

8. The Resolve

The tavern was packed late at night in Deadhorse. The place was dingy and and cheap, but the owner kept it clean and maintained. There were no servers or waiters; if you wanted a drink, you had to get up and get it yourself.

The owner, since he operated the place himself, heard all sorts of conversations and news. It varied by day and it depended largely on who was in for the night. Tonight, there was a group of four. Three had empty pistol holsters and the usual middle-price clothes that identified them as run-of-the-mill bandits, but one was dressed in a large black coat and riding boots.

The owner kept his ears open, listening to the men. The three usuals kept their noses clean (for the most part) but the third was a hitman for a group that called themselves the Codekeepers, whatever that meant.

The Codekeeper was telling a story about his latest job, one that had taken place a ways out of town, near Amarillo.

“So I’m all snuggled up in this dead log, waiting for the bastard to ride up like I was told. And then here he comes, trotting along on his horse. Then he just stops. The horse moves off, and he’s just standing there, exposed as hell, eating in the center of the road.”

“There’s no way, man.” One of the other men laughed. They each had drinks. “It couldn’t have been that easy.”

“I ain’t lying. So I sighted in with my trusty old rifle, right? And he’s just standing there. I squeeze off the shot and he drops like a stone.”

The other men laughed. But then the Keeper leaned in. The owner could see the black hood attached to the back of his jacket. “But you’ll never believe who it was.”

The men all joked, saying they couldn’t have been anyone important. But the Keeper leaned in further. The owner slid down a bit further down the bar to listen in.

“It was him.” The Keeper whispered.

The men sat in silence.

“Bullshit.” One of them called. “Couldn’t have been him.”

“The Reaper?” One of them asked.

The Keeper nodded. “The one and only. The Reaper of Amarillo.”

"Didn't he kill two of your guys?"

"Three." The Keeper corrected. "He was virtually untouchable."

"I still don't believe it, man."

The Keeper smirked. "I have his rifle and pistols. C'mon, I'll show you."

They went outside to the Keepers horse, but the owner was lost in his own thoughts. He'd heard stories of the Reaper. There were several names for him. The Gunslinger, The Reaper, Death, The Avenger, but nobody could firmly decide on one.

Somebody came up and asked for a drink, and the owner poured it quietly. He dismissed the thoughts from his mind. It was probably a made up story to boost the Keeper's prestige.

But he couldn't shake a cold feeling in the pit of his stomach.

Moore knocked quietly at the mayor's office door. This was the second time he'd been here this week, but this was the first he'd ever been sent for by the mayor's messenger.

A quiet "Enter." came from within. Moore opened and shut the door quietly behind him.

"Have a seat." The mayor said quietly.

Moore pulled the chair out and sat in it. "To what do I owe this pleasure?" Moore asked, his emotions iced out.

The mayor let out a long breath he had been holding. "Heard from your man recently?"

Moore stiffened. He'd received absolutely no contact from Mav in the four days following his departure. Moore had taken it as him having moved on, and vanishing into the wind. But there were no reports passing through Amarillo's now only pub serving drinks of gunfights or Codekeeper appearances. Either the Keepers were staying invisible, reconnoitering the area, or they simply weren't there.

"Not a single word." Moore said quietly. "You ran him out quite quickly."

The mayor nodded slowly. "Do you know if he made it where he was going?"

Now Moore was confused. "No."

The mayor sighed and pulled open a drawer on his desk. He pulled out a cylindrical object from it. Moore's heart sank when he recognized it.

It was the scope from Mav's Gewher rifle. He took it in his hands carefully. It had been snapped off, and the glass was shattered.

The scope didn't appear as anything special, but Moore knew how to recognize it. On the left side was a space where Mav had cut tallies into it. One for every kill. He could see the count. Seven.

"Deputy Hawes found this on the side of the road." The mayor said solemnly. "He recognized it as well. It was in the dirt, next to a sizable amount of blood."

Moore felt a rising, ice cold rage in his chest. He couldn't think of anything except Mav.

The mayor looked up at him. "I sent a man to his death." He muttered flatly. "And I've never felt so wrong in my life."

Moore just sat silent for a few moments. "Did he find a body?" He asked quietly.

The mayor shook his head.

Moore stood and slid the scope into his scope pocket. He had no emotion.

"Enjoy your day, Mr. Mayor." Moore murmured, before opening the door to the office and exiting.

The sun was about to rise when Mav finally reached the town.

He was almost passed out in the saddle. His left arm was resting in his lap, his right arm limp. The horse had kept riding for him, but it was almost as equally worn out.

He felt darkness coming. He kept on trying to cling to consciousness. The pain in his shoulder had faded to a dull throb. He was numb.

His last memory was him sliding left, out of the saddle, just inside the town, before he hit the ground and passed out.

He woke up staring at a wooden ceiling.

He moved his eyes slowly. He was resting on his back, shirtless. He looked down at his chest. It was covered in bandages.

He couldn't feel his only pistol in his holster just above his rear anymore. He was still wearing his pants, but his boots and socks had been removed as well.

He was in some sort of bedroom, in a bed against the wall opposite the door. There was a trunk at the foot of the bed.

Then he noticed the man sitting by the bed he was in.

"You're awake." The man said simply.

Mav just stared at him blankly. Then he pushed himself up so he was in a sitting position.

"You passed out just in front of my tavern." The man began. He had a dark black beard, trimmed. He wore a gray shirt and brown pants with suspenders. A thick man, but not with weight. Mav could see the muscle in his forearms where the sleeves of his shirt were rolled up. "I dragged you inside and sent for a doctor. I was in the middle of closing."

Mav kept silent.

The man continued. "Where are you from?"

More silence.

"I can tell you're some sort of bandit, maybe." The man said carefully. He reached behind him and set Mav's remaining pistol in his lap, still in its holster. "That, along with the rifle and shotgun on your horse. And the ammunition in your pack."

Mav chose this moment to speak. "Why help me?" He croaked.

The man sighed. "I saw a man, with a bullet wound in his shoulder, half dead, passed out in front of my business. I did what any sane man would do."

Mav considered that for a moment, then nodded slowly.

"Where are you from?" The man asked.

Mav thought for a moment. "Amarillo." He said finally.

The man started. "Who shot you?"

"Hell if I know." Mav whispered. "I stopped to let my horse drink from the stream. Then the bullet came."

The man was paying attention very carefully. "Do you know why?"

Mav shook his head.

The man sighed again. "You know," he began. "word comes out of Amarillo a lot, particularly in the recent weeks."

Mav just stared at him.

"Particularly of a single man, who everyone was calling the Grim Reaper. And tonight, in my tavern, I had a man who calls himself a Codekeeper, bragging about how he had killed this man."

"What did he say?" Mav asked, almost inaudible.

"That the Reaper had stopped his horse to break, and was standing in the center of the road. And that the Keeper shot him. Then took his rifle and pistols."

Mav was silent again.

The man stared at him. "So I'm going to ask again, who are you?"

Mav looked into the man's eyes. "Who do you think?"

Now it was the man's turn to be silent. He spoke after a while. "You're at my house, across the town from the tavern. I'd advise you not leave. I've stashed your belongings and other guns somewhere safe. I have to go and get the tavern ready for today. If you need anything, unfortunately, you'll have to get it yourself.

Mav nodded. The man stood up and paused, then pulled the revolver out of its holster, holding it out grip first to Mav. "You might want this."

Mav took it in his left hand. His right was still in pain, and all bandaged up.

"My name is Roy." Mav said quietly. "But some people call me Mav."

The man nodded. "I'm Gerd." He said. "I'll see you later. Get some rest."

Mav nodded. Gerd touched two fingers to his brow and left, closing the door behind him.

Mav slid himself back down into a laying position, and put the bed's only pillow beneath his head. He slid the revolver underneath it. He closed his eyes and went to sleep.

During his sleep he had flashbacks. The camp with Victor. The inferno. The several gunfights in Amarillo. He saw himself executing the man in front of the saloon. Him burying his knife in Victor's chest. Him, killing, and killing, and killing.

Then the dream flashed to him, being hit with that kick in the chest again, and he hit the ground.

He woke with a start, sitting up immediately, his left hand sliding beneath the pillow and whipping out the revolver, cocking the hammer, and aiming it at the door in one motion.

Gerd was standing there, half through the doorway. "Just me." he said calmly.

Mav was breathing hard. When he got himself under control again, he let the hammer on the pistol down and pushed himself backwards into a sitting position, setting the pistol down on the bed again.

"Doctor's here again." Gerd said. "Can she come in?"

Mav nodded. Gerd stepped into the room and stood to let the doctor past. A graying old woman with frail but true hands holding a large bag.

"How are you feeling, Roy?" The doctor croaked.

Mav stiffened at his first name. "I'm alive."

The doctor cackled quietly. "I was thinking old Gerd here was crazy, dragging you in. I didn't think you'd live to see the sun rise."

Mav stared at her blankly.

"You lost a lot of blood." She said, pulling up a seat and reaching to unravel Mav's bandages. "The bullet was still buried in your shoulder. Missed anything vital and important. Very lucky."

The bandages came away, and Mav looked at the wound. It was covered in red and white tissue. It had been cauterized.

"Looking better. Try moving your arm." The doctor said.

Mav raised his arm. It hurt but he could do it.

“Good. You’ve retained movement, and it shouldn’t be impacted. You won’t tear anything as long as you don’t do anything stupid.” She said.

Mav reached across with his right arm and grasped the pistol, but didn’t point the muzzle anywhere unsafe. He held it up to eye level. His arm burned, but he could still use the firearm. He cocked the hammer and let it down with only his right hand.

The doctor hadn’t flinched during the process. “Dangerous life, eh?”

Mav shrugged. “I’ve seen my share of violence.” He said quietly.

“I can tell. You’ve got a good amount of scars besides that bullet wound.” She said flatly. “Maybe you should take up farming instead.”

A ghost of a smile tugged at Mav’s lips. “Sounds boring.”

The doctor laughed. “So the Reaper does have a sense of humor.”

Mav glanced at her. “Son, I knew who you were the moment I walked in this room and Gerd was asking for help. My son lives in Amarillo. He described you well.”

Mav grunted. “Didn’t know I was somebody special.”

The doctor coughed. “You’ve killed a lot of people. But they were people who probably deserved it. He knew Victor well, and in all the wrong ways. I treated his wounds when Victor tortured him with a studded whip. Thirty lashes.”

Mav’s face hardened. “I killed Victor.”

“Good riddance.” The doctor replied sharply. “I may not condone violence, but there are men out there who have no place in this world. I’ve treated my fair share of soldiers and criminals. As far as I’m concerned, you’re doing the Lord’s work.”

Mav looked down at the pistol in his lap. “The Lord’s work.” He murmured softly, echoing the aging doctor.

Mav made a steady recovery.

He began to move his arm with less and less pain. He refused to take any sort of medicine for relief. He was able to get up and wash. He could eat by himself. Manipulate his pistol easier and easier.

The real challenge came in his throwing knife. He had to pull it out of his left sleeve, rear his arm back, and then extend his arm forward. He still winced a little bit, but now he could put the knife wherever he wanted.

It had been a month. Eventually he asked Gerd if there was something he could do to help out. So he began working in the tavern, named the Sparrow's Roost. He helped keep it clean, pour drinks, serve food at the bar. Gerd was glad to have a hand to take some of the load off, and Mav was glad to repay the man for saving his life, although the debt still felt irreparable.

Mav had cut his hair. It wasn't long and hanging down just past his earlobes anymore. It was a close cut. He also shaved the stubble he had always carefully maintained in order to blend in. For the moment he wanted to look like someone who just wanted to work. He also kept his back slightly hunched, and his eyes focused just in front of the bar for the most part.

After about a week and a half, the Codekeeper came in.

Mav made an effort not to look at him and sneer. This was the man who had shot him. He just knew it.

The Keeper was followed by three other men. They had all left their weapons at their horses, per Gerd's rules. Mav was still allowed to carry his pistol, attached to the back of his belt and out of sight beneath a simple brown leather jacket. "Four ales." The Keeper demanded. Mav grunted and went back to fill the mugs, and came back with two in each hand, setting them down for the men.

The Keeper was watching Mav. "Do I know you?" He asked.

Mav shrugged.

"What's your name?"

"Ron." Mav replied, using the false first name Gerd had helped him select. "Came in a couple weeks ago, from the mines up north." Amarillo was from the south.

"Miner, eh?" The Keeper chuckled.

Mav nodded. The Keeper laughed again. "You don't look like one, but you look like a man who's seen some stuff."

Mav didn't respond for a moment, choosing his words carefully. "I was a bit riskier than I should've been."

The Keeper nodded. "I've taken risks myself, but I follow a different business." He finished his ale and slid the mug forward for a refill, along with one of his pals.

Mav refilled the drinks. "What kind of business?"

The Keeper smiled. "I'm part of a group of men and women. We call ourselves the Codekeepers."

Mav gave him a curious look. "Never heard of them."

"Have you heard of the Bandit's Code?"

Mav shook his head. "Wouldn't know of it. I keep my nose clean as best I can."

The Keeper set his arms on the bar. "It's a set of rules that all groups who call themselves bandits and partake in our area of work are required to follow. Some violations are punishable by death. When one of these groups brings word of what we call a Codebreaker, we're the ones who deal with them."

Mav nodded. Gerd had come out of the back area, and was serving a man just down the bar. "Sounds dangerous."

The Keeper smiled again. "I'm well trained." He leaned in further. "Ever heard of the Reaper?"

Mav considered that for a moment, and nodded slowly. "Word travels far."

The Keeper leaned in even closer. He spoke with a whisper. "I killed him."

Mav gave his best shocked look, even though he wanted to laugh at the man for his stupidity. "You're crazy. The Reaper is invincible. He's taken on dozens of men and come out unscratched."

The Keeper shifted so he was facing in towards Mav, but before he could continue, someone came into the tavern. It was another Codekeeper, who was pulling down her hood. Female, with long yellow hair, and a perfect face. Ice blue eyes. Mav recognized her, and averted his gaze.

She strode over to the bar and grabbed the first Keeper's shoulder with her hand. "You sent for me." She stated quietly, with a voice like honey.

The Keeper at the bar turned, his refilled mug of ale in his hand. "I did indeed, I have good news."

Mav moved further down the bar to attend to a new patron. He had noted that on the new Keeper's jacket's right lapel, she wore a pin with a platinum feather that signified her as the leader of the Codekeepers.

"So give it to me." The female Keeper said, her voice losing its sweetness.

The Keeper at the bar maintained his smile. "It's done."

She just stared at him. "You have proof?"

"I took his rifle and matching pistols off him." The male Keeper said proudly. "They're wrapped up in my horses' gear."

The female Keeper's face contorted in rage. She grabbed the male Keeper by the hair and slammed his face down to the bar counter. She produced a revolver from her leg and cocked the hammer, putting the barrel against his head. The male Keeper's companions stood up from the bar and backed away.

"You idiot." She hissed. The tavern had gone completely silent. "I ordered you to bring me the body."

"It doesn't matter because he's dead!" He cried out. "I followed your orders and did my duty! I should be rewarded and praised!"

"But now you have no proof except for a couple of guns. If you had the body we would know he was dead. But you don't. So he could still be out there, still alive."

"You doubt my accuracy?"

"I doubt a lot of things about you at the moment." She said sharply. "I don't tolerate fools in my company. If you fail me again, then you'll be made an example."

He nodded. She let him go and holstered the pistol.

"Weapons are not allowed in this building, ma'am." Gerd said quietly. "If you wish to conduct business, I ask that you leave any blades or guns at the door."

"I was just leaving." She said, before turning and walking towards the door.

She stopped, and turned back to the male Codekeeper. "If Maverickson turns up alive, it'll be your head I want before I even consider thinking of his. Am I clear?"

"Yes ma'am." The male stated quietly.

She nodded, and exited the tavern.

Gerd put a hand on the bar and leaned out. "Tavern's closed!" He yelled. "Get out!"

People stood and began shuffling towards the door. The remaining Keeper slid two gold pieces across the bar to Mav, who pocketed them to give to Gerd later. "Night." The Keeper stated flatly, before turning and leaving.

Gerd shut the door and locked it behind him. He wiped a hand across his forehead and sighed. "Great." He said out loud, walking over behind the bar and pouring himself a drink. "Your change of appearance worked."

"For now." Mav replied, handing Gerd the two gold pieces. "I can only hide perfectly in plain sight for so long."

Gerd patted him on the shoulder. "I know what you mean. Believe me."
