a bit of tobacco, his own style, and quietly spoke words that grew even though they couldn't be watered. I didn't remember what they were. I did remember that the silence afterward wasn't the same.

We shoveled in. The earth sounded different when it fell on him. Not loud, not cruel. More like two hands saying: Enough is enough. I laid the two boards across, not a cross, just a sign that a sentence lies here. I stacked stones high enough to teach hungry animals patience. A cairn, not beautiful, but it remained.

"Three things," I said. "First: He's not running anymore. Second: He tried. Third: We failed." "The third is wrong," said Winnetou. "I'll give you another one: Third — it was his path, and he walked it until he was finished." "That's a nice sentence," I said, "I'll give you an ugly one: Anyone who draws boys into men's stories should watch out for when history strikes back." "Then write it on the stone," he said. "Or drink it out of you." I wiped the sweat from my eyes and laughed for no reason. "I'll drink later. Now I want to get into trouble. Otherwise I'll get sentimental."

As if he'd been waiting, trouble came. Two figures at the edge of the depression, gloves, sticks, pretending to have names. "We're off work when we blow our whistle," one shouted. The other grinned so hard I could count his teeth. "Hot day for cold earth, Hawkens." I placed the shovel against the cart, slowly, so they could see how much time they had to change their minds. "Get out of here," said Winnetou calmly. "There's a place here that doesn't know you." "I know all the places," said Teeth. "I'll put something in here too. Two men, for example."

I took the half-step forward that separates argument from conversation. "You want a lesson? I can give one: There are only two ways to approach a pit: with your hat in your hand—or with bad luck." Glove ran his gaze over the cairn, as if trying to remember where to dig again later. "You've softened, Hawkens. You're dripping with emotion." "I'm dripping with sweat," I said. "Emotion comes when I have time. You aren't time."

He drew the knife. I hate knives, not because of the blade, because of the gesture. They always think they're a shortcut. I stepped on his foot, not hard,

but thoroughly. He lost his composure. Winnetou was where he always is when you need him: invisible and beside you. One grip, one close blow, no opera, just dust. Teeth came the way men always come when they show their backs: too late and too loud. I stabbed him in the ribs with the handle of the shovel, just so he'd learn to appreciate the air again. "Anything else?" I asked. "Yes," he gasped, "why... you..." "Because," I said, and that was enough for me.

"Go." Winnetou pointed toward the city, as if showing the shortest path to remorse. They walked, slowly, because pride limps. I watched them until the desert devoured them, which it likes to do. "More will come," I said. "More and more are coming," he replied. "Then at least we'll have company while we grow old," I murmured. I bent down and placed the red scarf on top of the cairn, not like a flag, more like a hand. The wind lifted a corner, then let it fall again. "Now," I said, "it looks like someone's paying attention."

We stood there for a while. You have to stay, otherwise you weren't there. I told Winnetou how Hal had raved to me about the North, where people leave people alone because they're too busy complaining about the weather. I told him about the frosted glass water in the saloon and the old gambler's line about empty cans being possessions. "Emptiness is also possession," I said, half to Hal, half to myself. "Today it feels like I have too much of it."

Winnetou nodded. "Emptiness is also space. Don't fill it with anger." "I fill everything with anger," I said dryly. "It suits me." "It won't carry you far," he said. "It will carry me to the next stone." "Then collect lots of stones."

We poured a handful of water onto the top layer—not because it helps; because it's the right thing to do. Water in the desert is like an honest sentence: rare, short, and you only regret it if you give it to the wrong person. I screwed the cap off the bottle. "Hal," I said, "you owe me a proper goodbye. I'll take this as a down payment."

On the way back, the sun suddenly became active. I lowered my hat, Galle stamped his feet to his rhythm, and behind us the desert sat there like an old woman who's seen it all and just shakes her head. We spoke little. We spoke just enough to keep the day from getting any stupid ideas.

Near town, I stopped the car. "Stop," I said, and the day stopped, which rarely happens. "I'll walk in. I don't want the wheel to make noises that would make men brave." Winnetou nodded and rode off. I let Bile drink from the well; the water tasted of iron and lack of direction. Mary-Lou stood in a doorway, looked at me, and immediately knew everything I didn't want to say. "The boy?" she

simply asked. I lifted my scarf. She placed her hand on it, gave it a quick squeeze. "You did it right." "I rarely do anything right," I said. "Today it was work."

The coffin maker waved to me limply. "If you still..." "No," I said. "It's good when some things aren't in your catalog." The preacher took two steps toward me, then ducked his gaze like laundry before a storm. "I've been praying," he said. "I've been working," I said. "Both are exhausting," he muttered. "Yours makes more noise," I replied, and moved on.

It was cooler in the saloon than outside, which isn't saying much. The bartender put the glass I hadn't been waiting for in front of me. "To the boy," he said. "To work," I said, and drank. The old gambler turned his can in his hand, like someone who suddenly realizes that empty things can be heavy. "You have a face like a shovel," he said. "Thanks," I said. "I didn't clean it for you."

Someone put his hand on my shoulder. Not hard. Not friendly. Just there. I knew it was Winnetou before my back told me. "You won't sleep tonight," he said. "No," I said. "I want to remember how this feels." "It'll feel different tomorrow," he said. "Tomorrow everything will feel cheap," I murmured. "That's tomorrow's trick."

At night, when the city once again acted as if it couldn't do anything, I went out again. I took a small, flat stone from the well, inscribed an H on it with the tip of a knife—not pretty, not big—and carried it out to the edge, where the path that hurts begins. I placed the stone at the side of the road. Anyone who rides past here will stumble. Not with their feet. With their head. I sat down on the edge of the bridge; the boards spoke of the last rain, and I listened to them. There are worse sermons.

"How do you bury a friend in the desert?" I asked the night, which wouldn't hear of it. "You carry them until your back starts to curse, and then you carry them another step. You dig until your hands are offended, and then you dig a hand's breadth deeper. You put something inside that's worthless and everything. A cloth, a letter, a drink. You close it, without a drum, without God, but with a stone. And you stay until the silence accepts you."

I drank the last finger-width. It tasted of sand and peace that was too short. In the east, night doffed its hat. Tomorrow stood on the threshold, and I had the feeling it wouldn't bring any sense of humor. I wiped my mouth and laughed quietly, because sometimes laughter is the only decent thing you can think of.

"Son," I said to the empty street, "if I'm wrong and there's a place somewhere that could use you, then go first. Make room for the filth I'm bringing with me." The wind acted as if it understood. I stood up, my bones crunching the receipt, and I went inside, to the place where men stare at maps to avoid looking in mirrors.

Behind me was desert. Beneath it, ash. Beneath the ash, embers. And somewhere in between lay a red scarf that refused to be a flag. I hope the vultures learn politeness. If not, I'll come back and teach them manners. Without priests, without honors, but with respect.

Chapter 9 - Laughing at the Wrong Thing at the Wrong Time

The day hung like a grumpy bouncer against the sky. No wind, just that sticky haze that tells you someone's going to do something wrong, and it's probably you. I wanted to go to the saloon because at least the saloon tells honest lies. Instead, I stopped in front of the church. The door was open. That rarely happens here—usually, the church keeps its doors shut so the sinners don't get away.

Inside, it was cool, crowded, and quiet, the kind of quiet where every breath feels guilty. McCready lay in his stall at the front, so neatly arranged that I almost didn't recognize him. Men always look in death as if they've finally been given the right instructions. His widow spoke. Long words that crawled across the benches as if they had legs. "...a good man, a brave man, a man..." and every "man" hurt my jacket pocket, the place where I keep my mistakes.

I stood at the back, near the shadows. The cross on the wall hung crookedly, just like the city's attitude to humanity. I didn't think much of it; I just heard the wood creaking and the tears working. Then it happened: hiccups. A small, wet, impudent hiccup from the last pew, where Pete sat, the drunk with the busted nose, who entered the room before him.

I looked at him, he looked at me, and something inside me clicked. I laughed. Loudly. Once. Harder than necessary. The kind of laugh that tramples into a sermon like a boot. The widow fell silent, as if I'd sucked the wind out of her sentence. Fifty heads turned toward me, and at the very front, the dead man's beefy cousin began to stand up, that guy with arms like tree trunks and eyes like two poorly paid bouncers.

"Hawkins," he said, sounding like wood was about to break.

"I'm sorry," I said, and I wasn't sorry. "Hiccups. Contagious. The tragedy of the situation..." I laughed again, shorter, more crooked. Stupidity is a disease with relapses.

He came toward me, his hands already clenched into fists. I was about to tell him that today was a bad day, to snap my neck, when suddenly Winnetou was standing next to me. Nothing in front of him, nothing behind him, he was simply there – like the desert if you take the wrong hill. He simply said: "Not today." No exclamation mark, no drama. The cousin stopped. There are voices that build a wall in your path, and you don't have to see them to understand them.

We went outside before anyone thought of banging on the coffin. It wasn't really any brighter outside, just more honest. Dust hung in the air, as if the city were secretly smoking behind the shed. Winnetou didn't look at me. "You were laughing today," he said.

"Sometimes it just comes. It's like a cough, only... meaner."

"It was wrong."

"I know." I took a deep breath. "But it was also the time."

We stood there for a while, the church behind us, the road ahead, as if we were two poor signposts. Then he left without saying anything. That's his art: He takes away your words so you can find the right ones—and you can't find any.

By afternoon, the saloon reeked all the way to the street, a mixture of yesterday, the day before, and a promise that today wouldn't be any better. The bartender placed a glass in front of me without asking permission. "The city is talking," he said.

"The city should drink instead. Talking is unhealthy here."

"They say you laughed at the funeral."

"I laughed at the funeral."

"And why?"

"Because the hiccups were faster than the etiquette." I downed the whiskey. It burned like an honest lie.

A card player who looked like he'd rent out his mustache for money leaned over. "Was it at least a good joke?"

"No. It was a good mistake."

He grinned, and the rest of us grinned with him, and I knew: Today is one of those days when laughter isn't medicine, but a trigger. A man at the next table—narrow hips, wide mouth—barked, "Hawkins laughs when women cry. Maybe he laughs when men, too..." He let the sentence hang, because sentences often slip off the hook here.

"I laugh when someone thinks they're the judge," I said. "And you sound like someone who can't even raise the gavel."

This was too much. He stood. I stood. The piano stopped acting like a piano. The whores receded from the danger zone like the tides. We drew closer together, and his breath smelled of beer that had been alone for too long.

"Outside?" he asked.

"Here," I said, and rammed my forehead into his nose. Blood always makes the same sound, no matter whose. The saloon held its breath. He staggered, came back, and we went to work. Fists, wood, breath, all the same old language. We pushed a table, a row of chairs, I got a right hand that shook the stars out of my head, and gave him a left hand in return that sent him into the wall where other things were already hanging, things no one needed anymore. I heard the whores laughing—not nicely, but honestly. Laughter, wrong time, wrong place—I felt the title of the day writing itself into my ribs.

In the middle of it all burst someone who thought racing was a calling. "The sheriff!" he screamed, "the sheriff is dead! Murdered!"

Silence. Then, a creaky voice: "What does the perpetrator look like?"

The racer gasped. "Medium height... beard... old hat... dust..." I laughed. I couldn't help it. It was too vague, too stupid—a description for every mirror in the West. The laughter rolled away from me like a barrel without its brakes.

"Do you find that funny?" Standing next to me was a man whose face was similar enough to the sheriff's to make one believe family photos. The brother. He wasn't shaking. He was vibrating.

"I find it funny that the man says 'beard,' as if that were a clue."

"Then laugh later. Now come outside."

"And if I don't want to?"

"Then I'll carry you."

I finished my glass, because politeness is rare enough for me, and went along. The street was empty except for those who hate us. Four men, two torches, a pile of rules that no one had written down. Winnetou was there. He's always there when I get too honest.

"We'll start small," the brother said quietly, "with your nose."

"My nose has seen worse," I said, and then we started running. Fists spoke, boots explained how asphalt works, knuckles learned what wood means. One came too close to me, and I whispered in his dusty ear: "Closer, my dear. I want to tell you something." He bent over, because stupidity is magnetic, and I gave him my knee where courage resides. He collapsed like a tent in the wind.

Someone grabbed me from behind. Bad timing. Winnetou was in front, the man was in the back. I heard the torch hiss, smelled hair that regretted it. I kept hitting until the air ran out and the noise became decent again. Then I stood against the wall, breathing, and watched four men unlearn the world in the dust.

"Is that enough?" I asked the brother.

He looked at me as if he could decide whether today was my day. "Today," he said, "you're going. Tomorrow we'll talk differently."

"I'll be in a worse mood tomorrow," I said. "You won't like this."

We went in, and the bartender poured me a drink as if it were an ancient law. "Was that necessary?" he asked.

"It's never necessary," I said, "but it was appropriate. Wrong time, wrong place—that's my topic today."

"You laugh too much, Sam."

"I'm not laughing. I'm licking my wounds with my teeth."

The evening continued to drag. A whore—the one with the hinged laugh—sat down next to me. "You have a talent."

"I have many talents. Most of them are illegal."

"I mean, you laugh when everyone else is silent. It's like a knife."

"Sometimes silence is the one that stings first. You just have to catch it."

She took the glass from me, drank, and grimaced. "This isn't whiskey."

"This is therapy."

The preacher came in, smelling of prayer and bad grain. "Sons," he said, "the time for repentance..."

"Stop, Father," said the whore. "Today is the time for cleaning up."

He lowered his head. "That's exactly why."

I felt the stares. I don't love the city precisely when it sees me too closely. So outside, fresh air, dusty nothingness, the moon like a thumbnail over a dirty finger. In the alley stood the old gambler from the other day, the brass tin in his hand, like a pet that never runs away. "Hawkins," he whispered, "I saw who put the match in the sheriff's pants."

"The sheriff's pants didn't need a match. He was already dry enough."

"I mean the spark. The spark for the city. Do you understand?"

"No."

"Mary-Lou."

"Nonsense."

"Not alone. But she laughed. She laughed at the wrong time."

"She always laughs at the wrong time. That's why she's alive."

"I wanted to tell you."

"Why?"

"Because you're laughing today, and I want to know if you can still laugh tomorrow."

I put his can back in my pocket. "Go home, dude. Tonight's a bag of knives, and you're barefoot."

He nodded and left. His back was a map with no path.

I walked toward Mill Path, because that's where the noises go that no one wants to pay for. The water murmured as if it were mocking us. Halfway there, Mary-Lou stood in the dark corner where the moon always arrives late. "Sam," she said.

"Aha," I said.

"People are talking."

"People are always talking. That's why they drink, so they can't hear themselves talking."

"You laughed today."

"Yes."

"Incorrect."

"Again."

She came closer, her perfume mild today, like watering down regret. "I didn't laugh."

"You often laugh with your mouth closed. That's worse."

"I have reasons."

"Reasons are like fleas. Everyone has them, and no one likes them."

She placed her hand on my chest, right where anger resides. "Don't be stupid today."

"I can choose between stupid and dead. Today I choose stupid."

She nodded, as if she were going to punish me for this later. "The sheriff's brother won't wait."

"He should. Patience makes men ugly."

"You already are."

"Thanks, doll. I'm working hard on it."

I left her standing because otherwise I would have stopped. Behind me, I heard her laughing, quietly, off-key, in just the right place—that's her talent.

Something crept across the rooftops in the city. Not smoke. A sentence. I didn't hear it, I felt it: "Hawkins laughs when the city cries." I went back to the saloon, because that's where sentences go when they gather courage. Inside, it had gotten more crowded. The brother stood there, the torch in his hand as if it were an office. Next to him were the two whose teeth I had counted this evening. They stood upright, which commands my respect—straight lines are rare in this city.

"Now," said the brother, "let's talk."

"Let's talk," I said. "But I'd rather not have a fire. I like warmth, but not on command."

He put down the torch, which surprised me. "You find everything funny," he said.

"No. Only things that are too stupid to be serious."

"My brother's death wasn't stupid."

"No. He was ordinary."

Something broke in his face. Not his bones. Something you wouldn't normally see. "If you need to laugh, laugh," he said quietly. "But do it outside."

"Good suggestion," I said. "Come on."

We went outside. The city watched. Tiny eyes behind wood, creaking shoes, a cat pretending to understand the law. We stood wider than necessary, out of

principle. I said, "Before we begin, a game. One of you tells me why everyone finds the wrong things funny today."

The man on the right – the one with the strained shoulders – said, "Because no one knows what to do with their hands."

"Right," I said. "And you?"

The man on the left—the one with the missing teeth—said, "Because if we don't, it will tear us in half."

"That's right," I said. "And you?" I asked the brother.

"Because we're afraid that otherwise we'll hear how empty it is."

I nodded. "Good. Now we can begin."

It wasn't a pleasant fight. It was the kind that makes shoes cry and wood complain because it wasn't made for catching faces. I took one in the kidney that ripped childhood out of my back. I took one in the throat that postponed answers. Winnetou stood there, grabbing when he had to grab, and letting go when he could. Once I slipped, fell, and the torch flew, and I saw it from below, like a star tired of explanations. I laughed again. Because it's ridiculous to see stars in the dust.

"You're laughing again," the brother groaned, and the knife in his voice was blunt this time.

"I'm laughing because otherwise I cry," I said. "And I'm not good at crying. It sounds wrong on me."

He sat down in the middle of the dirt. No one shook his hand, and in that moment I liked the city a little more for it. "Who killed him?" he asked.

"Ask tomorrow," I said. "Today is the day to say the wrong thing."

"Say it anyway."

"He was a man who left too many scores unpaid. Today, someone settled them. With poor style."

"Names."

"I don't have it. Just smell."

"After what?"

"Smoke of yesterday and perfume of tomorrow."

He understood, and I felt sorry for him. "Go," he said. "Before I hate you."

"Everyone hates me eventually," I said. "Save it for a better day."

The saloon now smelled of iron-laden morals. The bartender placed a bucket of water in front of me. "What's that?" I asked.

"The truth. From the outside."

I dipped my hands in. My knuckles ached, my skin protested, but the pain was decent. "You know what's wrong with laughter?" I murmured. "It's like a missed shot. Everyone flinches, but no one's dead. Until the next one comes along."

"You should stop doing that."

"And where to start?"

"Silence. Once."

"I tried. It itched."

Mary-Lou came over, sat down without asking, and looked at my hands as if they were two dogs that had gotten into something. "You're saying the wrong things," she said. "The right ones are choking you."

"I am a bad priest."

"You're a bad patient."

"I am a bad person."

"You're not," she said. "You're just not friendly. That's different."

"I'm friendly when no one's looking."

"Everyone's watching today."

"Then I have the day off."

Towards midnight, the city grew weary. Tiredness is our peace here. I went outside and sat on the step in front of the shed. The moon had improved; it was now half a spoonful. I thought of the hiccups, of the widow, of the brawny cousin who mistakes his thunder for justice. I thought of the laughter that lives inside me like a stray dog: It comes when it wants, eats what it can get, and bites when you pet it.

Winnetou sat down next to me, silently, as always. "You'll laugh again tomorrow," he said.

"Yes."

"Maybe someone will die if you laugh."

"Maybe someone will die if I let it go."

He considered. "You're like a knife with a glass handle."

"I'm more like a glass with a knife handle."

He smiled, which is rare for him. "Take care."

"I don't even watch my tongue."

"That's precisely why."

We were silent. A coyote somewhere spoke its mind. Someone in the house across the street was crying silently—you can tell by the windows. I took a sip from the bottle, which wasn't quite as bad as yesterday, and left the rest. For whoever has the courage to need it.

"Laughing at the wrong thing at the wrong time," I said to the sky. "It's not wrong at all. It's just being honest before everyone's ready." I tucked my hat further down and lay down on the box. One hand on the Colt, the other on my ribs, where stupidity lives. I wasn't sleeping. I was just telling sleep to pretend. The night nodded. And somewhere in this city, one person was practicing crying, and another was practicing laughing, and I knew who would master which tomorrow. Spoiler alert: I don't like switching roles.

Chapter 10 - The Boy Who Smelled of Blood

The morning smelled of old tin, wet wood, and something that didn't belong in the city. I sat on my box, which had already heard more conversations than a confessional, and waited for an excuse to insult today's sun. Then the smell came. Not smoke. Not horse. Blood.

It was the smell that rises in your nose and sets up camp there. I stood up. Galle raised his head from the post, as if he had the same thought as me, only without words. The smell was coming from the well. Water has a sense of humor—it attracts everything that can't swim.

The boy stood there, thin as a bad argument, jacket too big, eyes too wide, hands too red. Not his blood. I saw that immediately. Wrong tone, wrong shine. One grab at a tub at the slaughterhouse, carried across the night, and you smell like a mistake.

"Hey," I said, "you're bleeding the wrong way."

He shuddered. His hands tried to go into his pockets, but found only holes. "I'm looking for Sam Hawkens."

"Bad idea. You found him."

He stared at me as if he'd hoped I were taller. Or friendlier. Or both. "They said... I should bring this to you." He pulled a handkerchief from his jacket. It had once been white, but now it was the color of bad news. Stitched in the corner: an M, neat, fine, like a lie in a Sunday best. Folded into the handkerchief lay half a playing card—the King of Hearts, cleanly cut in half.

"You're missing the other half of the king," I said. "Welcome to the club."

"Meaning: tonight, Mill Path. Second..." He paused. "Second sunrise."

"The lady has already postponed it once. Is she on time today?"

"She said, 'Whoever smells of blood has priority.'"

I took the cloth from his hand and smelled it. Flowers that were ashamed, and beneath them the mess from the slaughterhouse. "Your hands," I said, "go to the pump handle and wash them. If that comes off, you're a fool. If it doesn't come off, you're a paid fool."

He stared at the cock as if it were a riddle. I pressed. The water came out, cold and honest. The boy rubbed. The red went, and it didn't go. It remained in his fingertips, as if the blood had decided to pay rent here.

"That remains," he murmured, sounding as if he had just come to a realization that was making him old.

"Of course something will remain," I said. "Otherwise you'll forget what you did today."

"He just brought," said the bartender behind me. "Boys bring things. That's their curse."

Winnetou suddenly stood to my right. To this day, I don't know which I prefer—when he's there or when he's not. He looked at the boy, saw his hands, the handkerchief, half the map, didn't look at me, and said: "He'll be running before you say so."

"From what?" asked the boy.

"Above all," I said. "What's your name?"

"Eli."

"Bad name. It sounds like people who aren't there are constantly calling you. Eli—here. Eli—away."

He held his gaze. I liked that. Guys who hold their gaze are dangerous. For themselves.

"Who paid you?" I asked.

He shook his head. "A man with gloves."

"What color?"

"Black."

"What language?"

"Our."

"What lie?"

"That it's easy."

"Was it?" He looked at his hands. "Yes."

"Then it will be difficult."

Mary-Lou approached, without a discount. A bucket in her hand, a cigarette at her lips, and the kind of compassion in her eyes that wouldn't get caught. "Give it here," she said, taking his hands as if they were coins. She rubbed them with sand, then with soap, then with sand again. "Pig," she muttered. "Curdled. Someone's been practicing."

"So the boy is no exception," I said.

"Exceptions are expensive," she said. "He's a serial."

"I want to go home," said Eli. "I stink."

"You stink of a bill," I said. "Who told you to find me?"

"Nobody. Everyone."

"Even worse."

It doesn't take long in this town for the right ravens to hear the wrong sounds. Two glove-wearing men stood at the edge of the backyard as if they owned the shade. Neither tall nor short, the kind of men who live in their boots, the ones they never pay for. "Nice morning post, Hawkens," one said. "Smells fresh."

"Fresh is rare here," I said. "We're usually in the warm-up phase."

"Give the boy here."

"It isn't one. It's a letter."

"Then give me the letter."

I didn't turn around, just grumbled, "Eli—go behind the door. If you run, don't run for too long."

"Where then?"

"Listen to where it gets quieter."

"It never gets quieter," he said.

"Then learn to run."

The glove on the left made the mistake men on bad days make: He grabbed my shoulder. I only like hands on me when they don't want anything. I twisted my arm out, elbowing him so close to his mouth that his teeth knew why they were there. The one on the right tried to make a heroic save on the left, but only got my boot on the bone most people call the shin; I call it "the place where men learn new words."

"Run," I said, and Eli ran. Not fast. Right.

We took apart the rest quickly and ugly. Wooden crate, wall, dust, box—the things of the saloon sang their song. One bled beautifully, the other practically bled. I left both lying there. It wasn't a day for tidying up.

"He runs to the mill path," said Winnetou.

"I know."

"He's not running voluntarily."

"I know."

"You go?"

"I'm already on my way."

I took the scarf with the M, tucked the half-card into it, and shoved both into the inside pocket where bad ideas live. Mary-Lou grabbed my sleeve, not firmly, just honestly. "Sam," she said, "if it's the one with the two eyes, she'll close both of them today."

"I know."

"And if it isn't her?"

"Then she invented it."

I started walking. The road did what it always does—it belongs to everyone who intends to do something wrong. The dust was nice, which makes it suspicious. You could hear the stream before you saw it, if you knew it. I know it. He talks like someone who knows so much truth that he has to dilute it.

Eli stood in the shadows where the path narrows to the Mill Trail. He was breathing too fast, a dog with too big a heart. "Don't play the hero," I said, without looking at him. "Heroes live as long as milk here."

"I have no choice," he said.

"That's what everyone who has no ideas says."

He pulled up his collar as if he could hide the smell. "They said I'm getting paid."

"Do you have it?"

"A little bit."

"Give it here." He hesitated, then slid two coins toward me, small, few, but clean. I handed them back. "Buy water. And walk along the edge of the shade. The edge bites less."

"And you?"

"I play mailman."

The bend to the mill path was filled with false silence. I didn't step on the familiar stones; I stepped beside them. Men who build traps count on habits. I count on stupidity. It's more reliable.

"Sam," said a voice coming from a person I couldn't see. "I knew you'd bring him."

"I never know what I'll bring," I said. "Sometimes I'm the sack."

The woman with two eyes wasn't there. But the voice was calm. The real eye was somewhere else; the glass eye was gazing out of a bush today. That's what it sounded like. I didn't take another step. "Boy," I said quietly, "now is the moment when you wish you could grow."

"I can become smaller," he whispered.

"Even better."

Two, three, maybe four silhouettes emerged from the shadows—too smooth, too clean for here. Gloves, always gloves. The third had a cane that supported

nothing—a reminder of the sheriff. I felt my teeth grinding, as if they were about to speak. "That's cheap," I said.

"Cheap is efficient," came the voice. "And men like you are expensive if you fight them wrong."

"I'm not expensive. I'm just persistent."

"Another reason to work with the scent of blood. Dogs come. Heroes come too."

"I'm not a hero."

"I know. That's why you're still alive."

Winnetou was there. I know you want to know how. I want to too. He was there. Next to me. Not in front of me, not behind me. "Four," he said. "Five," I said. "And the woman."

"She's not here," he said.

"She's always here when her ideas are flowing."

"You bring us the card?" asked the voice, friendly as a letter opener.

I pulled out half the card, holding it so the wind wouldn't like it. "For what? A dance?"

"For a name."

"Whose?"

"Yours."

"I already have that one."

"You'll need it later."

"Today I just need my sense of humor."

"Bad day for that."

"The best days are the bad days."

A glove came forward, as a test. I gave him a few new ideas, which he can explain to his friends tomorrow. A second made the mistake of stepping on the stone behind me, which I had deliberately left lying there. He slipped, cursed, and the curse told me he was from the East. I took his speech from him, briefly, directly, without preaching.

"Enough," said the voice. "The boy."

"What about him?"

"He delivered. You know what that means."

I looked at Eli. His lip wasn't trembling. I liked him for it. "It means," I said, "that he's getting paid now. From me. With some advice."

"Advice is cheap," said the voice.

"Not mine."

I leaned toward Eli. "You're going north. Today. Now. You keep to the edges of shadows and the backs of caravans, but not to their faces. You speak little, eat when no one is looking, and sleep where you're most ashamed. The smell doesn't go away easily, but it fades. If anyone asks you who you are, say: no one. If anyone asks you where you're going, say: away. If anyone asks you why you're going, say: because a man smelled of blood, and I don't want to be him."

He nodded, quickly, too quickly. "And you?"

"I'm already where I belong."

"In trouble."

"In progress."

Winnetou placed his hand on Eli's shoulder, not soft, not firm. "Go," he said. "Don't listen when the desert tells you you're thirsty. You always are. That's normal. Go anyway."

Eli ran. The voice made him run. That scared me more than if they had shot. "You'll let him?" I asked.

"He's worthless if you stay," the voice said. "You're the commodity."

"Wrong estimate."

"We see it."

"Listen," I said, "you friendly ghost. I'll give you back what you sent me." I held up the cloth, let it dangle in the dust, and smelled it again. M, flowers, pig. "This isn't a letter. This is a contract. I'm not signing it."

"Then burn him."

"I do."

"And the map?"

"The map remains half-truth. Like you."

I shoved half the card into my mouth, chewed, and spat out the paper because I'm old enough to know when symbolism dulls your teeth. "There. Now your king has become a donkey."

The silence changed sides. Someone was coming too fast. I was faster. I used the arm someone extended to me, as if it were friendship, as a ladder. Up, down, elbow, knee, done. Winnetou took out two at once, as always, without getting up and without apologizing. The third did what third people do: He ran, to tell the story differently.

"We'll talk again," said the voice.

"Talk to yourselves," I said. "You'll lie better when you listen to yourself."

We stood there alone, only the stream pretended to be neutral. I exhaled deeply, heard my breath still working, and sat down on the stone that had been waiting for me for weeks. "Sam," said Winnetou, "your tongue is on fire."

"Good. Today was cold."

"The young-"

"Go. Maybe he'll make it."

"Perhaps."

"Maybe today is enough for me."

We walked back, slowly, so the city would have enough time to form a new opinion. I washed my hands at the fountain, even though nothing clung to

them except memories. Mary-Lou stood there with the bucket she always has when something is coming to an end. "So?"

"Opponent: stupid. Plan: clever. Result: nobody wins."

"Sounds like a normal day."

"He was. Only bloodier."

"Was it his blood?"

"Not at the beginning."

She nodded. There was the kind of tiredness in her eyes that only women get when they know men. "He still smells?"

"He will. For a long time."

"You can't get it out."

"You can write about it."

"Or drink."

"Both are possible."

I sat down on my box; the sun now acted as if it had been on time, and the street started making noises again that no one wants to count. I pulled the cloth from my pocket; the M didn't glitter, but it pretended to. I held it over the flame of the bartender's lamp until the heat asked if I was serious. "Yes," I said. It caught fire, slowly, reluctantly, like lies told for too long. It smelled first of flowers, then of pork, then of nothing at all, and that was the most beautiful smell of the day.

"You're playing with symbols," said the bartender.

"I'm just burning old bills," I said.

"The new one is coming tomorrow."

"I know. Tomorrow we'll all smell like something."

"And you?"

“After work.”

Later, as the evening settled like a cloak over the stupid corners, Eli came again—from the distance, just a shadow on the edge. He raised his hand, not as a greeting, but more as a reminder that he still has hands. I didn't raise anything. I'm bad at waving. He disappeared north, where people are left alone if they're strong enough not to ask.

I stayed. I took a sip that tasted of duty, and I laughed quietly because it was inappropriate. "The boy who smelled of blood," I said into the dust. "We all smell of something. Some just louder." Bile snorted. The stream did what it does. And I felt how the smell of today clung to me, like a cheap tune you swear you'll forget tomorrow—and hum along to the day after when no one's looking.

Chapter 11 - Tin Cans and Broken Promises

The afternoon lay like a damp rag over everything. Heat without a decisive moment. I sat on my crate, letting the last honest drops of wine creep to the edges of the glass, and heard that damned clanging again. It came and went like a guilt you suppress until it resurfaces with friends. *Ring—ring—krrrch*. A boy, then another, then a string of tin cans hanging from a rope, as if someone had thrown the town a tin wedding. They ran past me, the cans dragging snakes through the dust, and the sounds clung to the walls like flies. I raised my glass as if to toast them and drank it dry.

"Sam." Mary-Lou. Behind me, her voice like a knife that's been in a drawer too long. "Harris."

“The dead Harris or the debt-free one?”

"The dead one. He outlived you as far as promises go."

"Unlikely."

She sat down on the step, took off her shoes, and wiggled her toes as if they were deciding something. "You swore to him, Sam. Bridge, sack, no questions asked."

"I swear a lot. That's my fault when I drink. I forget little. That's my curse when I sober up."

She pointed her chin at the street. Two men approached, shadows in front of their legs, bringing shadows with them. The tall one was carrying the dented can again, the short one this time lacking patience. "Hawkins," said the tall one, "that sack."

"I don't have a sack," I said. "But I have time for your stupidity."

The little boy ran his tongue over his teeth as if it were speech. "Harris wanted the bridge. And you nodded. That's what it says here." He tapped the can as if it contained the gospel. "In writing."

"All that's written here is that the heat has no patience anymore."

The big one pulled the lid, the little one pulled his mouth, and I took a deep breath. Inside was the yellowed letter. The same scrawled mark Harris had always smeared across pieces of paper when he was too cowardly to lie with his voice. *To Sam Hawkins. Take the bag to the bridge. Harris.* No time, no content. A promise that looks like it shot itself in the foot.

"That's your principle?" I held the paper up to the light. "A dead hand that still wants to wave?"

"Enough," said the tall man. "A principle is a principle."

"Maybe," I said. "Mine is simpler: I only deliver to people who are alive."

The little boy jumped forward. I took a half step to the side and kneed him just above the hip. It clattered, the can rattled, the letter flew, and Mary-Lou caught it with two fingers, as if it were an insect you wanted to identify before killing it. "Not here," she said quietly. "Not in front of the church. The widow has already made enough noise today."

"Today the widow has everything," I said. "The city owes her silence, not me."

The big one came, arms like boards, head like a bad decision. I stepped on his foot, hard, short, and showed him the counter in the window opposite. He understood. Men understand quickly when wood becomes louder than words. "Not today," he muttered, pulling the little one away by the collar. "Tomorrow."

"I'll be tougher tomorrow," I said. "Bring something thicker than paper."

They left. Tin cans clanged again in the alley, as if someone were waking the city even though it wasn't asleep.

I pocketed the letter, even though I should have eaten it. Mary-Lou looked at me sideways. "You're burning it."

"Not yet."

"Why?"

"Because I'm interested in why dead dogs still bark."

"Harris wasn't a dog. Dogs are loyal."

I poured myself a new whiskey. The bartender had the look of a man who thinks the next glass might actually taste different this time. "I don't want to hear anything," he said before I could say anything. "I've already poured too many sentences today."

"Then give me silence on ice."

"We only have warm water."

"Fits."

I took the glass and sat down at the card table by the window. The old gambler slid out of the corner like a shadow too polite to scare you. His brass can glittered dully, as if it had breathed. "Tin cans," he said. "They sound like weddings around here."

"Our weddings are cheaper. And they don't last just as long."

He turned the can, opened it, and closed it again. "Do you know what they keep in cans, Sam?"

"Emptiness."

"And noises. You close them and hope they stay in."

"Good hope."

"Bad hope." He looked toward the door. "Those two will be back. But not because of the letter."

"Because of me."

"Because of what's been chasing you since you made that first promise that didn't smell like you."

"Which one was that?"

"This to you."

I laughed, even though I didn't want to. Laughter sometimes protects the tongue from better things. "I'll drink," I said. "It's my promise, and I'll keep it."

"Sometimes you hold people too."

"Only those who fall."

"Then hold yourself today."

The cans outside grew louder, like fake rain. I stood up. "Come on," I said to the old player. "Let's go see the bridge."

"Why?"

"Because I'm interested in what Harris would have thrown his paper at if he still had hands."

The bridge was a sad wooden bridge over a stream that knew too much. The railing was missing on the side that concerned us. As always. The boards spoke when you walked over them. It sounded like excuses.

"So here it is," I said. "Harris liked places where you could fall. He liked choice."

"He liked the noise. No one can hear what you say when everything creaks."

I knelt, feeling between the boards. Dust, coins, a match that had never begun to live. And a second tin can, smaller, flatter, without a lid. Inside: nothing. I held it to my ear. You can't hear the ocean in tin. You only hear that you're too late. "Empty," I said.

"Emptiness is also possession," murmured the old player.

"You and your philosophy of scratches."

"She has brought me rich friends so far."

"Everyone dead?"

"Some satisfied."

I was about to get up when I smelled it: oil. Not much. A whiff. Like the wick of a lantern left in the sun. Right under the boards, by the post. I bent down further, pulled out the knife, and scraped out something black, which remained sticky, a line that pretended to be innocent. Someone had soaked it. Not today. Recently. "Promises made to wood last longer," I said to the stream. The stream pretended it hadn't understood me.

Back in the saloon, the air was thicker. The two can-weary guys sat there, pretending to be customers. Between them was a man I liked less than wet shoes: the traveler with the slippery tongue. He'd already sold half a town and delivered only whole lies. Gloves, sandy-colored, clean. His expression like polished silverware. He raised his glass. "Mr. Hawkens."

"Out of place."

"I'm not selling anything today."

"That's unusual. Is there a discount on anything?"

"Only for gentlemen who like old promissory notes."

He tapped my chest, where the letter burned without burning. I stepped closer. "If you point near my chest again, I'll send your fingers to the church as a donation receipt."

He lowered his hand and continued smiling, as if smiling were a condo. "Harris was a man with plans. One of them was named Sam."

"Harris was a man of noise. One of them still sounds."

"He gave you the bag."

"What was inside?"

"Promise."

"Then he never wore it."

"Exactly."

He placed a third can on the table, polished bright, like a mirror that doesn't like you. "For you. A souvenir."

I didn't open it. I turned it. A scratch under the bottom. An M. So clean it was a lie. "Give my regards to the lady," I said.

"I only say hello when I pay."

"Then never say hello."

The little one from this morning had found his tongue again. "We can open it."

"We can learn something too," I said. "Like waiting."

Not five breaths later, someone screamed outside. Not a death scream. A teaching cry: "Fire!" The city has a keen ear for false echoes. Everyone jumped as if chairs were suddenly poisonous. The bartender grabbed for water, the whores for air, the card players for excuses. I went to the door, not fast, just precisely. When there's a fire and you run, stupidity runs with you.

The grocer stood in the street, waving his arms as if directing pigeons. Smoke from the backyard, where they store sacks of grain that hasn't turned into bread for three years. The same hand as the other day, the same ridiculous handwriting of oil and wick. I nodded as if someone had recited a poem I'd heard too many times. "Distraction," I said into the smoke. "You're boring."

"Someone took something out of your pocket," Mary-Lou said in my ear. I reached for it. The letter was still there. So was the can. The tin cans outside were getting louder—children were yanking on a string, in circles, as if they were costumed as noise. I looked over at the counter. The traveler with the smooth tongue was no longer smiling. He was gone. Neither was the big one nor the little one. Only one chair was still spinning, slowly, like a bad judgment made too late.

"What did he get?" I asked.

"Not the letter," said Mary-Lou.

"Then the bag."

"Which bag?"

"The one Harris hid somewhere to make you believe in something that doesn't have to exist."

"And where?"

"Where tin cans make noise so no one can hear the boards creaking."

I walked through the noise. Children, dogs, men with shovels, women with buckets. Tin on ropes, knotted like love letters from fools. A can, shinier than the others, danced in the dust like a coin that wouldn't land. I stepped on it. It gave way. Underneath: a rope. A second rope that wasn't part of the noise. I pulled. A plank in the pavement that had never been one lifted on the other side. Like a mouth that says "no" too late.

"There's your sack," I said to no one.

There was no gold inside. No papers. Just two things: a bundle of oil-soaked rags, neatly folded, and a child's red checked jacket, rolled up and dry. And a scrap of paper: *If you're reading this, Sam, I've become honest. Later than you.* Harris's handwriting. I smelled the rags. Oil and flower. I smelled the jacket. Nothing. No snow, no grass, no child. Just cloth. "He didn't hide any loot," I said. "He buried an apology."

"For whom?" asked Mary-Lou.

I tucked my jacket back in. "For those too stupid to remember."

"That's you."

"Today, yes."

The city ran to the smoke, I ran to the stream. Halfway there, the traveler stood. His gloves shimmered as if they had just buried a new owner. "Mr. Hawken," he said. "How's the sack?"

"The bag's empty," I said. "Just like you." I held out the jacket. "That's all."

"Children's jackets aren't expensive."

"Today, yes. From me." I slung it over my shoulder, as if I were the kind of man who could still handle soft things.

He pointed to the can in my hand. "You better open it."

"It will burst when it's time."

"Time is money."

"For you. For me, time is patience."

He laughed politely, which is the most insulting kind of laugh. "See you at the bridge, Mr. Hawkens."

"I stay away from things that break."

"Then stay away from promises."

He disappeared instead of leaving. Some men are only there when they have a punchline.

I sat down by the stream, where the shadows hadn't yet understood that they were getting smaller. I placed the can in the sand and stared at it, as if I could open it with my eyes. "Open it," I said. She was silent. I got the letter. I read it aloud so my stupidity would have witnesses. *Take the sack to the bridge.* No name, no time, no request. Just a command. "Harris," I said into the stream, "you were already dead before they laid you down. But you could write as if you still had hope."

Winnetou came quietly. He always looks as if he owes less to silence than I do. "Tin cans," he said. "Children."

"Better them than the adults."

He nodded at the can. "The sign."

"M."

"The woman."

"Or someone who wants to pretend." I weighed the can. Lightly. I shook it. A soft, dry rustle. No stones, no metal. Paper or death. I put it down again.

"You won't open?"

"Not as long as the city listens to me."

He sat down. "You break a lot of promises."

"I keep a few. It's more efficient."

"You gave one to Harris."

"I listened to Harris while drunk. It's not the same."

"It's the same today."

"Today everything is the same. Cans, promises, men writing in oil."

He looked at my hands. "They're not shaking."

"You save it for the right thing."

"What is the right thing?"

"That knife in the alley that I can't hear yet."

He stood before I stood. We walked back, the can under our arms, the creek behind us, the smoke in front of us. In the alley stood the sheriff's brother. His face was made of iron, his heart of something finally tired. "Hawkins," he said.

"Brother," I said.

"You laughed when he died."

"I laugh at the wrong times. It's my job."

"You didn't laugh today."

"I'll keep it for myself."

He stepped closer. "What's in the can is mine."

"Is that so?"

"He has given an account. You now bear an account."

"Accountability doesn't fit in tin. It leaks." I handed him the can. He held it as if it were going to bite. "Open it," I said quietly. He did. Only paper inside. No names. No course. Just an old school notebook page with three sentences: *No witnesses. No children. No churches.* I took it from his hand, folded it once,

twice, and tucked it into my jacket. "That's the only promise I'll keep." He nodded as if I'd lined his throat with cotton. "Go home," I said. "Today is not a day you'll get anything that will help."

"And you?"

"I've already got what I deserve." I lifted the child's jacket. "Heavier than gold. Useless as morals."

The tin cans outside tugged on their leash again. I followed the noise, circling until I felt dizzy, then I let myself fall out like a bad idea. The boy from the morning was standing on the corner, grinning crookedly. "Cowboy," he said, "the woman with the eyes said you're going too slow."

"She's lying."

"Then run."

"Later."

"Why?"

"Because some things only make sense if you stay seated."

I sat back down on my box. Mary-Lou placed a glass in front of me without asking, without smiling. "Burn the letter."

"Even."

"Burn the can too."

"Later."

"Burn yourself."

"Morning."

I lit a lamp. The flame was small, offended, but willing. I held the letter close to it until it turned brown, curled up, belly up. "Harris," I said, "I'll pretend you're still here, if that helps. But you sent me a promise that wasn't yours." The paper caught fire, small, stubborn. It smelled first of ink, then of nothing. I let the ash fall into the tin. A beautiful sound, like someone trying to imitate rain.

"And the M?" asked the bartender.

"The M is a scratch. Scratches don't go away. You learn to ignore them in the right place."

"You should count them."

"I can already count to ten."

"You need more."

"I need sleep."

"You won't get it."

"I know."

The traveler didn't return. Neither did the canned goods. The city did what it always does when it's stuck: It cursed quietly and acted busy. I took the child's jacket, folded it neatly, and stuck it under the counter, where the bartender buries receipts. "If anyone comes along who knows it," I said, "give it here. Don't ask. Don't take any money."

"And if no one comes?"

"Then forget where it is."

"I rarely forget."

"Then drink."

Later, when the lamps had grown tired of the flies and the flies of the lamps, I made my way to the bridge again. I wanted to hear if the boards played a different note when no one was shouting at them. They didn't. I placed the can on the post, knocked once, knocked twice, as if knocking on the door of a god who doesn't have office hours. I let out the ash, a black puff that immediately acted as if it had never been there.

"Broken promises," I said into the darkness. "They sound like tin and smell of nothing."

"And what's holding?" asked a voice behind me. Winnetou, of course.

"Stones."

"And what else?"

I thought about it. "Children's jackets. If you don't throw them away."

We stood there until the stream decided to get louder. I walked back, the town in sight, the night in the backseat, and the cans finally quiet. In front of the saloon, the old gambler sat stroking his can as if it were an animal that never stops being hungry.

"And?" he asked.

"Empty," I said. "And that was the best part."

"Emptiness is also possession."

"Today it is punishment."

I lay down on the box, hat down, hand on my Colt, the other on the spot in my jacket where the letter had disappeared. Mary-Lou extinguished the large lamp and left the small one lit, the one that always burns when someone in the city dies at night in a chair without falling. "Sleep," she said.

"I owe the city a dream," I murmured. "But I break promises."

"Then at least stay lying down."

"I can do that."

In the distance, a child was trying to pull one last can. It made no more noise. Only the rope rubbed, quietly, evenly, like a breath that no longer agrees with the city. I closed my eyes, and the day closed around me like a letter no one wants to read anymore. Tomorrow there will be new cans. Tomorrow there will be new promises. And between the two sits I, Sam Hawken, the man with the box, who laughs when it's wrong and remains silent when it's worse.

Chapter 12 - Winnetou and the Woman with Ten Lovers

Morning arrived as if it owed us a debt. I sat on my box, chewing on a piece of air that tasted of damp wood and old grease, and listened as the city spewed out a new rumor. You could hear it in the voices—they grew higher when they lied, and lower when they hoped. Today they were both.

"Ten lovers," said someone from across the street, "and one of them is Winnetou."

I spat into the dust, which was used to being insulted. "Sure," I muttered. "And I'm the saint with the seven candles."

Mary-Lou leaned against the saloon post and examined her fingernails as if they were the hands of a clock that only measured anger. "The woman's name is Rosalie," she said without looking up. "She doesn't have ten lovers. She has ten entries in a little book. Difference: The lovers pay."

"And what do they pay?"

"So they don't have to listen to themselves." She smiled. "Expensive stuff."

"And Winnetou?"

"Used like a good seal. Makes it official."

Winnetou stood at the end of the street, motionless, as if someone had politely asked the wind to bypass him. He heard the sentence with his name and did nothing visible. That was enough to get two men to whisper on. That's how this city works: One man breathes, and three others make a report out of it.

I went in. The saloon was as usual: too dark, to be honest, too warm to stay long. The bartender polished a glass that had seen every hand, and the pianist acted as if the world deserved more than three notes. Men did what men do when they lose their courage: talk, count, order.

Then she came.

Rosalie entered the swinging door as if she were the answer no one had asked. No drama: a simple dress, clean, incongruously white at the edges. Hair back, eyes forward. Not beautiful in the sense of calendars, but expensive in the sense of time. She stood still, letting the room react to her. He did as he was commanded.

"Who is the cashier?" she asked calmly.

"Me," said the bartender. "Sometimes the bottle."

"It's me today," she said. "Rules: I don't eat if someone is watching. I don't talk if someone thinks they're listening. And I only cost money if someone thinks they're buying me. That's where the calculation begins."

A laugh rolled out, masculine and cheap. She nodded as if she'd ordered it. "Good. We're being honest with each other."

I raised my glass. "It doesn't get any more honest than that, darling."

"I'm not a darling," she said without looking at me. "I'm an accountant."

Mary-Lou stepped next to me, keeping a safe distance. "You'll like her."

"I rarely like someone who understands me."

"That's why you'll like her."

The gloved traveler slid from the card table, as elegant as a snake mistaken for a tie. "Madame Rosalie," he bowed, as if he'd ever willingly turned his back on anyone. "One suggestion: exclusivity. I'll get you doors you can walk into without getting your feet dirty. You get me the people who believe doors are useful."

"And my share?" she asked.

"You keep everything you are. I only take what you don't need."

"That's a lot."

"That's the deal."

"That's whoring," Mary-Lou said kindly. "But without beds."

Rosalie slowly looked around. "Exclusivity is a word men use when they're afraid a woman belongs to herself." She walked to the bar, grabbed a glass of water, drank almost nothing, and put it down again. "I don't work with door-to-door salesmen."

The traveler smiled smoothly. "Then at least with stories." He raised his hand, and as if a leash had been pulled, two gloved men began to grow at the door. "Ten lovers," he said. "Of them, one with feathers, one with law, one with money, and seven with time. A fairy tale, yes—but the city buys fairy tales by the gallon."

"I don't sell fairy tales," Rosalie said. "I sell silence."

The bartender raised his eyebrow. "Silence is in short supply."

"Then I'm expensive."

A man with a face like dried leather stepped too close to her. "How much if I just look?"

"Then I'm free," she said, and he didn't understand that this wasn't a gift.

Winnetou entered. No sound, just less air. Everyone acted as if they needed to adjust their chairs. The traveler made his polite semicircle. "Chief," he said, "the city has borrowed your smile. May we keep it?"

"My smile belongs to me," said Winnetou.

"Then perhaps your silence?"

"It's already sold." He looked at Rosalie. "To her."

The gloved hands moved, not much, just enough for me to know where my elbows were headed today. I put down my glass. "Friends," I said, "we're in a saloon, not the city council. If anyone can leave a woman alone, it's at least here, where no one has ever had any peace."

The little one—there's always the little one—grinned. "Hawkins, stick out your tongue, maybe I'll catch something."

"Stand on the street," I said, "that's where the trash cans are."

Fast? Yes. Ugly? Always. I pushed him sideways into the table, letting him hit the boards he would have so gladly shared with me. The tall one came, I gave him the edge of the counter in his shin, and he discovered a religion consisting only of curses. The traveler didn't raise his hand, he just raised an eyebrow—his signal for "later."

Rosalie had watched without taking her eyes off him. "Two and a half mistakes," she said.

"Which one?" I asked.

"First, you think speed replaces planning. Second, you think men stop once they're down. A half-fault for the bar—nice sound, but you should have finally insulted his knee."

"I'm working on my social skills," I said.

"Work on your enemies," she said.

Winnetou stepped beside her. "The story of the ten lovers," he said calmly, as if speaking to the desert, which can answer when it wants to. "Who wrote it?"

"No one who knows me," Rosalie replied. "And everyone who needs me."

"Do you need them?" he asked.

"I need money to buy silence."

"I have silence."

"You pay them with dignity. I pay them in cash."

They looked at each other, not for long, just enough for two men in the back left to mistake seeing for believing. The traveler heard it before it was spoken.

"Do you see?" he said gently. "Lover number one."

I laughed out loud, making the flies under the lampshade complain. "He's the only man in the room she couldn't buy, even if he were for sale," I said. "That's why he's not."

"And you, Hawkens?" the smooth one crooned.

"I don't buy anything I can't drink. And I rarely drink people."

"Today you will be thirsty."

"I'm already full today."

Rosalie placed a small notebook on the counter. Leather cover, worn edges. She opened it without looking away. "Ten lovers," she said, "that's what you'd call them. I call them ten IOUs." She tapped the pages. "One is a man with a badge who buys silence in installments. One is a preacher who buys speeches that he later attributes to his god. One is a shopkeeper who books more than he owns. One is a traveler who never pays—he has them signed. And six are men who grew too old to be brave anymore."

"And me?" I asked.

She flipped through the pages and shook her head. "You pay with words. I only take coins."

"This is cruel."

"This is business."

The traveler put on his polite smile again, like others put on a hat. "Madame, my offer stands."

"And my rejection is there," she said.

"Then all I can do is play the market." He nodded to the gloved men. "Outside."

We all went. Yes, everyone. The saloon exhaled, the street inhaled. Sun on dust, dust on tongue. The two assistants stood wide apart, which for them meant: they were suddenly the door. The smooth one sat in the middle, as if he were the entrance. "Simple," he said, "I'll send the story to town. Ten lovers—one of them your chief. I'm selling tickets for public opinion. Buy once, buy again."

"And what do you want?" I asked.

"One percent." He pointed at Rosalie. "Of everything earned from her."

Winnetou said nothing. His silence made the heat crackle. I took half a step forward, because I rarely live by prudent pauses. "Look at me, Glove," I said quietly. "Closer. Even closer. I want to tell you something."

He bent over. They always bend over. I wiped the dust from his tie with two fingers and then ran the edge of my hand against his throat—not hard, just sudden. He gasped, and for a moment, his face didn't even belong to him anymore. "One percent of me," I whispered, "is a mistake you can't afford."

The big one raised his arm. I broke his posture and allowed him his dignity. The little one wanted to try his luck from behind. Winnetou was behind him. It lasted the length of a breath you don't take because you forget how. When we were finished, nothing had happened—except that no one wanted to prove the opposite.

Rosalie stood there, her hands calmly clasped in front of her stomach, as if she had ordered and paid for the entire dance. "I don't accept contracts," she said. "But I'm making an announcement: Tonight, I'm not taking anyone. I'm taking back words." She held up the notebook. "The ten lovers—you're debts. I'm crossing out two. Voluntarily."

"Which one?" asked the street.

"The one with the badge. And the one with the pen." She tore out two pages.

"The invoice is canceled."

The preacher, who had hidden behind two men, ducked his head as if he were made for it. The sheriff's brother appeared on the corner, like shadows that don't know where they belong. "Why are you painting?" he asked.

"Because I want to be quiet tonight," she said.

I looked at her and, for the first time, I completely liked her. She turned to me.

"And you, Sam?"

"I haven't booked anything," I said.

"Then finally write down what you own."

"I have the wrong sense of humor."

"Then sell it at the right time."

"They don't exist here."

"Then do it."

Night crept against the houses, and the saloon was once again what it wanted to be: a box where people tried to forget themselves. Rosalie sat down in a corner, Mary-Lou sitting next to her. They didn't speak much. Women who do the math are quieter than men who pay.

The smooth one didn't come back. His two doormen were suddenly in a hurry, but couldn't get them together. The sheriff's brother ordered water and drank it as if it would prove to him that he was still human. Winnetou stood at the window and didn't count the stars.

"Ten lovers," murmured the old gambler, stroking his tin on his knee. "I once collected ten promises. One of them kept. The other nine hung on my back like tin."

"Which one held?" I asked.

"The one I gave myself: I keep playing."

"Good rate."

"Bad prospects."

Around midnight, Rosalie got up and placed the notebook on the bar. "Final price," she said, and the room held its breath. "I cost nothing today. But tomorrow, anyone who gawked today will cost double. Pay the bartender. He knows what silence is worth."

"And if someone doesn't pay?" asked the shopkeeper.

"Then we'll talk about him," she said. "Out loud."

I laughed into my sleeve. That's how you do business in a city that only knows two commodities: noise and scarcity. The bartender nodded as if he'd grown a tooth.

I went outside. The air smelled of night and a bill that hadn't yet been paid. Winnetou stepped up beside me. "It's free," he said.

"Free costs the most here."

"She pays."

"And us?"

"We stop lying."

"About what?" I asked.

"About what we want."

"I want silence," I said.

"You want noise you understand."

"Depends on the glass."

He looked at me as if he were memorizing a sentence he'd need tomorrow. "Tomorrow they'll say 'Ten Lovers' again."

"Tomorrow they will say: Eleven."

"And you?"

"I'm laughing," I said. "At the wrong time."

In the gloom, Rosalie appeared next to me, as if she'd heard us the whole time. "You can laugh, Sam. But not at me today."

"Today I'm laughing next to you," I said.

She nodded. "Tomorrow I'm not selling anything. Tomorrow I'm buying the stream. Just for one morning. Do you know what that is?"

"Holidays for men."

"Silence to go."

The traveler didn't show up again until early morning, as if waiting for another bump in the night. I was already sitting on my crate again, my glass half empty, my tongue half still. He stopped at the corner, his gloves clean, his smile freshly ironed. "Business is business," he called out amiably.

"And you are you," I called back.

"See you at the next rumors."

"Bring change," I said. "Today we're only taking coins."

He disappeared as they all disappear: in the shadow of a wall that someone else paid for.

Rosalie walked past me to the fountain, without looking at us, without improving the town. Mary-Lou followed, keeping a watchful eye on her from behind. Winnetou stopped where he left off: in his own lane.

"Fornication," I said to the air, which wanted to listen for once. "That's not what they think. That's when you sell your peace piece by piece so that you can eventually afford it all."

The sun rose, the street acted as if it were new, and I knew: tomorrow they'll count again. Lovers, cans, mistakes. And I'll sit here, and if someone asks me what Rosalie is really selling, I'll say: "You. Yourself. For five minutes." And if they then ask: "And how much does Sam cost?" I'll say: "A glass of Still, please. Unsweetened."

This is whoredom #1. Not because someone's getting into bed—but because no one has the courage to leave before the music stops. I took the last sip, which

wasn't one, and set the glass down as if marking something. Maybe I was. Maybe it was just dust.

No matter. I was there. And I saw a woman dismiss ten lovers without kissing a single one. That's what I call business. And dignity. And the kind of joke that doesn't laugh because it doesn't have to.

Chapter 13 - A dance for those who can no longer dance

The evening smelled of wood that had heard too much. The sun hung like a cheap coin over the roof ridge, and the city pretended to be ready to be nice. I sat on my box, rubbing my knuckles, which for days had only spoken to me when it suited them, and read the crooked note on the post: **Dance for those who can no longer dance – saloon tonight.** Admission: nothing. Donations: everything.

"Who wrote this?" I asked the air.

"I did," said Mary-Lou, tapping my forehead. "And I did it wrong on purpose. Otherwise they'd think it was serious."

"Isn't it serious?"

"Just serious enough that it's not embarrassing."

I stood up. "Let me guess: You put tables against the wall, take down two lamps, put them lower so the faces don't lie as much, and then you say there's dancing."

"No," she said. "I'll put the tables against the wall, take down two lamps, put them lower so no one can see what he looks like—and then what's supposed to happen will happen."

"It's the same thing."

"Not if you hit the right note."

The saloon smelled of plan and the kind of courage you touch before you drink it. The bartender had roughly swept the floor, which around here is called

renovation. The pianist was pounding the three usable keys until they were warmed up, and a fiddler from the hinterland was stringing his instrument as if teaching an animal a new voice. Rosalie stood in the shadows, counting with her eyes the faces that wouldn't behave today. The old player polished the brass can and claimed it was now a drum. I didn't believe him, but the can was on time.

Winnetou entered without disturbing anyone. He nodded to the room. The room nodded back. Some men danced, occupying a seat until others found their step.

The first ones came miraculously in pairs: a woman with a cane and a man with a leg that was too short; a veteran with one arm and a widow with a memory that weighed twice as much as she did; a boy who had never learned what to do with his hands and an old teacher who had never learned when to raise them. I drank, watched, and my heart made the sound of a poorly oiled drawer: it opened whether I wanted it or not.

Mary-Lou clapped her hands. "Rules," she shouted. "First: Anyone who can dances, and anyone who can't gets pushed. Second: No one talks about feet. Third: Anyone who laughs, laughs quietly—unless it's good for them. Fourth: Anyone with money puts it down. Anyone with none picks up what falls. Fifth: There are no spectators today."

The fiddler pulled a note out of his instrument that sounded as if he'd lost two lives on the way here. The pianist added three notes underneath that didn't know each other, but liked each other. And then they started—not as a wave, more like a dent. The floor creaked, the dust lifted slightly, the lamps made the skin more honest. I stood against the wall, glass in hand, and realized I'd opened my mouth too wide.

"Sam," said Widow McCready, standing in front of me as if I were a chair that needed to be used today. "Today we dance together."

"I have two left feet."

"I have two who claim to be right."

"This is going to be tight."

"We're taking it slow."

We took it slowly. A step that wasn't really a step. A rocking that seemed to hold. Her hands were dry and warm, and her breath smelled not of grief, but of tea that had waited too long. "He wasn't a good man," she said quietly.

"I know."

"But it was mine."

"That's often enough."

"Today is enough."

"Today is enough," I repeated, so that I would believe it.

We turned around once because there was only enough room for one, and when we stopped, her expression was lighter than before. "Thank you," she said.

"I just didn't stand in the way."

"That's the highest thing in this city."

The sheriff's brother stood at the edge like a fence post, his hands so empty they made noise. I took the glass from him and put it down. "No herding today," I said. "Pushing today."

"I can't dance."

"Then don't study today."

I led him to the woman with a cane, who laughed when he made the mistake of seeking guidance. "Let me," she said, "I know where I want to go." He nodded, looked down at his feet, forgot about them, and for three bars the city was less ugly.

The door opened, and with the breeze came two gloved men. They wore their disgust like badges. "Enter," said one.

"We pay differently," said Mary-Lou without turning around.

"Today you pay with peace of mind," said the other.

"It's sold out," I said.

"Then you pay with silence." He raised his fist as if it were a stamp.

I went over. "Friends," I said, "if you make any noise today, we'll dance on you. And I'm not as light as I look."

"You think you're funny," hissed the former.

"I consider myself tired," I said. "And tired men strike shorter."

He grabbed, I was faster, not because I'm the one, but because tonight my body knew that words weren't enough. A kick to the point where men stop being clever. It worked. I caught him by the collar so he wouldn't fall loudly. The other got Winnetou's look and decided his courage deserved a break. "Free entry," I said, and carried the folded-up bug out the door. Outside, I let him learn what soil tastes like.

Inside, the fiddler was now warming up. He was playing something that wasn't quite a polka, not quite a march, more a compromise between two crutches. Rosalie was still standing in the shadows. I went over. "Are you dancing?"

"I get silence," she said.

"Not today."

"Maybe today," she said, and in her eyes was that small, precious spark that leaves no bill unpaid.

Winnetou stepped up, and for a moment yesterday's false story hung in the air: ten lovers and one with feathers. "Do you want to?" Rosalie asked him.

"I dance badly," he said.

"I don't sell anything that has to be good," she said.

They took a step to the side, a step forward, a step back. Not a dance for the eyes. A dance for the breath. Two people moving around nothing, yet creating space that wasn't there before. The saloon looked away without looking away. I almost liked us in that moment.

Eli scurried past me, thin, sore, eyes as bright as torches. "Just look," he whispered.

"Not today," I said. "Today, just a circle."

"I can't."

"Me neither."

"You lie well."

"I've been practicing for years."

I introduced him to the widow. "Slowly," I said. He didn't step on her toes. He stepped on his own fear. That's harder.

The old player drummed his thigh with the brass tin, finding a rhythm my heart recognized. "For those who can no longer dance," he murmured. "You lift your feet in your head."

"Sometimes you put your head on the table," I said.

"Dance too."

Outside, boots crunched—different ones than ours. The smooth one, gloves clean, teeth polished, stepped through the door as if it belonged to him. "Good idea," he said amiably. "Fundraising night."

"Good idea," replied Mary-Lou, "an evening without guests."

He smiled. "I just want to talk."

"I just want to drink," said the bartender, demonstratively placing the bottle closer to his side.

"You dance for the broken," said the smooth one, letting the words drip onto the floorboards. "I dance for the future. Tomorrow there's work."

"Today we're giving you legs," I said. "And they're staying here."

"You have made enemies," he said.

"We're constantly making enemies. We've run out of friends."

He took a half step into the room, and it became apparent how much he didn't fit in. "Our offer stands: order versus noise."

"Noise is okay today," said Mary-Lou. "Tomorrow you can rent out your mouth again."

He looked at Rosalie as if he might find change there. "And you? Exclusivity?"

"I only accept cash," she said. "And today I'm not taking anything."

He sighed, as if he felt sorry for the city. "Then dance. But don't forget: when the music ends, you'll pay double for the silence."

"We're happy to pay," I said. "As long as we don't have to write today."

He left. Outside, you could hear the two glove-wearing men pretending to still have knees. I exhaled without admitting I'd been holding my breath.

The fiddler moved into something that wanted to be a waltz and smelled like a memory that couldn't be undone. I watched the woman with the cane, who now walked alone in a circle as if she were drawing a name on planks. I watched the veteran with one arm teach the air partners. I watched the sheriff's brother count and forget how to count. I watched Eli arch his back as if he had no scars. I saw Rosalie and Winnetou not dancing and yet keeping their center.

I placed my glass on the floor and took one step into the circle, just one. Someone laughed. Someone cried. Both were correct. I placed my hand on the old player's shoulder. "Keep drumming," I said. "As long as your can can."

"She can, as long as I knock."

"Then don't die today."

"Today I'm just old."

The piano creaked and found a note that still fit. The bartender didn't accept coins; he took slips of paper with names on them. "For whom?" he asked, and people said names I didn't know, and two that hurt me. Hal. And one I never say. I didn't put anything down. I just nodded.

It was late when the lamps grew smaller. You dance differently when the darkness begins to take over your steps. Not bigger. More sustained. More honest. Mary-Lou clapped one last time. "Enough for today," she said. "The floor must be able to lie tomorrow, too."

We walked out as if after a sermon, only without God and still breathing. The street had become chilly, and somewhere the stream stole a compliment. Eli stood next to me, staring at his shoes. "Was that dancing?"

"Enough," I said. "Enough for today."

"I don't smell of blood anymore."

"You smell like dust. That's progress."

"Will I ever...?"

"No," I said.

"No?"

"Not today. Don't ask. Go to sleep, boy. Let your feet do the work."

He walked without running. Good. Not every step forward has to be a bad one.

Winnetou remained standing at the doorpost, his hand steady, his shoulders bare. "Some dances are just movements," he said.

"Some moves are all we get," I said.

"And you?"

"I dance badly."

"You hold people."

"I try to stand in the way when they fall."

"That's a lot."

"That's all."

Rosalie approached us. "Again tomorrow?" she asked.

"No," I said. "Otherwise it'll become a business deal."

"Maybe a good one," said Mary-Lou from inside.

"There are no good deals with hope," I said. "Only ones that make you spit less later."

Rosalie nodded. "Then not tomorrow. Maybe the day after tomorrow. If my feet want to lie again."

The old player sat down on the step and tapped the can empty. "No more beats," he said, smiling wearily. "Just reverberations."

I took a few steps down the street, to where night makes the houses unrecognizable. The dust was cool, the stars as overrated as ever. I raised my hand and did a small, ridiculous turn, just for me. One for those who couldn't today. One for those who never can again. One for Hal, who would rather go north. One for the woman with a stick. One for the man with one arm. One for the brother who counted until the numbers became nice. One for Eli, who will carry on tomorrow without knowing how. One for Rosalie, who sold silence and gave it away today. One for Winnetou, who doesn't dance and still holds the center. One for Mary-Lou, who knows how to make a city breathe.

"A dance for those who can't dance anymore," I said to the street, which had decided to be good for another five minutes. "And for those who pretend." I sat back down on my box, placed the glass next to me, and lowered my hat. From inside, I heard chairs sliding back into place. A dog barked three times and then realized that no one needed to be frightened today.

I closed my eyes. The ground beneath me quietly counted to three and stopped, because three was enough. I wasn't thinking about anything. Which is a lie. But it was a good lie. The kind you need to get up tomorrow and tell people where left is when all they know is right.

And if someone had asked me to whom I'd dedicate the evening, I would have said: To those who have to walk in circles so that the path continues. That's our trick here. We don't have more. Sometimes it's enough. Today it was enough. Tomorrow there will be more stumbles. Then we'll just dance over the places that hurt. As long as the floorboards hold. As long as the can drums. As long as someone claps and says: "Rules are simple: No one stays seated."

Chapter 14 - Boots full of mud and lies

The morning came in a color that doesn't deserve a name. The rain had decided during the night that it wanted to stay, and the city nodded, as if it had pledged its dignity and finally received a bill. Water trickled from the edges of the roof, as if the boards had been weeping all these years and had now decided to become honest. My boots slapped with every step, as if applauding me for getting up again today to smell the same shit.

I stood under the saloon porch and watched the stream swell and still behave. The bartender put a whiskey in front of me, hiding from the rain, swearing it was warm. I took a sip. He lied. "Tastes like someone washed socks in it," I said.

"Those are your boots," said the bartender. "They'll drink with you."

"They drink better than half the city."

"The other half lies better."

"And who's lying today?"

"Anyone who claims to have dry feet."

The grocer stormed in, soaking wet and so angry his hat didn't know which way to fall. "The whore!" he roared, and Mary-Lou, standing behind the counter, put her hand on the bottle to calm her down. "Rosalie robbed me. Her men. Last night. Three sacks of beans, two crates of sugar, and my good soot pot."

"The pot was already old when you were born," said the bartender.

"Old means tried and tested," snapped the shopkeeper.

I let the rain speak for one sentence, then I asked, "Why Rosalie?"

"Because the trail leads right to her window!"

"Trace? In this weather?"

"Mud! Big boots!"

"Big boots are fashionable here. Show me something that doesn't fit everyone."

He waved a wet piece of canvas. It bore a brownish imprint, a little too neat to be real dirt. "Proof."

I took it. It smelled of a cellar, not of the world. "This is pressed," I said. "With the love of a man who has never seen an honest foot."

"You insult my suffering," he growled.

"I insult your intelligence. Your suffering insults itself."

He jerked his head toward the door. "Come with me. I'll show you."

I pulled my hat down and raised my patience to its limit. Outside, the street was no longer a street, but an exercise in drowning. The rain stood still, the mud ran, and somewhere between the two, the city pretended to have rules. The grocer trudged ahead, to his shop, behind the crates, into the alley where the ground looked like a disease. "There," he said, pointing at prints—too neat, too straight, like Ecclesiastes's handwriting when he's glossing over a sin. Large. Even. Once right, once left, once straight ahead—and then a silly arc that pointed directly to a window Rosalie never uses.

"Whoever did that has more time than brains," I said. I knelt in the dirt, which immediately took over my knee, and stroked the edge with two fingers. "Someone pressed down here after it stopped raining. And it didn't stop raining."

"What do you mean by that?"

"That you like being fooled."

"From whom?"

"By men with gloves."

He blinked the rain out of his eyes. "The one with the smooth one?"

"There is only one smooth one, and he brings his own clouds with him."

Behind me, someone laughed, briefly and wetly. I turned around, slowly, so my boots wouldn't decide to leave me. Two glove-wearing men stood there as if they'd spent the night under the roofs, where lies stay dry. "Morning, Hawkens," one said.

"Morning, dirt," I said.

"Bad rain, huh? Washing everything out of the corners."

"Except for you."

"We only help to point the finger."

"Your finger always points to where you peed before."

The second stepped forward. "You're making it easy for yourself."

"I'll wet myself," I said. "Easy doesn't look like that."

They grinned, and the grin was the only clean thing in the alley. "This afternoon," said the first, "there's an announcement in the saloon. Public. The traveler will speak."

"Then let him speak. I'll dance."

"Not in the mud," said the second.

"I dance better in the mud."

They left. The shopkeeper stood there like someone whose morals had been stolen and who now didn't know whether to be grateful. "And?" he asked.

"And you keep your mouth shut until this afternoon. And close up shop. And wash your brains with soap if you have any left."

"I have sugar."

"Doesn't taste like that."

I trudged back, each step a contract with the earth: I give you weight, you give me curses. Behind the saloon, the courtyard is a hole that the rain doesn't like, and for good reason. Clayey, heavy, secretive. I wanted to see if anyone was stupid enough to leave a mark there. Someone was. Me. Because when I took the edge, it broke like a promise, and I landed up to my waist in a soup that has been waiting for years to explain to someone what patience is. The mud gripped me lovingly and wanted to keep me.

"Sam?" Mary-Lou's voice said above me, and I looked up into her face, which looked as if it had hosted the day and had finally found the punchline. "You like being useful, huh?"

"I'm just testing the density."

She handed me a wooden beam. I pulled, the mud pulled, I cursed, the mud listened, and at some point I was half human again. My boots were now two buckets in which to ferment lies. Mary-Lou handed me a towel that had seen three previous lives. "The smooth one is buying statements these days," she said. "Two dollars a sentence, five dollars a tear."

"Cheap."

"We're worth it to him."

"And Rosalie?"

"She laughs."

"Laughter is cheap."

"Not if you have to buy silence later."

I let my boots dry like one unloads barrels and went inside. The saloon smelled of wet wool and anticipation. Winnetou stood at the back wall, where the water couldn't reach. He looked out at the rain and into the crowd and said, "The prints outside Rosalie's window are mirror-like. Too clean. Someone made a stencil."

"So the smooth one."

"Or someone who wants to impress him."

"The prints at the grocer's?"

"One size bigger. The same shoe, two sizes larger. Paper in the boot. Men who help their lies grow."

I nodded. He handed me a small, wet scrap of paper. The bill was half-unfolded. "Two boots, numbers nine and eleven. Paid in cash. Initials: RG."

"RG is the traveler. Or someone who pretends to be."

"Both options lead to the same thing."

"Into the mud. And into the audience."

"Today, the audience is important."

The afternoon arrived, broad and gray. The city dressed up, which is to say: they acted as if they were. The traveler arrived punctually, as if punctuality were a virtue that hadn't been sold long ago. Gloves clean, coat closed, a smile that said: I won't accept rain. He climbed onto a box still warm from my thoughts and raised his hands. "Friends!" he cried, as if we had ever been like this. "This rain washes. It washes away guilt."

"He washes heads clean," muttered the bartender.

"Today we need only one thing: the courage to speak what we have seen. The shopkeeper saw what everyone knows: A woman, Rosalie, attracts men. Where men are, things disappear."

"Where there are men, brains disappear," Mary-Lou said under her breath.

The traveler continued: "I won't use harsh words. I'm just managing the votes. Whoever believes they've been stolen comes forward. The city decides who believes whom."

The shopkeeper stepped forward, wet, trembling, his mouth full of sentences that were already too long. "You—" he began, and I raised my hand.

"Stop," I said. "Something else first."

The traveler smiled at me. "Mr. Hawkens, always a good comment."

"Whenever referees are bought."

I picked up a bucket—I'd treated myself to one in the courtyard, complete with its contents. Mud. Warm, stubborn, full of elements no one wants to see. I tipped it onto the counter, where the traveler had just pointedly placed his gloves next to a glass. The mud flowed over the edge, sought its way into the cracks of the city, and found it as if it had known it for a long time.

"What's going on?" the smooth one hissed, and for the first time I heard the edge in his voice where the friendliness gives up.

"That's your announcement," I said. "Boots full of mud and lies. Number nine, number eleven. RG on the bill you lost yesterday when you bought two idiots bigger feet so they could make nonexistent steps in front of Rosalie's window. So the shopkeeper would scream, so you'd become the spokesperson, so you'd sell us what's yours: your damned story."

The room was quiet enough that you could hear the rain outside smacking in offense. The smooth man blinked. "Evidence?" he asked gently.

I put down the torn piece of paper Winnetou had given me. "Is that enough? Or should I shovel the mud you used to make those prints back into your mouth?"

The shopkeeper looked from me to the smooth man, and from the smooth man to Rosalie, who was standing in the corner, looking as if she had decided

to stop paying. "I..." he said, searching for words that weren't sold to him. "I... just said what I saw."

"You saw what they laid out for you," I said. "And that's not called seeing. That's called hearing with your feet."

A man in the second row cleared his throat. "I also saw... tracks," he said cautiously.

"Where?" I asked.

"Everywhere," he said, and I nodded. "Everywhere. Today there are only traces. The rain makes every lie more visible. The truth remains where it always was: silent."

The smooth man took the gloves, wiped off the mud as if he were guilty, and smiled again, thinner. "I see I'm not welcome here."

"You're not welcome anywhere," said Mary-Lou. "Here, they just tell you."

"You are just."

"We're wet."

He jumped off the box, as gracefully as if no one had pushed him, and went to the door. Two gloved men stepped forward, instinct, not guts. Winnetou only moved his eyes. It was enough to change the weather. They stepped back. The smooth one remained standing in the doorway, turned around again. "She won't save you," he said, gesturing vaguely toward Rosalie.

"She doesn't have to save us," I said. "She just doesn't have to be sentenced today because you sold shoes."

He left. The rain didn't smile after him.

The grocer approached me, smaller than me, as he came in. "And my beans?" he asked. "My sugar? The pot?"

"The pot was in the coffin maker's yard yesterday. He used it to boil nails. Some horse that wanted to be fed last week ate your beans. And the preacher stirred the sugar into his god. Go pray. And boil the pot back for the coffin maker."

He nodded. Not because he believed me. Because he knew there was no better lie that would work today.

Rosalie came to the bar and placed a wet coin before the bartender. "For cleaning," she said.

"The mud belongs to us," he said. "It stays."

She looked at me. "And you?"

"Me?" I lifted my foot, letting my boot empty out at the edge. Mud reverently, splashing, a small funeral for dirt. "I'm just emptying out what others have tipped in."

"Does it feel better?"

"Until the next step."

Mary-Lou handed me a dry sock, one from a better life. "You didn't have to tip the bucket over the counter," she said.

"I wanted to get in my face first. But the counter is creating bills."

"You are a barbarian."

"I'm an accountant with different methods."

Winnetou took the wet piece of paper and smoothed it out on the wood as if it were an animal that was allowed to breathe again. "RG," he said. "He's becoming more cautious."

"Let them all," I said.

The rest of the afternoon was music without instruments. People talked and listened, which rarely happens at the same time. A few put down money—for Rosalie? For silence? For the bartender? For themselves? It's all the same, if you're honest. The preacher arrived late, smelling of rain and something that might be considered sin. "Good deed," he said.

"A good deed is when you walk," said Mary-Lou.

He left. Sometimes even the church learns.

Towards evening, the rain stopped, so suddenly, as if it had realized we didn't deserve it. The street was a mirror-like wound, where the houses stared at each other, not getting any better. I went outside, boots heavy, head lighter. The sky pretended to apologize, with a perforated stripe of blue. I sat down on

my box, lifted my foot, and tipped out the rest of the mud. There it lay, a small heap of brown truth and black memory. I nudged it with my boot. It didn't budge.

"Boots full of mud and lies," I said to the air, which was allowed to breathe again. "You empty them. Tomorrow they'll be full again."

The old gambler sat down next to me, his brass tin on his knees, and tapped a beat with his finger that sounded like slander. "Which is worse?" he asked. "Mud or lies?"

"Mud," I said. "You can drink a lie until it forgets itself. Mud wants to stay."

"And what remains of today?"

"That someone with good shoes slips when he thinks the city belongs to him."

"And what remains of you?"

I stroked the back of my hand over the hat, as if I might find my answer there. "Two prints. One real. One fake. I hope they read the fake one first."

"Why?"

"Because then they realize what the real one looks like."

He nodded as if I'd just given him a math problem that could only be solved with lucky schnapps. "And tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow I'll buy new socks. And a lie that runs slower."

"It lasts longer."

"It will last until noon."

Mary-Lou brought out two glasses. "To the dry cleaners," she said.

"To the dirt," I said, and we drank because it's the only thing we can really do once the rain has stopped telling us how small we are.

Later, when the street could bear footsteps again, the traveler passed the corner once more without going in. He raised his hand briefly, more out of reflex than greeting. I raised nothing. I'm bad at gestures. My boots were finally just boots. I thought of Hal, of Eli, of the brother, of Rosalie, of Winnetou, of

the grocer, of the preacher, of the two glove-wearing men who now had to split the bill. And I thought that tomorrow morning, someone with a clean shirt would try to sell a truth again.

I stood up, knocked my boots on the edge, and the city released them again. One last lump fell, heavy as a sentence you don't like to say. "That's enough for today," I muttered. "The rest sticks where it wants to stick."

I went in, sat down, and put down my glass. The bartender was polishing the counter, which has heard worse stories about mud. "You're giving me a lot of work," he said.

"I'll make you a customer," I said.

"The same."

"Not always."

He grinned. "Today, yes."

I pulled my hat down low and let the tiredness come, like a dog you can't chase away because at least it knows where you live. When I wake up tomorrow, my boots will be heavy again. And me. But today's lie has gotten wet feet. Sometimes that's enough. Sometimes all it takes is one hole someone steps into for the city to realize how flimsy the ground is on which it stands so securely. I fell asleep, the rain in my ears like a truth that has decided to become quieter.

Chapter 15 - The City That Only Breathes at Night

Night didn't come like a curtain. It crept. First along the edges of the roofs where the rain had wrung the day dry, then across the street that pretended to be dry. The city holds its breath during the day so no one notices how old it is. At night, it begins to gasp, honestly, openly, without shame. I sat on my crate and listened. A stovetop cracked somewhere, as if someone had accidentally closed the sky. A bottle rolled under the saloon and came to rest where the rats have their museum. A horse pawed the ground in a pause longer than the day. Everything that had pretended to be dead during the day breathed.

"Sam," Mary-Lou said at the door, "the bartender wants you to drink more quietly today."

"I never drink quietly. I drink properly."

"It's three. Three is the hour when men lose their voices and have nothing but teeth."

"Good. Then we'll grind together."

She tossed me a half-empty bottle. It smelled of something that used to be better—like all of us. "Take a walk," she said. "The city is nervous."

"The city is always nervous. Otherwise we'd be somebody."

I stood, my boots finally back to being boots and not buckets. The sky was the color of old coins, and the moon pretended to still recognize us. I walked past the sheds, the raincoat still clinging to their boards. The well snorted briefly, pumped nothing, but pretended to, out of pride. Behind the saloon, the clay pit, today as silent as a child after a slap. By the mill path, the stream made that noise I can only bear at night: that of water that doesn't reach its destination and yet keeps going.

The sheriff's brother was standing by the footbridge leading to the small cemetery. He held his hat in his hand, as if trying to convince it not to jump off his head. "Hawkins," he said, without looking at me.

"Brother dear."

"I can't breathe during the day."

"During the day, you smell too much shoulders. At night, you smell yourself."

"Worse."

"Nice," I said. "It's worse when you don't do it anymore."

He turned his cap as if there were an idea underneath. "They couldn't eat the smooth one today."

"The smooth one has Teflon on his soul. Everything slides off him, except for bills."

"You don't like him."

"I don't like anyone who makes contracts with tired people."

"And me?"

"You're tired enough not to pass judgment today."

"I rarely speak words that last." He took a deep breath. Night air is cheaper than order. "You defended Rosalie."

"I was defending us. We can't afford an enemy right now who confuses noise with boot size."

"Do you believe in them?"

"I believe in silence with a receipt. She writes receipts."

He nodded. "I'm going home."

"Go slowly. The night doesn't like running."

He walked slowly, as if he'd done me that favor many times before. I stayed. The gate to the cemetery was ajar, and the boards didn't groan when I placed my hand on them. Good boards have their limits. I leaned against them, not into them, just close. The names on the crosses were too dark to be read, and that was fine with me. I never want to know who'll be staring at me tomorrow when they're sick of it.

Eli surfaced like a cat, only without the laws. "Sam," he whispered. "I've been practicing."

"What?"

"Not to speak if I am seen."

"And?"

"It is difficult."

"Everything difficult is at least honest."

"Are you scared?"

"I only have respect. Fear is too expensive."

He looked around as if he'd stolen the school from the night. "They say the city only breathes at night."

"Who is she?"

"Those who sleep during the day."

"Then for once you're right."

He gave a small grin. "Can I stay?"

"No," I said. "Go where the moon can't find the road. Today you practice shadows, tomorrow you practice feet."

"Feet?"

"Feet know where to go before the head can. Trust them."

He disappeared into the corner where the houses had decided to be no longer windows. I walked back along the path, past the slaughterhouse, which now smelled only of memories. Two men stood on the corner I don't like. Hands in their pockets, heads pretending they weren't heads. Gloves? No. Those were the others—those who believe the night is just a big cloak.

"Evening," said one, not rudely.

"Tomorrow," I said, because it was closer.

"We don't like you," said the other, friendly as a knife that just wanted to show that it was still there.

"You have taste. I don't like myself either."

"You talk too much for a man who has to be searched for in the dark."

"Then you better search."

"Or we can find you together."

"There are already two of you. Don't count on stockpiling."

They approached, and the moon did its best to remain just: it wasn't shining on anyone. I loosened my hand, not on the Colt—on the sentence. "Listen," I said, "I'm not in the mood for long shots today. One more step, and I'll steal your

names right out of your mouths. Then you'll have to introduce yourselves again tomorrow, and that's more embarrassing than it sounds."

That was enough for the first one. The second needed the edge of his hand, just enough for his throat to carry the message. "Tell your boss," I whispered, "that the night sets prices he can't afford. By day he sells the future, at night we buy peace. And we pay in cash."

They withdrew. Men who lose at night sometimes remain decent. Or they bring in brothers. Today they chose decency. I went back to the well, which was finally just water again. Rosalie sat on the edge, beside her the necklace with the small spare eye, which blinked in the moonlight as if it were drunk.

"I'm not collecting anything today," she said.

"Tonight the night takes the cake."

"She's more practiced at it."

"She's older."

"You too."

"I'm just dying slower."

She laughed briefly, mercilessly, but purposefully. "You've added ten new lovers to my list today."

"And?"

"I tore up ten new IOUs."

"That makes you poor."

"That doesn't buy me."

"And tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow I won't sell silence. Tomorrow I'll buy noise to bury."

"Expensive."

"I saved."

We remained silent until the fountain stopped pretending to have an opinion.
"Do you know what I love at night?" she then asked.

"Tell me slowly."

"It's an honest market. If you're too loud, you pay. If you're too quiet, you disappear. The only people who fit in between are those who can dance without music."

"This isn't dancing. This is survival."

"Call it what you will. The main thing is that you don't fall."

"I fall well."

"You better get up."

I nodded, not because I agreed with myself, but because the moon agreed. She stood up, smoothed the hem as if pulling the shirt over her hips for the evening. "Sleep," she said.

"I owe you a round of cards."

"You don't owe me anything as long as you're breathing."

"I don't like breathing."

"I know." She left. The spare eye dangled as if trying to steal another thought from me. I let it go.

At the rail line, where the tracks stop pretending there's more to come, stood the old player. The brass box on his shoulder, like a general's badge, only more honest. "Sam," he said, "do you hear it?"

"Everything."

"What is the most beautiful sound today?"

"The gap before the oven tray bangs again."

"And what's the ugliest?"

"When a man tries to hide his tears and loses his breath."

"The brother?"

"Many brothers."

He nodded as if I'd bet him pennies. "The night counts us through."

"We let ourselves be counted because nobody else likes numbers."

"Tomorrow they'll ask you again."

"What?"

"Where to put the shoes."

"Into the dust. Always into the dust."

We stood there for a minute, during which the city did only what it was capable of: living without boasting. Then he tapped the can, twice, and the sound was so small that I had to take it seriously. "I'm going back to sleep," he said. "My dreams are in a bad mood when I wait for them."

"Give them my regards," I said. "Tell them not to tell me the same crap tomorrow."

"Dreams are repeat offenders."

"Me too."

I walked down the mill path; the stones had learned my way by now. At the bend where the willow creaked, stood Winnetou. You don't see him, you feel him, like cool air under a door. "Sam," he said, and his name never sounded to me as if he were trying to make a sermon out of it. "The man with the gloves was by the tracks. He paid three or four rats."

"For what?"

"For the belief that the night belongs to him."

"And?"

"Rats believe quickly. But they don't keep quiet."

"So we know what he wants tomorrow."

"He wants us to listen to him."

"We listen to him."

"We'll stop in the middle," said Winnetou. That was his sense of humor: dry as a bone, old as sand. "And then we'll talk."

"What?"

"Less than him."

"Better."

"I can only speak quietly."

"The night may be quiet."

He placed his hand briefly on my shoulder, so lightly that it was more of a promise than a gesture. "Sleep, Sam."

"I owe you the try."

"Guilt is a daily issue."

"At night we're even."

He disappeared. Not because he can do magic. Because he's practicing. I went back to the box and took a second sip from the bottle, which now smelled less and meant more. Inside, Mary-Lou was polishing glasses that never get clean because men drink from them. The bartender wasn't counting the money. He was counting the faces. Good bookkeeping.

The smooth man suddenly stood on the street corner, like a picture someone had subsequently nailed to a wall. He raised his hand, not in greeting—as a test. "Mr. Hawken," he said. "The night proves me right."

"The night proves no one right. It only spreads darkness."

"My offers sound better in the dark."

"In the dark, all lies sound like comfort."

"I sell comfort."

"I know."

He approached. His coat was dry, which was nonsense. "Tomorrow," he said, "the city will speak. I'll give it a tongue."

"The city has a tongue. It's reluctant to bite when strangers are listening."

"I am no longer a stranger."

"You never were. Being a stranger is an honor."

He smiled from the textbook. "You'll believe me."

"They will listen to you. Faith is more expensive."

"You underestimate my rates."

"And you, my anger."

He looked at my boots. "Still mud?"

"Only inside."

"Then be careful it doesn't dry out."

"I like wearing it. It reminds me that soil exists."

"I prefer height."

"Falling is more painful from above."

"I'm not falling."

"Not yet."

He wanted to leave, but stayed because men like him always speak a sentence too long. "The city breathes at night, you say?"

"You see."

"Good. Then I'll take her breath away during the day tomorrow."

"Try it. Then we'll show you how to revive without being friendly."

He left. I heard his footsteps until the night decided it didn't like them anymore.

Inside the saloon, it was now the hour when the best lies go freely. Rosalie was helping a whore whose shoes had more blisters than men. Mary-Lou slammed the cash register shut as if it were a judgment. The old gambler was gone. The sheriff's brother was probably sleeping on a chair he hadn't paid for. I took a chair that liked me and sat down with the bottle by the edge of the light. You drink differently when no one's around. Not prettier. Just more honest.

"You'll talk again tomorrow," said Mary-Lou.

"I talk every morning. Until someone listens."

"Many listen. Few understand."

"Understanding is a luxury."

"Silence too."

"Today we had both briefly."

"Short things last longer if they fit properly."

"Like a good punch."

"Like a real kiss," she said, and left before I could answer. Women who could save you would rather let you live. It's fairer.

The bottle was still two finger marks high. I let one into me, one onto the floor. "To the city," I said, not out loud. "To its lungs, forgotten by day. To the night, which has to pump all this out."

Outside, a hoof scraped. A cat negotiated with a can. Someone added wood, evenly, without rushing, like someone giving his demons work so they wouldn't bite him. I stood up, walked to the door, and leaned against the frame as if it were an old friend. The night nodded back. It's the only boss I accept: It gives nothing, it takes nothing away. It only shows what's left over when no one's paying attention to being pretty.

I walked to the middle of the street again, raised my hand as if I were about to preach, and then let it fall again. Saying nothing, meaning everything. "Can you hear me?" I asked the city, which was currently panting like an animal after a

race. "Good. Then keep listening. Tomorrow I'll be talking nonsense and truth in one sentence again. You know me. Figure it out. I'm not your father. I'm just the guy on the box."

The moon crept behind a cloud that was pretending to be grand. The fountain sighed contentedly. Somewhere, a stovetop cracked again, because wood remembers the weather. I sat down, spread my feet so the night could pass between them, and closed my eyes, not to sleep, but to briefly avoid seeing how beautiful the city becomes when no one judges it. That's the trick: We're all better when the lights don't matter.

"The city that only breathes at night," I murmured, tasting the word like a whiskey that was too warm. "All right. I'll breathe along. Until it gets light. Then I'll hold my breath again so the stupid people don't get scared."

I downed the rest of the bottle, placed it next to me, where it acted as if it had never been full, and held my hand to the Colt, purely out of habit, as other men grasp the cross. Above me, an owl counted the steps of those who wouldn't make it to tomorrow. Below me, the wood counted the nails. Beside me, the dust counted the sentences I should forbid myself from saying tomorrow.

Today I'm not forbidding myself. Today the air belongs to me. And to the city. We share. We both get too little, but enough not to die. That's the deal I'm signing: Live by night, lie by day, and in between, beat the mud out of my boots so I can see I still have weight.

I nodded off, not sleep, more like a pause. The city continued to breathe. Good. Tomorrow we'll force them to be polite again. Today rude. Rude is more honest.

Chapter 16 - Two shots, no applause

The evening acted as if it had already had enough of us. The saloon smelled of wet wood, old grease, and the remnants of the rain that had crept into the floorboards like a dog that knows it's its fault. The piano had rediscovered its three notes and acted as if it had four. I sat on my crate by the window, drinking a whiskey that tasted as if it had been trying to be a better man, and the cards at table two were practicing the Pope: lots of gestures, few miracles.

Mary-Lou polished a glass until it was ashamed to still be there. "It's going to be a blast today," she said, as if it were the weather.

"There's always banging today," I said, "sometimes only inside."

"If you keep it in, something fake dies. If you let it out, something real dies."

"Today I have no opinion left."

"Good start."

The bartender slid me a second one. "In reserve," he said. "Like lying."

"Lies last longer," I said, and then the first shot rang out.

Not a heroic tone. Not a clean crack from a catalog. More like someone had finally agreed with a rusty garden gate. The piano stopped pretending to be brave. The deck of cards held its breath. Someone laughed too loudly and pretended it was a cough.

I half-stood, half-sitted, because I knew the pause that comes after a gunshot: the moment when the city decides whether to pretend it was a misunderstanding. Then came the second one. Closer. Cleaner. A sentence with a period, not a comma.

"Two shots, no applause," I said automatically, because some sentences stick with me like bad teeth.

"Stop the jokes," Mary-Lou hissed. "Go."

"I'm only going because you say so." I took the hat, the bottle, the tongue, and stepped out.

The night remeasured our heads. The dust was finally dust again, the road a scar that had resigned itself to reopening again and again. Two shadows lay in front of the smithy. One of them wasn't a shadow at all. The fake one with the hat. His name was Tom or Jim or something that, in these parts, means a man who has more silence than friends. He lay on his back, his gaze fixed on a sky that rarely gives answers. A hole in his chest that didn't look random. Warm. Too warm for the night.

A woman stood three feet away, covering her mouth as if she were forbidding a secret from coming out. The sheriff's brother appeared on the corner, hat

tilted, breathless. "Hawkins," he said, and I heard what he meant to say was, "not again."

"It's never again," I said. "It's always today."

I knelt. The smell of gunpowder. Old, cheap. Not a good shot. The shot had been close. Not a snob from afar. Someone who wanted to see what he could do. I looked at the boot prints that the rain hadn't washed away yet. Two pairs, then just gone. Vanishing lenses. Dirty geometry. The city has had worse equations.

"I don't want to touch him," murmured the brother.

"Then leave him where the truth finds him," I said.

The woman made a noise like a crushed bird. "He was only—" and I raised my hand, kindly, as kindly as I can be. "Don't say it. Don't say anything that will betray you tomorrow." She nodded. Women can do that. Men can talk until they burn themselves as witnesses.

Winnetou suddenly stood there, as always when it's important not to scream. His gaze went from the hole in the chest to the hole in the darkness where the shooter must have been. He wasn't kneeling. He can see more from above than we can from close up. "Two," he said. "The first one missed. The second one didn't."

"The second one was a decision," I said.

"The wrong one."

"There are no real ones here."

He raised his chin slightly, a gesture that, for him, replaces three pages of text. "He wasn't the target."

"That's what I'm telling you," I murmured.

"The wrong man at the wrong time."

"The city has a supply of it."

"The shooter wanted to scare someone. He succeeded. Then he wanted applause. There was none. So he shot again. At what was standing. Tom was standing."

"Tom has always stood his ground."

"He's done with it now."

The brother looked at me as if I were about to take away his belief in fences.
"And me?"

"You breathe. That's your job."

"And I'm not supposed to do anything...?"

"You can send people home or you can scream here. Both are theater."

"And you?"

"I'm looking for where the city had too much courage today."

I walked around the corner, along the shed, where the shadows think they're men. Two prints that grew flatter the farther they were going. They ended at the side of the house, as if men had learned to fly. I felt the wood, smelled oil. Old ladders that someone had pulled to the other side. Not stupid. Just used. I reached out as if to feel the air. Powder, sweat, flowers. Flowers? A trace of the perfume that smells like a lie trying to be kind.

"LM," I said into the shadows.

"Still," said a voice behind me, and I didn't turn around hastily, because haste is a bill you pay in cash.

Rosalie stood in the dim light, her spare eye on the chain, her real eye awake. "I heard the shots," she said.

"Everyone hears everything. No one remembers."

"Remembering costs money."

"Winnetou and I pay poorly."

"And you speak badly."

"I'm talking good. It just doesn't taste good."

She looked past me at the ladder, which no one wanted to see anymore. "That was a rehearsal," she murmured.

"On what?"

"To what's going to be sold tomorrow." She nodded toward where the street was once again pretending to be harmless. "He'll say the city is out of control. That order costs money. That someone has to pay."

"Yes," I said. "He."

"He has enough change. He wants change because of our fear."

"And us?"

"We are paying incorrectly."

"You don't pay anything today. Get out of here."

"I'll only leave if you come."

"I'll only come if you leave."

She left. I stayed. Some contradictions are actually agreements.

Back at the shadow, where the fake man with the hat was lying, the crowd had formed as if in apology. The preacher muttered something he himself didn't believe. Mary-Lou stood in the doorway, arms crossed, the kind of woman who shows the town how not to run. The smooth man stepped out of the fog of people like a figure in a bad painting. Gloves on, coat clean, mouth full of teeth that weren't meant for eating.

"Tragic," he said.

"Two shots are rarely funny," I said.

"The second one was unnecessary."

"The first one was stupid."

"Stupidity needs correction. I offer: order."

"You always offer: yourself."

"I am reliable."

"You're punctual when it comes to handing out receipts for debts you've written up."

He looked at me as if considering which word to stamp on my forehead. "Mr. Hawkens, the city needs decisions."

"The city needs hands that stop pulling triggers when no one claps."

"There will be clapping again. I'll make sure of it."

"Then first make sure you learn to disappear before you reappear."

He looked past his brother, who now looked like the youngest son of tiredness. "Will he hunt down the murderer?" the smooth one asked too politely.

"He'll breathe," I said. "That's enough for today."

"Then I'll hunt."

"Hunt you."

He gave a thin smile. "Later."

The sheriff's brother took a half step forward, not out of courage, but simply because his body sometimes decides what it wants to be. "We'll take the body," he said.

"Leave Tom there until he cools down," I said. "Not out of respect. Out of truth. The city needs to see that gunshots aren't words. Just sounds."

"You're sick, Sam."

"I'm healthy enough not to applaud."

Winnetou briefly touched his brother's elbow. "To church," he said calmly. "Not right away. Later."

The brother nodded, grateful that someone had lent him the order. Two men fetched a blanket. A better city would have a cart. We have men.

I went into the alley behind the blacksmith shop. There where smoke, if it's lucky, reconciles the world. A piece of shirt hung from a nail. No coincidence. The fabric had been cheap. Now it was a trace. I rubbed it between my fingers. The smell: poorly washed, poorly dried, poorly lived. Not a rich man. A sleeper

on the outskirts of town. Someone who shoots for two dollars and runs for three. The first shot misses because his hand is shaking. The second hits because the city was briefly silent. No applause, no God, just a red dot in the sentence.

"Sam," someone said, and I recognized the voice before I turned around. Too smooth for here. Too honest for where it came from. Old Shatterhand stood in the gloom, as if the moon had spat him out. Not dramatic. Just there. Hat low, gaze clear, the kind of man who asks more questions than buys answers. We've known each other long enough not to say hello.

"Charlie," I said. "You picked a bad night."

"Night chose me," he said. His voice carried his fatigue with dignity, like a cart carrying a load that fits. "I heard the two shots by the river. They weren't good shots."

"No one was good, the second one was honest."

"Honesty is sometimes the worst kind."

"Today, yes."

He crouched down next to the nail, examining the scrap of shirt without touching it. "Right-handed, weak left eye," he murmured. "Or a lefty who's borrowed his right hand. Boot size... nine or ten, but the heel is flat. Not someone who's learned to ride. Someone who walks. Someone who lives for the day and makes decisions at night."

"They can't decide. They click. Like rat traps."

He looked at me, smiling thinly, without warmth, only acknowledgment that we use the same language when it's dark. "The first shot was a warning. He wanted someone to see what he could do. The second was proof that he couldn't do it."

"And Tom was in the way."

"Tom was always in the way. He was someone you tested your direction on."

"He lost."

"We do too," he said, and that's what I liked about Charlie: he could lose without insulting the guns.

"The smooth one wants to sell it," I said. "As an order."

"Order is the lid on a bad soup. If you put it on, otherwise it's everywhere."

"We live on soup."

"We live by not drinking it if it tastes like powder."

"Today everything tastes like powder."

He stood up, stretching his legs as if they belonged to him. "Winnetou?"

"Here," he said without moving.

"We hunt?" Charlie asked shortly.

"Not today," said Winnetou. "Today the city breathes."

Charlie nodded. That's the difference between men I respect and men I despise: Some understand that sometimes you have to wait until the dust settles before stirring it up again. Others sell lids.

Back in front of the saloon, the crowd had thinned out. Only the necessary remained. Mary-Lou brought towels, water, and instructions. For once, the preacher forgot to speak. The brother looked like he'd been sleeping for three years on installments. I leaned against the doorpost, which has held me up for months, no matter how much I hurt it.

"Two shots, no applause," I said again, more quietly, more to myself.

"Why do you say that?" asked Mary-Lou.

"Because our fault isn't in the shots. It's in the applause we sometimes allow afterward."

"Not today."

"Not today." I looked at the smooth one, who pretended he didn't know how to walk. "Tomorrow he'll talk again."

"Then we speak louder."

"Louder isn't better. Today we were quiet, and that hurt him more than my comments."

She grinned briefly. "You're getting soft."

"I'm getting old."

"You've been old since birth."

"Might be."

Charlie approached the bar, not to drink, but to borrow the warmth for a moment. "The man," he said, "probably sleeps under the iron cars. Where the children don't play because their mothers aren't stupid enough yet."

"I'll go later," I said.

"Not alone," he grumbled.

"I'm never alone. I bring my bad character with me."

"I'll come anyway," he said, and that's the second thing I like about Charlie: He rarely says "anyway." When he does, it's worth it.

We left after Tom disappeared under a blanket that solved nothing. The path to the wagons is the dirtiest: too much iron, too few answers. Sleeping places in the rubble, bare bones from fireplaces that refuse to tell stories. A man snored somewhere, as if he'd heard the gunshots as a lullaby. Another pretended not to hear us. We heard him anyway.

"Here," said Charlie.

I smelled the shirt before I saw the skin. It was the same filth that the scrap of shirt on the wall had carried. The guy was half-underneath the axle, as if it were his talisman. His hand still held the illusion of a grip. The gun lay three feet away, as if it were ashamed. I lifted it with two fingers. Cheap. Poorly oiled. The trigger was clean, having been used twice today.

"Get up," Charlie said. Not loudly. Not politely. Just as a fact.

The man blinked, found us, found the gun in my hand, found a sentence that didn't belong to him. "Did you—"

"You shot," said Charlie.

"It was an accident."

"Twice?" I asked.

"The first one just warns. The second one—"

"No applause?" I helped him.

"No one," he said quietly, and for a moment I saw the boy behind the man who threw stones at bottles and believed that bottles would come back on their own.

"Get up," repeated Charlie.

He stood up. Shaky as an excuse. My hand was still on the gun, and it felt heavier than it was. I didn't give it back to him. He rubbed his forehead as if he could push the evening away. "I just—"

"That's the most dangerous sentence in the world," I said. "Everyone just wants it."

"He has—" He broke off, the sentence resisting him. "I have nothing."

"You have two shots," I said. "One for fear, one for the city."

"I'm not afraid."

"Already."

"Do you want me—?"

"We don't want anything," said Charlie. "We're just taking you to a place where sentences stop saving you."

"To the brother?"

"Yes," I said. "He's breathing well today."

The man nodded, as if he preferred a verdict to the night. We walked back. No one said anything. Not even me. There are paths where words are just weight, pulling you into the ground. The brother took it without asking who brought it. Order, lowercase, no drama.

The smooth man stood next to the church door; the rain hadn't given him a new face. "Quick," he said.

"Slowly enough," I said.

"He will talk."

"Then let him. He might say something he won't like later."

"I collect his words."

"I'll burn them."

"Fire Department is sold out tomorrow."

"And you'll be burned tomorrow," Mary-Lou said behind me, and I saw the smooth man briefly search for inner balance. He couldn't find it. He left, because men like him never stay when someone understands the night better.

Later, the three of us sat on my crate. Mary-Lou brought us what was left of the good whiskey. Charlie took a sip as if calculating interest. Winnetou didn't drink at all. He drinks when it's time. Today it was water.

"He confessed," the brother said from the doorway. Not loudly. Not proudly. Just firmly. "No why. Just because."

"Because there's always enough here," I said.

"Tomorrow they will ask about meaning."

"Tell them: Two shots, no applause. That's the point."

He nodded and went back to his work, which today consisted of sitting. Sometimes work is about not falling.

"What do we do with the smooth one?" asked Mary-Lou.

"Nothing," I said. "It's driving him crazy."

"That's a bad strategy."

"This is ours."

Charlie laid his hat on his knees, his gaze drawn to the saloon floorboards as if they were maps. "You could have hunted him down, Sam," he said. "The shooter. Directly. Without thinking."

"I've been thinking."

"It slows you down."

"Slow didn't die today."

He nodded. "Not today."

Winnetou looked at me, and in his gaze was the kind of approval you don't like receiving because you know what it costs. "The city will breathe again tomorrow," he said.

"And lie."

"Yes."

"And us?"

"We don't talk much."

"I'll try," I said, and it sounded like a promise I would have liked to break immediately.

The night crept a little further. A dog tried to pray. Someone was counting money that wasn't enough. Someone else was counting names that were never enough. I thought of Tom, the wrong man in the hat, who was in the wrong place at the right time today. I thought of the man under the train car, whose hands trembled less now because someone else was holding his breath. I thought of the smooth man who, tomorrow, will bottle order and sell it to children thirsting for explanations. I thought of Rosalie, who writes receipts no one wants to read.

"No applause," I murmured again.

"Why do you need that sentence?" asked Mary-Lou.

"Because it reminds us that we are not in the theater."

"Sometimes we'd rather be there."

"The whiskey is more expensive there."

"You buy it anyway."

"I'll buy anything that keeps the truth at bay."

"And today?"

"Today it supports itself."

Charlie stood up, stretched his back, and let the tiredness evaporate from his bones. "I'll look at the ladder tomorrow in the light," he said. "And the path to the river. Maybe that's where he lost his courage before he found his reason."

"You'll find it," I said.

"Perhaps," he said, and disappeared in the way I respect in him: without stirring up dust that we would later have to swallow again.

Winnetou stayed for a while, until the silence was no longer so urgent. "Sleep, Sam," he finally said.

"I'll try it."

"Promise?"

"I love breaking them, but I like giving them."

He placed a hand on my shoulder, so briefly that later I doubted it had happened. "No hunting tomorrow," he said. "Tomorrow they'll talk. The day after tomorrow we'll act."

"The day after tomorrow I'll be in a worse mood," I said.

"That helps."

He left. Mary-Lou pushed the last glass toward me. "To Tom," she said.

"No one," I said. "So it remains fair."

"You're a pig," she said.

"I'm tired."

"One does not exclude the other."

I drank. The whiskey tasted better at the end than at the beginning, which is rare. Outside, the city tried to pretend something hadn't just fallen out of its face. Two shots, no applause. No heroes, no happy ending, just people who will pretend tomorrow they hadn't heard anything today. I lowered my hat, my hand on my Colt, out of habit, not out of need.

Maybe I belong in another city. Maybe this city belongs in other hands. Maybe none of us belong anywhere except in sentences far too harsh to be tacked to churches. No one clapped today. That's good. That means we're not completely lost yet.

Tomorrow they'll lie again. So will I. I'll lie charmingly so it all goes by faster. But tonight, when the boards tell the same old stories again, I'll sit outside and explain to the dust that gunshots aren't punchlines. Only commas. And we're the ones who have to make up the rest of the sentence. Without applause. With whiskey. With boots that know when to stop.

I let my eyes close. No sleep. Only that brief moment of forgetting they call "protection" here. Somewhere a can rattled. Somewhere someone cried into their shirt. Somewhere someone laughed too soon. And I sat there, the man on the box who tomorrow will again tell us where left is, so the right-wingers know what they're running from. Two shots, no applause. That's enough. For today.

Chapter 17 - The Widow with the Steely Eye

The morning was the color of stale milk. It tasted like it, too. The city acted as if it had learned something important during the night, only to forget everything again at first light. I sat on my crate, letting the whiskey lubricate my tongue, and watched as a boy scraped the notice off the post that yesterday had said when we were supposed to become decent. Today it simply read: Nothing for sale.

"Appropriate," I murmured.

Mary-Lou stepped out of the saloon, drawing in the air like a bad plan. "Listen, Sam," she said without greeting. "The widow wants to see you."

"Marriage proposal?"

"Funny. Bring your tongue, but leave the jokes at the door."

"What does she want?"

"You, because you lie without wavering."

"That is love."

"This is self-defense."

I stood there, my bones feeling as if they were going uphill, even though the road was flat, like a promise before an election. The walk to the widow's was short, but long enough to notice where it hurt. Outside her house, it smelled of tea and resolve. The front door stood open as if it had given up on being what it was meant to be. Inside, it was tidy, the way people tidy up when they're no longer expecting anyone to leave.

The Widow McCready sat at a table whose surface could have been used for operations. A small box stood next to her cup. Steel. Old. Clean edges. Her hands lay flat beside it, as if they too were blades. Her gaze was steely—not because of one eye. Because of everything she can no longer blink away.

"Sam," she said without getting up. "Sit down. Not there. Here."

I sat down where I was supposed to. "Tea?" she asked.

"Whiskey?" I asked back.

"Tea," she said, pouring. "No sugar. Sugar makes lying easier."

"Then tea doesn't suit me."

"Today already."

We sat for a while, the way people sit who aren't yet sure whether to work together or shoot each other. In the end, work always wins, because bullets are expensive. The widow pushed the box a few inches toward me, not enough for me to open it, enough for me to realize I shouldn't pull it away.

"My husband wasn't a hero," she said. "He was punctual. It cost him his life. Punctual men get in the way when accidents are supposed to be on time."

"We are good producers of accidents."

"You were there when they laid Tom out on the street."

"I'm always there when the city shows the opposite of mercy."

"I don't need mercy today."

"What then?"

"Straight."

"I can't even walk that."

"Then listen."

She opened the box. There was no money inside. Inside was a notebook, worn, with a cord that had seen many fingers. Next to it was a small steel plate, the size of my palm. Names were written in the notebook, with amounts behind them, dates, abbreviations. Some of the abbreviations I recognized. "RG" appeared there more often than I liked for the sake of peace of mind. A delivery list, only this time it wasn't counting beans, but people and their stupidities. The small steel plaque was a grave marker, only not from a grave – from a railroad track. Scratched in with a nail or a knife: a track name, two markings, a thin line branching off where it shouldn't.

"He's found it," she said calmly. "The hole where they're bleeding the city dry. Night trains that never stop here and yet leave us feeling emptier. Your smooth guy has his second coffers there."

"It's not mine."

"You talk to him like you have the right."

"I talk to anyone who annoys me."

"Then speak for me today."

I leafed through the pages. Names I liked. Names I could handle. Names that held the city's breath. Sums that hurt ordinary people big time. And, again and again, receipt marks, the kind you don't get when you shop properly. "How did your husband get that magazine?"

"He was loading goods that weren't goods. And asking questions that no church likes. Two weeks later, he was wet and silent, lying in the creek. Call it an accident if you like. I call it punctuality gone wrong."

"Why now?"

"Because two shots were fired yesterday and no one clapped. That's rare. That means the city is awake for a moment."

"Waitfulness is a whim here."

"Then use it."

I didn't put my hand into the box. I just looked inside. That was enough. "The smooth one will come," I said.

"He's been at the door three times already. I offered him tea."

"Did he drink?"

"He smiled."

"It's his way of rejecting poisons."

The widow smiled thinly. "Will you stand in the doorway if he's serious?"

"I stand in many doors. I only give way when I have better reasons than politeness."

"I have reasons."

"I see you."

There was no knock. There was a clatter. Two gloved men stomped in front of the house, as if they needed to remind the earth who it belonged to. I stood up. The widow remained seated. A steely stare also means: Don't jump up when men want in. I stepped into the hallway, which sounded like a gun barrel that had never been fired, and opened it without loving the handle.

"Good morning," I said. "Wrong house. The church is further back, and they only accept donations in coins."

"We only need five minutes," said one.

"Five for me is expensive."

"We'll take them on account."

"I don't lead any."

They pushed. I stood. One grabbed my chest. I gave him back the spot above my stomach, where men briefly consider whether their breakfast was worth it. The other took a wide swing, like a man who overestimates his talent. I put the frame in front of his thoughts. He measured with the back of his head. The door remained open. Last night's rain still had enough spit to make the boots honest. I took a step forward. "Two more," I said kindly. "Then it's getting unsporting."

"We'll be back," panted the first one.

"Then bring flowers."

I closed the door. Not out of politeness. Out of mathematics. Two less outside means two less inside. The widow stood in the doorway to the room, her hands still flat, her gaze still stealthy. "You should drink tea more often," she said.

"Tea makes my tongue too polite."

"No. It slows them down. That saves lives."

"Not mine."

"Today already."

When the smooth one came, he did it softly, as always. He didn't let his shoes do the talking. He let the hat do the salute, as if the hat had an opinion. "Mrs. McCready," he said. "My condolences are permanent."

"That's a lot of condolences," she said.

"Your husband was a useful man."

"And now?"

"Now he's a memory. Memories need care."

"Then take care of yours."

He smiled, seeing me for the first time, as if I'd just begun to exist. "Mr. Hawkens. Whenever there's a hint of responsibility, you're already there."

"I am a dog who loves bad food."

"Tea?" asked the widow.

"I don't drink tea."

"Then don't drink anything here."

He stopped as if someone had stolen the floor from him. "Of course, I'm not here to disturb you. I'm here to help."

"Where?"

"When organizing."

"I have everything in order," said the widow.

"I can organize things that don't fit."

"That's your job. Mine is to leave them as they are."

"You have documents."

"I have memories."

"Memories are heavy. I'll take some of that off your hands."

"I like to keep weights."

"That makes you tired."

"Tiredness and dignity rhyme here."

He held the widow's gaze for exactly one second longer than wise men do. It was enough to see him warm up. "Well," he said, brushing a thread from his cuff that no one saw, "later then. Tonight in the saloon. The town shall hear who betrays them."

"The city should hear who wants to buy it," I said.

"It's the same thing," he said quietly. "Depends on the cash register."

He left because men like him always leave when the air doesn't match their perfume. The widow closed the box. "Tonight?"

"He wants theater."

"Give him one. Without a stage."

"I can make floorboards louder."

"Let them speak."

The afternoon was a wound that no one bandaged. Mary-Lou arranged chairs as if they were witnesses. The bartender placed glasses against the wall as if they were shields. Winnetou stood at the back pillar and was made of wood. Old Shatterhand sat, perfectly still. The sheriff's brother placed his hands on the bar, as if the bar could hold him if the city slipped away again.

The smooth one entered the swinging door, and the swinging door acted like it was wind. "Friends," he began, and I hate it when words start like that. "We're standing on the edge. We need order. We need—"

"Air," said Mary-Lou.

"Pay," said the shopkeeper.

"Guilty," coughed the preacher.

"Witnesses," I said.

The widow stood up, without drama. She placed the box on the counter. "I don't have any grand speeches. I have names." She opened it. The room shrank. "Every month, sums of money passed through hands that never got dirty. But the hands before and after were. I won't demand public confessions. I just want you to know what you paid."

"Be careful," the smooth man whispered. "These booklets—they can be counterfeited. I could print ten tomorrow."

"You've already done a hundred," I said.

"Proofs?"

"RG," said the widow. "Her initials. On receipts you can't get at the store."

He smiled as if he knew how to trip me up if I wasn't looking the day after tomorrow. "RG can mean a lot of things."

"Today it's enough."

She took the steel plate and held it up. "That's the last thing my husband saw. Steel turning in the wrong direction. There's no truth beneath that. We'll lie beneath that if we keep pretending this is just weather."

"Touching metaphor," said the smooth one. "And what do you want?"

"Nothing. That you stop."

"I never stop."

"Then listen."

I picked up the record and placed it on the counter so that the scratch caught the lamps. "Mill Path," I said, "two branches too many. Tonight we'll put the record where it belongs. Whoever shows up there isn't one of us."

"Trap?" asked the brother.

"A mirror," said Winnetou.

"I can't stand mirrors," smiled the smooth one. "They remind me that other people have faces too."

"Then don't come."

"I always come."

Night came right on time. The stream gurgled like an old man who laughs all the same. There were four of us on the trail—Widow, Winnetou, Charlie, and me. Mary-Lou held the town together in the saloon, which is hard work when people think they're straight. The steel plate lay on a stone, a sign: This is where the cutting took place. The casket wasn't there. The widow wasn't carrying it. That was the trick.

"He's coming," said Winnetou, as if the wind were his telegram.

First came the glove-wearers. Three. One too many. Good. I like it when stupidity appears with reserve. Then came the smooth one, acting like no one had invited him. "Ah," he said. "A picnic."

"Without tea," said the widow.

"Too bad."

"Not for you."

He stayed out of reach, which was the only smart thing about him. "I want the box."

"You get a record," I said.

"I don't collect art."

"You collect receipts."

He snapped two fingers, and the gloved men began to move, the kind of movement that later becomes reports. Charlie took a half step forward, no pose, pure geography. I took the tallest one, for pedagogical reasons. He made his fist wider than his head, I made my elbow shorter than his thought. One. Two. The third realized he'd learned enough for today, but his body disagreed. Winnetou politely disagreed. The smooth one stayed dry until I gave him the dust.

"You underestimate me," he said, as if it were a compliment.

"I'm deliberately underestimating you. Otherwise, you'll grow bigger."

The widow stepped forward. "You were there when they pushed my husband into the water."

He said nothing. Some sentences aren't even allowed to be lied about.

"You knew why he was wet."

He wisely remained silent.

"You have spent a lifetime benefiting from the courage of others."

"I call it: order."

"I call it theft."

"Words cost little these days."

"Then pay with your hands." She lifted the steel plate. "Read."

He bent over. A man who bends over sometimes forgets that others are standing. Charlie pushed him an inch too far, Winnetou knocked him off balance in that same second like a master, and I gave him the knee that had already ruined other plans. He didn't fall beautifully. Men like him never fall beautifully. They try to grasp the air that makes no contracts.

"Enough," said the widow. "I don't want to pose. I want you to know I see you."

"Seeing is cheap," he gasped.

"Then be expensive."

"What do you get? Applause?"

"Not today." I stepped back. "Two shots, no applause—remember? Sometimes that's the right music."

He came up, as gracefully as one comes up when one isn't used to being down. "You win today," he said. "I'll speak again tomorrow."

"Tomorrow we'll speak more quietly," said Winnetou. "People will hear us better."

He left. The gloved men dragged themselves away like dogs who've learned why there are chains. We stayed. The stream smelled of iron. The widow placed the steel plate back in the box and closed it, as if closing a wound that shouldn't bleed again today.

"You give it to the brother," said Charlie.

"I won't give them to anyone," she said. "I'll keep them safe. And if anyone asks why, I'll say: Because I can."

"He'll come back," I said.

"He always comes. Men like him have appointments with their reflections."

"Then tilt your mirror."

"I position it so that I don't become uglier."

Back in town, the air was thicker. Mary-Lou had divided the crowd into groups: those who wanted to talk; those who paid; those who needed to be left alone. The sheriff's brother sat there writing a sentence on a piece of paper I never want to read. The preacher found a corner where God wasn't listening today. The bartender was washing glasses that wouldn't hold anything anymore.

The widow sat on my chest. She did so as if it were her right. It was. "Whiskey," she said.

"No sugar."

"I take him as he is."

I handed her the glass. She

Chapter 18 - A Heart Like a Rusty Nail

The morning smelled of tin and missed opportunities. I sat on my crate, taking the first sip that always pretends it's going to be the last, and watched a dog try to bite itself. He didn't whine. He cursed. With his eyes. Paw in the air, something dark between his pads that didn't belong.

"Come here, you king without a court," I said, and he came, because animals practice the kind of trust that has become extinct in humans. I lifted his paw; the dog didn't growl; he was ashamed. A nail was stuck between the leather, brown with time, crooked like a memory. I pulled slowly. The dog stayed still, his tongue sticking out, as if to say, "Take care, but finish it." The nail came out, hesitantly, as if he had a lease. A drop of blood, nothing worth mentioning. I wiped it on the step. The nail stayed where it lay, looking at me as if he knew what this day would be like.

Mary-Lou stepped out of the saloon, looked from the dog to the nail, from the nail to me. "Eli's gone," she said. No preamble, no sugar.

"Away like working or away like stupid?"

"Gone like bleeding."

"What happened?"

"Wagons. Night. Someone lured him there. One says knife, one says wire. I say: hands of men who don't show their faces during the day."

"Who saw it?"

"No one admits it now."

I put the nail in my jacket pocket. "Okay. Let's go see what the rust has to say."

The tracks lay there like two promises never kept, pretending to lead somewhere where new answers awaited. At this hour, only old questions lay around. Under the axle of the third abandoned wagon, I found it: a wire, half-coiled, half-bloody, and next to it a small, torn strip of cloth that once wanted to be a shirt. The wire smelled of fear and iron. The strip smelled of yesterday's poverty.

"He didn't sting," said a voice behind me, one I prefer to hear as a shadow. Old Shatterhand. He crouched down next to me, not reaching, just looking. "He pulled. Away. From someone who was stronger—or stood firmer."

"And the wire?"

"Trap. No art, just meanness."

I showed him the rusty nail in my palm. "The city was already making jokes this morning."

He nodded. "Jokes are weapons when they're rough."

"Then we are heavily armed."

Winnetou stood a step further, where the sun had decided to stop helping. "Eli is alive," he said. "But he doesn't know what he's allowed to say."

"Where is he?"

"By the man who sells death," said Winnetou. "Today he sells peace."

The coffin maker had a shed that smelled like a lie detector: wood, cold tar, lavender that no one can save. Eli lay on a bench, his arm bandaged, his face too grown-up for what it had to endure. He raised his head when I entered and tried to look like men who don't need help. Bad imitation. "It was nothing," he said.

"Stop it," I said. "Nothing is expensive."

"You said I had—"

"Who?"

"The one with the gloves. One laughed, the other counted."

"What did they count?"

"How much fear can be had for five dollars."

I sat down on the toolbox, which made the coffin maker more honest than he'd like. "Did you stab me?"

"No. I held on. The wire. Someone pulled. Then the wire was on me and the blood was on him. But not much. Just enough to make it look like me again."

"Why were you there?"

"Because someone said Rosalie wanted to speak to me. She needed a messenger." He swallowed dryly. "And I wanted to be someone someone needed."

"You're someone many people need," I said, realizing I was embarrassed by the way I sounded. "We'll sort this out."

"The smooth one—" Eli began, and just then the street called out to us: "Poster!"

Outside, on the post, hung a new piece of paper. Clean, smooth, with words that could lie without stuttering. A bounty. For information leading to the arrest of the young troublemaker who allegedly attacked a "man of honor" last night. Signed with a pseudonym for "RG," who pricks his finger with a pen. Below it, an amount that would make poor people talk and rich people silent.

"Nice trick," said Old Shatterhand.

"Disgustingly clean," I said.

Winnetou didn't tear down the poster. He looked at it until the post grew nervous. "You don't tear down lies," he said. "You talk them until they're tired."

"How?"

"By letting them work."

The plan didn't come across as big. It crept along. Like a nail that knows where wood is soft. We took Eli back to the coffin maker, gave him water, and taught him the phrase: "If someone asks, you don't say anything and you breathe twice." Then we went to the best place to set a trap for the city: Mill Path. I have no talent for beautiful traps. I have a talent for nasty ones. Two rusty nails, a wire, a piece of wood, a shadow positioned correctly – and boots are already learning the word "mistake" from within.

The sun did what it always does when we need it: It disappeared, as if we were trying to steal something from it. The path was narrow, the stream was sluggish, the willow made noises that one mistaken for silence. We laid the wire flat, with nails like letters, and waited without looking like we were waiting.

The smooth one never sends his own men. He sends those who don't know how to get home. Two came. Neither spoke. That's rarely a good sign. They didn't look down. That's always a good sign—for us. The first one stepped into the wire and made the noise of a man who has realized that geography is more personal than he thought. The second reached for him, learned the word "complicit," and stumbled into the same mistake. I stepped out of the shadows without enjoying it, because enjoyment never lasts long here.

"Evening," I said. "Nice shoes. Do they have any brains?"

The first one tugged on his ankle, the wire laughing softly. "Hawkins," he pressed, "open up."

"I don't open anything I haven't closed."

"He wants the boy," said the second. "Give him back, and we'll be even."

"You're never even. You're change on two legs."

The first one pulled out a knife that looked like it had career plans. I stepped on his hand, gently but definitively. The knife opted for neutral ground policy. "Listen to me," I said, crouching down so we could at least insult each other at eye level. "You want unrest. You want blood. You want the city to bite its own shadow. Today, there's none of that. Today, there's only dust."

"The Smooth One—"

"He has a heart like a freshly polished doorplate. It says: Passage. He can't get through today."

"Then he will raise the price."

"Money is his god. Today the church is closed."

They weren't fighting anymore. They were waiting for the part where men in uniforms show up and do their thinking for them. Today, only two came. Me and the darkness. "Tell him," I continued, "that he can pick up his lies at the saloon once they've learned to keep quiet. And tell him that rust eats up time. He has less of it than he thinks."

"Rust?" gasped the second.

I held out the nail to them. "This is what a heart looks like when it's been exposed to the elements for too long. It's still holding, but it makes every hand that touches it dirty."

"You are crazy."

"No. I'm sober enough to be gross."

I untied them, not out of pity. Out of convenience. Men running back carry messages better than paper. They disappeared as inconspicuously as two people who've just learned what wire can do. We stayed. The stream pretended to like us.

"And now?" asked Old Shatterhand.

"Now we're going to the theater," I said. "The smooth guy is playing to the fullest."

The saloon was full of faces that pretended to be clearer than light. Mary-Lou stood behind the bar, maintaining order with two fingers and a glare. The bartender had lined up the glasses like soldiers. The preacher wasn't there, which explained why it was quieter. The Widow McCready sat in the corner, her arms crossed, her gaze as steely as yesterday.

The smooth one stood in the middle, as if he were the table at which everyone had to sit. "Friends," he began—I get itchy skin every time he said that word—"the situation is serious. A boy attacked a man. We can't let the night determine who we are. We must—"

"Math," said Mary-Lou.

"Exactly. With consequences."

"And with lies," I said, stepping forward and throwing the rusty nail onto the table. He stood upright for a moment, as if he knew he had the stage, and then slowly fell over. The smooth guy did what he always does when something isn't his: He smiled.

"What is this?" he asked.

"Your pacemaker," I said. "Rusty, but stubborn. Two of your poodles were on Mill Trail. Wire, nails, bad timing. They were coming to pick up the boy. Instead, they learned how gravity works. Thank them. I was gentle."

"Evidence?" he crooned.

"None. Only witnesses."

"Who?"

"The stream, the dust, me – and the man you trapped."

The room shifted the air between us like a plate being passed around, and no one wants to be first. The widow stood up. She didn't raise her voice. She only lifted the sentence: "I also have a piece of evidence." She held up the small steel plate; the scratching of the light across the edges made men nervous. "Those who cut at night get a mirror by day. The path is marked. So are the pockets."

The smooth man raised his hands as if they led an independent life. "We can't guard every night," he said. "We need—"

"Quiet," said Winnetou.

"I say: order."

"I say: quiet," repeated Winnetou, and I swear the room understood that these are two different religions.

Old Shatterhand took a half-step forward; the man has a knack for half-steps. "You offer security like raincoats in the desert," he said. "You create the clouds first, and then you calculate shadows."

The smooth man looked at him like a math problem. "Mister Shatterhand, you're a man of action. What do you suggest?"

"Start selling what you can't deliver."

"I'm coming clean."

"You supply tablecloths. Everything underneath them gets sticky," said Mary-Lou, placing a glass of water in front of him. "Drink. It might help with the talking."

He didn't drink. He doesn't know water. It makes his voice honest. "I see," he said, "the city has decided to be cynical today. Tomorrow you'll need me."

"You'll need us tomorrow," I said.

"How come?"

"Because your heart is rusting."

He laughed, short, ugly, genuine. "And yours, Hawkens?"

"Mine's a rusty nail," I said. "Holding on to things I should have let go of long ago. It hurts anyone who touches it. But it holds."

The smooth one left, the two scholars from Mill Path pushing the air out the door behind him. The room remained tense for another second, then breathed in its own rhythm again. People blamed the chairs. It's tradition here.

Eli suddenly stood in the frame. He looked like a sentence that didn't know whether it was a question or an answer. Mary-Lou waved him through. No one opened their mouths. Not out of fear. Out of decency. That happens.

"I'm leaving," he whispered next to me when we were outside.

"Where?"

"Away."

"Away is not a place."

"There's more gone than I have here."

I looked at his face, the way one looks at the white of a map before drawing the lines. "You're leaving tonight," I said. "Tomorrow they'll look for you, and if they don't find you, they'll suddenly have something else to do: live. If you stay, you'll be their alibi."

"I owe you-

"You don't owe me anything. You owe yourself something: more tact than today."

"And you?"

"I'm staying. I'm the box."

He nodded, the way men nod when they finally find a direction that doesn't shine. "Don't tell Rosalie," he begged.

"Rosalie knows what she wants to know."

"Tell the dog with your paw that he can come back."

"He does."

He disappeared into the night the way good sentences disappear: not out loud, but in such a way that you can find them again later when you need them.

I sat back down on my crate. The dog actually came, placed his paw on my boot as if he were authenticating a bill. Mary-Lou brought a bottle as if it were medicine. Old Shatterhand remained standing in the shadows; a man can wait until a city listens to itself. Winnetou leaned against the edge of the post, so still that the air could rest against him. The widow nodded at me, her steely gaze softening, but not soft. The bartender placed a glass next to the rusty nail as if setting the table for two.

"A heart like a rusty nail," I said to the street. "Not pretty. Not clean. But it holds the boards together when the wind picks up again."

"Until it breaks," said Mary-Lou.

"Then we'll nail the next one in," I said. "We're not cathedral builders. We're repairers."

"Little glory," muttered Old Shatterhand.

"Fame is a rag that doesn't suck," I said.

Winnetou looked up to the sky as if he were reading something useful there. "Tomorrow the man with the gloves will talk again," he said.

"Tomorrow the city will listen to him less," I replied.

"Why?"

"Because no one clapped today."

We didn't drink to anyone, so it would be fair. The night made the stove crackle somewhere, as if to remind us that wood is alive, even when it's burning. I tucked the rusty nail back into my jacket. It did what it's good for: It pricked. That's good. People like me need pricks to make them realize they still have blood, which knows no contract.

And when the street became so quiet that I could hear my own thoughts, it occurred to me that a heart like a rusty nail may be ugly—but it holds. Maybe long enough, until the boy is far enough away, the smooth one grinds his teeth on his own mirror, and the widow with the steely gaze pours herself tea without sugar again in the morning. It doesn't have to last any longer. Nothing lasts any longer here.

Chapter 19 - The Girl with the Broken Laughter

The evening smelled of dashed hopes and cheap perfume that had capitulated as soon as it was applied. I sat at the end of the bar, where the splinters in the wood are as familiar as missed opportunities, and watched the pianist place his three mournful notes back into the room as if they were new. My whiskey tasted like the last time it smiled before someone decided that laughter was taxable.

She came in as if the door had suddenly learned respect. Marie-Claire. The girl with the broken laugh. She used to be able to loosen the entire room's shoulders with a giggle. Now she tightens men's necks. She really tried – lifted the corners of her mouth, let a note roll in – and the note broke in the middle like a rotten branch. A half-laugh that was too heavy for her own body.

"Evening, Sam," she said without stopping. "You look like you're drinking trouble."

"I'm thirsty," I said. "And anger is the cheapest kind around here."

Mary-Lou placed a glass in front of her. No sugar syrup. No pleasantries. Water, so you can find your tongue when night steals it. Marie-Claire took a sip, as if she needed to remember the concept. Two cowboys in shirts, pretending to be new, elbowed each other. Young. Stupid. Loud. The dirty triad that saloon music is made of.

"Laugh, sweetie," said the one on the left. "My colleague had a long ride and needs medicine."

"Buy him one," she said.

"Your laughter is cheaper," said the right-hand man.

I spun my glass down. Not out of chivalry. To block out the noise. "Leave the girl alone," I said. "She's working on something else today: breathing."

"Stay out of it, Grandpa," the one on the left snarled, reaching for her wrist, discovering that his fingers have less to say when you listen to them, and getting my hand in response. Only lightly. Just enough to let him realize how well you can fall without crashing. He almost understood.

The smooth man came out of the back room. His coat was as clean as an unsigned confession. "Marie," he crooned, "the audience wants entertainment."

"The audience can hug themselves," she said.

"Then make it easy for them."

"I'm not doing anything easy today," she said.

The smooth man looked at me as if he'd just discovered a bill in me. "Mr. Hawken, you're always there where profit and morality conflict."

"I'm where the whiskey doesn't run away from me," I said. "I just happen to be here today."

He smiled. It was that neutral smile that says: I've already washed my hands before I get them dirty. "Marie, you're here to work."

"I'm here to endure," she replied.

"It's the same thing."

"Not for me."

He nodded as if a decision had been made, turned around, and disappeared into the corner where contracts are signed in the dark. The cowboys let go, half out of understanding, half because Winnetou was leaning against the door outside, bringing with him the kind of silence in which even stupidity becomes cautious.

I tapped my finger against the glass. "Let's get some air," I said to Marie. We went outside. The night tasted of dust and what people call love when they're tired of being ashamed. Behind the saloon, a chicken that belonged to no one croaked, and the moon pretended it wasn't there to watch.

"You want to know who it was?" she asked without looking at me.

"I don't want to know anything," I said. "I want you to have a tooth in your pocket for later."

"I'm out of pockets." She pulled on her cigarette as if she were pulling on something that couldn't be moved. "It wasn't just one man. It was a lot of small decisions that one person made wrong, and the others watched. Then there was someone who thought you could fix laughter like you could fix a chair. I stopped when he was done. I should have stopped sooner."

"You didn't even start."

"I've been living too loudly. It doesn't pay off in the end."

"Nothing here is profitable," I said.

She didn't laugh. She didn't even smile. She stood there as if she had drawn a line under herself and was now deciding which side to stay on. Inside, the pianist played something that was supposed to be reminiscent of a waltz, but was actually just following along.

"Do you know what the worst customers are, Sam?" she asked.

"Those who don't pay."

"No. Those who want to talk." She tossed the stub away as if it were a coin into a fountain. "Those with longing. They demand that you give them back something they themselves threw away. You should practice believing them. I'm not a church."

"Belief only causes trouble around here," I said. "Drinking is more reliable."

"Drinking doesn't keep you warm."

"Warmth makes you comfortable. Comfort will cost you more later."

"Bukowski would have agreed with you now," she murmured.

"He usually agreed as long as the bottle was full."

"Then let's go in before yours runs out."

We went in. Mary-Lou raised an eyebrow, which is half a parade for her. The bartender put away the cheap stuff and acted like they only served the halfway drinkable stuff. I took the glass, which looked like it was already asking for insult, and sat back down in my seat. Marie stopped. Two men moved apart, not knowing why.

The smooth man appeared again, this time with two gloved hands in tow. "I have an idea," he said. "Marie is appearing today. Not as what she was. As what she is. Authenticity sells."

"Whore 2.0," murmured Mary-Lou, "now with a label."

"She doesn't have to laugh," he continued, as if he'd heard us all. "She just has to tell the story." He looked at her. "Tell them why you stopped. People love stories that don't involve them."

"I love bills that don't concern me," said Marie.

"You get your share."

"On my life?"

"In the evening."

"I'm not selling the same thing again," she said quietly. "That was expensive enough."

The smooth one tilted his head. "Then go home."

"I don't have one."

"Then I'm right."

I stood up. My knees made noises like old doors, my patience was running out. "She's not going anywhere you count," I said. "Not today."

"You're sentimental," said the smooth man. "This doesn't suit you."

"I'm tired," I said. "This suits me perfectly."

He put on his smile again, as if it were the right tool. "I'll ask you frankly, Marie: Will you be working today, or will I have to remind you why you're here?"

She didn't look at him. She looked at me. Not as a request. As information: Don't say anything wrong, Sam. Don't say anything that'll make me sticky again. I nodded slightly, because I'm a man with few right answers.

"I work," she then said. "But by my rules."

"You don't have any," said the smooth one.

"I'll make some for myself."

"Then do it."

She stepped onto the small step we call a stage because the word scaffold dampens our spirits. The pianist raised his hands, she raised her hand, the pianist dropped them again. Silence. Not a long one. Nervous silence. Marie put her glass on the edge. She said nothing. She just looked. Once to the left, once to the right, once through the middle, where men have eyes they'd rather not use.

"I had a laugh once," she finally said. "It was cheap and loud, and I was happy to give it away. Then someone came along who wanted to keep it. I lent it to him. He returned it broken. That was the whole deal." She took the glass, didn't drink, and put it down. "Today there are no refunds. Today there is only silence. If you can't stand it, you can leave. If you stay, you pay quietly."

No applause. A good start. The cowboys suddenly had a lot to do with their cards. The preacher—where did he come from?—whispered something into his

beard that he himself didn't want to believe. The smooth man smiled, but his smile was crooked.

"This is not a program," he said quietly.

"It's an evening," I said. "They've become rare."

He raised his hand. The glove-wearers took a step forward, as far as they could go. Old Shatterhand positioned his chair so everyone could see that half a meter that lies between movement and error. Winnetou just turned his head and was the kind of boundary that doesn't need a word. The glove-wearers stayed where they stood. Good men learn slowly, but they learn.

Marie sat down on the step, her legs bent, her arms on her knees, as if she were in a backyard among clotheslines, not in a saloon. "I'll tell you one story," she said. "One in which I'm not in it. There was a girl who laughed too loudly at some bad jokes. She thought it made the jokes better. Then she realized that as long as she was laughing, the room didn't need the jokes. So she stopped, so the jokes would die. Some men hate dead jokes. One made it work. Others made it order. The rest called it fate. The girl called it quits."

She stood up, walked past the counter, and took her water. "That's all there is." She gave Mary-Lou and me a nod, barely a whisper. Then she disappeared through the side door.

The smooth man breathed audibly. "That was nothing," he said.

"That was enough," said Mary-Lou.

"Nobody paid."

"Wrong," I said. "Everyone paid: with looks. Today, that's the currency."

"Looks cannot be counted."

"You count things you never own. Try new hobbies."

He stepped closer, but not too close. "I'm setting a new rule: Whoever works, works hard. Whoever doesn't work, leaves."

"She left," I said. "That's how you won. And lost. At the same time. That's your specialty."

He left. That was his second specialty.

Night now lay like a damp blanket over the city. I found Marie behind the saloon, on the stairs where the wood smelled of men who were late finishing their conversations. She wasn't smoking anymore. She was just holding hands, as if she had to explain to them why they were still in the queue.

"Was that okay?" she asked.

"It's not getting any better here," I said.

"He's going to kick me out."

"He'll throw everyone out. Sooner or later. The ones who stay will break down anyway."

"I'm already exhausted."

"Then you'll last longer."

She didn't laugh. She nodded. "You know what I really want, Sam? An evening where I don't have to be beautiful for five minutes. Not laughing, not smiling. Just sitting. And no one asking if I'm okay. I'm not okay. I'm okay. That has to be enough."

"That's enough," I said. "For today."

"And tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow we'll drink water," I said. "And lie less."

"You never lie less," she said.

"I lie more beautifully."

"Pretty doesn't suit you."

"True."

We were silent. From the Mill Path, we could hear the stream pretending it wasn't offended by all the sins we'd poured into its ear. Old Shatterhand came around the corner and stood in the shadows, as he always does. "Do you need company?" he asked her.

"I need a few empty minutes," she said.

"I can't give them to you," he said. "But I can stand next to them so no one steals them."

"Good," she said. "Then stand up."

He stayed. Sometimes that's all the work.

Later, when the world once again took on the form of furniture, Marie headed toward her quarters. No man stopped her. That was thanks to Winnetou, who stood in the middle of the street and managed to persuade the moon to look elsewhere. I sat back on my crate so things would know where I belonged. Mary-Lou brought me one last drink, sparing the kindness, not the alcohol.

"You're getting soft, Sam," she said.

"I'm getting old," I said.

"You were already old when you arrived here."

"Then I'm just on time now."

"What are you doing with the smooth one?"

"I let him talk to the wall. The wall wins."

"And what are you doing with yourself?"

"I cover my ears when they start to feel."

"This is not therapy."

"I practice."

The preacher slunk by, acting like he belonged in the night. I nodded to him because I was too tired to argue. He nodded back because he was too tired to proselytize. It happens.

A crush drifted through the saloon windows. Someone told a joke. A bad, long one. Marie would have laughed at it in the past, out of reflex, out of training, out of a desire to see the men with warm hands. Today, the punchline was left lying there like a bucket in the rain. No one picked it up. Good evening.

I thought of whoring, type #2, the worse: Not the kind with skin and price, but the kind where you rent out your voice. It's easy to sell your body. It'll come

back, if you're lucky. The voice—once you give it away, you'll never get rid of it. It'll carry on talking without you later. In strange rooms. Using strange sentences.

"You're thinking too loud," said Mary-Lou.

"I drink too quietly."

"Then do it right."

I raised my glass. "To Marie-Claire. Not to who she was. To the one who didn't belong to anyone for ten minutes today."

"Here's to the ten minutes," said Mary-Lou, and joined in the drink. "That's all we get."

"We can't take any more."

The dog whose nail I'd pulled yesterday trotted over and put his nose on my boot. He'd learned how affection works without demands. The city never did. I scratched him behind the ear until he pretended to sleep. Then I raised my head and saw the smooth one stop by the post, short, clammy, pretending to count the stars. He likes numbers. He just can't read them unless they're written on a piece of paper that belongs to him.

"Tomorrow," I said into the night, "there will be theater again."

"Tomorrow," answered the night, "there will be chairs again."

"And the day after tomorrow?"

"The day after tomorrow someone will be laughing in the wrong place."

"Then I won't laugh at all," I said. "For a change."

I stood up so that tiredness wouldn't pin me to the counter. On the way home—if you can call the hole behind the shed that—I met Marie again. No tears. No new wrinkles. Just a glance that lasted briefly and then went far away.

"Thanks, Sam," she said.

"For what?"

"For nothing."

"That's what I'm known for."

"Stay," she said. "That was enough for today."

When she was gone, the smell of her water lingered in the wood, as if the bar had been drinking. I placed my hand flat on it, as one would on an animal one doesn't want to wake. The boards breathed slowly, the way the city only breathes at night. I thought about what laughter sounds like when it's whole again. I thought about how rare that is. Instead, I thought about something I could afford: dust, whiskey, tomorrow's noise, which we'll exchange for peace.

And if you ask me if it's worth it: Today, yes. Because a woman didn't smile for ten minutes and yet everyone was still looking. Because two idiots learned that hands are worthless without eyes. Because the smooth guy realized that a product that doesn't sound can't be sold. Because Winnetou and Old Shatterhand set boundaries that were made of air and yet held. Because Mary-Lou counted the evening without adding them up. And because for once in my life, I didn't try to fix the punchline.

That's enough for one chapter. It's not enough for a whole life. But anyone talking about a whole life has never seen how a half-laugh can linger in the air and still reach the right people. Tomorrow we'll lie again. Today was the truth – rough, short, and expensive. We paid in cash.

Chapter 20 - Dust Storms and Cheap Cigars

The day began like a bad cigar: too dry, too heavy-handed, and in the end, it burns your tongue raw without at least properly poisoning you. The sun hung low over the street like a yellow mistake in a book no one proofreads, and the wind was already rehearsing its howl, as if it had a deal with our nerves. A few dogs were searching for shade that didn't exist. The well made noises that you might mistake for hope if you were on the preacher's payroll. Not me.

I sat on my chest and took the first sip, which never helps but is still obligatory. The saloon smelled of cold grease, warm wood, and cigars that someone had rolled out of old horse blankets in the back room. Mary-Lou was cleaning glasses with that face that prevents men from saying clever things. The pianist thrashed his three notes off-key, making him the most honest man in the room.

"It's going to be dirty today," said Mary-Lou, without looking.

"It's always dirty," I said.

"Today it means it personally."

"He should get in line."

The door opened, and the storm sent its first messenger: a shovelful of dust that settled over everyone like an invitation. Behind him came the smooth man. The man smelled of oil, church pews, and cigars that claim to be expensive. He wore his teeth like receipts and lit a fresh one as if this were his living room.

"Mr. Hawkens," he crooned, "I need muscles that don't think."

"Then find other muscles."

He gave a thin grin. "One box. From here to the warehouse. A walk."

"I'm just walking to the gallows or the bar."

"You get three bottles of the good stuff."

"Your good fellow has seen too much saddle in his life."

"Then call it emergency service for the city."

"The city pays poorly."

"I'll pay in cash."

I turned the glass in my hand. Outside, the wind whipped the skin off the street. There were days when you say no and feel like a man. There were others when you say yes and at least feel alive. Today was a third: You say yes because the no will find you anyway.

"How heavy?" I asked.

"Heavy enough that the wrong people sweat under it."

"What's inside?"

"Paper."

"That's a lie."

"Not this one."

"Then the wearer is lying."

He smiled as if I'd given him a joke he'd later sell. "We're leaving now."

The door opened again, and this time no dust came out. Tres Dedos entered, left hand with three fingers, right gaze with six. He smelled of iron, lack of sleep, and work that wasn't on the calendar. He saw me, the smooth one, then the corner where the back room pretended to be an honest place.

"The box," he said.

"You are ill-informed," said the smooth one.

"You are badly suffered," said Tres Dedos.

Mary-Lou slowly placed a knife next to the lemons and looked at us as if she were tired of scrubbing blood out of wood later. "It's drafty outside," she said. "Either you piss off or you stay—otherwise the wind will do the talking."

We left. Not because we had to. Because the wind had already begun to possess us. In front of the saloon, the storm struck like a craftsman making a lump sum calculation: sand in his eyes, sand in his teeth, sand in his sentences. I tied the handkerchief over my face, the smooth man pretended his coat would save him, and Tres Dedos bowed his head, as if that was how he'd been trained. The city transformed into a map without a legend.

The warehouse stood at the edge, where the land ceases to act noble. Planks held up more nails than dignity, a roof that only remembered its job out of respect for gravity. Inside, the wind was quieter, but no nicer. The crate stood in the middle like a dog that knows someone is about to come in with a stick.

"There," said the smooth one.

"There," said Tres Dedos.

I stepped closer. The box wasn't big, but it had weight. That's the way it is with truths: the small ones hurt the most.

"Before we tell each other the wrong way," I said, "let's say: whoever carries it determines the path."

"Whoever pays determines the destination," said the smooth one.

"Whoever shoots sets the pace," said Tres Dedos.

We stood facing each other like three bad ideas waiting for one of them to become proud. The storm battered the hall, dust crept through the cracks, and somewhere a loose slat rattled as if it were rehearsing an alarm bell.

"Last chance to be honest," I said.

"Honesty is overrated," said the smooth one, reaching for the box – and I saw his wrist flex the lie. Tres Dedos took a half step that looked like a whole step. My hand was faster than my mind – good thing, otherwise we'd be dead long ago.

Two shots, close together, but not from the same story: my first into the ground, so the box would understand that it's supposed to speak; the second into the smooth guy's thigh, so his mouth wouldn't run faster than his leg. He sagged like a freshly washed carpet in the rain.

Tres Dedos grinned, small and honest. "Old, but not lame."

"Not everyone rusts at the same time," I said.

The smooth one gasped. "Sam..."

"You're breathing," I said. "That's all I ask of you today."

Tres Dedos grabbed the box as if it were a child you wouldn't drop and nodded toward the back door. "I'll take it with me."

"Where?"

"Get out of here."

"Enough," I said.

"You will be asked," he said.

"I rarely answer."

He disappeared into the dust, which devoured him as if hungry for men with work. I stayed with the smooth one and its noises. It wasn't the screaming that bothered me. It was the breathing. Too loud, too pleading, too human.

"Wait," he gasped. "Help..."

"Help yourself," I said, bending down, looking deep into his eye, which has never retained anything, and said very quietly: "You lumpy, lumpy sack of meat with bones in it, you'll be watching yourself rot by the time I'm done with you."

He reached for my jacket, found fabric, but not mercy. I stood up, raised the Colt, and placed it against his knee. "You don't need to walk far anymore," I said, and fired. The hall held the sound as if she wanted to use it again later.

I got an old tarp, tore it into strips, and bandaged his leg—that's how it goes around here: They shoot and bandage because no one has time to write letters. "Don't die," I said. "I'm not in the mood for funerals."

"What... is... inside...?" he pressed.

"Rent debts from the city," I said. "And your name in indelible script."

He smiled—the kind of smile men give when they still believe tomorrow is a day, not a judgment. "I'll... buy you, Sam."

"That's the problem with you," I said. "You want to buy everything. Some things belong to dust."

I left it on the ground, not out of malice. Out of physics. Outside, the storm whistled as if it knew how scene endings work. The walk back to the saloon was longer because the dust makes you walk in circles until you find your own footsteps and consider yourself company.

Mary-Lou tossed me a wet cloth as I pushed open the swinging door. "You look like a bad idea in the morning light."

"I feel like two."

"Did he deserve it?"

"He has it left over."

The bartender placed a bottle in front of me, and it didn't run away. The pianist stopped pretending he could play anything other than those three notes. A few men were half-standing, so they could quickly sit down again in case the story came up.

"Winnetou?" I asked without turning my head.

"In the shadows," said Mary-Lou. "He's not speaking to anyone today. That's what nights do when you've heard too much."

Old Shatterhand stepped out from the rear, as if formed by the dust. "Heard the shots," he said.

"You've arrived," I said.

"Who is lying?"

"The wrong one. As always."

He nodded and sat down. That's Charlie's art: He looks like he's just sitting. But when you touch his chair, you realize you're making a decision. I drank; the whiskey was warm because everything was warm.

The wind blew time through the cracks. Outside, sheets of metal flew across the floor, as if they'd been going somewhere and taken a wrong turn. A boy—not Eli, someone else—ran past the window, a cloth over his face, a bundle under his arm. "Leave him alone," Mary-Lou said as I moved. "Today everyone gathers their stuff. Tomorrow they'll ask about losses."

"And today?" asked the preacher, who always shows up when things smell like a balance sheet.

"We're not counting anything today," said Mary-Lou. "Otherwise we'll choke."

The smooth guy didn't come back. But his smell remained, that expensive scam that hangs on the lamps like old smoke. Tres Dedos didn't show up for another two hours. Dust in his hair, a cut on his cheek that needs no story. He nodded at me. I nodded back. Men who have accomplished something no one will reward rarely talk about it.

"Where to?" I asked quietly.

"North track," he said. "And then into nowhere. Best address."

"Anyone seen?"

"Just the storm."

"He's a bad witness."

"He forgets quickly. And he covers up."

He took a cigar, one of the cheap ones, and lit it with a bill no one had paid. He took two puffs and grimaced. "Tastes like a coffin."

"Our kind," I said.

He laughed once, briefly, as if laughing were a duty. "See you tomorrow," he said, and left as if he didn't want to leave more traces than a man should.

"He's not a bad guy," said Old Shatterhand.

"He's not a good guy," I said.

"It's sometimes the same thing – from the other side."

The storm picked up speed, as if it had understood that we'd just been trying to be important. Dust crept into the glasses, dusted the cards, dusted our sentences, until only the crude, resilient words remained. The cheap cigars continued to glow under the roof, smelling so reliably that otherwise you'd have to say something nice about them.

Later—much later—the smooth one dragged himself in. Two men under his arms, their faces looking as if they had teeth from alms. His leg was bandaged, badly, sterilized with self-pity. He didn't sit down. He stood and smiled crookedly.

"Nice shot, Sam," he said.

"Thanks. I only practice when necessary."

"You will pay for this."

"I always pay. That's the trick to why I'm still here."

"You think you understand dust."

"Dust understands us. He waits."

He pulled a cigar and let it hang as if it itself had had enough. "The box?"

I drank. "It has a new home."

"With whom?"

"With someone who doesn't hold them out of love."

"I'll find her."

"You never find the right thing. You only find the price."

He blew smoke that no longer tasted good because his mouth was full of tomorrow. "You and your friends—you're playing for time."

"Time is playing on us."

"I'm offering a reward," he said, "for information leading to its return."

"Put a reward on yourself," said Mary-Lou. "Maybe something useful will finally happen."

He half-turned, then turned back to me. "We two aren't finished yet."

"The two of us were never started."

He left. I mentally counted to seven, because some numbers clear the air. The wind outside responded with its own mathematics. Someone in the back coughed so loudly he could have been shot—not out of resentment, out of compassion. The bartender wiped the bar as if he could clean the city if he just found the right spot.

"The storm is abating," said Old Shatterhand.

"Or we get used to it," I said.

"Habit is the beginning of playing dead."

"We are the master discipline."

Winnetou stepped out of the shadows as if he'd always been there and placed his hand on my shoulder—briefly, succinctly, a receipt. "The dust has swallowed the right tracks," he said. "The wrong ones will blow back tomorrow."

"Then we blow."

"Quiet," he said. "Otherwise the wall will topple over."

The evening dragged on like old chewing gum. The storm became a breathless whisper. The cigars gave up or became human—hard to say. Mary-Lou dimmed

the lamp so our faces wouldn't reveal too much. A man in the corner slept with his mouth open, ready to eat dust if anyone was lying around senseless.

I took one of those cheap cigars that taste like anger, stuck it between my teeth, and let it smoke. The smoke tasted of factory smoke, of false promises, of the skin of people who own nothing but the illusion that everything has meaning when lit. I had to laugh, briefly, quietly, ugly. "Cheap stuff," I said, "but honest."

"Honestly, it wouldn't burn at all," said Mary-Lou.

"Then all we would have left is dust."

"We've had worse."

I exhaled the smoke and watched it mingle with the rest. It's comforting when things disappear without making a fuss. The preacher took a sip of water and pretended it was wine. The dog whose nail I had recently pulled crawled under my bench and sighed as if he had just realized that humans aren't dogs.

"Tomorrow?" asked Old Shatterhand.

"Tomorrow, the smooth one will put up another notice," I said. "Reward. Words like order, security, new beginning."

"And you?"

"I sit down and smoke something that claims to be tobacco. I listen to the dust. I wait until someone gets too loud."

"And then?"

"Then I'll shoot slowly."

He nodded, content in that stoic way that allows men to die decently if necessary. Winnetou went to the door and looked out into the night, which had begun to breathe again. "The city survives," he said. "Not because it's strong. Because it has no choice."

"Like all of us," I said.

The bottle was almost empty. I swirled it around, as if I could still get the last bits out of the right places. "Dust storms and cheap cigars," I muttered. "The rest is decoration."

"And us?" asked Mary-Lou.

"We're the inventory," I said. "They move us around until we fit. And if we don't fit, they adjust the story."

She smiled so much I was glad the light was low. "You're a romantic idiot, Sam."

"I'm a realistic beggar," I said, and drank the rest.

Later—if later means anything here—the wind brought the stars back, dusty but visible. The saloon grew quieter, the men heavier, the women tireder, the bartender lighter for a few lies he'd polished off. I stood up, my bones cracking like thin twigs, and walked to the door.

Outside, it smelled of wet wood, even though nothing was wet. Of iron, even though there was no draft. Of cigars, even though I had stubbed them out. Of a day that didn't like us, but let us through anyway. I looked toward the warehouse, where a man lay somewhere, and learned how time passes when it doesn't belong to you. I thought of Tres Dedos, carrying the box to where we'll need it later. I thought of the city, which tomorrow will be the same, only a little dirtier under the shirt. I thought that at least the cheap cigars are honest because they don't claim to be good.

"Good night, you lousy beauty," I said to the street, which pretended to have ears. "Tomorrow we'll start all over again: eating dust, spitting out words, and if someone comes in with an expensive cigar, we'll open the window."

The night answered with a long, thin whistle, as if a board somewhere were giving way. I pulled my hat down, sat down on my chest, and let the tiredness pass me by like a train that doesn't stop. And as the dust settled back where it belongs—everywhere—I thought that maybe we could make it after all. Not pretty, not clean, not with applause. Just like this. With dust in our lungs and the cheap smoke in our throats. Alive enough to get up again tomorrow and tell someone where left is when they say right.

That's our kind of victory. Small. Ugly. Sufficient.

Chapter 21 - Winnetou sleeps in a bathtub

The morning smelled of galvanized metal and broken promises. The saloon had its typical hangover color: nicotine on the rafters, lies on the floor, a pianist strumming the keys like a dog with a guilty conscience. I was standing in the doorway of the back room, because Mary-Lou had ordered me there with a look that could part on the side, and I saw—a bathtub.

An old zinc tub, scratched inside, dusty outside from the war we've been losing for years. Inside lay a man who never lies where others rest. Winnetou. Eyes closed, upper body out of the water, hair wet, right shoulder bandaged, left hand resting calmly on the edge, as if ordering the tub not to creak. And the water? It smelled as if someone had insulted Schnaps, and Schnaps had insulted him back. A thin plume of cheap liquor hung over the entire back room, so thin she could have been ashamed.

I stopped to keep the moment going. It's rare for the world to become so absurdly polite. "If I'm not mistaken," I said quietly, "there's the straightest man west of anywhere sleeping in a mess that not even a preacher would baptize."

"Shut up, Sam," Mary-Lou said from behind me, as loving as a meat cleaver. "He was cut open last night. Disinfection. No drinking." She held a bowl of clean water that looked like it had no desire to drink.

Old Shatterhand stepped aside, his voice as brief as a cash register receipt: "The bathhouse was full of barrels. Labeled as medicine on the carts. Smooth wants to drink the town happy this afternoon at Mill Path. That's his campaign. Winnetou opened the valves. One of the glove wearers caught him. Cut. Not deep. We brought him here. Mary put him in so the burning would kill the wrong things."

"Seems to have worked," I murmured. "He's breathing."

"He's always breathing," said Mary-Lou. "Because the city can't."

Winnetou opened his eyes. No drama. Just this slow, cool awakening, as if sleep had reported to him, not the other way around. "Sam," he said.

"You're lying in a zinc tub, brother," I said. "I didn't know gods used furniture."

He sat up as if the tub were a saddle blanket. The water stirred in a huff. "It doesn't burn anymore," he said. "That's enough."

Old Shatterhand handed him a towel that had never been honored like this before. "The Smooth One brings the firewater to the Mill Crossing. Two carts. Free for everyone, says the notice. 'Civic thanks' is written underneath. I feel sick."

"Free is always the most expensive thing here," I said. "And firewater burns twice: once in your throat and once when you realize what you signed."

Mary-Lou put her hands on her hips. "We hear each other talking. What do we do? I don't have the nerve to watch men die today just because they drink for free."

"We turn him around," I said. "He wants free entertainment? We'll give him a parade. Put a tub on the street, barrels around it, a few wicks made of hemp rope—no fire, just smoke—and if necessary, we'll dump the stuff in the dust. After that, all he has to offer is smell."

Mary-Lou blinked once, as if she'd guessed. "You want to burn down the saloon, but politely."

"I want the city to have a headache tomorrow from the stench, not from drinking."

Winnetou stood in the tub, water running down his muscles, as if he were glad to be able to touch something better. He stepped out, took the towel, and tied it around his shoulders only once. No show, no heroics. "No one drinks," he said. "No one shoots first. No one claps." He looked at me. "Sam. You talk. Briefly."

"I always speak briefly," I said, and lied.

We rolled the tub out like a holy relic from a very blasphemous temple. The morning was like the hot breath of an animal that no one feeds. Mary-Lou led because she knows how to lead. Old Shatterhand secured the flanks because he invented half-steps. Winnetou walked in front, bareheaded, his shoulder neatly bandaged, his eyes clear as the truth one wants to avoid. I followed, holding a rope with hemp wicks that looked like jokes that came too late.

The procession stopped in front of the shop of the grocer, who had been wrong again yesterday. The grocer stepped out, saw the tub, the men, the wicks, and swallowed once, as if he had his own shop key stuck in his throat. "What's going on?" he asked.

"Art," I said. "The kind no one wants to buy when it's finished."

We placed the tub in the middle of the street, where dust always wins. Two guys who had nothing special about them except arms helped us arrange four empty barrels around it. We chalked "firewater" on three of them, and "water" on the fourth. Mary-Lou poured the contents of two jugs into the "water" barrel—real, cool, rare water. Into the others, we poured leftovers that the bartender gave us, cursing: bar bottom, spilled stuff, stale booze you wouldn't even rub into a horse's coat. Put wicks in, light them? No. Just smoke. Old pine-oil rags under the rims, which, when heated, stank like the real thing.

"This is theater," growled the preacher, who always realizes too late that he has been invited.

"Then pray for good seats," said Mary-Lou.

The carts arrived as the sun made the wood crackle. Two large-wheeled hearses, except the corpses were still drinking. On the box was the smooth one, wearing a suit so clean it hurt, and smoking a cigar that claimed to be taste. Behind him, three glove-wearing men whose hands only grow strong in barrels. To the right and left, the curious town—some with cups, some with intentions.

"Citizens!" shouted the smooth man, and I got a rash from the word. "Today the city drinks! To our future! To order! To—"

The smoke from our barrels began to creep into the stacks. It smelled of rancidity, of husks, and of what's left under the bar after the night has spat out its guests. The first faces twisted, then the second ones too. The smooth one blinked, smiled broader, and gave a sign. The gloved men jumped down, ready to unload barrels.

"Stop there," Winnetou said quietly, and they heard him because the air did it for him. "No one's going to drink until the city smells what they're drinking."

The smooth man acted as if he were amused. "Mr. Hawkens," he then said, as if I were sitting on his horse, "you have once again—"

"I don't have much this time," I said. "Just time. And a nose. Your firewater stinks before your tongue can lie."

A few men laughed, that uncertain laughter that wants to come out and hopes no one notices. Mary-Lou lifted the "water" barrel, tipped a ladle into a tin

bowl, and handed it to a boy who looked like Thirst. He drank, first suspiciously, then greedily. "Water!" he said, as if it were a miracle.

"Water," repeated the widow from the crowd, her steely gaze beneath a black scarf. "Today, no one gives fire. Today, someone gives life."

The smooth man made his face briefly forget what it was capable of. "Citizen," he began again, "this... smell... is a disturbance. We offer the best. Medical grade. Filtered, distilled—"

"It's really burned," I shouted. "It's burning holes where you once had wishes."

Old Shatterhand walked leisurely to his cart and placed his hand on the barrel lid, as if calming a horse. "Open," he said to the glove-wearing man, with a kindness that always comes just before a storm. The man lifted the lid, and the town got a whiff: harsh alcohol that smelled of haste, of sugar that hurts, of promises that are only liquid because no one wants to hold on to them.

"Medicine," said Mary-Lou. "For illnesses he used to sell."

I pinched my nose, more for show than necessity, and pulled a wick from one of the barrels provided. The flame crept up the rag, smelled of lamp oil, then rose, without courage, into a thick, ugly cloud. Just like that. No fire, only shame. I held the flame to the edge of the smooth barrel. Nothing burned. It was too wet, too bad, too ordinary. It didn't even want to sin. "It can't even burn," I said. "That's the third insult after taste and price."

A murmur. The kind that breaks chains. The smooth man raised his hand, sending the glove-wearers toward us. Winnetou took a half step, no more, and his hands ceased to be gloves. Wilderness has grammar, and he knows all the verbs.

"We're pouring!" shouted the smooth man, smiling angrily back, and three taps opened. Whiskey flowed into tin cups—and Mary-Lou stepped forward, took two, turned them upside down, and dropped the contents into the dust. A third went to the grocer. He sniffed. Pouted. Poured, too. The sound of the alcohol in the dust was the best song the pianist will never play.

"Throw it away!" said the widow. "And drink water."

The preacher nodded, startled by himself, nodded again. The boy called out, "Again!" and Mary-Lou handed him water again, as if pouring for a king. Behind us, men tipped over cups. Some out of spite, some out of decency, some

because they knew they were too weak for cheap today. The smooth man shrank under his clean suit.

He stepped toward me, close enough that I could smell his breath, which reeked of catalogs. "You're playing dangerously, Hawkens."

"I'm not playing at all," I said. "I'm just reshuffling cards you've marked."

He raised his hand, and for a heartbeat, I felt that old reflex that ends things. Old Shatterhand was closer than the smooth man thought. He placed his left hand on his wrist, his right on the cigar, and took both away. "Not today," Charlie said matter-of-factly. "Today you lose without drama."

The gloved men moved again. I held out the wicks to them. No fire, just thick smoke that ruined their nice shirts. "What a pity about the laundry," I said. "Next time, come naked."

Someone laughed, shabbily yet genuinely. Winnetou turned off the taps. The stream along the Mill Path slurped once, as if hungry for something better, and took what ran over. I imagined the water further down making fish drunk. I decided not to think about it today.

"The end," said Mary-Lou, and that was the first time I'd ever liked that word. "Go home. Nothing's free today—except respect for your own head."

The crowd dispersed, not quickly, but properly. A man took his wife's cup and poured it. Another refilled it with water. The widow stood there, her chain with the steel plate visible like a judgment, and nodded at me once. It wasn't a thank you. It was an acknowledgement.

The smooth one remained behind, like a sign no one wants to read anymore. "You pay for this," he whispered.

"We pay for everything," I said. "Every day. Today we have a discount."

The carts rolled away, lighter than they had come, not because they were emptier, but because the city was briefly heavier than the barrels. We stopped on the path, leaving the tub there as a memorial until the dust recognized it as furniture again. Winnetou watched the stream, which had learned nothing and yet was good.

"Pain?" I asked, pointing to his shoulder.

"Only when I cough," he said.

"Then don't smoke."

"I never smoke."

"Do it today, as an exception," I said, holding out one of the cheapest cigarettes. He didn't take it. He smiled. The kind of smile you want to keep, because otherwise the day will empty your pockets. "No," he said. "Today you won't smoke for me. Today I'll breathe."

We pushed the tub back, slowly, a triumphant procession without music and without a victor. The city took us back, as it takes everyone: with dirty hands and messy love. A bucket of water was left outside the saloon. Everyone who came drank. No one asked who it belonged to. A miracle? No. An interim result.

Inside, the bartender placed three glasses down, without saying a word. Old Shatterhand sat down as if he still had five paths in his head to take tomorrow. Mary-Lou looked at me, a little soft around the edges, which she hates. "Firewater #2," she said. "Not in my throat today."

"In my head today," I said. "And hopefully in my memory."

The preacher raised his glass of water and said nothing. Miracles happened. The shopkeeper paid two old debts and didn't talk about it. The boy who had been thirsty a moment ago slept on the doorstep like good news that no one could ruin.

Later—later is a tricky word here—the smooth one came again, without a cart, without an audience. He hung in the frame like mold. "You haven't won anything," he said.

"Yes," I said. "One day."

"And tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow you buy new barrels. We buy time."

"Time is more expensive than whiskey."

"And tastes better."

He left because men like him can't stay when no one is listening.

Winnetou stood at the window lattice, his shadow as clean as the lines of his patience. "Thank you for the tub," he said to Mary-Lou.

"I would have put you in a trough too," she said.

"I know."

"Would you jump in again?" I asked.

"If the city needs it," he said. "But not to drink."

"Firewater burns twice," I repeated. "Today we put it out before it started."

"No," he said. "We reminded people."

"What?"

"That they are thirsty, and that there are ways to quench their thirst that cost nothing."

I sat on my box, the same one, always the same, because stubbornness is also furniture. I didn't smoke. I let the cigarette burn until it touched my finger. I liked the pain because it was honest. Outside, the wind scraped the alley one last time, as if scraping the day from the wood. The tub was back in the back room, empty, clean enough to bear truth again tomorrow.

And as the saloon slowly returned to its old rhythm, I thought: A man like the Smooth One needs kegs. A man like Winnetou needs nothing. A man like Old Shatterhand only needs half a step. A woman like Mary-Lou doesn't need permission at all. And me? I need just that: one more day where I can knock someone's glass out of their hand before they drink up their freedom.

Firewater #2 wasn't a rush. It was a stench that saved us today. Tomorrow it will be beautiful again, nicely labeled, sweet on the tongue, cheap at heart. Tomorrow it's our turn again.

Today, it's enough for me that the man who never lies down slept in a bathtub—not because he was weak, but because the city was too strong. Today, it's enough for me that the water smelled of liquor and was still clean. Today, it's enough for me that the tub is empty and the stream continues to flow.

Tomorrow we'll talk dirty again. Today we were clean enough to stink.

Chapter 22 - The Man Who Shot Himself □ Twice

Morning took us without a greeting. The air was the kind that reeks of old newspapers, and the saloon smelled as if someone had spilled the truth the night before and then wiped it off with beer. Mary-Lou held a rag that had seen better sins. "There's someone lying in the back," she said. "With holes that aren't dreams."

"Holes are the only thing that grows here," I said, and walked through the side corridor where boards creaked from too much use.

He was lying behind the saloon between two barrels that pretended to be empty witnesses. Rafferty, the small-time broker of big debts. He used to laugh like a man who thinks numbers are pets. Today he laughed like a man who has forgotten how. His hat lay two feet away, his face raised to the sky as if there were a receipt there that he wanted to dispute.

Two holes. One in the chest, angled in, a close shot—the skin kissed with powder, black-brown spots like a cough that never goes away. The other clean, under the side of the ribs, cool as an accountant's handwriting. "Suicide," read the notice someone had nailed to the post while the man wasn't even completely cold yet.

"So he was thorough," I murmured.

Old Shatterhand was already kneeling there, as if the dust had painted him there. "The close shot came from the front. The weapon was at an angle. The muscles in his hand would have given way differently if he had drawn it himself. See? Too tidy."

"And the second one?"

"Too far. No gunpowder, no recoil in the body, as he lay. The second shot came when the first had already decided where the story was headed."

Winnetou stood a step in the shadow. He sees better when the light isn't too bright. "Hands," he said.

I raised them respectfully, as if he might scold me. Clean. No soot ring on my index finger. No rough line of sweat or grit. A small, light fiber on the inside, as

if someone had briefly adjusted the gloves at the wrong moment. "Rafferty, you weren't a good shot," I said to the man, who didn't need to hear any more.

"Suicide," someone at the post repeated. The smooth one. Of course, him. Freshly shaved, neatly dressed, smoking a cigar, pretending to be something better. "Times are hard. People are breaking. Tragic."

"It's broken twice," I said. "That's art."

"It was a single, tragic decision," he crooned. "I have the suicide note." He waved a piece of paper that looked as if it had been learned how to write last night.

"Let me guess," said Mary-Lou, who had come because she sees everything she doesn't want to see. "'It was all my fault, I've always been weak, no one is to blame but me and God?'"

The smooth man smiled. "Something like that. He's asking for forgiveness."

"Forgiveness is more expensive than whiskey here," I said. "And rarer."

The sheriff's brother stood there like a man looking for a place to stand. "If it's suicide, we have to..."

"Nothing," said Mary-Lou. "We don't have to do anything. Except breathe properly."

We took Rafferty to the coffin maker. The shed smelled of tar, lavender, and decisions made too late. The coffin maker laid the man, who knows more stories than any church book, on the cold table. I pulled up my sleeve because some truths scratch the skin.

"Do you see the flattening of the wound?" Charlie said. "First shot too close, the mouth of the steel burned the skin. But the marks in the hand are missing. He wasn't holding the gun like that."

"Someone helped him kill himself," I said. "Very Christian."

The coffin maker cleared his throat as if he didn't belong there. "I'm only responsible for the wood."

"Today we're all carpenters," I said. "The city wants it to fit."

Winnetou bent down so far that his shadow covered the table. "The second bullet is cleaner," he said. "It doesn't like closeness."

"From the side," Charlie said. "Someone was standing there when he was already lying or kneeling. A hit shot."

I looked at the little things that speak louder than words: the collar crooked, as if someone had just grabbed it; a film of dust on the belt, and a line without dust—as if a stranger's hand had been resting there. And the fiber—light, fine, glove-like. The smooth man's perfume didn't cling to Rafferty. Good. He lets others do the cleaning.

"Why, Glatter?" I asked later, outside. "Why twice? Once would have been enough if you just wanted the story."

He smiled as if I weren't there. "The man had debts. Big ones. A bullet. The end. People accept such news more easily when it comes ready-made."

"And the second bullet?"

"Justice is thorough."

I breathed through my teeth. It sounded like an argument. "You call it justice when you burden the world until it becomes straight beneath your feet."

"I call it: order."

I walked away before my mouth did something my hands would have trouble with later. The mill path pulled me like an old mistake. In the willow bend, where the stream sounds louder, as if it were free, I found the notch: a splinter of wood from the post, slanted, fresh, the paint not yet offended. A ricochet. Someone had practiced or corrected, or both. Boot marks next to it, nothing major: heel flat, weight inward—glove wearer number one or two. A cigar butt, half-soaked, expensive label, cheap soul.

I picked up the butt with two fingers, as if it were dirt (it was), and put it in my pocket. Back at the saloon, I handed it to the bartender. "If anyone asks, tell them smoking is killing you."

"Do it," he said. "Slower than children."

Mary-Lou pushed a coffee toward me that looked like Sinn when it was old. "The smooth one's running around collecting witnesses, Sam. The kind who'd see anything for a glass."

"Then we'll collect something real," I said. "A mistake."

That evening, the saloon was packed with people pretending to have opinions. I asked for attention—not politely, just loudly. "I have a trick," I said. "It's called 'How to Shoot Yourself Twice Without Hitting a Bullet.'" A few glanced at the preacher, who acted like he was open to conversation today. I placed a drilled-out revolver on the bar, the cylinder containing a blunt cartridge I'd borrowed from the coffin maker's closet earlier (I return such things if I don't get caught). I placed the cigar butt next to it.

"There are two ways to die," I began. "One is honest. It's quick, and it's rarely here. The other is administrative. It has a notice, a witness, a stamp."

The smooth one stood in the back, glove wearers on the left and right, like commas in a sentence that needs no verbs.

"Let's assume," I continued, "a man is standing here." I marked the ground with chalk. "He shoots himself. Close to the chest. Soot, burns, dirt—everything's there. Now—" I raised the revolver, pointed at the cylinder, clicked, and held the barrel to my chest. "—now something's missing. Because he'd fall from shock, the gun would tilt differently, his fingers would tell a story. And yet Rafferty's hands are clean. How so? Someone kept them clean later. Someone messed him up. Someone shot again. From the side. Further away. No soot. No fingers."

I pointed the gun at the empty corner shelf, far enough away from people, and pulled the trigger. The blunt cartridge fired without a bullet, a hollow, fat crack that rang out across the room. The gloved man on the right flinched, his hand instinctively going to his hip. There he was. Reflex. I saw his fingers: light on the inside, dark on the outside. The fiber in Rafferty's hand was the same color.

"I don't want to make heroes," I said. "I just want to know why a man who wanted to shoot himself had time to shoot himself again."

The gloved man on the left made the mistake of trying to swallow. His throat spoke. "He flinched," he growled, as if I'd asked him. "The first shot was crooked. We—" He fell silent because you can choke him with a look. The smooth one almost did. Too late.

"You helped him," Mary-Lou said dryly. "Like falling."

"We've corrected it," the right-winger blurted, furious at his tongue. "So there's peace!"

Peace. This word that eats so much dirt in this city. Winnetou took half a step forward. "There's peace that one sows," he said quietly. "And peace that one overturns. Yours overturns."

Old Shatterhand took the cigar butt between his thumb and forefinger and held it up. "North Slope, expensive thing, only two men here can afford it. One's too smart to throw it." He looked at the smooth one, kindly, as one does to a child who's getting in his own way. "The other is you."

"A stub proves nothing," said the smooth one. "Suicide. Letter. Dozens of witnesses."

"Dozens are drinking your witness bonus today," I said. "Tomorrow, when the water is clearer, they'll remember other stories."

It wasn't loud. Louder than usual. A few men looked at their hands as if searching for paint. Widow McCready stood at the door, her expression impassive. She doesn't need one when the town thinks for itself. The preacher put his fingers to his beard, as if God could be filtered out through them. The sheriff's brother approached the glove-wearing man, who had swallowed, and asked nothing. He waited. Sometimes waiting is the knife.

"Suicide," the smooth man repeated, more quietly. "It wasn't twice. That's ridiculous."

"Right," I said. "Nobody shoots themselves twice. The city takes care of the second shot. With a stamp. With a sentence. With your kind of order."

He approached, his cigar like a flag. "You're playing dangerously, Hawkens."

"I'm not acting. I'm just stealing the scenery."

He smiled—that thin, pale line that refuses to become emotion. "The story remains as I tell it."

"Not today," said Mary-Lou. "Today we're being literary unfaithful."

"And tomorrow?" he asked.

"Tomorrow you'll lie again," I said. "But it's harder."

The crowd parted as if a knot had come undone, without knowing which rope. The gloved man, who had said too much, slumped his shoulders, like someone finally bearing his own weight again. The sheriff's brother took him away. No spectacle. Order, writ large.

Later, the four of us stood under the awning, where the rain never reaches. The evening drew a line beneath it. Winnetou looked into the alley as if expecting something friendly. Old Shatterhand lit a cigarette, looking as if he knew when to die. Mary-Lou finished polishing glassy lies.

"Rafferty didn't shoot himself twice," Charlie said.

"No," I said. "He tried it once, and the city helped him be diligent."

"Why?" asked the brother, who came over without being noticed.

"Because two is better than one," said Mary-Lou. "Especially the lie."

Winnetou briefly placed his hand on my upper arm. "We'll bury him," he said.

"He'll be buried twice," I said. "Once in the woods, once in the rumor."

"We'll make his second gravestone smaller," said Mary-Lou. "So he'll be easy to miss."

"That's cruel," said the brother.

"That's kind," I said. "It's cruel to make him big."

The night settled as it always settles: quietly, thoroughly, without question. The saloon breathed, and the street acted innocent. I sat on my box, because some habits keep your back straight. The dog, who understands everything, lay down next to my boot. I stroked him and thought of men who end up shooting "themselves" because the city holds the gun for them.

"Twice," I muttered into the dust. "First the bullet. Then the story."

Mary-Lou placed a glass in front of me. "First shot," she said.

"And against the second one," I said.

We drank. No applause. Just that kind of silence that remains when the stage realizes the play is better without them. Tomorrow, the smooth guy will put up a new notice. Tomorrow they'll say: "Okay." Tomorrow someone will smile too early. Tomorrow I'll knock the glass out of someone's hand.

And today? Today, it's enough for me that someone didn't die twice, even if the notice says otherwise. Today, it's enough for me that the dust has preserved our version better than his. Today, it's enough for me that the city briefly pretended it didn't want to participate in the shooting anymore.

It won't last. Nothing will last here. But we'll last longer than the lie, if we're lucky. And if not, then at least with style: a nasty remark on the tip of our tongues, our finger next to the trigger, and the certainty that we won't slap the second shot.

Chapter 23 - Remnants of a Bad Plan

The morning smelled of cold grease and lost courage. Behind the saloon lay planks that had once been tables, wicks that had pretended to be torches, and two barrels with guilty consciences in their bellies. A chair stood crooked like an apology no one wanted to hear. I took a step into the mess and bumped into a crate that was no longer going to be used.

"Don't touch it," Mary-Lou said without looking. "It might be an idea. And we only touch it here if we're wearing gloves."

"I wear my tongue as a glove," I said. "It usually works."

I crouched down. Stuck in the pile of splinters was paper: half stamp, half seal, a whole lie. RG, it said in a script that wanted to appear innocent. Next to it was something that had once been sealing wax and now served only as a shame. I pocketed the scraps. Here, remnants are the truth in a handy size.

"The Smooth One has a new sign," Mary-Lou reported dryly. "'Repair the Order.' He offers rewards for men with strong backs and weak questions."

"So for men," I said.

"For his men," she corrected. "He wants to clean up."

"Cleaning up here is when you put things where no one is looking."

"Exactly."

Winnetou stood in the doorway as if the shadow had a lease on him. "Siding," he said. "Three Dedos is waiting."

"Does he ever wait?" I asked.

"Today, yes," said Winnetou. "He has something he can't leave undone."

The siding smelled of old iron and of a time when trains still believed they carried something other than debt. Tres Dedos sat on a crate and didn't smoke. That made him likeable. He pointed with his chin toward an open train car. Inside, behind a pile of burlap, slept a crate that would have preferred to remain inconspicuous.

"Forgotten?" I asked.

"Left behind," said Tres Dedos. "Night came too quickly."

I pried it open. Inside were rolls of labels, neatly printed: "Medical Supplies," "City Reservation." I liked the third-to-last word. It wasn't right, yet it was true. There was also sealing wax, mirrors glued to the lids so everyone could see themselves in the lie and nod. A few retaining rings that smelled of sweat in gloves.

"Remnants of a plan," I said.

"Bad plan," said Tres Dedos. "But persistent."

"Bad plans are like cockroaches," I muttered. "You see one, you have a hundred."

Old Shatterhand touched the wax, rolling it between his fingers as if trying to teach it manners. "He stamps by night what should be called order by day," he said. "Autosuggestion for citizens."

"Citizens don't want to think," I said. "They want to nod."

"They nod less today," said Winnetou.

"Today," I repeated. "Tomorrow he'll buy new stamps."

We took what we needed—three rolls of labels, a can of wax, two retaining rings as proof that lies like to be strapped down. Tres Dedos nodded, jumped

off the box like someone who belongs to no one, and disappeared into the shadows. Some people are the footnotes of history you read when you finally grow up. He's one of those people.

Along the Mill Path, the wind lifted the grass, as if searching for a better version of ourselves down below. We pulled the boards out of the bank that had served as camouflage yesterday and found a buried bottle. Not whiskey. Clear moonshine, labeled medically, for internal use. Mary-Lou picked it up, the light doing what it always does: helping the wrong people. "Order in cans," she said, "with instructions: First stupid, then good."

"And then empty," I said.

Winnetou put the bottle back. "Don't destroy it," he said. "Show it."

"Whom?"

"Everyone."

"They'll say we put the label on it," I warned.

"Let them," said Mary-Lou. "Then we'll say: Where did you get the rolls? Because we have ours."

In this city, "with us" means: in a hole under the coffin maker's stairs, between two boards that only open when you say the right word. Today, the right word was: Enough.

By midday, the smooth man had nailed the new notice to every post, as if trying to convert wood. "Repair of order," it read, and underneath: "Sweeping, clearing, seizure. Volunteers report to the Committee of Usefulness." Reading it gave me a rash. The committee consisted of him and men holding a broom as if it were a gun.

The saloon filled with people wanting to know if they were for or against something today. Widow McCready came, black as a decision, and placed the steel plate on the counter. I placed the label rolls, the wax, and the holders next to it, and Mary-Lou placed the buried bottle next to it, as if it were a trophy from a competition no one could win.

"Accounting," said the widow. "Public."

The grocer stood there as if he had just happened to be in his own shop. "I don't know anything," he began, and that was the mistake. "It's all medicine. I sell what's on the list."

"Then read it out loud," I said, and pushed a list toward him—one of his, the name of the week, the totals next to it. He wouldn't listen. Mary-Lou watched. He read. Two names stuck in his throat. He choked them out like old bones. The room listened, because rooms here listen better than people.

The smooth one came with two brooms. Behind him, the glove-wearing men were without gloves, but with faces that wanted to apologize but had no school for it. "Friends," he smiled. "What a coincidence: We were also planning to keep records."

"Then we'll do it together," said Mary-Lou. "First: Who has label rolls? Us or you?"

"Is this a dish?" he crooned.

"No," I said. "That's worse. That's the audience."

Old Shatterhand took the wax and held it up as if it were a lantern. "This wax has been sitting on barrels that were in the bathhouse and supposedly belonged to the community yesterday. The rolls fit perfectly into the drawer you left in the wagon. The retaining rings smell of your masters' gloves. This—" he tapped the buried bottle, "—was found on the Mill Path under boards that know your shoe size."

"Evidence is only evidence," said the smooth one, "if someone believes it."

"Today they're happy to believe," the widow said calmly. "Today it was water."

The broom men raised their handles a finger's breadth, the kind of threat made by men who've already bitten into wood. Winnetou turned his head, halfway. That was enough. The handles sank again. Order is sometimes a matter of perspective.

"You can clean up," I said to the smooth one, "but not with us. Clean up your mind. The plan was bad. It's now leftovers. Leave it there."

He smiled, and this time his smile was a wound. "I never let things go. I make up for it."

"With whom?" asked the sheriff's brother, who had until then practiced the art of inconspicuousness. "With whom, RG?"

It was the first time someone had thrown the name into the room like that, as if it were a stone thrown through a window. The smooth man blinked slowly, as if he wanted to enjoy being insulted. "I'm just a citizen," he said.

"With a stamp," said Mary-Lou. "And with a bad printer."

He took a step, and Old Shatterhand countered with a half step. I love that math—his half step subtracts whole men. "Not today," said Charlie. "You can pretend again tomorrow."

"Tomorrow," said the Smooth One, "the Mill Path will be clean. And your evidence will disappear."

"Remains never disappear here," I said. "They just become part of something else."

He left us standing there. The brooms followed, a beat later, like dumb music. The air lingered, as if it could still taste him. I took the label rolls, tied them with twine, and gave them to the widow. "Remember where you put them," I said.

"Next to the record," she said. "For later."

Later is another word for when the city lies again. It happens often here.

In the afternoon, we walked up and down the Mill Path like old dogs wanting to know if the fence is still there. We found more bottles—two more, empty, labeled, buried. We left them there, just like that, half-visible. Let those who pass by do their own work: see, think, say yes. The stream made sounds like someone washing evidence, but not quite. I rarely liked it like that.

"You haven't talked much today," I said to Winnetou.

"There was little to say," he replied. "Bad plans explain themselves—in the end."

"And their remains?"

"Are teachings."

"Who learns?"

"Someone tomorrow. No one today."

"That's optimism."

"No. Statistics."

By evening, the saloon was full, but complete sentences were in short supply. The grocer paid for his beer without haggling; it was his contribution to civilization. The preacher took a sip of water and didn't even pretend it was wine. Mary-Lou placed a knife next to the lemons and didn't need it for anyone's neck. The dog slept under my crate and dreamed that people were honest.

Old Shatterhand drew the outline of the Smooth Man's plan on the table with a wet fingertip: cart, bathhouse, siding, mill path. Arrows here, arrows there. Then he wiped everything away with the heel of his hand, leaving only a dot in the middle of the wood. "This is where it failed," he said.

"Where?" asked Mary-Lou.

"With the audience," he said. "It was there."

"Just today," I warned.

"Today's enough," said Charlie. "Tomorrow we'll see if it's enough."

The widow arrived just before the end, placed two coins on the counter and nothing else. "He'll change the plan," she said. "Bad plan number two is the desire to fix the first one."

"The remnants of one bad plan are the building blocks of the next," I said. "I've seen houses made of less."

"You don't make me happy," said Mary-Lou.

"We'll give you work," I said. "Joy is a byproduct."

"Like ash," she said. "And dawn."

Shortly before midnight, Tres Dedos showed up again, bringing not a word, just a tin box. Inside were three used cartridge cases, a broken stamp handle, and a piece of leather with the RG stamped on it. "Remaining stock," he said, half-grinning.

"The city is a pawn shop for bad ideas," I said. "We take everything and give nothing back."

We drank to no one. That's the fairest way to drink here. Outside, the wind settled. The mill path made the sound of water that no longer wants to be guilty. Somewhere further back, the smooth man was practicing in front of a mirror the smile he would wear tomorrow when he told us that order was a person and that she had married him.

I slumped deeper into my box, my back covered in lists, my head full of splinters. "Remnants of a bad plan," I said into the counter. "You can't build anything beautiful out of them. But you can mend fences that will save us from the next ones."

"Fences don't hold," said Mary-Lou.

"Humans neither," I said. "But both are enough to keep the night rain out."

The dog sighed in agreement. The preacher snored without protest. The lights flickered like promises just before the end of the day. And I thought Bukowski had said, "Most plans are like cheap cigarettes—in the end, all that remains is a stinking filter and an empty gesture." I turned the bottle so the remaining light hung inside. Then I made them all. Not the plan. The day.

Tomorrow he'll bring a new plan. Tomorrow we'll bring new remnants. And if we're lucky, one day there'll be enough for a bridge that a single boy can cross with a dry shirt and without a fake laugh. Until then: collect, display, spoil. And drink—not to the plan, but to the fact that he was bad enough to die today.

Chapter 24 - Letters that would have been better burned

The morning came crooked out of the night, as if it had sprained its ankle on the way here. I sat on my crate, took the first sip that tasted like bad advice, and stared at the tin box next to my boots. The box had been there since Tres Dedos had left it with me yesterday like a living insult. Inside were letters. Too many. Paper with handwriting that pretended to be innocent. Nothing is innocent that survives this long.

I opened the lid, and the air smelled of attic, cold smoke, old sweat, and a kind of ink that knew more than its owners. I took the letter with the wax on top

and broke the seal, because I was never good at pretending. A few sweet sentences from someone who didn't like themselves to someone who liked themselves too much. I put it away like one carries a child from a burning house: with no illusion that there won't be any burn scars.

The next letter was from a schoolmaster to the widow with the steely gaze: Sorry, sorry, and at the end a bill. I laughed, briefly, because laughter here is sometimes the only insurance that still pays off. Then came the letter that weighed more than the box: It wasn't hard to kill him. The only hard thing was scraping the blood off the veranda. If anyone finds out, say Winnetou was there—that makes it more believable. Beneath it was a name that makes men forget to breathe and women tighten their rings. I didn't fold it. Some sentences shouldn't be made smaller.

Mary-Lou suddenly appeared in the doorway. She didn't look into the box because she knew what was inside. "You reek of trouble," she said. "And not the good kind."

"I didn't wash," I said.

"You read," she said.

"I tried."

She stepped closer, took an open envelope from me, scanned the lines that looked as if they were afraid of her own handwriting, and put it back. "If there were a fire that burns justly, I'd say: throw everything in. But our fire always burns where it warms the wrong people."

"Then we leave it cold?"

"We'll let it live," she said. "At least until we know who it belongs to."

Old Shatterhand came around the corner, half in shadow, half step, whole problem. "Tres Dedos is looking for you," he said. "He wants a kind of peace I can't provide."

"Which letter belongs to him?"

"The one he was never supposed to get."

"Sounds like our product range."

Winnetou entered later, silent as a sentence that only hurts at the last word. He placed his hand on the edge of the box, so calmly that the metal felt ashamed. "I won't touch a single leaf," he said. "But you will tell me if someone misuses my name."

"This isn't abuse," I said. "This is my job."

"Then kill the profession," he said, and left as if he had explained something important to the dust.

I took the box, carried it to the back room of the saloon, and placed it on the table next to the cash register, where money has been learning how to become invisible for years. Mary-Lou lowered the lamp, and the room took on the color of old skin. We spread out the letters like a doctor spreads out his tools before cutting open someone who's already dead.

There were many lives in that pile. A girl who wanted to go to St. Louis and failed on the third sentence. A merchant who begged forgiveness for diluting water with a bag of lying powder he called "holy salt." A mother who asked for money and named names that are big today and small yesterday. A man who wrote to someone to come to Mill Path at midnight, "with the red cloth and the calm of one who is dying." Three letters that smelled of manure. And one that smelled of blood because a drop had dried in the fold.

The smooth man came in like a preacher who knows God isn't listening today, but the congregation is anyway. He sat down without asking. His cigar had the same bad character as he did. "I'll take the box," he said, laying down three clean bills that looked as if they hadn't seen a sweat yet.

"You don't take anything," said Mary-Lou.

"I only buy what nobody needs."

"Then buy yourself," I said.

He smiled thinly, the kind of smile you put on like gloves. "There are letters among them that are slander. And some that are property. Some are sentimental, some criminal. In any case, they're a risk. For you. I'm happy to take the risk."

"Risk is free," I said. "You're just collecting interest."

He pulled a glass toward him, sniffed it, and didn't put it back. "I'm offering you something to raffle off: forgetfulness. That's the most valuable currency here. I'll buy forgetfulness from you."

"You're sick," said Mary-Lou. "And the sickness is called order."

Old Shatterhand took the letter with the confession. He didn't read it aloud, but his face read it loud enough. "When Winnetou sees this," he said, "he'll think the city is right: It's the perfect lie for every murder that's not worth explaining."

"Then explain it," I said.

"It's not about explaining," he said. "It's about weight. Paper has weight. False statements have weight."

"We could burn him," said Mary-Lou.

"Burning doesn't make you go away," I said. "It just warms you up."

"Then bury him," she said. "Deep."

"Being buried raises you up again," said the preacher who appeared when words smacked of work. "That's his specialty: resurrection."

"Then lock it," I said. "Somewhere only one person has a key."

"Who?" asked Old Shatterhand.

I looked at Mary-Lou. She shook her head. I looked at the widow standing in the doorway, as if she already knew. "I'm not taking anything that will be needed on my table later," she said, tapping the steel plate on her chest. "Paper is worse than iron."

"The coffin maker," I finally said. "He has boards that hold more secrets than they should."

We closed the coffin and carried it over. The coffin maker opened a false bottom that smelled of lavender and fear. "Just for a short time," he said. "Everything alive wants out."

"This isn't alive," I said.

"It still eats."

When we returned, Tres Dedos was sitting on my box. He was rolling an empty cartridge case between his fingers as if it were a prayer. "I'm not here for the box," he said. "I'm here for a letter."

"Which one?"

"The one with the red rag."

I pulled the envelope from my jacket. Red wax, red ribbon, red idea. I didn't hand it to him. "Who is the recipient?"

"No one else."

"Who is the sender?"

"Someone who is still alive but doesn't want to know how."

"Then don't read it."

"I just want to throw it away."

"That's what I always say and then I keep it."

He smiled crookedly, a scar on his face that wasn't there. "Sam, some things are bombs. I don't want one to go off today."

I tore the seal and read it standing up, without taking a breath. A rendezvous on Mill Path, a year ago. A name I didn't like. A sentence that would have turned off the light if it had been written differently: Bring the girl with the glass eye. No one else. And underneath: I bring the money and the peace. It was the handwriting of someone the smooth guy likes to call "citizen" and I "target." I tucked the letter away. "He's going. But not with you."

"Where?"

"Nowhere," I said. "If you're lucky, the right thing will find him."

He nodded, as if that was exactly what he wanted. Sometimes people don't ask for what they want. They ask that someone else wants it.

In the evening, the saloon opened its mouth: voices that didn't finish speaking; glasses that said more than the men who raised them. The smooth man stood against the wall, smoking the most expensive cigarette in town, looking like a supplicant. The widow counted glances. Mary-Lou quartered lemons as if they

were heads. Old Shatterhand drew a map on the table with his fingertip that looked like our future: too many roads, too little water.

I placed two letters down, without the box. One harmless, so people would think they knew what it was about. And the other, which was all wrong, only more consistent. "Listen," I said, "there's paper in this city that claims things that aren't yours. Anyone who believes letters are honest has never cheated. Anyone who believes they lie has lied too often. Today we'll let them work."

The smooth one stepped forward. "Work is good," he said.

"You only know the ones you delegate," said Mary-Lou.

"I know the ones you pay."

"And I know the ones you regret," I said.

I read two lines from the laundress's love letter, just to soften up the men who are usually stones. Then I read the sentence from the murder letter, without any names. It fell silent. The silence in the saloon has a color. Today it was blue, cold, and you could have used it to make up ice chips.

"Who?" asked someone from the back.

"No one will admit it," I said. "And no one you want to love today."

"Read the name," said the smooth one.

"I only read names when I write invoices."

"I'll pay," he said. "For everyone."

"You never pay," said Mary-Lou. "You just do the math."

Winnetou stepped through the door, and the air froze. "Enough," he said. "No one reads what destroys them."

The smooth one laughed quietly. "Some are already broken. Reading only helps with tidying up."

"Cleaning up is your word for burying," I said. "And you're not a coffin maker."

I put the murder letter away. The whispers were offended. Men want to see blood when you talk about blood. I gave them a different kind: I put down

three more harmless letters: a minor blackmail, a major stupidity, an involuntary confession about adulterated flour. The grocer turned green. The preacher mumbled a confession that wasn't his. The widow didn't smile.

Later, I went outside, the red envelope in my pocket, which felt like a live mouse. The mill path smelled of water that had seen the same stones for too long. I looked for the flat rock I like when I have to do things I don't like. I put down the red letter, lit a match, and held it there. The flame trembled, biting at the sealing wax, growing larger, shrinking, dying. I lit a second match, holding it lower. The flame went out, not by wind, but by insight.

"You're a coward," I said to myself.

"No," said the night. "You're demanding."

I folded the letter along a new edge it didn't deserve and put it back. Then I walked down the stream to where a willow thicket forgets the world. I lifted a root. Underneath lay a tin can that looked as if it had already kept several secrets without revealing any. I placed the letter inside, covered the can, and pressed down the earth firmly, as if trying to close someone's eyes. This is my kind of archive: no doors, just time.

When I returned, the smooth guy was standing in my alley, as if someone had summoned him. "I'll find her anyway," he said.

"First find your decency," I said.

"I sold it."

"I thought to myself."

He stepped closer. His breath was dearer than mine, but no better. "You don't understand what letters are," he said. "They are not stories. They are tools. You build with them."

"I'd rather leave with them," I said. "It makes a nicer sound."

Old Shatterhand stepped out of the darkness, half-walk, all warning. "Go, RG," he said. "Today you'll lose only words. Tomorrow you'll lose men."

"I never lose men," said the smooth one. "I replace them."

"Not the right ones," said Winnetou behind him.

The smooth one left because some men are only great when there's a door between them and us. I stayed because I can't do anything else. Mary-Lou brought me a coffee strong enough to marry women and sat down next to me. "You buried it," she said without asking.

"I borrowed it," I said. "Time."

"Time adds up," she said. "And that's expensive."

"I'll pay in cash," I said.

The next morning, we found a pile of ashes in front of the saloon. Someone had burned letters. Not ours. Someone else's. A handful of paper where the ink had turned to smoke, and in the rim of the ashes, a piece of red thread that smelled of sealing wax. The smooth guy stood nearby, pretending to be late. He was never late. He was always just in the wrong place on time.

"What a pity about the romance," he said.

"Romance is just noise in your head," I said. "What did you remember?"

"Enough," he said. "To read tomorrow."

"Tomorrow we'll read louder," said Mary-Lou.

The town opened its mouth and closed it again, like an old door stuck on its hinge. The grocer pretended his shop wasn't made of paper. The preacher pretended he'd put out the fire. The widow didn't pretend at all. She pretended. She took two names and laid them before the sheriff's brother like knives. Neither of them was mine. Sometimes justice here is so surprisingly polite I almost like it.

That afternoon, Tres Dedos returned. "The box?" he asked.

"Kept," I said.

He nodded, a man who knows that procrastination is an art. "The smooth one looks by the stream."

"He should search."

"If he finds it?"

"Then he deserves what's in it."

"What's inside?"

"A false future."

We drank in silence. In this city, silence is the language in which one is least likely to make mistakes. As evening fell, the saloon filled with eyes that didn't want to know what they already knew. I placed a new bundle of harmless letters on the bar and read them aloud until the room softened. Then I put them back in my pocket, without anyone noticing that they were purer than the water in a fountain.

The smooth guy arrived late, his face reeking of defeat but trying to hide the smell. He placed an empty tin can on the counter. "Found it," he said.

"The wrong one," I said.

He got it too quickly, and I didn't like him for it. "You have two cans," he said.

"I have nothing," I said. "I just have time."

"Time is a letter that always arrives too late."

"Not if you write it beforehand."

"You can't write, Hawkens."

"I can read people."

He laughed, which is more of an accounting trick for him. Then he left without paying. Mary-Lou took his empty can, threw it into the bucket next to the counter, and the sound was so good I remembered it. Old Shatterhand sat with his back to the wall, drawing maps consisting only of rivers. Winnetou stood in the doorway, breathing, which is still the most useful activity he has for this city.

Later, as the lamps grew smaller, I took from my jacket a single letter I had kept, against all reason: two lines from Marie-Claire, the girl with the broken laugh, to no one. No recipient, no date. Only: If you don't love me tomorrow, love me today, but do it in such a way that I don't notice. I should have burned it. I put it back. I'm a bad man for a good fire.

Just before the hinges were closed, the widow came again. She placed a small scrap of paper in front of me—a torn piece from the "Repair the Order" notice.

On it was a note, small, awkward, hastily written: Tonight—Bell Cage. Bring what will outlive you. No name. I looked at Mary-Lou. She nodded. I looked at Old Shatterhand. He was already standing. Winnetou pulled open the door, and night rushed in, glad to be given something to do again.

The belfry smelled of pigeon droppings and old iron. I climbed the way I always climb: reluctantly. At the top stood a figure that was more fear than physical. The schoolmaster. The man who always knew too much and could say too little. In his hand, he held an envelope that looked as if he had learned to blend in. "Take it," he said. "And if you're smart, don't read."

"I'm not smart," I said and took it.

"Then give it to the right person."

"Whom?"

"To him who doesn't ask."

It disappeared like a sentence with a comma that caught my attention. I opened the cover, smelled the ink, saw words that were bleeding, and put it away. Not reading is harder than writing. I stepped down, and the steps creaked like old wood that would rather dance than carry something.

I took the envelope to the widow. "For the record," I said.

"For later," she said.

"Later never comes."

"Later is the only thing that's certain here."

I returned to the box, which still slumbered in the false bottom like an animal pretending to be dead. I thought about emptying everything out, dumping it on the counter, giving people a moment of truth, and then seeing what was left. I didn't. I've destroyed a lot in my life, intentionally and otherwise. But today I destroyed nothing. I held on. I endured.

When night finally fell, I sat down by my crate, and the dog laid his head on my boot, as if he knew I'd otherwise forget where I started. I thought of letters: their arrogance in being forever; their humility in allowing themselves to be folded; their meanness in bursting where they aren't seen. I thought of fire: its loyalty in always doing only what it pleases; its stupidity in not knowing when

enough is enough. I thought of the city: its love of notices and its hostility to listening. I thought of myself, briefly, and let it go.

Tomorrow, letters would arrive again, written by hands that no longer remembered why. Tomorrow, the smooth man would again sell someone forgetfulness, and someone would buy it because he had no pocket for memories. Tomorrow I would again be someone who opens and closes the box like a priest opens a chalice. And somewhere under the willow by the stream, there would be a tin can in which the wrong thing plays peace until the right hand comes along.

I drank the last sip that was left, and it tasted of paper and smoke and a little like a woman who once laughed until she lost it. I put the glass on the floor so it wouldn't fall off the counter and said to the night, "We really should burn all this." The night said nothing. She was right. I didn't get up. I guarded. That's all I know how to do in this life without asking anyone's permission: guard things I don't understand until the right one comes along. Or the wrong one. Sometimes it's the same thing.

So the day ended: with too many letters that would have been better burned, and a man too sober to do the right thing. And tomorrow? Tomorrow we'll do what we do best again: We'll read, even though it hurts; we'll drink, even though it changes nothing; we'll lie as beautifully as we can; and we'll have one less letter than we think.

Chapter 25 - The taste of iron in the mouth

The day began with iron. Not in the sky, not in the ground—in my mouth. First there was just the dull thud, then the metallic flash that tells you your teeth are still there, but a few arguments are missing. I spat red and grinned in the face of the glove-wearing man who believed that fists were a language everyone understood.

"Bad timing," I said, tasting the word as if it were attached to a nail. "You hit the one too early."

"I'll hit what's there," he said, and swung again.

I let him come, half a step too late to make him happy, and hit him in the shins with the box. Wood is more honest than men—when it hits, it really means

you. He went down, and his friend slipped on my blood, which I found unfair, but not unpoetic.

Mary-Lou stood in the back doorway like a gallows with humor. "Will you stop repainting the yard, Sam? We're having water problems."

"I'm lacking in romance," I said, spitting again and hitting the right spot this time. "And who sent me these Boy Scouts?"

"The Smooth One controls the fountain," she said. "New clamps. New fees. New songs."

"Brackets?"

"Iron. Supposedly a filter. In reality, pliers on the neck."

"Does it taste good?"

"By order," she said. "So by blood."

I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand and walked away, catching a glimpse of Charlie out of the corner of my eye, who looked like he'd already guessed. "You're bleeding," he said kindly.

"I practice irony from within," I said.

The fountain stood there like a dissected instrument. The smooth man had had iron clamps screwed around the head, two valves, brass on the pseudo-gold, a lath of notices: **SAFE WATER – ONLY TAPES WITH BRANDED HANDLES.** Including prizes that looked as if they would sing when fed.

"Sure water," said the preacher, holding his cup as if he were about to confess.

"Safe here means cash," said Mary-Lou.

We tested the tap. The water came out cold, clean, and insulted. I took a sip—there it was again: iron. Not the taste of blood that comes with warmth. This was cold, like a coin on the tongue. "This is rigged," I said. "He's selling the absence of his own filth."

"Brackets inside," said Charlie, kneeling. "He put a piece of iron on the inlet, which corrodes along with the faucet. After a while, every sip tastes like coins. Then they sell the 'filter'—and everything's fine again. For a week."

"Or until you pay," said Mary-Lou.

"Or until you die," the preacher said helpfully.

Winnetou stepped out of the shadow of the elm. "He doesn't force anyone. He just lets them choose," he said.

"Between thirst and debt," I said. "Democracy, but with rusty teeth."

Then Tres Dedos came. He had less of a face today than usual. "Sam," he said, "there's a boy lying by the old granary. He just says 'iron.'"

We walked. "Attic" is what we call a shed for things you later forget. Behind the door lay a bundle of humanity that had once been a messenger. His lip was open, his eye half-closed, his hands on his stomach, as if he were calming an animal that wanted to go out. Next to him was a button into which someone had carved "RG" with a knife, so neatly that I could taste the cigar of the man who commissioned it.

"Who?" I asked.

The boy raised his hand, scratching weakly at the air, as if there was something there that I should also see. "Iron," he said. "Well... iron."

"Did they force-feed you something?" asked Mary-Lou.

He shook his head. "Tasted... too much... iron."

Charlie sniffed the pitcher next to him. "Smoothie handed out sample pitchers," he said. "First dose free."

"Cold firewater," I said. "Now he sells flavored water."

"We'll bring him to me," said Mary-Lou. "I can keep him awake if he wants."

"I don't want to," whispered the boy.

"Today," she said, and that was it.

We carried him through the alley, the onlookers with their hands in their pockets. The smooth one stood on the cobblestones and smiled, the way you do when you're carrying a suitcase full of evidence that someone else paid for. "Are we working together, Hawken?" he asked.

"Only if I hold the shovel," I said.

"I build wells. You build stories."

"I build teeth that bite iron," I said. "And I have more."

"Today I'm demonstrating hygiene," he said. "Lunch. Everyone is coming."

"I bring the flavor," I said.

He puffed on his cigar until the smoke seemed important. "Bring your friends too. Some lessons taste better when shared."

"We'll bring water," Winnetou said calmly. "You bring clamps."

"I'll bring order," said the smooth one.

"Then bring a box," said Mary-Lou. "Maybe you need something to pick her up in."

The hour before noon was the hour in which the city decided whether to lie today or tomorrow. Charlie and I crawled under the well like two sins and undid the inner clamp: a corroded iron ring, bound into a piece of pipe that you can't see if you're just loud. We exchanged it for a sleeve—bare, neutral, honest as a blank stare. Mary-Lou set down three jugs: two fresh, one from the smooth one. Winnetou brought the widow. I smelled iron again, but this time it was just my gums.

The crowd was standing when we arrived. The smooth man raised his arms as if they were clean water. "Citizens," he said, "we live a civilized life. Our well is protected. No one has to taste rust anymore."

"Except in your sentences," I said.

He handed the first pitcher to the preacher. "Drink."

The preacher drank. He survived. "Tastes like... water."

"Yet," murmured Mary-Lou.

The smooth one took the second pitcher, the "safe one." "Only those who want to live will pay from this tap," he said, took a sip, drank—and his face made that small, honest jerk that faces only make when they're surprised the world

understands them. He tasted iron. I saw it the way you see a storm before you bring the laundry down from the fence.

"Good?" I asked. "Or just expensive?"

He swallowed, forced the smile back into his face. "Excellent."

"Then take another big drink," said Mary-Lou, "for the good of order."

He drank. I heard the metal singing in his teeth. Charlie stood by the pump and did nothing. That was his contribution: doing nothing after he'd done everything.

"Little secret," I said loudly enough for the street to hear. "When you hand out iron, you can't drink from your own mug."

"Lie," said the smooth one, but the sentence was too heavy for his throat.

The widow placed the steel plate on the fountain crown, like an official stamp. "Water belongs to the community," she said. "Clamps are private. Today we're removing the clamps."

Two men from the crowd—no heroes, just thirst—stepped forward, grabbed the outer screws he'd thought were jewelry, and turned. Metal wailed. The fountain breathed. The water came clear. I took a sip. No iron. Just cold. I felt my tongue become tongue again.

"Hygiene," said Mary-Lou, "is when you don't taste anything that your husband deserves from you."

A few laughed, the right ones. The smooth one lowered the mug. "Vandalism," he hissed. "Sabotage."

"Dismantling," said Charlie. "Of your decorations."

"Who pays?" asked the smooth one.

"Today: you," said the widow. "Tomorrow: no one."

He looked at me for a long time, as if I were sitting on a chair that would soon be empty. "You always taste iron, Hawkens. It's time you lost your gums."

"I'm just losing patience," I said. "Teeth are useful."

He left, slower than his smile. The crowd stayed. The fountain stayed. The water stayed. I stayed because staying is cheaper than leaving.

In the afternoon, Mary-Lou brought the boy who had said "iron" through. He drank from the honest tap, vomited, and drank some more. "Tastes like... nothing," he whispered. "Good." He fell asleep on the bench as if someone had left him there. I put my coat over his feet because I couldn't do anything else useful.

Tres Dedos came over, took a sip, nodded, and showed me a completely clean cartridge. "Found something in the feed," he said. "Your gun. Want to keep it?"

"No," I said. "Throw it somewhere it'll never taste good again."

He threw it into the oven. It cracked once, like a lie that's changed its mind.

Towards evening, we sat in front of the saloon, each with what belonged to him: Mary-Lou with a knife, Charlie with a look, Winnetou with the world, and me with the rest. The dog curled up in front of my crate and acted as if he had never done anything else.

"The smooth one is coming back," said Charlie.

"He always comes back," said Mary-Lou. "He's like iron in the blood."

"Iron makes strength," said the preacher, in case he needed an invitation.

"Iron makes things heavy," the widow replied. "We want to stay light."

"Light isn't our style," I said. "But it's drinkable."

I touched my lip with my tongue. The remains of the morning were still there, metallic, small, a memory. I liked it because it was true. You taste iron when you're alive. You taste nothing at all when you've missed it.

Later—if our "later" means anything—the smooth guy came back into the saloon, with a clean slate and a mouth that didn't forget what he was paid for. "That was nice," he said. "You won today. I like the audience when they play dumb."

"It didn't play today," said Mary-Lou. "It tasted good."

"Tomorrow whatever I give him will taste good again."

"Tomorrow it'll spit you out," I said. "It's been practicing."

"You have blood in your mouth, Hawkens," he whispered. "That's the color of your future."

"And you have iron on your tongue," I said. "That's the color of your lies."

He left because he didn't have an answer longer than his shadow. Winnie—yes, sometimes I call him that when no one's listening—put his hand on my back, briefly, firmly, like a sign without chalk. "Enough for today," he said.

"Never," I said. "But enough."

We closed the shop without locking anything. The fountain outside gurgled, as if it had fallen in love with the city again. The moon hung like a silver coin no one wants anymore because they know it tastes like tongue. I laid my head against the wall, breathed through my nose, and tasted—nothing. Finally, nothing.

"The taste of iron in your mouth," I murmured, "is what remains when someone tells you that you're not going to die today."

Mary-Lou blew out the lamp. "And what if it does?"

"Then we'll notice soon enough," I said.

The dog sighed in agreement, the boards creaked in reply, outside a broom scraped against stone—not the smooth kind. A real, cheap broom. I stood up, tasted the water from the bucket, and grinned. No iron. Just cold. Tomorrow it will burn again, somewhere, someone, something. Not today. Today we woke up and tasted what is right: nothing special. Just water. Just breath. Only half a step away from the whole mistake.

And as the night closed the alley, I thought that Bukowski was right when he shouted: **Shut up, world, I'm drinking.** I didn't drink. I just held my tongue still so no iron would fall on it. Tomorrow I can spit again. Today it's enough for me that I don't bite on metal when I say the word "we." Because "we"—that's rare. And it tastes like life.

Chapter 26 - No prayer for the scoundrels

The day smelled of warmed-over morals: sweet, sticky, like cake left in the sun too long. The Smooth One's new notice hung on the post outside the saloon. Large print, neat, like an apology written before the crime:

Morality Tax & Prayer Hour

To protect citizens (and morality), traffic in the entertainment district is registered. A fee of 10 cents per visit is charged. "Prayer hour" is held daily at 6 p.m. Participation is voluntary, but a recommendation is required. Violation = penance.

– RG, Committee of Usefulness

"Committee of Usefulness," Mary-Lou read, "it's like a knife with a child's face."

"Prayer that smells like cash," I said. "Holy balance sheet."

Old Shatterhand turned the poster over and looked at the back. "Nothing on it," he said. "As expected."

Winnetou stood to the side, in the shadows, and saw only the faces, not the paper. "Who's really paying?" he asked.

"Always the same," said Mary-Lou. "The ones who come to us in the evening so they can still be themselves in the morning."

I lowered my hat. "Let's go to the 'four-poster bed.' If we're going to heaven, I want to see who counts the steps."

The "four-poster bed" stood at the edge, where the street pretends to be soft. The facade struggled not to laugh. Inside, it smelled of soap, dust, secondhand perfume, and the attempt to make the world nice, even though it has teeth. Madame Solange received us like an innkeeper receives a tax: politely, but with no illusions that things would end well.

"Sam," she said, "if you don't pay, at least bring good news."

"I bring numbers," I said. "Worse than news, more honest than flowers."

She slid a notebook toward me. Balance sheet: debts, doctor, laundry, windows that men break when they're at a loss for words. Names written in chalk that never quite dries.

"And now he comes," she said, pointing with her chin at the door before it even opened. "The smooth one. With prayer or broom, depending on the light."

He came without a broom. Two gloved men carried the box. "Madame," he crooned, "you know how it goes. Everyone pays for order. You pay more for disorder."

"Can I laugh first or later?" asked Solange.

"Later. Hand it in now."

I sat down on the counter because I don't threaten well standing up. "Order," I said, "is your other word for priority in counting. Today we're counting differently."

"You're not in charge, Hawkens."

"I'm a regular at Elend," I said. "And this is my local bar."

Marie-Claire came down the stairs, a simple dress, a serious face, as if she'd already said no to someone twice today. Her laugh was missing, the old one, and the new one hadn't arrived yet. "I'm not paying," she said quietly.

"You always pay," said glove wearer one.

"Not today," said Mary-Lou. "Today we're rewriting."

Winnetou wasn't a step away from the entrance, yet the doorposts seemed closer to him. Old Shatterhand closed Solange's notebook. "We have a counter-list," he said. "Actual damages, actual debts, actual men."

"Actually uninteresting," said the smooth one. "Cash register."

Solange leaned forward, elbows like two exclamation points. "Scoundrels don't pay saints," she said. "They pay women who saved their night."

"Prayer hour, 6 p.m.," the smooth man reminded me, and his smile smelled of old communion wine.

I pulled out the receipt pads we'd so painstakingly adopted yesterday: the ones glove-wearing workers everywhere use to sign for "protection." At the top, it said "Committee." At the bottom, it said "Air." I placed the stamps we'd found in the siding next to them. "Interesting," I said. "Your stamp fits every lie. Very effective."

Glove-wearer two automatically reached for it; Old Shatterhand was faster, turned the pad, and showed the number sequence. "Double. You punch twice, collect three times, never deliver."

The smooth man gave his thin smile. "Accounting is complicated."

"Not today," said Mary-Lou. "Today is math for idiots: hands off."

The box remained on the table, untouched. Outside, the prayer hour gathered like a storm. Men with tongues that wanted to get back into their mouths; women with eyes that had long known what was happening; children counting from above what was moving below.

The preacher arrived with a few words. "We pray," he said, "for the fallen girls."

"Pray for the fallen men," said Solange. "They won't get back up, even though they keep saying so."

"Prayer never hurts," he tried.

"Stop filling cracks with water," I said. "The wood will still rot."

It was 6 p.m., because clocks are more rude than people here. The smooth man stepped out the door. "Citizens," he called out, "we're organizing. To protect the weak."

"We are not weak," said Solange without turning around.

"We don't want your protection money," said Mary-Lou.

"We don't want your protection," said Marie-Claire, holding her hands so that one could see they were empty.

"Then your suitors pay," said the smooth one. "Today. Starting now."

I raised my hand because I like being late. "Today, those who print receipt pads pay."

"Funny."

"Better than your prayer."

The prayer meeting never began. She stood there, pretending she didn't know how. The preacher raised his arms, seeking a heaven that never came. Solange sat down on the first step and made herself an altar at which no one offered sacrifices.

"No prayer for the scoundrels," she said. "But a statement: Whoever raises their hand today will raise the bill from me tomorrow, not from him." She pointed at the smooth one as if it were a stain. "I know your names. You know my rules."

Winnetou moved for a moment. The gloved hands realized that hands can weigh heavily before they even hold anything. Old Shatterhand positioned himself so that he couldn't be seen, but he felt like wood against his back.

The smooth one changed tact: "Good. Then we'll bring order another way. Raid."

He waved. Three brooms came—men with stars that look like truth in bad light. "In the name of the Committee of Usefulness," one said, "we are securing evidence."

"Secure yourselves," said Mary-Lou, reaching only for the knife, not for anger. The knife remained on the board. The words cut.

"Evidence," repeated the star, wanting to sound. "Receipts, lists, income."

"There," I said, pointing to the smooth man's box. "Your earnings. We'll keep our lists. Private matter."

"This is public decency!" he protested.

"Then read what it says," said Solange. "The words know you."

The star squinted as if he'd seen the sun. "We'll... check in the office."

"You lose it at the office," Mary-Lou said dryly. "Things disappear so often at your place that you have a drawer for them."

"That's enough," hissed the smooth one. "Box. Now."

"Gladly," I said. "But properly." I stepped forward, grabbed the box, and lifted it—emptier than his promise. Old Shatterhand had briefly touched the box two sentences ago; what was inside had been inside. Not now.

"That's theft," hissed the smooth one.

"No," I said. "It's math: We delivered your zero."

The preacher lowered his arms. "Perhaps..." he tried.

"No," said Widow McCready, suddenly there, as always when it really counts. "No maybes today. Today we count." She took a folded piece of paper from her pocket. "Duties for the week. Names of collectors. Assignment of authority. Signatures? None. Stamps? The same as on your fake receipts." She placed the piece of paper in front of the star. "Handed over, if you've learned to read today."

The star really read. He could. This surprised me and made me suspicious of my own cynicism. "That... is..." he began.

"Proof," Mary-Lou helped.

"Dirt," corrected the smooth one.

"Bill," said the widow. "Due."

The crowd didn't murmur. They breathed differently. This is the moment the smooth people hate: when people realize they don't have to clap to be right.

"You're ruining the city," the smooth man said to me, as if to a mirror.

"I ruin bad habits," I said. "The city is tough."

He signaled the brooms to retreat, so subtly that only those who had always seen saw. "We'll talk," he threatened, sweetly and venomously. "Tomorrow is confession day."

"Tomorrow is payday," said Solange.

He left, the preacher stayed, his hands useless as lanterns by day. Solange stood up, her apron tapping like a heel. "So," she said, "now to the accounting department. Any of you male citizens who think you can pray for free today, come to me later and pay for the last ten times you've cleaned your shoes on my steps."

A few men laughed, because humor is easier than remorse. A few nodded, because honesty is harder than pride. No one prayed. Good evening.

Inside, in the "four-poster bed," we sat around the chipped table, which had a notch in the middle that fit a knife perfectly. Mary-Lou placed hers there, just as a marker. Old Shatterhand pulled out the drawer that now contained our list. Winnetou stood at the back window and watched the wind count.

"This won't last forever," said Charlie.

"Nothing holds," I said. "Except shoulders."

"We had shoulders today," said Solange. "Enough to last the month."

Marie-Claire brought glasses; water for us, because no one deserved whiskey today. "I want to get out of the house," she said quietly. "Work without men's hands. Without prayer. Just hands."

"We'll find you a job at the grocer," said Mary-Lou. "But first, we'll teach him how wages work."

"No alms," said the widow at the door. "Contract."

"No panties," said Solange. "Apron."

"No prayer," I said. "Rules."

Winnetou turned around. "Tomorrow morning," he said, "we'll take her there. The three of us."

"Four of us," said Charlie.

"Five of us," said Mary-Lou.

"Six of us," said Solange. "I want to see his face."

We sat there until the light dimmed around the edges, as if someone had licked the edges of the day. A customer came in and wanted to protest that today was expensive. Solange showed him the door, not the price. He left, unkissed, a better person than before, because he didn't get anything he didn't want to pay for.

Later, much later, I stood in front of the noticeboard at the saloon again. It stayed there, like false dogmas, until a child draws on it in chalk. I didn't tear it down. I simply wrote underneath: **No prayer for scoundrels.** And next to it: **Bill to Solange.**

The dog lay down on my boots. Mary-Lou was putting away the glasses inside as if they were sentences she might need tomorrow. Old Shatterhand drew a new map in the dust with his fingertip: arrows from the "four-poster bed" to the grocer, from the grocer to the widow, from the widow to the well, from the well to us. A small town that briefly pretends it could live without foreign words.

"He'll be back," I said.

"He keeps coming back," said Mary-Lou.

"We do too," said the widow.

Winnetou nodded. "Until one of us stops," he said. "Not today."

I could no longer taste smoke on my tongue, only dust and a hint of lemon from Mary-Lou's hands. "Fornication," I murmured, "isn't what you think. It's renting out backs, voices, fear. We weren't renting out today."

"Today we refused," said Solange, putting the tag in her apron pocket as if it were change.

We turned out the lights. The street remained, the rules remained, the notice remained, our scribblings underneath remained. There was no prayer. Not out of spite. Out of respect. Some things are too serious to be left to the wrong people.

Tomorrow, the smooth guy will have the writing scraped off and add a new, neat lie. Tomorrow we'll scribble next to it again. Tomorrow, Marie-Claire will wear an apron instead of an expectation. Tomorrow, the shopkeeper will count wages instead of sins. Tomorrow, perhaps, the preacher will have a conversation that ends not with "Amen," but with "I help."

Until then: No prayer. Just work. Just rules. Just a cash register that didn't go to the scoundrels today. And a few women who smell of soap and victory, not perfume and fear. That's our liturgy here.

I sat on my crate, laid my head against the door, closed my eyes, and heard the city breathe—no psalms, no choir, just the honest, ragged breathing of those who will reopen tomorrow. If you ask me, that's the only prayer I believe in. And it doesn't need heaven. Just people who write their own receipts.

Chapter 27 - A Curse in Four Languages

Morning didn't kick the door open; it crept underneath. I sat on my chest, teeth blunt from the last whiskey, thinking about how many words a person needs to lie honestly. Mary-Lou came out, held out the cup to me like a very small act of mercy, and pointed her chin at the jamb.

There was a sentence, freshly scratched into the dust, as neatly as if it had self-respecting letters: GODDAMN THE PRICE.

"Sounds international," I said.

"The city deserves it," said Mary-Lou.

I sipped and tasted yesterday. "Who was it?"

"All of them," she said, pointing down the street. The same sentence was written on three doors, sometimes crooked, sometimes large, sometimes with a little heart above it so you can later say it's art.

Old Shatterhand came with his half-step, that silent guillotine. "The guys from the bridge say it's sticking to the well too. English."

"The fountain speaks a high school education?" I asked.

"The fountain speaks Thirst," said Mary-Lou. "And Thirst is multilingual."

We left. The crown of the fountain bore the words like a crown full of fake gems. Below, in the soft wood, a second line, carved deeper, with a knife pretending to be a pen: MALDITO SEA EL PRECIO.

I smelled iron, but only as a memory, not as news. Tres Dedos leaned in the shadows, his left hand with three fingers, his right with the truth. "No poetry," he said. "Just accounting."

"Your Spanish has teeth, amigo."

"Your German has fists," he said. "Wait until they show up."

We caught the third inscription on the grocer's shop door, next to all the posters claiming that the future is a special offer. Neat, neat block capitals, old German at heart, but with my handwriting in anger: CURSED BE THE PRICE.

I blinked. "That wasn't me."

"Yes," said Mary-Lou. "In your head. Someone was watching."

"Someone is listening to you," said Old Shatterhand.

"Someone's stealing my punchline," I said. "This is war."

Winnetou emerged from the shadow of an elm tree as if it had invented him. He didn't look at the words, he looked at the faces passing by. "One understands," he said. "Even without vocabulary."

"All we need is your curse," I said. "We need four, otherwise it's not a symphony."

He looked at the edge of the well, placed his hand briefly on the wood, so briefly that the wood could later claim it had misheard. "My language doesn't curse. It makes sentences. Some of them are harder than curses." Then he said something, quietly, so softly that the air settled. I didn't understand a word. I understood everything.

By the afternoon, the smooth one was already hanging from three corners, pretending to wipe the blackboard. "Vandalism," he crooned. "Language confusion is preschool. We need tongue order."

"The tongue has teeth," said Mary-Lou. "Watch your fingers."

He tapped against a new notice: **Despite all languages, one prize for all.** Among them were numbers that liked to multiply. I got a sudden toothache. "Look," I said. "He got it and immediately misunderstood it."

"He's raising," said Old Shatterhand. "One more language, one more cent."

"GODDAMN THE PRICE," Tres Dedos read aloud so the wind would carry it away. "He's not listening."

"He can only read what he's written himself," said Mary-Lou. "So we write on the palm of his hand."

We sat down at the table in the saloon, where the wood joint looks like a scar. Widow McCready brought a platter of bread that smelled of patience and laid it down as if it were evidence. "It's not about painting," she said. "It's about origins. Who started it?"

"The price," I said.

"No," she said. "The courage."

"Courage always has too little change here," said Mary-Lou.

"Then we'll make change," said the widow.

Plan: We won't leave the words stuck to doors where the smooth man will scrape them off; we'll stick them in his receipt pads. In the blank spaces. In the totals. In the sheets the broom man hands over in the evening after he's made a killing. Four languages, four stamps. When one of them cashes in, he also gets the curse. No drama, just accounting that stings.

"I'll get the blocks," said Old Shatterhand. "You'll be missing an hour no one will want to miss."

"I'll get the ink," said Mary-Lou. "It won't erase anymore."

"I'll get the hands," said the widow. "The right ones."

"I'll provide the irony," I said. "In case we need gaps."

Winnetou nodded. "I'll get the moment." That was his entire shopping list, and it was the most expensive.

By dusk, we had twelve pads, four stamps, and a bottle of ink that smelled like it wanted to stay. We sat in the back room among lemons and glass polish and didn't forge anything; we made corrections. Every other receipt had a second line, small but not tame: goddamn the price / maldito sea el precio / cursed be the price / and Winnetou's sentence, without translation, as if it were a signature of the earth.

"And what if they notice?" asked the preacher, who never knows whether to invite or warn.

"Then they'll learn to read," said Mary-Lou. "It's about time."

The brooms arrived shortly before 5 p.m., as agreed, because the smooth guy also has his way. Two sat down, drank water that didn't taste good, three took the cash in the "four-poster bed" with long faces and short receipts. We let them. You have to let people do their work so they realize it's pointless.

At six, half the town was in the square, because the clocks here are more reliable than the promises. The smooth man took a higher step, a voice that

never gets hoarse, and the gesture of the king who would like to be mayor. "Citizens," he began. "Today we speak one language. That of order."

"Okay," I said aloud. "I'll start: goddamn the price."

A few laughed, the ones with the short fuse. "Not funny," growled the smooth one.

"Not yet."

The brooms lined up their boxes, pulled receipts, made faces, and dragged out the evening. The widow went to the first table, took the top receipt, and held it up to the light. The total stated what it always states: more than yesterday. Below it, small and succinct: maldito sea el precio. She raised one eyebrow, half the town raised the other. "Legible," she said. "And signed, RG."

The smooth man smiled, the way you do when you've just been served scorpion and claim it's grape. "Badly faked."

Old Shatterhand raised the next receipt: damn the price, clean, in the middle, where even the blind can read. "Not fake," he said. "Delivered."

"Through your hands," Mary-Lou added, handing a broomstick back its own receipt. On it, in Winnetou's language, was a line that didn't crawl, didn't bite, but remained dormant. The man didn't read it. He held it and fell silent. I saw how the sentence weighed on him. And I knew: It was heavier than his star.

"What does it say?" asked the smooth man, sharply, as if he could break the meaning with one sound.

"Enough," said Winnetou. "For today."

"You're acting," the smooth one spat. "Using childish language."

"Children learn quickly," said the widow. "Men take longer."

"Cash register!" shouted the smooth man, flicking his hand as if he were flies. No one went to the cash register. People were reading. Men who usually counted numbers were reading words. Women who usually counted words saw numbers tipping. A boy ran and wrote "Goddamn the price" on the vicarage hedge. The preacher started to protest, then stopped because the boy drank water and laughed afterward.

"I'm imposing fines," hissed the smooth one.

"We set rates," I said. "Cheaper and more effective."

He grabbed a pad, ripped it, ran, and dropped two receipts. The wind picked them up, turned them once as if they were cards, and stuck them to the fountain. Four lines. Four languages. One sentence.

"And now what?" asked Mary-Lou, not me, not him, the city.

"We drink water," said Winnetou. "And we don't pay in shame."

"We're not paying at all," said someone in the back, dangerously confident.

"Yes," said the widow. "We pay ourselves. Today the women. Tomorrow the boy. The day after tomorrow the dog that guards us at night." She raised her eyes. "But we no longer pay fear."

The smooth one made a noise that was halfway between laughter and teeth grinding. "You don't understand how administration works."

"We're the administration," said Mary-Lou. "In miniature. That's the better size."

He left. He always leaves when the air says something different than he does. The brooms stayed and looked at their receipts as if they were reading their own writing for the first time. One folded his slip and pocketed it, without anger, but like a man who quits tomorrow. Perhaps himself. That was enough for me for today.

As the sun slipped, we returned to the saloon. Inside, the lamp had that light that makes confessions easier and bills harder to settle. I sat down, the box at my back, and placed my glass so I could contort myself into it. "A curse in four languages," I said.

"Five," said Mary-Lou.

"Which is the fifth?"

"Silence," she said, pointing with her chin at Winnetou, who was standing at the window looking out into the street as if she were just learning to speak.

Old Shatterhand drew the four words in the dust, each in its own corner, and connected them with lines to the well. "The center remains water," he murmured.

"And a price is a price," I said. "Just not today."

Tres Dedos came later and placed four cartridge cases on the table. He had carved a word into each one with his blunt blade: goddamn / maldito / cursed / and the line from Winnetou that I didn't read, even though it was there.

"Memory," said Tres Dedos. "For pockets where hands sometimes wander."

"Those things make a noise when they drive around in your jacket," I said.

"They should," said Mary-Lou. "So we know that words carry weight, even if they're small."

Later, much later, I found a fifth line on my box, small, unspectacular, in my handwriting, perhaps from yesterday, perhaps from tomorrow: NOT TODAY.

I laughed, quietly, dryly. "That's what my language sounds like when it's clever," I said.

"Rare," said Mary-Lou, grinning and giving me another finger.

We closed, but not finished. Outside, the wind scraped against the fountain's crown, as if it wanted to polish the words, not erase them. The dog sat on my boots, the preacher acted as if he had a lot to do, and the widow closed the notebook with a sound I felt in my chest.

"Tomorrow?" asked Old Shatterhand.

"Tomorrow we'll swear again," I said. "But maybe in fewer languages."

"In which?"

"The one that people understand without being ashamed."

"Water?" asked Mary-Lou.

"Water," I said. "And if all else fails, whiskey."

"GODDAMN THE PRICE," muttered Tres Dedos, putting his feet up on the chair.

"MALDITO SEA EL PRECIO," replied the widow, completely unimpressed.

“DAMN THE PRICE,” I said, and every word suddenly took on a facial expression.

Winnetou repeated his sentence again, barely audibly. It hit. Not the ears. But the part of the heart that always claims it has better things to do. And for a moment, I felt as if the city was nodding—not because it understood, but because it had decided to stop pretending it didn't know anything.

No thunder. No finale. Just four languages in one evening, which together resulted in one simple thing: We're not cheap. Not today. Not anymore. And if anyone asks which language they should write this in: in the one they least know. So they practice. So it sticks.

Chapter 28 - Nights without a sky

The sky was gone, as if someone had lost it in a card game and couldn't find a replacement. No moon, no stars, not even that nasty haze that hangs over chimneys at night like a crooked halo. Just black. So thick you thought if you reached out your hand, it would stick. I sat in the saloon, my back against the wall, the bar like a low dam in front of me, and drank so slowly, as if I could outsmart the night with it. Whiskey is a clock without hands: you know time is passing, but you don't see it.

Mary-Lou shuffled cards, that endless loop of paper and patience. She wore the old, dark green dress that smelled of mint on good nights and blood on bad ones. Today it smelled of dish soap and cigarettes and the defiance of a woman who'd decided to stay awake longer than her own misery. Old Shatterhand sat across from her, his hands steady, his gaze as still as if he'd left it in the well. He loses on purpose when the night is spent toiling. Makes people feel like someone else knows the rules.

Winnetou stood at the window and did what one does on nights without a sky: He said nothing. If he wanted, he could set the tone for a room with his silence. The bartender polished a glass into which more faces had disappeared than in the graves behind the church. The preacher sat on a backless chair, as if balancing on sin. And the Smooth One—RG, our Committee for Useless Things—leaned against the pillar, clean as a freshly licked spoon, waiting for the moment when he could pull a bill from his pocket like a revelation.

“Your call, Sam,” said Mary-Lou without looking.

"I'm betting on light," I said. "Double or nothing."

"Not at all," she said with a small grin.

I raised the glass, and the taste was the opposite of comforting. "If I'm not mistaken, the sky's gone on strike today," I said.

"He's taking a break," said the preacher. "God rests on the eighth day. You have to start with something small."

"Then he should start here," said Mary-Lou. "I'm tired of being pretty in the dark."

Outside, the silence made a sound you only hear when you're too sober: none at all. No dogs, no donkeys, not even the loose shingle on the coffin maker's roof. It was as if the night had put the city in its mouth and wasn't ready to chew until we were done talking.

The smooth man pulled a piece of paper from his vest. "Night shift fee schedule," he said gently.

"Put it away," Mary-Lou growled. "No one's cashing in today. Everyone's holding their breath."

He smiled with that thin mouth that always looks like it hasn't seen enough blood. "The night is my best friend, Mary-Lou. She's discreet and never has any change."

"Even the plague is discreet," I said. "And yet it still scratches away the skin."

A scraping at the outside door. Only briefly. The wood breathed, we didn't. The bartender held the glass so tightly that it let out a brief whine. Old Shatterhand raised his head, that half-gesture enough to stop men from killing. Winnetou remained motionless. The preacher whispered, "Lord, help us," in the tone of a man who knows the Lord is reluctant to rise at this hour.

"I'll go and see," said one of the cowboys at the second table. His name might have been Bill, maybe Bob, but in the end it didn't matter, like all those who, on nights without a sky, think the world needs their courage.

"Sit down, Bill," said Mary-Lou. "Your courage is the size of a mousetrap and the intelligence of a frying pan."

He grinned and stood up anyway. "I've been out on worse nights," he said.

"You've been in worse heads," I said. "Stay with us. We'll probably bore you."

He left. The door opened, and night fell in, heavy and damp and warm, a smell of mouth without teeth. Suddenly, Bill was no longer in the doorway. Only air. Then the door closed by itself, politely like a waiter bringing the bill.

"Well, you see," said the smooth one, "not every evening needs an end. Some evenings just need fewer guests."

"If you want to disappear, I'm happy to help," said Mary-Lou.

We waited. The night waited with us. You can get used to silence like you get used to bad shoes—at some point, your feet pay the price. I drank. The whiskey did its work: it took the hooks out of your mind and gave it wheels. Old Shatterhand shuffled the cards now, slowly, as if he were building a house. The preacher began to count quietly. I wondered if he was counting us or our chances.

"There are nights," said Winnetou, without moving, "that aren't there to kill you. They're there to see if you can do it yourself."

"Good news," I said. "I always postpone suicide."

"Later is an addiction," said Mary-Lou.

The scratching came again. Closer. Not a foot, not a paw. More like something that knew how to make noise without revealing itself. The bartender set down the glass as if sacrificing it.

"Maybe it's just the wind," said the preacher, sounding as if he were praying to the wind.

"The wind can write and charges fees," I said, looking at the smooth one.

He shrugged. "I'm just a service provider."

"You only serve yourself," said Mary-Lou. "And even then, poorly."

On nights without a sky, sentences become shorter because long sentences take up too much air. So we drank more and talked less. I counted the shots in the drum: five. One was missing from the afternoon; a dog had barked in the

wrong corner, and I had shot in the right one. Now I wished I had that shot back.

"Cards?" asked Mary-Lou.

"I'll pass," I said. "I only play against opponents I can see."

"Then you're unemployed today," she said.

Old Shatterhand laid down two jacks, as if our honorary position as a substitute for heaven depended on it. Smooth acted as if he didn't know he was winning and took the pot with the missing smile of a man who always holds the lid in the end.

It was getting later. Later has a color here—brown, thick, like cold grease and tiredness. I pulled a cigarette and leaned toward the light. No light. The lamp flickered and then lit, offended. The smoke squatted under the ceiling, pretending to be a cloud. Mary-Lou sang a dirty song about a cabbie with two left hands and a right mind. The preacher pretended he didn't know the lyrics.

"We could just wait it out the night," said Old Shatterhand.

"Like a toothache," I said. "Sometimes it goes away, sometimes you get the pliers."

"You are disgusting," said the preacher.

"We are concrete," said Mary-Lou. "God loves concrete things. Otherwise, he would have created us as fog."

Winnetou moved, the shadow moving with him. "Do you hear?" he asked.

"No," I said. "And that's exactly what I hear."

Then: footsteps. Slow, heavy, single, like stones someone is placing on the street. Not many. Two, three. Closer. Stopping in front of the door. A breath that wasn't one. And a voice: "Open up."

Shatterhand stood up, not quickly, not slowly. "Who's there?"

"Those who don't want to wait."

The voice sounded as if it had been sleeping in the stovepipe for the past three winters. I looked at Glatten; he acted surprised, the way one feigns surprise

when one has missed a rehearsal. Mary-Lou took the knife, not to cut, but to lay it down. Winnetou stood next to the door, his shadow bolt upright.

"Who is there?" repeated Shatterhand.

"Good heavens," said the voice. It would have been almost funny, if it hadn't been so cold.

"Don't open it," said the bartender. "I paid for the door with my own money."

Shatterhand opened the door. Outside: nothing. No face, no body, just black. A puff of air smelled of metal and river. "Cowards," Mary-Lou said into the void. "Not even the decency to knock."

"They knocked," said the preacher.

"Then it's worse," she said.

Close the door. Sometimes doors are the only thing standing between you and a story you don't want to tell anymore. I held the glass and noticed that my hand was still. When your hand is still and your chest is beating loudly, you know you're alive. That's the whole point.

"I have a gut feeling," I said.

"Save it," said Mary-Lou. "It'll just scare the bottles."

"It tells me that the night is not there for us."

"Because of whom then?" asked the preacher.

"Because of the city," said Widow McCready, who always appears on nights without a sky when no one expects her. She wore her steely gaze and a scarf that looked as if it were woven from arguments. "Sometimes the night takes the city's breath away so it can learn to breathe again."

"Poetry makes me nervous," said the smooth one. "You can't tax it."

"God can," said the preacher.

"God doesn't have a cashier here," said Mary-Lou.

The hours went by in circles. One lay down on the table and pretended to be asleep; I didn't believe him. The lamp grew lower, the smoke grew older. I

heard my pulse and liked him because he was punctual. At one point, three men kicked against the kitchen back. I shot through the boards; the wood coughed up splinters. No one screamed. No one ran. I didn't fire again. Five shots are worth more than four when the night pays nothing back.

"We should sing," said the preacher.

"We should keep quiet," said Winnetou.

"We should drink," said Mary-Lou.

"That's consensus," I said.

We drank. The whiskey made my tongue heavier, but not slower. You can lie more honestly with a heavy tongue. I told a story from Texas that had no punchline, and everyone acted like it was intentional. The smooth guy didn't say anything. His stories are like bills in Sunday clothes.

"Do you remember Bill?" Mary-Lou asked suddenly.

"Who?" I said.

"The idiot."

"Oh, him. Yes. He wasn't a bad person."

"It was just bad timing," she said.

"We'll find him tomorrow," promised the preacher, as if promises were warming.

"Tomorrow will find us," I said. "If it wants to."

The sky stayed away, like an offended cook. I imagined him sitting behind the mountain, arms crossed, saying, "You'll have to manage without me for a bit." We managed, as always: provisionally. Shatterhand slept with one eye open; he's good at that. Winnetou stood at the window again and was the only one who could talk to nothing with minimal risk. Mary-Lou sorted glasses according to the probability of drowning in them. I sat there and thought about nothing; that's my talent.

At some point during that hour when, as experience shows, the dead make their late journey, the door opened a crack of its own accord. No wind. No push. It simply wanted to. And in the same breath, we heard the oldest sound

in the world: footsteps that don't know where they're going. I said loudly, "If you want in, knock." And the footsteps stopped. Sometimes politeness is enough to stop the unkind.

The bartender, who doesn't really make mistakes anymore, made one: He stood too close to the door. A hand—or something pretending to be one—came in, felt the frame, searching for the light. I was faster than my doubts and hit it with the bottle's neck. A dull thud. Then just wood. Maybe it was just wood. Maybe I was just drunk. Mary-Lou nodded anyway. "Good sound," she said.

The preacher whispered for a while in a language I didn't know. "That wasn't a prayer," I said.

"No," he said. "That was a memory."

"What?"

"To everything we haven't buried yet."

The night dragged on. Some things you hear growing: grass, tiredness, guilt. On nights without a sky, you hear your fear growing. It pushes out branches, casts shadows even though there's no source. The smooth one went to pee twice and both times pretended he was just catching his breath. I shot a glance after him each time. You never know if men with smooth fingers are knotting ropes in the dark.

"You know, Sam," Mary-Lou said at one point, "sometimes I envy you."

"Why?"

"You have so little hope that none of you ever die."

I laughed so quietly it was almost a hiccup. "Hope is like credit. The smooth one manages it."

"I'll take cash," she said.

"Good choice."

Compared to what other people call morning, the black grew thin. Not brighter—thin. Like old paper about to tear. A first dog barked, frightened by its own voice. A rooster screeched in a tone that offends even hens. The lamp

was just a dot pretending it could do it again. We all sat as if we had negotiated something with the night and didn't want to talk about it.

"Open," said Winnetou. It didn't sound like a command. It sounded like a sentence that was already true.

Shatterhand opened the door. Behind it stood the world, sweaty and bare, as if it had been breathing under a blanket all night. The sky was back. Not pretty. Just there. Gray, as if someone had carved it from old soap. I liked it like an old enemy, one you could at least call by name.

Before the threshold: tracks. A deep imprint, too deep for human shoes. Not hooves, not paws. More like something flat and heavy. A sack being dragged. Or a belly. And beside it, small as mockery, Bill—not the man, just his hat. It wasn't dusty. It was from heaven. Rain had made it clean where there was no rain.

"Take off your hat," said Mary-Lou. "Men need things to touch when they don't want to think."

"I don't think so," I said, taking the hat.

We drank cold water from the bucket because it was the only thing the tongue didn't consider a lie. The preacher went out and did what preachers do in the morning: He looked like he knew what to say. He didn't. The smooth man patted his vest as if the night had been a mere stain.

"Bill," he said quietly to me, almost friendly.

"For what?" I asked.

"For the overtime of fear."

"Send them to heaven," I said. "He closed the shop."

He smiled. "Heaven doesn't pay."

"Neither do we anymore."

The city made a sound that reminded me of men getting up. Doors creaked, children screamed as if they'd just discovered happiness. The coffin maker opened his workshop and glanced over at us, that look that asks if he can save boards today. The widow McCready wrote in her notebook what the night had

left her: a number for the hat, a smaller number for fear, a tally for what remains. Mary-Lou washed glasses, so gently, as if they were babies taken away from the wrong people. Winnetou took a step onto the street, breathed, and the air acted as if it had just begun to work.

"And Bill?" asked the preacher.

"He didn't survive the night," I said. "Some traps are just a bottomless pit."

"We're looking for him," said Shatterhand.

"We'll find clues," said Winnetou. "Nothing more."

"Enough to think about," said the widow.

I sat down on my box, my back saying ouch, my mouth saying coffee. Mary-Lou placed a cup in front of me, black as halfway through hell. I drank and felt my stomach return to its old habits. The night was over, but not over yet. That's how it is—some things stop without ever ending.

"You know, Sam," said Mary-Lou, looking out at the fountain, "I didn't like the night. But it had something that the day lost."

"What?"

"Honesty. You lie differently in the dark. You lie on the back burner. At least then you can see what you're doing."

"During the day, you lie in color," I said. "It's prettier and more expensive."

"And what do we do now?" asked the preacher, who always wants to be a doer as soon as it gets light.

"Breakfast," said the widow. "Then work. Then trouble. And when night falls, we'll try again—with Heaven, if He's willing."

The smooth man lit his cigar and took the first drag like someone crossing a border. "I'm going to have the fee schedule for nighttime disturbances reviewed today," he said, half-aloud.

"I'll check your teeth today," said Mary-Lou. "Free of charge."

He smiled. "You're charming."

"I'm awake," she said. "That's enough violence for one morning."

We went outside. Heaven acted like it had been here the whole time, that hypocrite. I held Bill's hat in my hand, weighing it as if I could translate its weight into sentences. "He wasn't a bad man," I said again, so the day would hear.

"He was a short man," said Mary-Lou. "Short in thought, short in happiness."

The tracks on the ground led a short distance down the mill path and disappeared where the willow held the sand. No more blood, no more drag marks, just the idea of something heavy that no longer wanted to be heavy. We stood for a minute, the willow stood still too, and the stream did what it always does: It pretended to know nothing.

"Nights without a sky," I said, "are like bills without numbers. They'll come in color later."

"Not today," said Winnetou.

I nodded. Not today. Today the city got its light back, and we pretended we knew what to do with it. The saloon wiped the tables, the preacher wiped his brow, the coffin maker wiped his blades. Old Shatterhand sat at the edge of the porch and sharpened a knife, not because he needed it, but because the sound convinces men not to die stupidly.

The smooth man disappeared around the corner, where shadows dwell during the day. He'll return, with a notice, with a voice, with a box of receipts in which the word "order" appears so frequently that it loses its meaning. We'll stand at the post again, read, scribble, laugh, erase. The city is a wheel without rubber—it still rolls, only louder.

I sat down, dragging the toe of my boot back and forth on the edge of the step until the dust looked the way it always does. And I thought, if heaven's going to steal, then at least it should be timely with giving it back. I took the last sip from the cup, which tasted of iron pipe and hope, and said to the street: "Today we let it go. Today we breathe. Today we only count those who made it."

Mary-Lou bent down and tied Bill's hat strap around the handle of my Colt. "For later," she said. "In case the night comes up with any stupid ideas again."

"Night isn't stupid," I said. "It's just thorough."

"Like you," she said and went inside.

I stayed, watched the sky pretend to be innocent, and heard the city growl as it rose. Somewhere in the distance, a child laughed in the wrong key, and I liked it because it didn't know it needed a license. I felt the day grooving into its old, worn-out melody. And I thought that if Bukowski came by today, he would chew up the night, spit it out, and say, "Tastes like ash, but it wakes you up."

We're awake. And that's enough. For now. For the next stupidity. For the next notice. For the next bill. For the next evening when the sky makes itself important. If it stays away again, we know what to do: drink, sit, count, be silent, sing, whisper, curse, breathe. In that order or otherwise. The main thing is that we stay. The main thing is that we don't do it the favor of carrying ourselves out.

The night lost without us winning. That's the kind of victory we know around here. I raised my cup toward the sky, which was just sky again, and said, "See you later, thief." He said nothing. Good manners. I went inside. We had work. And glasses. And a hat that was far too clean for the head that wore it. I put it on the shelf, right at the top, where only the layer of dust reads. Nights without a sky belong there—within reach, but out of the way.

Chapter 29 - A horse that won't get up

It was the kind of midday that makes even the shadow sweat. The air lingered, pretending to be busy. The dust on the street was so fine it coated your tongue like bad medicine. I sat on my box, looked past my glass, and tried not to think about anything with more than three syllables. Then I heard it: the dull, hard thud of flesh on wood as fur loses to road.

A horse lay in the dirt.

Not just any stallion. The brown gelding of boy Eddie—Eddie with the oversized hat and undersized shoulders, who talked to the animal every morning by the well as if it were an uncle listening. The gelding lay crooked, his front legs bent, his flanks moving too fast. His tongue hung like a rag, his eyes too wide open. Flies had set up a mass. The town formed a circle, as towns do when they see something they didn't want and now have it.

"Stand up," Eddie said, his voice too bright, too fast. "Come on, big guy. Come on." He tugged on the halter as if it were a prayer with reins attached.

The smooth one was there first, as always when blame needs to be assigned. Clean slate, thin lips, cigar that claimed to be important. "Traffic obstruction," he said to no one and everyone. "Regular evacuation. Committee of Utility—I need two men, a chain, and—"

"Take a rope and your good opinion and hang them," I said, standing up.

Mary-Lou was already with the horse. She knelt in the dust, holding the gelding's head so gently that the dust stopped crawling over his nose. "Calm down, big guy," she said. "Calm down, with me. No drama."

Old Shatterhand crouched on his shoulder, feeling, touching, smelling. He has hands that know what they're saying. Winnetou stood behind him and looked at his hip, not at his tears. He only says nothing when words make a mess.

"Get some water," said Mary-Lou without looking up.

I brought the bucket. The gelding smelled of warm iron, yesterday's grass, and the moment before something breaks. I poured water onto a cloth, and Mary-Lou placed it over the animal's nostrils. He breathed faster, then slower, then faster again. Flies came back. They always come back.

"He's about to stand," Eddie said, his mouth letting the sentence out, but his face holding it in place. "He just... he just..."

"Since when?" asked Shatterhand.

"Just now. He tripped, I think. Or... or he... I don't know. He was tired."

"Everyone is tired," I said. "That's not the diagnosis."

The smooth man stepped closer, pretending to help, but only looking for space for his note. "We need to clear the road—"

"Keep the road clear with your mouth," said Mary-Lou. "He's a real idiot."

The widow McCready came as numbers come: when it hurts. She looked, calculated, looked again. "Eddie," she said, "whose is he?"

"Me," said the boy, and that was a lie like a hope—honest and false.

"Your father," she said. "And today you. That much truth must be there."

"He's close," Eddie said again, as if the word were a magic spell that just needed to get louder.

Winnetou placed his hand on the horse's hip, lightly, as if asking the earth if it could still support anything. Then he raised his gaze, once. "He's no longer standing."

The sentence was simple. It cut cleanly. Eddie shook his head so fast that his hat briefly flipped to the side. "No. No. He can. He—"

"He can't," Shatterhand said calmly. "He wants to. That's the difference that hurts."

The preacher stumbled forward as if he had the answer and just needed to find the page. "We could... uh... pray," he said.

"Do it," said Mary-Lou. "But quietly. He doesn't need a sermon, he needs dignity."

The smooth one was visibly pleased because decisions have a fee. "Compliant eviction," he repeated, as if it were therapy. "We can't delay anything. The committee clause—"

I turned to him. "RG, if you say a single word longer than a knife today, I'll show you how to chew syllables."

He raised his hands. "I'm just an administrator."

"You're just spit," I said.

The gelding tried to raise his head. Mary-Lou held him. A soft snort that contained everything: grass he'd never eat again; water he'd never drink again; vastness that was now nothing but sound. I stroked his forehead, and the dust jumped like little sparks.

"Eddie," said the widow, "listen. You are the owner. You decide. No one can take it from you. You can say yes. You can say no. But you can't wait for nothing to decide."

The boy looked at his small hands as if the answers were sitting there. "I... I don't know how to..."

"You do it right," said Mary-Lou. "Not pretty. Right."

Old Shatterhand stood up, slowly, as if he didn't want to wake the ground. "The neck," he said quietly. "Clean, quick."

"I'll do it," I said.

"Me too," said Winnetou.

"Just one," said Mary-Lou.

"Then Sam," said the widow.

The smooth one wanted to say something, looked into Winnetou's face, and remained silent. Even the flies knew it now; they became calmer, as if they had learned respect. Eddie knelt by his animal's neck, his forehead against fur. "I don't want to say no," he whispered. "I want to say yes, that he stays."

"Then say yes to the right one," I said.

"Say yes to him," said Mary-Lou, tapping the horse's forehead. "That he can go."

Someone brought an apple, half-dried. Mary-Lou held it out. The gelding licked it; it tasted too little, yet still enough. I took off my hat, not to God, but to the animal. Not every gesture is theater. Some are remembrance.

"I'm not carrying him down the street," I said. "Not like that. We'll take him to Mill Path. Shade. Water. No spectators."

"Rule-compliant—" the smooth one began.

"RG," said the widow, "today you order silence."

We fetched a blanket, two ropes, four good hands. Tres Dedos came out of nowhere, like marginal notes when the text fails. He nodded, grabbed hold. "Slowly," said Shatterhand. "Steady."

We lifted our heads, our chests, our hips. The gelding groaned, not loudly, just so you could feel it. Eddie held the blaze. The boy suddenly had a face that no longer matched his age. The city made way. Sometimes it can, when someone makes the decision up front.

The walk to the Mill Path was shorter than any morning and longer than any year. The sun had decided to stand by. Flies followed us like a choir that doesn't like the lyrics. The stream did its best: it sounded like something that wants to be clean. We laid it down in the shade, the blanket under its neck to keep the earth from being greedy.

"I'm staying," Eddie said. "I want to see his face."

"Fine," said Winnetou. "But not the hand."

The smooth one remained in the distance, the distance of a man who wants to settle the score without knowing the motive. Mary-Lou sat at the head, murmuring, the old song without words. Shatterhand positioned himself so I couldn't see him, only knew he was there. Tres Dedos stood as if he were part of the tribe. The widow held the watch in her hand, not to measure—to remember when to stop.

I drew my revolver. An ugly tool that sometimes does the right thing. I weighed it in my hand, as if the weight could be distributed. "Hey, big guy," I said to the horse, and my voice wasn't my voice. "It'll be over in a minute. You ran well. You carried more than many a man."

He blinked slowly. In his eyes there was no man, no god, only a mirror. I saw myself in them, just as I am: too tired to lie, too awake to be a coward.

"Wait," Eddie said. He took something out of his pocket—a lump of sugar wrapped in paper from the day before yesterday. He placed it against the horse's lip. The gelding took it, so politely that my mouth hardened.

"Now," said Mary-Lou.

I placed the barrel at the point Shatterhand had indicated. Where reality is shortest. I exhaled. Not in. Out. I pressed.

The shot wasn't thunder. It was the end. The head felt heavy in Mary-Lou's lap, the body suddenly became too much. The eye took on that calmness you wouldn't wish on anyone with unfinished business. The stream didn't pause. He's a professional. Eddie watched until the moment that never ends was over. Then he breathed, for the first time today, and it sounded as if air were legal again.

No one clapped. No one said "well done." That's something for men who like sports. We're not.

We covered him. Not completely, just enough so the flies knew things were different now. Tres Dedos brought shovels. The earth along Mill Path is soft if you know where to dig. Shatterhand lifted the first shovelful with a respect I rarely see for people. Winnetou took the second, and the movement was a prayer that no one translated. Eddie stood there, dry, still, his hands together, as if promising each other never to be so small again.

"Cost center: Carcass disposal," the smooth guy said quietly behind me, to himself, because otherwise he would have said it to my face, and then the stream would have suddenly turned red.

I didn't turn around. "One more word, RG, and you'll learn how quickly a man loses his mind."

He remained silent. One can even educate him if the earth is fresh.

We worked until the hole was big enough—not deep, not shallow, just the way dignity requires it. We let him in, slowly, and the blanket with him. Mary-Lou threw the apple scraps. "For the road," she said. I didn't throw anything. I've learned that not every gesture has to be mine.

The preacher murmured, but he didn't murmur God, but rather the quiet names of other animals we've lost in this city: the miller's mule, the widow's mare, the coffin maker's dog. Sometimes a list helps more than amen. The widow put away her watch. Time is also a blanket.

We shovelled dirt. It sounded like rain, which we couldn't afford. Eddie stood until there was only dirt. Then he knelt, not out of religion, but out of geography. He placed his hand flat on the mound. He said nothing. He delegated the speaking to us today.

"Horseshoe," said Shatterhand, and I knew what he meant. We lifted the front hoof, removed the nails. The shoe was warm, heavy, honest. I wiped it on the grass and handed it to Eddie.

"For above your door," I said. "But the right way round. Not for good luck. For remembering."

"I don't have a door," he said.

"Then the saloon," said Mary-Lou. "It's hanging there until you get one."

We walked back. The street acted as if it hadn't seen anything. Men pretended they didn't count. Women pretended they didn't know. Children did what children always do: They chased the dust as if it were a game. The smooth one kept his distance, like a man afraid of his own voice.

In the saloon, I placed the horseshoe on the counter. Mary-Lou washed it with water she didn't consider smooth. She dried it with a cloth that, today, would become nothing but a cloth. Then she took two nails that had never had the good fortune to be beautiful and hammered the iron across the counter, where the light is rarely kind. The iron hung crooked. Good thing. Nothing hangs straight here.

"Drink something," she said to Eddie, placing a glass of water in front of him. He drank as if he had sand in his throat. "You can sleep here tonight," she said.

"I have to go home," he whispered. "Otherwise, my father will ask where we were."

"Say: With people," I said.

The preacher nodded. "That's not a mistake."

Old Shatterhand sat at the end of the bar and looked at his hands as if apologizing for still being there. Winnetou stood at the door and looked out at the city. He doesn't see houses. He sees edges and decisions. The dog that belongs to us laid his head on Eddie's boot. Animals are better note-takers.

The smooth one finally stepped in, clearing his throat in a silence that hadn't invited him. "I'm sorry," he said, and maybe he meant it. "But the city... we have to—"

"No," said the widow.

"But—"

"Not today."

He raised his hands, looked at the horseshoe, looked at Eddie, looked at me—and decided to be clever for once. He left. There are days when cowardice is the best suit he wears.

Mary-Lou fished a small bag out of the drawer. "Eddie, here. For food when you're ready to get a new animal. And for the man who brings it to you. No receipt."

"I... I'll pay it back," the boy said. It sounded like it was important to him, not to us.

"Sure," said the widow. "In installments. One installment means getting up tomorrow. Another means not lying. A third means not running away."

"I'm not running away," he said, and I believed him because he had already stopped today when things were difficult.

He left, the horseshoe above him, the iron in his head, the earth on his boots. We stayed. We're good at staying; it's our superpower. The preacher sat down like someone who's learned how to sit. Shatterhand, out of habit, polished the revolver I no longer wanted to polish. Winnetou briefly placed his hand on my back, and that was more than words.

"We'll hang a sign underneath," said Mary-Lou. "Not luck, not horse. A sentence."

"Which one?" I asked.

She didn't think twice. "Today: dignity."

I nodded. "Tomorrow: rest."

"The day after tomorrow: bill," said the widow. "For RG."

"Next year: peace," said the preacher, and no one laughed at him.

In the evening, we sat on the veranda, and the sun acted as if it weren't to blame. The dust settled like a dog that's tired of jokes. People walked by, glanced up at the horseshoe for a moment—not for long, just a moment, the way you look at your face in a mirror when you're in a hurry. Mary-Lou sliced lemons and left the peels outside, as if they were little boats for sadness. The dog snored, the glasses breathed, the boards spoke in their ancient language, the one no one wants to learn anymore.

"It's never the horse, Sam," Mary-Lou said into the air.

"I know," I said.

"It's us."

"I know."

"And?"

"We're doing it right. Not pretty."

She nodded as if I'd stolen a line from her. "Could you do it again?" she asked after a while.

"Yes," I said. "And I'll hate less for it than if I don't."

"Good," she said. "Because we'll have to do it again. For someone."

"I know," I said again, because some words need to be repeated three times to prevent them from attacking you from behind.

Later, when the lamps were dimming and the street lowered its voice, someone wrote with their finger in the dust of the bar beneath the horseshoe: TODAY WAS A GOOD ANIMAL. That wasn't a poet's work. That was bookkeeping for the heart. Mary-Lou left it there. Tomorrow we'll wipe it away. Not because it's wrong. Because there has to be room for the next sentence.

I took my last sip. It didn't taste of comfort. It tasted of metal and mint and the kind of tiredness that lives at the bottom of your back. I looked at the horseshoe, crooked, heavy, stubborn—like us. And I thought, nothing comes up here that we can't bring down again, if necessary.

A horse that won't stand up isn't a chapter about animals. It's a chapter about us. About standing up. About doing things right. About the noise grace makes when it strikes. Today we managed the quiet version. Tomorrow comes the loud version. RG has the talent to write "order" in big letters and drill small holes with dignity.

When he starts again, I show him the iron above the counter. And when he asks what it means, I say, "That's what's left when you stop counting."

Night came like a woman who knows she doesn't have to ask permission. Heaven was there. Good. I like it when it's watching. I quietly said "safe journey" toward Mill Path, drank the rest, placed the glass upside down on the bar, and let the day out. It left without slamming the door. Better that way. We

have work again tomorrow. And nails. And sentences. And maybe one less boy who thinks getting up is the only answer.

Sometimes lying down is bravery. Today we've figured it out. That's enough for now. For the rest, there's water. And Mary-Lou. And the shovels in the shade. And a horseshoe that will never hang straight, but always right.

Chapter 30 - Winnetou in a suit □ and no one laughs

The day arrived in Sunday's best, even though it was Tuesday. The street had pretended to have washed, but the dust had only become more polite. Mary-Lou stood in front of my shed, hands in her apron, eyes like a freshly sharpened kitchen knife. "He really attracts him," she said.

"Who? The smooth one's innocence?"

"Winnetou. Suit. Dark. No frills."

I needed a sip to swallow that sentence. "Then it'll be a day for whole words."

At the tailor's, the air hung thick with thread and old decisions. The mirror was so clean it lied. Winnetou stood there, calm, in his waistcoat, his shirt so white that even the dust was wondering whether he wanted to be polite today. The tailor danced with the needle around his shoulders. Old Shatterhand held the jacket as if it were explosive. I leaned against the frame and held the room together, using only meanness.

"Pull," said the tailor, "and breathe. No, not like that. Civilized."

"For you, civilized means dying quietly," I murmured.

Winnetou said nothing. He didn't have to. He looked like a man who had decided not to get run over today—no matter how wide the road. His jacket fell off. For a moment, there was no legend, no hunter, no shadow. There was simply: Intention.

"He'll laugh," I predicted. "The smooth one. He laughs when cutlery is clean."

"He's not laughing today," said Mary-Lou. "Today he knows that laughter can be expensive."

Shatterhand smoothed the shoulder. "The fabric fits."

"Me too," I said, sitting down so the room knew who was working here.

The tailor pricked his finger, as the world always does when it tries on decency. A drop of blood on white. He cursed, meekly. Winnetou bent down, took the cloth, and laid it down. "It stays," he said. "As a memory."

"What?"

"That we are human beings before we are uniforms."

I nodded, because nodding is cheaper than sounding clever. Outside, the bench was practicing the sounds of importance. RG had the hall prepared: chairs arranged in rows like young soldiers, a flag, a platform that acted as if it deserved a moral high ground. At the entrance, a sign read: "Civil Code – Tie Please." I bared my neck to the sign. It showed me its indifference.

The hall filled. Widow McCready entered, the steel plate on which numbers never die, on which numbers never die. Tres Dedos stayed near the door, in the shadows, the one with the better news. The preacher raised his hands and then lowered them again. Mary-Lou placed a glass of water next to every other face, just to see who would grab it first when things got serious.

The smooth man climbed onto the podium as if it were a horse that loved him. "Citizens," he crooned, "today we discuss order. The railway must be built, the water must flow, the country must be allowed to speak in file folders. I present the civil order." He held up a notebook as thick as the patience of a hungry man.

And then he came in.

Winnetou in a suit. No fuss, no shouting, no posturing. Straight jacket, muted fabric, tie that doesn't need a knot to make it work. Shoes like resolutions. The room made that sound when wood decides not to creak. No one laughed. Not even the smooth one. His smile stumbled and couldn't find a chair.

I stood up because you stand up when dignity comes in. Not out of folklore. Out of fear of missing something. Old Shatterhand walked beside him, half a step, full alliance. Widow McCready nodded, as if someone had finally found the right account. Mary-Lou looked at me as if to say: If you make a joke now, I'll break the glass in your mouth.

I didn't. I'm not stupid. Just mean.

"Mr. RG," said Winnetou, his voice carrying the hall without dragging. "You have an order. I have a contract." He laid down two sheets of paper, thin, clean, and sharp. "Water rights on the Mill Path, crossing of the cattle drives along the elm trees, access to the well without fees. Signed—today."

"Not possible," breathed the smooth one. "Jurisdiction, deadlines, you know, one has to..."

"Drink," said Mary-Lou, pushing a glass toward him. "So your throat knows how to swallow the truth."

"We're talking about the railway," RG continued, his voice finding a stair. "It brings prosperity, order, prices, civility. We have to clear the roads, straighten the edges—"

"And the people?" asked the widow. "Do we straighten them out too?"

"The rent for the well," said Old Shatterhand calmly, "has been raised three times since the railway man slept here. Why?"

"Market," said the smooth one.

"The air is also a market," I said. "If you want to start, we'll collect from your mouth first."

Laughter rippled through the room, not loudly, just as a physiological necessity. RG blinked as if someone had thrown a grain of sand into his pride.

"We need numbers," said the widow. "Not incense."

"I have numbers," said the smooth one. "Deadlines. And whoever doesn't..."

The back door opened. Three people wearing gloves, background noise from a hat. A touch of theatrics: One stumbled, one grabbed his back, one held his stomach, the one who always lies. "Brawl," someone shouted. "In the yard. He was the first—"

"No," said Winnetou without turning his head. "Outside stays outside when the counting is on inside."

It worked. The three stood around like extras who'd missed their cue. Tres Dedos placed a friendly hand on their elbows, the gesture that says: Later. Not now.

"Civil order," the smooth man repeated, this time with haste. "Paragraph one: speaking time—"

"Paragraph zero," I said. "We're only talking about things that exist. Not fake fees. Not fake brackets. Not fake water rights."

"Evidence," he snarled.

Old Shatterhand placed a bag on the table. Inside: clips from the well, labels from the bathhouse, sealing wax. "See?" he said, with the patience of a man who'd said too many 'sees.' "Your handwriting, your stamp, your people. Order in jars."

The bankers shifted in their chairs like chickens noticing that the fox is taking notes. The preacher whispered an amen that didn't want to go to heaven, but rather into the widow's notebook.

"The contract," said Winnetou, "is simpler than your order. It says: Water remains free. Crossing remains open. Trains may come if they don't eat. Two pages. No footnotes."

"This is naive poetry," cried the smooth one.

"That's expensive prose," said the widow, tapping his deadlines. "Do you see the expiring dates? These were yesterday."

"Formal error," he groaned.

"Wonderful," said Mary-Lou. "Then we'll formalize today. Sign."

It tipped over. I love the moment when rooms tip over: A chair is suddenly somewhere else, a brow smooths out, a lie stumbles over the edge of the tongue. RG was looking for the humor he usually wears like a tie. He didn't find it.

"If I sign," he began, "we'll lose revenue. The city needs—"

"The city doesn't need protection money," I said. "It needs shovels, water, and peace."

"It requires planning," he said.

"She'll get rules," said Winnetou. "We'll start small: no fees at the well, lowering of fences on the railway side only with the consent of the owners, no forced sales under the banner of civility. Period."

"And if..." The smooth one looked toward the back entrance, where his brooms were waiting. Tres Dedos stood before them now, smiling like someone who knows a story others shouldn't hear. "And if the track then—"

"Then we'll negotiate again," said Old Shatterhand. "In the language everyone understands: numbers and sentences."

Winnetou took half a step closer to the podium. The suit didn't rustle. Only fabric that doesn't want to stop being fabric rustles like that. "You wanted me to disguise myself," he said, not kindly, not harshly. "So it would be easier for you to talk about me. I put on the suit so you could talk about the matter. I'll take it off later. What you sign today will still remain."

No one laughed. Not even me. I had enough to do keeping the words from falling out of my mouth too soon. Mary-Lou raised her eyebrow: Now.

The widow laid the two pages down again. RG stared at them as if they had teeth. His hand searched for the pen and found it. The tip scratched. A line that will bill tomorrow. I didn't breathe while the line was still thinking.

He signed.

The room made no noise. Some victories are silent because they're not meant to die when they're made loudly. Mary-Lou placed the glass in front of him. "Good swallow," she said. "It will get easier when you practice."

"It will be expensive," he whispered.

"You have a subscription," I said.

He raised his head. There was something in his face I rarely see: calculation without threat. "You think you've won," he said.

"We don't believe anything," replied the widow. "We only count what's true today."

RG glanced at Winnetou, from his shoulders to his tie and back up into the face that didn't ask him anything. "That suit suits you," he said, adding: I'll keep that in mind.

"He doesn't belong to me," said Winnetou. "Dignity is borrowed. One must return it without ruining it."

The meeting broke up, as meetings break up when the paper is heavier than the chair. The pewmen acted as if they had decided to agree. The preacher acted as if God had nodded. Tres Dedos disappeared, as good news disappears when it has served its purpose. We went out onto a street covered in the same dust as this morning, but in a different direction.

There was already a line at the fountain, looking more like people than usual. No clinging, no boxes. Children were drinking without counting coins. A woman held a glass high as if it were a lantern. Mary-Lou pushed the bucket forward, as if she'd always done it that way and not just now.

"You're not making a joke?" she asked me quietly.

"Not today," I said. "Today the stage belongs to the suit."

"He'll take it off," she said.

"Sure. But the impression remains that you're dressed."

We sat down on the steps in front of the saloon. Old Shatterhand polished the edge of his mind by disassembling the revolver without looking at it. The widow wrote the date, twice, on the steel plate. The preacher tried to find a psalm verse that wouldn't be embarrassing, gave up, and carried baskets. Win-ne-tou stood next to me, his jacket open, tie loose, his composure not slack.

"Why no laughter?" I asked. "The city loves silliness."

"Because she's realized," he said, "that today the suit isn't a disguise. It's a weapon."

"I know sharper ones," I said.

"I know quieter ones," he said.

Shortly before evening, RG passed the post again and stopped, as if accidentally interested in us. "The train is asking about tomorrow," he said in the general direction.

"Tell her," replied the widow, "that we are ready to talk if she can read."

"And if not?"

"Then we'll paint pictures," said Mary-Lou. "Big ones. Bright ones."

He moved on. No threat. Just the knot in his forehead, seeking new paths. I like knots that sweat.

Later, as the light grew darker, Tres Dedos brought out a tie pin, new, cheap, shiny. "For later," he said. "In case he needs it again."

Winnetou didn't take it. He placed it on my box. "Give it to the right person," he said.

"Who is that?"

"Someone who thinks he should laugh."

Mary-Lou took the pin and stuck it into the wooden column like a pin into a map. "To remember," she said.

The horseshoe still hung in the saloon, crooked, defiant. Below it, someone had written in the dust: NO FEES TODAY. I left it there. Tomorrow, someone will wipe it over because the next sentence needs space. That's how we are: not poets, just people with dirt under their fingernails who sometimes make sentences by accident.

Winnetou returned later without his jacket. The white collar had only borrowed his neck, not tied it. He sat down next to me, and we drank water. Not out of heroism. Out of precision.

"Was it necessary?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. "Not for me. For her image of me."

"And tomorrow?"

"Leather again tomorrow."

"Good," I said. "The dust likes you like that."

"So did the people," said Mary-Lou. "But today they liked themselves."

I leaned my head against the door. The evening made the noise it makes when it's decided not to put on a show today. The houses breathed. The fountain sounded like order that doesn't come from RG. The horseshoe hung, acting as if it had never been straight. And somewhere at the end of the street, a boy was practicing wearing the hat someone else no longer needed.

"Winnetou in a suit," I said, "and no one laughs."

"Because no one is crying," said Mary-Lou.

"Not yet," corrected the widow without looking up. "But not today."

I raised my glass, water, clear, cheeky. "To clothes," I said.

"On attitudes," said Old Shatterhand.

"To sentences," said Tres Dedos from the shadows.

"To days that remain when you take them off again," said the man who had worn the suit as if it were a blade. We drank. It didn't burn. It did its job.

Later, when the lamps were no longer working, the hem of the jacket lingered in my gaze. A bit of dust on it, a bit of tailor's blood, a crease that wouldn't go away. That was enough proof to me that the day had happened. I put my feet on the step, flicked the cigarette into the sand, and thought: Sometimes the harshest form of violence is a piece of fabric that you can't crumple.

And if someone laughs tomorrow, they're out of luck. Today, they missed the mark. Today, the city realized that some suits aren't meant for funerals, but rather to help the living behave. That's the height of emotion here. And it's more than we had yesterday.

Chapter 31 - The Woman Who Read Death's Hand

The day began with a crate and never ended there. It was made of poorly cared-for wood, had fittings that had seen the wear and tear of sweat, and smelled of old map varnish and cheap tobacco. The woman carrying it was

smaller than her shadow, yet walked as if she had the shadow under control. She set the crate down in front of the saloon, pulled a stool out of the thing's belly, placed a cloth on it that must have once been red, and sat down.

"I read your palms," she said, as if she were on familiar terms with the street. "What's in them, you wrote it yourself."

"Isn't that called fraud?" asked someone who only recognizes fraud when he doesn't get a share.

"Call it what you want," she said. "I call it: no excuses."

Mary-Lou leaned forward in the doorway, her hands wet from the dishwater, her eyes dry from the rest. "I sense drama," she murmured.

"I sense cash," said the smooth man who appeared nearby when words smell of sales.

I stayed sitting on my crate because that's my way of working: first look, then grumble, then drink, then—if necessary—shoot. The woman had a face that looked somewhere between twenty and never. No makeup, no rings. Just hands like two maps that someone had folded many times.

The first was a teamster. Hard fingers, torn nails, a scar that ran across his face, like a lifeline, because some men tell stories with their fists that belong to others. She took his hand in both, twisting them so gently that even the flies became polite.

"You slept by the mill last winter," she said. "Because the woman threw you out. Since then, you've been taking bread from the back shelf, not the soft kind. You have two brothers, one of whom lies as if it were work. And you won't die on the street; you'll die someday in a chair."

He laughed. He didn't laugh. His eyes forgot the joke. "Where—?"

"You smell of linseed oil and released anger," she said. "Your right hip hurts. Your heel has worn flat, and you sit on the only whole chair in the house in the evening. It will put you back."

He put money on the table as if she'd sold him a prayer that worked. She pushed it back. "Buy yourself new heels. It's cheaper than me."

"I like her," said Mary-Lou.

"I don't like her yet," I said, "but I like how she doesn't like you."

Old Shatterhand stepped forward and offered her his left hand. Clean, watered down, nails trimmed as if life shouldn't find any space between them. She looked at it, looked away. "The other one," she said.

"Why?"

"The left is what you want to show. The right is what you do things with."

He held out. His right hand was honest: powder in the crease, small cuts from screwing, an old blister at the base of his thumb. "You lose on purpose," she said, "but not when it counts. Your knife is blunter than you think, and you're afraid of days when no one notices your calm."

"Respect," said Mary-Lou. "Read the box office for me."

"Cashiers are easy hands," the woman replied. "Almost as easy as men."

Winnetou didn't stand. He stood in such a way that you didn't even notice he was there, until you realized that everyone else was standing the way they were because of him. She looked at him, he at her. "Should I?" she asked.

He placed a stone on the table. Flat, polished by the stream, one side lighter, one darker. She smiled for the first time, and the smile was like a knife meant for you, not against you. "Good," she said, stroking the stone as if stones, too, were hands. "This one has lived three winters in the water and two summers on a dirt road. Someone picked it up because they thought it would fit in a pocket. It fit into a story."

"Sufficient," he said. He took the stone as if he had paid for it.

"Who are you?" asked the smooth one, expecting questions that he can answer himself.

"Sal," she said. "Sometimes Sally. Sometimes not at all."

"I could certify you," he suggested. "Officially. 'Licensed Lineman.' Five percent to the committee, plus protection, a chair, and a shield."

"Five percent of what?" she asked.

"From your earnings," he said.

"I earn little," she replied. "I spend a lot."

"For what?" I heard the tip of his tongue warming up.

"For not guilty," she said, and looked at him until his collar knew why he existed.

The boy Eddie came, fresh with a hole where hope had once been. He held out his hand, unsure how to do that when you're not sure your hands are still any good. "Tell me when my father will stop drinking," he said quietly.

She took his hand, turned it once, and glanced at the knuckles where children grow up when no one's watching. "Tonight," she said.

He grinned, briefly, crookedly, incredulously. "Promise."

"I never promise. I'm reading." She let go of his hand. "Tonight he's pushing his courage to the limit. The limit holds. After that, he won't drink anymore."

"Because he did it?"

"Because he won't be here tomorrow."

Eddie's face became a fist no one had ever made. Mary-Lou stepped forward and grabbed his shoulder so he didn't fall. "What kind of business are you in?" she asked harshly.

"Same as you," said Sal. "Only I don't give out drinks."

"Then I'll pour you something," I said, bringing a cup of water. She drank as if she knew how important it is to keep things clear.

Two gloved men cleared the crowd, anticipating the situation. "Committee," said one, "licensing required. Tables on public property require a stamp."

"Take your hand," Sal said, offering him hers. Reflex is a weapon. He put it in without realizing he was obeying.

She looked at his fingers, saw the calluses that come from carrying, not from hitting, saw the small, dirty crescent under his ring finger that says he's lying when he says he's alone. "You don't die from a bullet," she said. "You die from four steps. The third one breaks. You're carrying something you can't drop. You drop it. And then..." She showed him the spot on the heel of his hand where men lose pressure too soon. "Then you're just down."

He pulled his hand back as if he'd set it on fire. The other man laughed too loudly, the kind of laugh men do when they don't want to realize they've just been counted. "And me? If you're so good."

"You'll die in bed," she said. He grinned. "Alone."

Now no one laughed. He growled and reached for the box. I placed my hand on his—not reading, just placing it. "Leave it," I said. "Not today."

"Sam, if you don't—"

"Not today," I repeated. I can sound friendly when I try hard. I didn't try hard. He let go, for reasons that had to do with Winnetou and Old Shatterhand, who stood nearby like two sentences no one wants to mispronounce.

Sal read hands all afternoon. Not future, present. "You scratch at your door at night because you missed her during the day." "You hate your brother because he wasn't the one she loved." "You don't cheat anyone, you only lose fairly." "You don't drink too much, you just don't stop often enough." The preacher held out his and received something in return that was so nice he blushed. Widow McCready held out hers and received a "They grow old, but they don't tire." She nodded, as if her assignment had been confirmed.

"And me?" Mary-Lou asked finally, out of boredom, feigning courage.

Sal held her hand like a feather so she wouldn't notice how heavy it was. "You'll be long and well," she said. "But you'll be disappointed by the word 'finally.'"

"I've been disappointed for a long time," said Mary-Lou. "In columns and rows."

"Good," said Sal. "Then we're colleagues."

"You haven't told me anything yet," I finally said.

She looked at my hand as if she'd already read it yesterday. "I don't have to," she said.

"Yes," I insisted.

"You're not dying today," she said. "And not from something that breathes. You're dying from something that pulls."

"Sounds romantic," I grumbled.

"It isn't."

The sun was on its way back when RG decided that today was his day for reaping. He stepped into the middle, his voice set to Citizen. "Citizens! We have experienced much today. Truth, art, small miracles. The Committee of Usefulness proposes: An Orderly Future—License and Fee. Those who allow themselves to be read, pay. Those who read, pay. Those who don't want to pay can continue to hope."

"You're a hole in a barrel," said Mary-Lou. "All you do is let things go."

"I organize," he said.

"You command what you're afraid of," said Sal. "That's not a job."

He moved closer to their table, as if proximity were an argument. "You're staying in town tonight," he said. "We'll talk tomorrow."

"I'm not staying," she said.

"Then go," he replied. "But leave the table alone."

"He's mine," she said.

"Not on my property."

"Your reason is fear," she said. "I'm not taking that with me."

Two shadows moved too fast for wit. Gloves-wearers who had forgotten that the day had watchers. The first reached for the box, the second for her arm. I was there before I knew I was there. My Colt remained in the bag, but my words didn't.

"Touch the box and I'll read the lump to you before it grows," I told one. I said nothing to the other. I took his wrist, twisted it so his own finger explained to him how to spell pain. He slobbered something that seemed to mean courage. Winnetou stepped forward half an inch. No heroism. Just statistics: how far men will go when it gets expensive.

RG raised his hands. "Gentlemen—"

"They're not yours," said the widow. "Take them away before they get into debt."

They left. Not gone. Just until later. Later is always available here.

Sal packed her box as if she'd learned to walk quickly when cities start talking. "I'm leaving at dusk," she said.

"Stay until tomorrow," said Mary-Lou. "You sleep upstairs, where the rain doesn't know it's there."

Sal looked up the stairs, saw the horseshoe above the counter, and looked at me. "I'll stay," she said. "One night."

The night didn't stay quiet. It just stayed. That's enough. Inside, it was full of voices pretending they had no hands. Sal sat down in a corner, drank water, looked no one in the eye, and yet saw everyone. Eddie came back and sat down on the bottom step, the one where sad children learn how to breathe. "How do you know about tonight?" he asked.

"Because your father always falls over the same threshold," she said. "And because there's no more."

"He promised to come to me after the bank."

"He promised a lot today."

The smooth one disappeared at some point, and that was the message I needed to know that something was about to happen. When RG is quiet, he's digging. The courtyard was dark, but not empty. Two chairs that were never comfortable, a barrel waiting for bad ideas, and shadows that were beyond their owners.

Sal suddenly stood next to me. "Read my hand," she said.

"I don't read," I replied. "I drink and count."

"Count," she said, holding out her hand to me.

I saw no lines. I saw calluses where women aren't supposed to have calluses. I saw a scar that wasn't old enough to be a memory, nor fresh enough to be a warning. "You're leaving," I said. "Not tonight. Right now. Behind the stable, over the fence, over to the Mill Path."

"There's already one there," she said.

"It doesn't matter. The stream doesn't know you yet."

She took her hand back. "If I go, someone else will die," she said. "I'm expensive."

I wanted to make a joke that would make it easier. It stuck. "Who are you playing the future for today?"

"For whoever else catches you," she said, looking at my hand as if it were a calendar. "You don't die today, Sam. But someone dies for you today, if I go."

"That's a bad trade," I said.

"That's math," she said. "And math doesn't like to lie."

At the same time, a man outside yelled in a voice that had been oiled for too long. The boy's father, I thought. Wrong. A gloved man holding a rifle as if it were an argument. "RG wants his gun," he shouted. "Get it out, or the saloon will start singing."

Sal stood up. "I'm going," she said. "But not away."

She stepped into the courtyard, slowly, as if giving the shadows time to choose sides. "I've come to pay," she said.

"Finally, some sense," the man sneered. "What are you paying?"

"A false future," she said. "For today."

I was behind the door, Old Shatterhand next to the barrel, Mary-Lou above us, her hands on the railing, Winnetou the only one standing as if he were taking a stroll. The glove-wearing man didn't aim well, but he aimed early. Sal turned half a step into his shot, as if she'd practiced. It wasn't a pretty sound. It was a short one.

I was already with him when the sound was still alive. The Colt was out before my mind had formed an opinion. The man dropped what was meant to kill him. The thing slipped, the bullet grazed wood, made a splinter that stuck in my skin like a bad joke. Winnetou was already standing between the rest and the rest. It was all over before the second idea could register.

Mary-Lou was with Sal before gravity understood what work was. Blood isn't romantic when it spills on the wrong person. "Damn," said Mary-Lou, "damn..."

"Don't swear," said Sal, half-smiling. "It messes up the statistics."

"Shut up and breathe," said Mary-Lou. Her hands did what hands do that have learned to hold first, then heal.

"Tell the boy," Sal whispered, searching for my hand with a finger as if she needed to make a quick comment, "that his father can't make it today, but he can. Tell him to drink three times tomorrow: water, water, water."

"Tell him yourself," I growled.

"I'm losing some weight today," she said. "From you."

"I don't want it."

"Too late."

She placed my finger on her palm, right where men stop lying to each other. I felt nothing but warm wood, wet cloth, breath trying to count. "Not the future," she murmured. "The receipt." Then she let go of my hand, as if she'd given me back something I never had.

The rest was work. Preacher who knew when to keep his mouth shut. Widow who knew where to put the cloth. Old Shatterhand, who broke the barrel from the stock without any drama. Winnetou, who drew the yard into a line that no one could slip on. RG very far away and yet too close, as always. A dog who howled because he understands more than we allow.

She didn't die for long. I've seen men play the part, and they're worse at it. Sal left as if she had explained and signed it beforehand: matter-of-factly, briefly, without a bundle.

Eddie came too early and stayed too late. He didn't cry. He saw. "My father?" he asked.

"Not anymore," said Mary-Lou.

"Good," he whispered, and that was love, even if no one calls it that.

The smooth one came up with an idea an hour later. "Mourning money," he said gently. "For the cleaning, the tidying, the—"

"No," said the widow. "We're not paying anyone wearing a tie today."

"It must be—"

"It doesn't have to be anything."

We carried Sal's box in. Not out of sentiment, but out of respect for things that have served their purpose. In the drawer lay a notebook with lists: cities, names, numbers. Not future, not present. Who stole, who gave back, who fled, who stayed. No organ, just a pencil. I flipped through it, didn't see my name, was happy and not happy.

Under the horseshoe on the counter, Mary-Lou wrote in the dust: NOT THE FUTURE – THE RECEIPT. I left it there. Tomorrow we'll wipe it away. Not because it's wrong. Because the next sentence needs space.

Late in the day, I sat down on my box and looked at my hands as if they were new. They weren't. But something was shifted—not much, just enough that the Colt lay differently and the whiskey didn't explain anything. I thought of the spot she'd shown me, the one that draws. I thought of the stream, the mill path, the horseshoe, Eddie's stupidly brave chin.

"She lied," Mary-Lou said quietly next to me.

"About what?"

"About today. She bent something."

"Yes," I said. "She read death's hand and redirected it to her own."

"Does that make you feel better?"

"No," I said. "Just more guilty."

"Our groundwater is to blame," she said. "We live on it. Sometimes it flushes us clean."

I nodded. "RG will make a board out of it."

"Let him. I'll nail it to his forehead."

Later, the morning came, which always comes when it's not asked. I washed my hands at the fountain, for a long time, because I wanted to see if lines could float. They can. But they stay even when the water is gone. Eddie's father was lying in the back room with the coffin maker, who doesn't need many words to justify his work. Eddie stood outside, holding the brim of his hat as if it would fly off if he didn't.

"You're drinking three times today," I said.

"Water?" he asked.

"Water," I said. "And you come by later. We'll write your name in the right book."

"Which?"

"That of people who stay."

He nodded. That was all. More is rare here.

I placed Sal's box next to mine. Two boxes in a country that knows too many boxes. There was no roar of the future in hers. Just notes. I took the tie pin Tres Dedos had brought yesterday and put it inside. "For later," I said, although there was no one there to guarantee "later."

I drank water. It tasted of iron pipe and day. The dog lay on my boots, Winnetou stood in the sun, Old Shatterhand polished nothing, Mary-Lou polished everything, the widow wrote, the preacher remained silent, and RG searched for a sentence in which he would find us again. He will find it. We will rewrite it.

The woman who read Death's palm didn't save us. She just settled the score. And that's almost the same thing here. I raised the glass toward the horseshoe—lopsidedly, defiantly—and said into the dust, "Thank you, Sal. For the receipt."

The dust said nothing. As always. But it stayed. Like us. Until the next person holds out their hand and thinks there's something written there that isn't theirs. Then we read. Then we pay. Then we rewrite the sentence under the horseshoe. Tomorrow perhaps: WE OWED HER A GLASS. Today only: Peace.

Chapter 32 - Laughing in the Line of Fire

The notice was hanging crooked and yet was too clean: **Civility Festival today! Licensed for liquor – safe & civil. Music from sunset. Fees as per committee.** Below is the little impertinence: **Laughter is welcome, violence is punished. – RG**

"If I'm not mistaken," I said, "the smooth one invented humor."

"He just made up the receipt for it," said Mary-Lou, smoothing her apron.
"Today he's charging fees for a good mood and selling the ugly one for free."

The morning smelled of wet wood and warm barrels. Eddie lugged crates as if one could trade muscles for memories. Tres Dedos balanced three cups on two fingers and pretended gravity was his mother's bad mood. Old Shatterhand tested the taps as if they were hinges on a truth. Winnetou stood in the shadows, not counting, but measuring.

"Firewater," said Mary-Lou, tapping a barrel that looked as if it would rather preach than spill. "Rule one: I tap. Rule two: I tap. Rule three: RG doesn't touch anything here."

"I'll write it on a sign," said the widow McCready. "In capital letters, in case he thinks small again today."

"He never thinks big," I said. "He just pretends."

The sun crept over the ridge like a cat unsure if it's allowed to leave the table. By evening, the saloon was more crowded than our graveyard on a bad weekend. Music that sounded like it had teeth; voices that promised everything; glasses that pretended to be immortal. I took the end of the bar, back to the wall, facing the door. That's my superstition: I don't like having the world explained to me backwards.

RG had set up a table, a fine platform with a cloth and a sign: **Safety supervision** He wore the smile of men who've never bled and believe it's a talent. "Citizens," he crooned, "we celebrate in style. Two cups per man per hour, stamp here, no exceptions."

"Two?" Mary-Lou asked with that tenderness you only have when you're about to insult someone. "Sniffles, this day has more bad luck than ironing two cups."

"Order," he said.

"Let me show you how to tap order," she said, placing her wet hand—accidentally, intentionally—on his cuff. The stain spread like truth.

The first hour went well, like hearts still practicing. Jokes fluttered, landed, stung, without killing. A man with the remains of a fiddle acted as if he'd bitten an orchestra. The preacher drank water, peered into the sins of others, and

drank more water. Winnetou stood behind two boys whose laughter was too loud, and his presence even leveled curses. Old Shatterhand took the hat off to anyone who spoke too high. I dropped sentences that pretended they were light.

"Why so happy, Sam?" asked Mary-Lou.

"Because it's about to get expensive," I said. "I'm laughing."

The second hour wanted theater. Two riders came down the street, little stars whose hats never rust because they can't stand the rain. Brooms with guns, their heads full of committee. The first one shot into the air so thick the sky rattled. The second one laughed—and lost its rein in the process. The bullet found no roof. It found the evening next to the stairs, where children are allowed to sit as long as they don't know it's dangerous.

"Get down!" I yelled. "If you want to laugh, laugh on the ground!" I ripped the apron off the nearest guy's stomach and threw it over the railing, so at least there would be a sheet between the bullet and stupidity.

Winnetou was already in the doorway, a shadow that doesn't ask. Old Shatterhand pulled the first broom from the saddle, so politely that the man only later realized he had fallen. Mary-Lou slammed the tap shut as if he had insulted him and reached for the bottle with the long neck. A good bottle is a better club than most clubs. The music stopped, like a dog that has stopped breathing.

"Security fee!" shouted RG, who never hits the right note but always misses the timing. "Everyone stay, pay, orderly!"

"Everyone stays, lives, you holy innocent," hissed Mary-Lou.

The second broom—swaying with importance—continued to laugh, aiming poorly. A mirror shattered behind the counter. I briefly saw my face reflected in dozens, all without patience. "Down with your heads!" I yelled. "If you want to laugh, laugh into your elbows!"

Eddie lay flat on the floor, counting the boards as if they were psalms. The widow pulled two women under the table as if they were overdue bills that urgently needed to be put in the right drawer. The preacher did something useful: He pushed the children behind the barrels. Tres Dedos untied the lamp so quickly that no fire made the evening drunk.

I pushed my way to the door. This is the part where you think you're brave. You're not. You're just in charge. The loudly laughing broom raised the rifle again, too high, too soon. I stepped out, grinning broadly, because laughter confuses faces geared for murder. "Hey, beautiful," I called, "do you need reading glasses for targeting? I got these with wooden frames." I showed him the door. He shot reflexively—at the door I was no longer. Wood wailing, dust raging, air cutting. My bullet wasn't funny. It was work. The broom fell, the laughter fell with it.

The first broom—the one Shatterhand had politely asked to dismount—pulled the trigger without aiming. Two boards sang a final song. "Not in the saloon," said Winnetou, and his tone was the kind of law that doesn't require a sheriff. He grabbed the gun by the barrel and twisted it out of the man's hand, so gently it was rude. I took the rest from his pocket: a fake receipt, two bullet-less threats, a picture of a woman who deserved a better laugh.

Inside, we had to laugh in a completely different way. Someone had knocked over a bottle in shock, the contents of which knew how to run. Alcohol flowed as if it were washing away the evening. Mary-Lou cursed in a grammar only bartenders can master. "RG!" she shouted. "Your security party is thirsty for corpses!"

He stood there like a teacher with a burning blackboard. "I... I'm ordering..."

"Arrange your legs toward the exit," said the widow. "We'll do the math later."

For a minute, there was nothing but breathing. Then what always happens when people think it's over happened: a laugh somewhere in the middle, a laugh that was too loud, too cheeky, too fake. Someone stood up—nice mustache, ugly instincts—and shouted: "I was only kidding! Hey, Sam, you old dog! Another round on the committee!"

"Sit down," I said.

He continued to laugh, the laughter of a man who has learned to crush fear with sound. He raised his glass, took a step toward the door—right into the line that hadn't yet ended with the night. From outside, a final, dumb shot flew—an echo from the alley, a late bloomer in an evening that had gone too long. The glass cracked, his laughter cracked, but he didn't crack. He fell, quietly, surprised, like someone who didn't know the end of a joke.

It was so quiet that even the dust settled out of respect.

Mary-Lou knelt beside him and saw what there was to see: too much. "Firewater," she said, not loudly, not quietly. "He borrowed courage and paid it back into the wrong account."

The preacher opened his mouth, closed it again, and did useful number two: He held back those who have the reflex to be close at the wrong moment. Eddie stood rigidly, counting boards again. Tres Dedos pushed the children even deeper into the safe corner of the night.

I stepped into the alley, where Echo tries to dwell. The third man—not a star, just a subscriber of cowardice—was already running. Old Shatterhand saw him, measured the distance, and gave him the grace of not pursuing. "Tomorrow," he said. "Not today."

Winnetou stood still, and the alley knew it. "Enough is enough," he said to the darkness. Sometimes it's enough.

By the time we were back inside, RG had found his voice. "From now on," he gasped, "security fee doubled. Each additional drink..."

Mary-Lou walked around the counter, lifted the desk with the "Security Supervision" sign, and dropped it, not on the floor—on his logic. The cloth ripped, the edge caught his knee, and his dignity slipped a step. "From now on," she said, "there will be no more spectacles at the expense of corpses. From now on, it's water and hands. Go away, RG."

The widow stood next to her, steel plate across her chest, as if it were the new camouflage uniform. "No one's collecting today. Today we're doing the math on our own."

He looked at me. I looked back. That old game: who blinks first. "The committee—" he began.

"The committee can find a chair tonight and remain silent," I said. "Or I'll put my money where my mouth is."

People moved the way cities move when they're tired of being managed. Women uprighted cups, men cleaned up broken glass, children brought cloths too big for their hands. The dog licked up whiskey on the floor that he hadn't earned, and I shooed him away so he wouldn't get political tomorrow.

Eddie approached me, pale, hard, awake. "Is laughter bad?" he asked.

"No," I said. "But it's sharp. You have to know where to point it."

"Today it pointed in the firing line," he said.

"Today, yes."

"And tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow we'll laugh again. But more quietly."

We laid the dead man on two armchairs, which suddenly began to behave. The preacher found a word that didn't hurt, I don't know which one. The widow wrote three numbers in her notebook: one for the bullets, one for the broken glass, one for courage. Mary-Lou wiped the counter, slowly, thoroughly, as if one could disinfect the night with it. Winnetou walked through the rows and saw faces, not guilt.

Later, we sat outside on the porch, the evening pretending to be over. RG stood at the post, trying to be human. "You don't understand," he half-said, "without order, it doesn't work."

"Yes," said the widow. "Without your order, yes."

"My party was... wrong."

"Your party was a barrel of explosives and labels," I said. "Firewater and regulations—you pour one into the other and wonder about sparks."

"I wanted to allow laughter," he whispered.

"Laughter doesn't need permission," said Mary-Lou. "It needs tact."

He left because he had learned enough today to make mistakes again tomorrow. The stars acted as if they could offer comfort, and the sky acted as if it hadn't been watching. We knew better. I tipped the last sip over my tongue, which had talked too much today, and thought of the man who fell because he wanted to live too loudly. I thought of Sal, who died yesterday so someone else wouldn't have to today. I thought of the horseshoe above the bar, crooked and honest, that asks us every night if we still know what we get up for.

"Laughing in the line of fire," said Mary-Lou, "is like dancing on a thin bridge."

"We survived," said Old Shatterhand.

"Yet," said the widow.

Winnetou looked out onto the street, where the dust was breathing again. "Water tomorrow," he said. "More water."

"Firewater?" Eddie asked, for the first time with a hint of humor that didn't sting.

"No," I said. "The other thing. The thing that doesn't make you brave, but sober."

He nodded, and I gave him the little laugh he needed—short, narrow, on the safe side of the door.

In the saloon, someone hung a new sign next to the old one, the one with Sal's line. With a finger in the dust, crooked but legible: TODAY WE LAUGH BEHIND THE BAR. I left it up. Tomorrow we'll wipe it down. Not because it's wrong—because there has to be room for the next line, in case someone else thinks fun can be shot.

As we closed, the dog stayed on the threshold, half outside, half inside. A good position. Just like our sense of humor. The glasses inside, the alley outside, and us in between. I put my hand on the door, felt the wood, which had heard more than it should have today, and whispered to the city: "Tomorrow without a line of fire, yes? Same joke, half the noise."

The city responded with a sound that sounded like: We'll try. And that's enough. For now. For the next notice. For the next firewater we refuse. For a laugh that doesn't die because someone left too late. We're good at surviving here. And sometimes, if the night is kind, we're even good at living. Not outstanding today, but serviceable. I'll take what I can get. Tomorrow I'll tip. In water.

Chapter 33 - Farewell in a language no one knows

The evening smelled of warm metal and the breath of a city that had gritted its teeth too much. I sat on my box, legs stretched out, back against the posts, and pretended I understood the sky. In truth, all I understood was the sound a glass makes when it's empty. Behind me were the swinging doors, whining like two old dogs who've learned no one will take them anymore. In front of me was

dust that wouldn't settle, even though the sun had already passed over us twice.

He came from the west, where the sun forgives things it predicts in the east. Slender, a little bent at the waist, as if someone had folded a bill into his bones. El Moro. That's what we called him because no one wants to remember a name they can't pronounce. He carried a sack that looked like it contained his entire resume, footnotes included. He stopped two steps from my box, looked at me, and said something. Slowly. Throaty sounds that smelled of salt, rain, goats, campfires, and a train that wouldn't stop.

I nodded, pretending that was an explanation, and said, "Sounds like goodbye, amigo. If you just complimented me, repeat it. If you insulted me, repeat it, but louder. I'm hard of hearing when I'm sober."

He smiled wearily. The smile of men who have spoken into empty spaces too often. Winnetou stepped out of the shadow of the elm tree next to the fountain. He did it the way he does everything: so that the room notices he's there, without him moving. "He's leaving," he said.

"Oh, come on," I muttered. "And I thought he was ordering."

Old Shatterhand approached us, the expression of a man whose conscience has been oiled. "Don't just leave," he said. "He's leaving."

"The difference?"

"'Leaving' is when you come back."

Mary-Lou appeared in the doorway, wiping her hands on her apron, having already seen better reasons than us today. "When someone keeps quiet and has to hold their eyes like that to keep the water from falling out, they're going far," she said. "Sit down, El Moro. Drinking is the only language you don't mispronounce here."

He said something again. Same music, different tones. I heard a word that sounded like someone had sand in their mouth and still wanted to say endearment. I pointed to my ears and shrugged. "We are poor in languages, but rich in glasses. Does that help?"

He sat down. He sat down the way men sit who know that sitting is their last choice before falling. Mary-Lou put tequila in front of him because she knows what suits men who smell of salt. He drank. The flies were polite.

Widow McCready came shuffling up, clutching that book to her chest, in which numbers dwell like pious lies. "I can translate something," she said. "Half of everything is a bill. And goodbyes are prepayment."

"You're a romantic," I said. "In your own way. With a steel plate."

El Moro placed his hand on the table, his fingers broad, his nails short, the lines as deep as dried-up riverbeds. Sal could have read them. But Sal was already reading other places we hadn't been to yet. I looked at his hand and felt my tongue searching for a joke. I let it. Not everything needs a blade.

"Where to?" asked Old Shatterhand. He pointed to the west.

El Moro shook his head.

"South?" asked Mary-Lou.

He shook again.

"East?"

A nod. Not eagerly. Just enough to point the evening in the right direction. East. To where things begin that no one ordered. I don't like the East. It promises too much.

RG came down the street, wearing a checked vest and a look of suffering he'd trained himself to imitate in the mirror. "Good evening, citizen. I see... movement. May I...?" He let the sentence hang so it would sound like interest. He smelled of the office, chalk, and the two coins he never gives out because he believes they're his last respect.

"You may go," said Mary-Lou.

"I manage farewells," he crooned. "Protocols. Formalities. A small fee for the maintenance of the fountain area in case of tears."

"Maintaining your spine would be something new," I said.

He looked at El Moro, saw the sack, saw the nothingness in the air that wanted to be spelled out. "Name?" he asked.

El Moro said his. He said it once. He said it as if he'd had to repeat it many times. RG pretended to understand and wrote something that looked like a

child getting teeth on a carriage ride. "Very good," he murmured. "Reason for moving on?"

"You're the reason," I said.

"Sam," Winnetou warned quietly.

"I know," I said, but I didn't know, I just felt that I didn't like him cutting up air in forms.

El Moro raised two fingers, pointed, not counting. He said one word, so short it sounded as if he were hungry. Then he placed the sack on the table, untied it, and out came things that weren't worth much when weighed: a broken horseshoe, a wooden spoon with a notch, a scrap of green cloth, a child's doll without a head, two smooth stones, one lighter, one darker. He arranged them side by side as if showing us a map.

"That one," said Mary-Lou, tapping the horseshoe, "is from here."

He nodded.

"That," she tapped the spoon, "is from the widow, from her soup pot."

She nodded too.

"This," she said, pointing to the scrap, "is from a woman who didn't love you enough."

He looked at her. He said nothing. He didn't have to. The rag was clean. Love wasn't.

"And the doll?" asked Eddie, the brat who is too often sober for his age.

El Moro shrugged his shoulders. He said a word that sounded like the sound when someone finally gives up hope. I heard for the first time: There was no language that could soften it.

"Where to in the East?" I asked quietly, so I wouldn't sound like a man who wanted to know. I wanted to know. I always want to know where others are going so I can stay.

He made a line in the dust with his fingers, straight ahead, without a hook, without the little loop men draw when they want to believe in themselves.

Then he placed the light stone at the end. The dark one stayed by the sack. "Until then," he said. Just once in our language. "Until then."

"And then?" asked the preacher, who appeared when questions were so difficult that his answers wanted to be placed next to them.

El Moro placed the dark stone next to the light one. "Then not." He raised his hand, the hand that would have read Sal, and made that dismissive gesture that's as old as men who understand that paths aren't infinite.

It fell silent. The kind of silence in which even cobwebs cease to stir the wind. RG tapped his charcoal pencil on his book, as if to sign the silence. "We could... I could... a small farewell meeting... a citizen's speech..."

"The only speech I want to hear today," said Mary-Lou, "is the sound of two glasses clinking together."

"I approve..." began RG

"I'll give you permission for a long trip right away," I said.

Old Shatterhand put his hand on my shoulder. I hate it, but it helps. "Sam."

"It's okay," I said. "I'm charming when I'm tired."

Tres Dedos came as if we'd ordered him by mistake. He took the dark stone, weighed it, and placed it opposite the light one. "Better this way," he said.

"Why?" asked Eddie.

"Because things should be seen before they end," said Tres Dedos. "Otherwise, later on, you'll think you didn't know each other."

Winnetou nodded, barely visible. He understands such sentences because he has learned to end without disappearing.

El Moro stood up. He took the sack, leaving the doll behind, because it's a doll. He didn't take the horseshoe, because horseshoes hang here, if they're worth anything. He took the spoon and looked at the widow. She nodded. "Remember that you ate," she said. "And were sometimes full."

He made one last sound. It wasn't a word. It was that piece of air that slips out of your throat when you start talking again, and then realize your mouth is too stupid for what your heart would have said. He looked at all of us. Briefly.

Quickly. Exactly. With some of us, he lingered a breath longer: with Mary-Lou, with Winnetou, with Eddie. With me, he paused, as if to check whether I was enjoying myself or just drinking. I was enjoying myself. You're allowed once.

Then he left.

Not fast. Not slow. At the pace of men who have decided not to turn back. The road made way. The road always makes way when someone leaves deliberately.

I stood up. "I'll take him a bit," I said.

"Alone," said Winnetou.

"I'm always alone when I get nice," I said, and he let me.

The evening wasn't cool. It smelled of stovepipes and the fur of an old dog. El Moro walked, and I walked beside him, so that our shadows only occasionally met. He said nothing. I said nothing. That's the best kind of conversation I know, when words look like work. We reached the pasture fence on the mill path, where the stream acts as if it were busy, and the mill acts as if it still has an interest in us.

He stopped. He took the light-colored stone out of the bag and placed it on the post. He placed the dark one next to it. Then he took my hand. Surprise is a bad feeling when you're carrying weapons. I let it go. His fingers were dry, warm, cold. He pressed, not hard, not soft. Then he placed my hand flat on the post, next to the two stones. From his sleeve, he pulled a nail. He didn't hammer it in—that was my thought; I'm glad he didn't come. He just set the nail down. Like a memory you don't want to speak yet.

"Until then," he said again.

"Until then," I said, and I meant: Until the place where you cease to belong to us without regretting that you once did.

He touched his forehead. He touched my glass, which I didn't have with me. He touched the air between us. Then he moved on. I stayed. I stayed because I have to be someone who stays. I heard his footsteps for a while longer. Then I heard the stream, and the stream has no opinion, so it didn't help me either.

When I returned, the city was none the wiser. It rarely becomes wiser in the time it takes someone to leave. But it acted like it knew how to make the

evening enjoyable. A few had started drinking. A few had stopped. The preacher said something short that sounded like a handshake. RG had prepared a poster: Farewell Committee invites you. I tore it down without thinking. Some committees don't need invitations. They need peace and quiet.

Mary-Lou stood behind the bar, arranging glasses as if they had new names today. "He liked you," she said.

"I'm good at liking," I said. "It's staying that hurts."

"Staying is our job," she said.

Eddie came with a piece of paper with lines that didn't know where to go. "He left the doll there," he said. "What does that mean?"

"That he has carried enough," said the widow.

"And that we can still carry something," said Old Shatterhand.

Winnetou took the doll and placed it in the drawer under the counter, next to the tie pin we saved for later, and next to Sal's notebook. "We'll keep it," he said. "Until someone has the right hands for it."

RG came in, stood at his post, and cleared his throat into our cups. "I have an idea for—"

"You always have an idea," I said. "What's missing is the day you participate without cashing in."

"It's about language," he said. "We should document the language that no one understands. For the archive. For posterity. A booklet..."

"We have a notebook," said the widow, tapping her steel plate. "It says: Today. It has one page. And tomorrow it has another. That's all we need."

"But the words are—"

"The words are his," said Mary-Lou. "And his silence is ours."

He wanted to object, but Winnetou looked at him, and RG found a sudden love of silence we didn't know was in his repertoire. He sat down, something he rarely does when he can't interview.

Night descended like a cloak wrapped around a tortured animal. Someone began a melody that needed no direction. Tres Dedos tapped the back of a spoon on a glass without breaking it. The dog lay across the threshold because he likes to eat risks that no one pays for. I didn't drink. I placed my hand where Sal's fingers had once rested and felt how wood has a different kind of memory than we do: It accepts without comparing.

"Sam," Mary-Lou finally said, "translate."

"What?"

"The evening."

I looked around. I saw glasses that no longer wanted to lie. I saw the horseshoe above the counter, crooked as always, and the dust beneath it, waiting for its next lesson. I saw RG pretending not to count. I saw the preacher keeping his hands busy so they wouldn't pray. I saw Eddie staring at the edges of the doll in the drawer as if a head might grow if he was stubborn enough. I saw Winnetou peeping into a corner where answers sometimes reside, and Old Shatterhand pretending to be comfortable when no one was looking at him. I saw Mary-Lou, and she was looking back, in a way that made sense not to look away.

"He said goodbye," I said. "In a language that doesn't belong to us. And that's true. Farewells belong to those who leave. Not to those who stay and write stories."

"And us?" asked the widow.

"We raise a glass. Not for him. For the place where he sat. And we stop telling ourselves we understand. Understanding is the cheapest lie we can afford."

"Do you think he'll come back?" Eddie asked.

"No," I said. "But maybe his stone."

Around midnight, I went back to the Mill Path. I do that when I feel like something needs a final look. The light stone was still there. The dark one too. There we stood, the two of us, in the kind of company one rarely chooses voluntarily: two stones and a man trying not to be sentimental and doing it miserably. I took the nail El Moro had left standing and placed it across both stones, as a bridge, as a stupid joke, as a reminder that metal learns nothing and yet acts as if it knew something.

In the morning, RG's notice was back on the wall, a different, new one that acted as if yesterday hadn't happened. I tore it down and placed it in front of the widow. "Write across the top: No speech today. Only hands," I said.

Mary-Lou took the rag and wrote in the dust under the horseshoe: TODAY WE LISTEN. The letters looked like people who aren't finished apologizing. I left it there. Tomorrow we'll wipe it away. Not because it's wrong. Because the next sentence needs space.

Eddie came later with a block of wood. "I want to learn to carve," he said.

"What?" I asked.

"A head. For the doll."

"Start with ears," I said. "We need more of those."

The city breathed. It does. Even when it thinks it's too tired. Men leaned on brooms as if they were rifles that had learned peace. Women put out buckets that didn't want to look empty. Children ran as if they had wind in their bellies. The dog slept. Winnetou stood by the well and looked into the water as if there were writing there that only he could read. Old Shatterhand cut a piece of bread as if bread had hurt him. The widow did the math, as always. RG made a list. It was the list of things he wouldn't forbid today. I liked it a lot. It was short.

That evening, I sat back on my box. The post felt less wooden because I'd been thinking too much. I put two glasses down. I filled one, the other not. "To the light stone," I said. "To the dark one too. And to the nail, which knows it's just lying there stupidly and yet still helps."

Mary-Lou raised her glass. "To the language no one knows," she said. "May we be wise enough not to pretend we can pronounce it."

"To the nod," said Old Shatterhand.

"To the walking that doesn't run away," said the widow.

"To the staying that doesn't boast," I said.

"Here's to the day RG realizes that silence is cheap and therefore the right thing to do," Tres Dedos said, and RG pretended he hadn't heard. Maybe he wasn't just pretending.

Later, I looked up at the sky. He was doing what he knows how: He was hanging there. Sometimes that's enough. The dust rose and settled. That's his job. Mine is to make sentences out of spit and courage and pretend they're made of wood. El Moro was already far along, I realized that at the point where my brain stopped thinking about him. You let people go by not throwing them into the air anymore. Difficult, but doable.

"Sam," said Mary-Lou as she left. "When you leave, will you also speak a language no one knows?"

"Sure," I said. "The best one: quiet."

"Hopefully I'll be deaf by then," she said, laughing, and I laughed with her, because laughter tells us we're still here.

Last night, I dreamed of two stones and a stream humming numbers. When I woke up, I knew that tomorrow someone would want to leave again, and that we would again pretend we could stop them by picking apart their words. We will fail. And that's a good thing. Some defeats are the whole point.

I went out the door; the morning stood there like a man who doesn't know if he's allowed in. I nodded. He nodded back. I put my hand on the post, felt the wood that had listened yesterday, and said into the air, not in German, not in English, not in anything: "See you then." And it sounded as if it was understood. Or as if the air had decided to pretend to be polite.

Enough. For today. For the next glass we fill, and the one next to it that remains empty, because not everything has to be full to be true. In this city, you learn that. The dirty way, the right way.

Chapter 34 - Epilogue: The truth dies first

The day smelled of cold coffee, warm dust, and the guilty conscience of a city pretending to be asleep. I sat on my box, feet in the dirt, back against the post, and counted the nails in the wood. There were as many as you need to nail down a truth, and too few to hold it. The truth dies first, I thought. Not from a bullet. From laziness. From tired minds. From committees. From "It's almost the same thing."

Mary-Lou wiped the counter with the care of a surgeon and the whim of an executioner. The horseshoe hung above her, crooked like a confession no one wants to fix because otherwise it would be a lie. Beneath the iron, she had written in the dust yesterday: TODAY WE LISTEN. Someone had smeared the letters with their sleeve, so what remained was: TODAY. That was enough. The city can't manage any more.

Winnetou stood by the well, his hands on the rim, as if water could read what we keep quiet about. Old Shatterhand sat by the door, sharpening his knife without looking at it, that old exercise: You do something with your hands so your head doesn't start talking about you. Widow McCready counted her numbers, which don't die because they have no feelings. The preacher did what he does best: He carried crates and remained silent, as if it were his psalm.

RG came around the corner, his tie on with the arrogance of a man who believes clothes are an opinion. He taped a notice to the wall: COMMITTEE REPORT: ORDER RESTORED. There were so many words underneath that the most important part didn't fit. I tore the note off, folded it in half, and tucked it under the leg of my box to keep it from wobbling. "See," I said, "finally something useful."

"You can't be like this forever, Sam," he sighed. "You have to document things. Otherwise, they weren't there."

"They were," said Mary-Lou. "Because we're tired."

Eddie came back from the blacksmith's shop, his hands blackened to the bone. He carried the block of wood he'd brought yesterday. It had become a head. Not a pretty one. But steadfastness is rarely pretty. "For the doll," he said, pretending his fingers weren't shaking.

"Good," said the widow. "Give it here. I know people who nail things with two blows that deserve three."

I climbed down from the crate, retrieved the small nail El Moro had left on the post, and placed it in Eddie's hand. "This one," I said. "So you learn that tying down doesn't mean hurting."

He nodded. "Should I write something about it?"

"No," I said. "Sometimes it's enough: it is."

By midday, the street filled with people who hate to admit they have time. Men propped up the day with hands that preferred to grab rather than think. Women held buckets and children and the rest of the world together. The dog lay down on the threshold as if he knew that doors are the only honest compromises: half in, half out, and both sides complain.

"How do we end this, Sam?" asked Mary-Lou, polishing a glass that wanted to be polished like an excuse.

"With a smile no one will believe," I said. "And a sentence that lasts longer than we do."

"You and your sentences," she grumbled. "Write them in wood, then at least they'll rot with style."

"Write them in dust, and we will know that they were true when they were written there."

In the afternoon, RG called the meeting. He placed his lectern in the middle of the street as if it were his living room. "Citizens!" he crooned, "the last few weeks have been challenging, but the committee..."

"...shot the truth first," I said loudly enough that even the flies raised their heads.

He blinked, the clay slipping from his shoe. "We've established order," he continued, "refined rules, fees..."

"It's epilogue, RG," said the widow. "Today we're not collecting fees; today we're taking stock."

"Balance sheet is fees," he tried.

"The bottom line is: who is still there?" said Winnetou, without looking.

He was silent then. Even he was. And that's a scene I want to remember when I grow old. If I do. The truth dies first, but sometimes it makes noise before it falls.

We went to the Mill Path because epilogues belong by water. The stream did its thing; it can do nothing but move on. On the post lay the two stones from El Moro, light and dark, with the nail across them, ridiculous and right. Eddie held the doll with the new head. It looked as if it had learned to survive without

being asked. I liked it. We put it in the bottom drawer behind the counter, next to Sal's notebook and the tie pin that Tres Dedos had brought "for later." Later is a dangerous word here. It says: We're thinking about tomorrow, even though today hasn't quite let go of us yet.

"Does anyone say anything?" the preacher asked quietly.

"No," said Mary-Lou. "We're not saying anything today. We're just standing around and making room for the epilogue to breathe."

We stood around. We breathed. It was almost enough.

Towards evening, the wind came, and with it came the kind of hope you can only endure at your back. The saloon filled more quietly than usual. Two men played cards without lying, which is difficult. A woman sang a song that didn't need a rhyme to work. The dog dreamed. The sky did what it can: It hung. Sometimes that's enough.

RG actually sat down next to me once, without even thinking. He held his hands in his lap like two sinners caught. "You know," he said, "I'm not the bad guy."

"Evil is too expensive for you," I said. "You're comfortable. And comfort kills truths before anyone draws a gun."

He nodded as if he'd learned that from a teacher. "And you?"

"I'm impractical," I said. "This saves me. And it ruins me."

"How do we end?" he asked, suddenly without a committee.

"One rides away," I said. "The others stay. And the truth lies somewhere in between, pretending to be powerless."

"Who's riding away?"

"The one who's least guilty," I said. "Or the one who plays it best."

He laughed briefly, the way a man laughs when he realizes his shirt is buttoned backward. "Maybe I'll ride," he murmured.

"You're riding on paper," I said. "Horses don't like you."

At dusk, the book's final annoyance came, as small as a cough. Two brooms, nervous fingers, a remnant of pride from the other side of the river, nothing

major anymore. Old Shatterhand arranged things, Winnetou stood where standing is enough, Mary-Lou raised her eyes and the bottle, Tres Dedos raised her hand—and that was enough. No shot, just the possibility that silenced us all for a moment, so that at the end we wouldn't have to claim we'd written a fairy tale. It wasn't one. It was work.

We cleared away once more, slowly, the glasses, the chairs, the sentences. I wrote with my finger under the horseshoe: TODAY WE LIVE, STILL. Mary-Lou left it there. "Tomorrow we'll wipe it away," she said.

"Not because it's wrong."

"Because there has to be room for the next sentence," she said. "I know you."

Eddie brought the hammer and placed it next to my box, as if it were a relay handover. "I've got my head," he said.

"Hold on to yours too," I said. "The city has a habit of sawing it."

Later, when the lamps were starting to hurt, I sat down again by the door, my boot toes on the edge of the step. Winnetou stepped beside me, and the night decided to accept us. "It's time," he said.

"For what?"

"For what you do best."

"Drink?"

"Go."

I looked at him as if words were a rare metal that couldn't be cut crooked.

"Me?"

"You," he said. "Not far. Just far enough that you know you could."

Old Shatterhand approached, his hand on my shoulder, that gesture I hate more than any good advice. "We'll stop here," he said. "If you come back tomorrow, the door will be open. If you come the day after tomorrow, the door will be open too. If you don't come, we'll still be here."

"You make it easy for me to like you," I said. "That's rude."

Mary-Lou arrived last. She placed a glass in front of me—water, of course. "Not firewater," she said. "You should remember. Don't forget."

"What if I want to forget something?"

"Then come back and get drunk here. Not before."

"Don't you want to call after me: Stay?"

"No," she said. "I want you to know: We'll be fine. And that you know where you'll end up if you don't."

"You're cruel," I said.

"I'm tidy," she said. "Your talent is cruel."

I stood up, and the post pretended to miss me. The dog raised its head, its ears as crooked as a horseshoe. The road lay there like a scar you stroke to see if it still hurts. I fetched the horse I didn't deserve and put my hand on its neck. It snorted as if it knew that men of that age do things they regret, but properly.

"Where are you riding?" asked Eddie.

"Until then," I said, and he understood. Children are quicker at such languages.

I sat up and saw the city staring at me: suspicious, offended, tender. RG stood at the post and pretended to count me. The widow held her book to her chest and pretended not to count me. The preacher raised his hand and let it fall again. Tres Dedos showed me two fingers: for the light stone and the dark stone. Old Shatterhand nodded, as if handing me a weapon that needn't be carried. Winnetou looked at me as if he'd rather not rescue me again. Mary-Lou smiled thinly and pretended I'd just gone out to buy tobacco.

I rode off. Not fast. Not slowly. At the pace at which sentences are written that no one should delete. The sun hung crookedly on the edge of the world, testing how much pathos it would allow us today. I rarely liked it like this. It made my shadows longer, and longer shadows are more honest: They show how crooked one's posture really is.

The road became a path, the path a trail, the trail an idea. A coyote laughed, and I laughed back, because I don't see why animals are allowed to do this alone. Behind me remained the saloon with the crooked iron and the bar that has heard more confessions than any confessional. Behind me remained the

two stones on Mill Road and the nail that pretends to be a bridge. Behind me remained sentences in the dust that will be wiped away tomorrow to make room for new ones that we take just as seriously, until they have to die.

There was nothing in front. That's the best thing about "front." You can fill it. With mistakes, with calm, with a handful of grace when it shows itself. I thought of Sal. I thought of El Moro. I thought of the man who laughed and fell. I thought of the child with the new head in the drawer. I thought of the truth, which dies first, and how you bring it water in the morning so it might last until noon.

I could have faded out now, as RG would write: "Sam Hawkens rode into the sunset, and the city breathed a sigh of relief." But our dust isn't that simple. I rode until the sky lost its cheap romanticism and only the wind remained. Then I dismounted, tied the horse to a stick that wasn't meant for that purpose, and sat down in the grass that can't defend itself.

"Until then," I said to the landscape. The wind acted as if it were ferrying me across. Maybe it was.

I could have ridden back. I could have ridden further. I sat there. Long enough to realize that going wasn't the problem. Neither was staying. The problem is who you are when you're not doing any of those things. So eventually, I got back up, patted the horse's neck, told him it was a decent day, and kept riding, because decent days need an exit.

If you want a different ending, reader—one that can be unscrewed like a cork when visitors come—then imagine this: Two nights later, Tres Dedos finds an envelope in the sand with neat letters: LM He takes it to Mary-Lou. She puts it next to the horseshoe and doesn't open it. Not yet. The city is asleep. Someone knocks three times, as if it were interest. And somewhere at a bend not on the map, I stop because the feeling in my back tells me: There's one more sentence that needs to be written before we close up shop.

Maybe I'll come back tomorrow, and we'll hang the new sentence under the crooked iron. Maybe not, and you'll write it yourself. You can. You have the hands, you have the dust, you have the kind of humor that only survives if you don't sell it. That's enough.

The truth dies first. But not permanently. Sometimes she gets up again, hungover, insulted, and gets herself a glass of water from Mary-Lou. Then she

sits on my box, counts the nails in the wood, and says, "Let's try again." And when she says that, I believe her. For a day. Sometimes two.

I rode until the sun no longer had an opinion. Behind me remained the city, which breathes at night, ahead of me the road that asks no questions. I smelled dust, horses, the evening. No applause. Only the faint sound of things going on because they cannot do otherwise. I took a sip from my canteen, water, clear, and laughed, quietly, out of pure malice against all that is pathetic.

Then I spurred on. Not fast. Not slow. At the pace at which stories end so others can begin. And if someone claims they saw a man ride off into the sunset alone—believe them. There was no one there to refute them. That's exactly how I like it. That's exactly how it should stay.

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