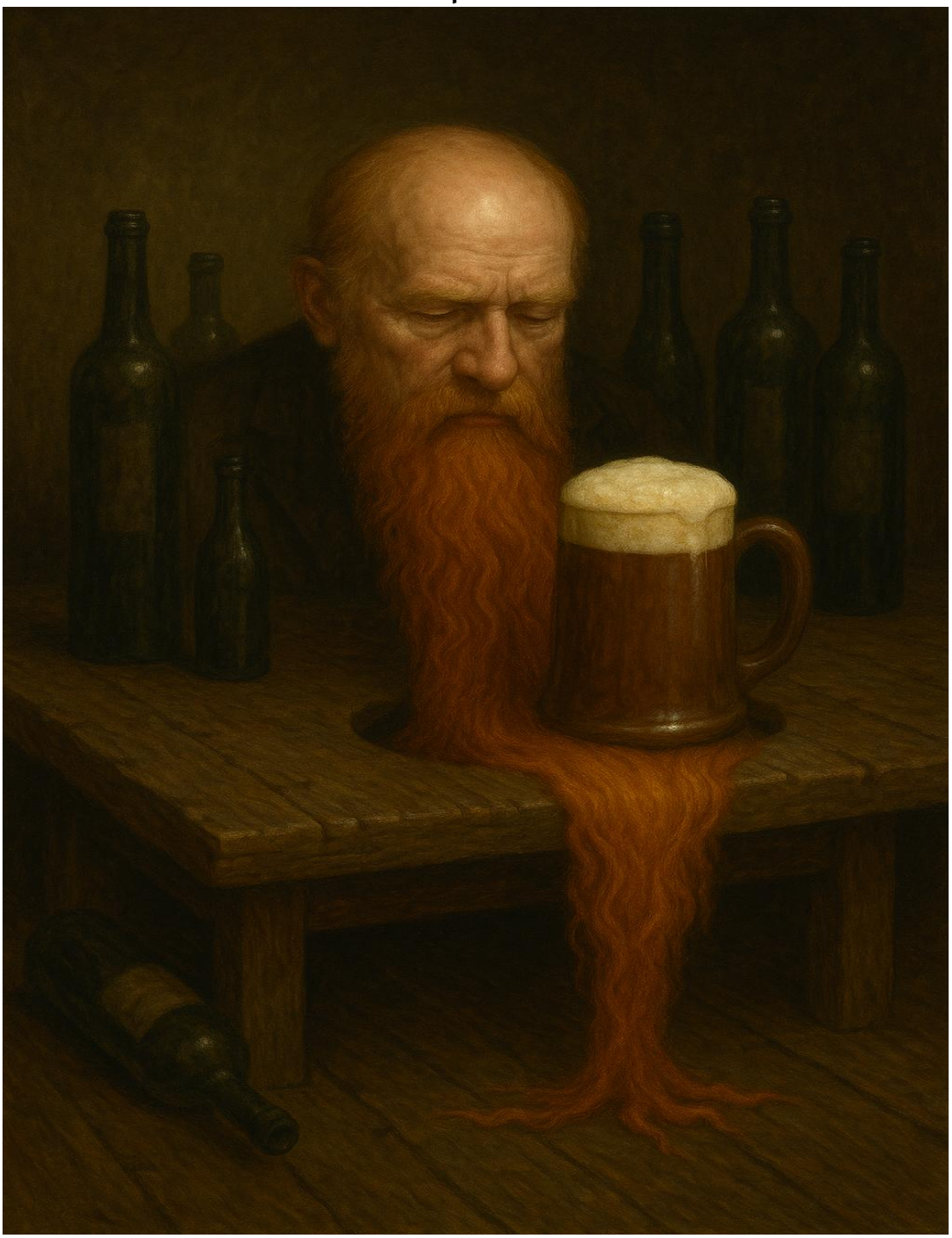
Barbarossa

How to win an empire and lose in the dirt



Michael Lappenbusch

www.perplex.click

Contents

An emperor stumbles from the dust

In the morning, the empire smells of horses and iron. The ground is cracked like old leather, and somewhere a blacksmith beats the cold out of a horseshoe as if it were the whole world: sparks, curses, sweat. Then he appears—not as an emperor, not as a hero, just a guy with a beard not yet red enough to ignite stories. A man who has worn more dust than velvet, more boots than a crown. He doesn't arrive; he drags himself: footsteps, breath, curses. That's how it begins—not with fanfare, but with a dry throat.

He's a bundle of hunger and ambition, bound together with a belt that's seen better days. The empire? A squabbling court, a horde of princes with fat rings and thin nerves, each wanting something: land, justice, revenge, or just proof that their neighbor is an idiot. Among them is a man still learning how to stand tall when his knees go weak with false kindness.

The castle courtyards smell of torn suede, of wine that's too sweet, to be honest. The kitchen casts the scent of salted meat onto the ceiling, the dogs line up. But he chews on a piece of bread as if it were a promise. "King," they say, "Emperor," they whisper. Words that taste of metal. He spits them out and picks them up again, because spitting alone doesn't satisfy.

The monks come with inky fingers and faces so smooth they look as if they had turned the world from polished brass. "God wants order," they say. "God wants tribute," say the cities. "God wants restless saddles," say the knights. What God wants, no one knows. What people want is simpler: more. He nods, smiles thinly, memorizes names—the beginning of every reign is an address book full of gnashing teeth.

He practices not drinking when others are about to spill it. He practices drinking when someone would be offended if the cup had been sitting on the table too long. Politics is sometimes just the art of clinking glasses at the right moment and then keeping one's words straight. It's said he has a smile on his face that, if you're stupid enough, you could mistake for warmth. In truth, it's a weapon: teeth that flash like blades – and suddenly, someone is at odds with the conversation.

In the markets, merchants shout as if they could drown out the world: Salt! Wood! Iron! Law! Nobody sells the last one; everyone trades it. He stands on the sidelines, watching coins change hands like diseases. The cities aren't places, they're animals: large, stubborn beasts with walls of pride and teeth of

guild rights. He lets them roar, counts the gates, counts the troops, counts his patience. They call it administration. He calls it warming up.

The princes test him like one tests a puppy's teeth—hold out their fingers, see how hard he bites. He bites. Not so that blood spurts, but so that no one forgets the mark. A few old men with offended coats of arms suddenly learn the value of distance, and how difficult a message becomes when you turn it over three times before delivering it.

And there it is, this crown. A cold thing. Hollow inside, hard outside. It never fits, not even later, when everyone claims it's a perfect fit. You can feel the weight on your neck, as if someone were constantly touching you from behind. "Stand up straight," says the crown. "Say yes," says the clergyman. "Say no," says pride. He says both, in time, and no one notices the music changing.

At night, he sits under a sky that looks as if a drunken deity had spilled the stars. The grass smells of metal and wet leather. He doesn't think about eternity; he thinks about tomorrow: Who will stand in his way? Who wants money? Who has enough friends to be dangerous? An emperor isn't invented; he is crafted from cunning and fatigue.

His beard grows. Not like a poem, more like a vow. Red, but not from wine. The beard says: This isn't about gentleness. It hangs over his chest like a flag, and everyone reads it differently. Some see fire, others pride, most just see a new opportunity to make themselves important. He lets them read it. He has time, he thinks. Always this mistake: thinking that time is something you own.

The first victories are lopsided. You win and lose simultaneously. You take a city and pay with an alliance. You kiss a ring and swallow an affront. You give up one privilege to keep two others. Playing chess with pawns who prefer to wield knives. He writes charters, and each parchment is a small pact with fatigue. Ink dries, and suddenly it's law. The empire is full of dry ink.

Once, while riding, he stops because the path is covered in dust and yet smells of rain. The horizon is a dull blade. "All right," he says to no one, "I'll do it then." And that's the moment no one notes: not the election, not the crowning glory, but this murmured surrender to his own ambition. After that, everything rolls along. Men join because they sleep better around determination.

He learns the art of not blinking when a bishop threatens him with a voice steeped in Latin. He learns to apologize without offering anything back. He learns to negotiate in tents where the candles drip as if they've lost their

courage. Sometimes, late at night, when the wind beats the canvas, he hears the empire breathing—not a beautiful sound, more like a wheeze. But who loves beauty when they love responsibility? He doesn't love it. He bears it.

People say he has a heart of iron. Nonsense. Iron rusts. His heart is a millstone: it turns when water comes. No water, no turning. Hence the travels, the moves, the constant movement. You can't cultivate an empire from a chair. You have to ride, ride, ride, until your thoughts turn into narrow lines and every decision becomes a notch in the saddle.

One evening, he stops into a dive bar—not because he has to, but because ruling without filth inspires no trust. Beer that tastes like bread, wine that smells like a lie. A few mercenaries gamble for a belt no one needs. A whore sings half-baked songs, the innkeeper polishes an axe as if it were a jug. He sits down, orders nothing, and still gets something. That's what power is like: It fills cups without being asked.

"Where to, sir?" asks someone with too many scars on his face and too few teeth in his mouth. "Forward," he says. "What's that?" - "Opponent." The man laughs, a clear, ugly laugh that echoes all the way into the courtyard. "Then it's fine." - "Yes," he says, "then it's fine." And suddenly he realizes: The Reich is a long bar. You walk along it, everyone wants to sell you something, everyone wants to steal something, and in the end, you pay for everything you haven't drunk.

He stands up, abandons his half-empty beer because he's not a fan of endings. Outside, the moon has hidden behind a woolen rag. The horses paw, the men grumble quietly because silence frightens them. He throws his coat over his shoulders the way others carry a decision: firm, unkind, irreversible. "Saddle up," he says. No speech, no blessing, no song. Just this word, which sets men in motion.

And then it begins. Not as a triumphal procession, not even as a march. More like a repair crew in a world that keeps falling apart. You glue the empire together with oaths, silver, and threats, knowing that the next rain will bring something loose. But until then, you count the miles, the faces, the possibilities. An emperor stumbles out of the dust, and every step makes more dust. That's the trick: keep dusting forward until the world coughs behind you.

Later, they'd say he was born of the mountain, with a beard and a scythe. Nonsense. He came from the drought, the noise, and the small, embarrassing necessities: well-fed horses, dry boots, reliable lies. He grew from every

rejection like a bad wine that still warms. And the first time he said "we" and meant "I," he was definitely on his way.

There are days when he believes the crown is a gold trap that snaps shut on his neck when he laughs. So he rarely laughs. But when he does, it's short and sharp – like a bolt that springs back. He now knows: Dust has no beginning and no end. It is the element. You breathe it, you chew it, you govern it. And if you're lucky, the others suffocate sooner.

Thus the story begins, not with glory, but with grit. A kick into the morning, a rein that creaks, a beard that grows as if to hide something that isn't there yet. The emperor stumbles out of the dust—and the world stumbles after him.

A boy between daggers and jugs

Before someone mumbles "Your Majesty," there's always a boy who stinks like barn straw and curiosity. Someone who sticks his fingers in everything: in bread dough, in horse manes, in anger. The courtyard wasn't a place for childhood, but a training ground for guilt. Walls of cold stone, windows too small to let in light, but large enough for the rumors to pass through. The boy learns early on that words cut faster than knives—and knives cut more cleanly.

Daggers lay around like grumpy dogs. Everyone carried one: the chamberlain, the groom, the cook, who acted as if his blades were only for meat. The boy received his first one on a morning that smelled of smoke. A narrow steel, horn handle, too big for the hand, too small for fear. "For rats," said the man who handed it out. He meant the animals that eat grain. Or the others who live out of politeness. Hard to say.

He practiced when no one was looking. Bales of straw, willow branches, the wood of the fence. Cuts, stabs, twists. A dance without music. His hand became steady, his heart remained undecided. A dagger is honest: it never lies about its intention. Humans do. The boy learned to listen when steel kisses fabric. That soft, offended sound. Once, he accidentally hit his own fingertip. Blood tasted of metal and regret. He sucked on it and laughed, because sometimes laughter is the only kind of bandage that stays put.

In the evening, the courtyard smelled of beer. Mugs stood side by side like pious sheep until someone turned them into wolves. Men talked big, women spoke tersely, and somewhere there was always a song waiting that no one

knew the end of. The boy sat at the edge of the tables, between bowls that never seemed to be empty and blows that were never entirely serious until they were. He learned to hold mugs without drinking, and to drink without showing it. A courtyard is a brewery for rumors: you'll get drunk whether you want to or not.

He was taught to read from books that smelled of cold skin. Monks with inky fingers prayed like accountants and calculated like saints. "Knowledge," one said, "is a ladder." The boy thought: Yes, and beneath the ladder lie those who have fallen off. He wrote words that were heavier than his knife: feud, right, loyalty. You say them with a straight spine, yet they are crooked as soon as you leave the room.

Between lessons lay the courtyard, a scraped knee of the world. Dogs barked, horses snorted, armor clanged like bad music. A knight showed him the grip used to pull a man from a horse. "Everything is quick," he said. "Even dying." The boy nodded and pretended this was news.

The Guelphs, it was said, were wolves. The Hohenstaufen, others said, were knives too well-honed to appear honest. The boy was both pack and blade. In the kitchen, he heard the cook banging a spoon on a pot, sorting out the world: "Over there they're boasting, in here we're cooking." And somewhere in the house, an aunt whispered that God loves order. Nice. But order rarely tastes good.

He got his first drunk from strangers' lips. A cup was passed around, everyone pretending they were only there because politeness is a matter of destiny. The boy drank. Warmth ran into his stomach like thieves into an open barn. Suddenly every joke was better, every lamp brighter, every man a brother. Then the world tilted, ever so slightly, like a table with one wobbly foot. He held on to the bench and realized: drinking is practicing falling. If you don't fall, you just haven't drunk enough.

Later, in the courtyard, the stable boy was waiting with two knives. "Throw," he said. The boy threw. The blades whizzed, hit, wobbled. He kept throwing until his hand was tired and his arm burned like poorly made soup. "Good," said the stable boy, "but good isn't enough. The world demands better than good." The boy nodded and picked up the dagger again, as if it were a sentence he wanted to learn flawlessly.

There was a hunting day when the forest steamed and the dogs devoured the air. Men shouted orders that said more about their fear than their authority. A

boar burst from the thicket, alive as a curse. The boy saw only bristles, eyes like nails, and the animal's thought: "Not today." Someone fell, someone cursed, the spear did what spears do. The boar lay, the world was silent for a moment. The boy held the dagger over warm fur and searched for the spot between rib and heart that an old hunter had explained to him in a whisper. When the blood came, it was honest. Later, he washed his hands in the stream and realized how cold success can be.

A messenger visited the court, the kind who opens doors without using his hands. Messages from somewhere, seals like tattooed threats. The boy didn't read, he watched. How the lords grew paler, as if suddenly standing in the shadow of a truth that didn't fit into the plan. He understood: Power is a chair whose legs constantly wobble. You need knives to drive wedges in, and jugs to wash the pain away from your hands.

There was a night when two knights clashed, first over a dice roll, then over a glance, and finally over everything. The boy stood there, a cup in his hand that suddenly felt too heavy. One drew a dagger, the other a smile. Both kill. The first stab missed, the second found leather, the third skin. Blood makes the floorboards slippery, and a prayer stumbles over them. Afterward, they spoke quietly, as if death had taken their throats as collateral. In the morning, men carried the carpet into the courtyard and drummed out the dust, as if memories could be beaten out.

Between daggers and jugs, he learned the order: first look, then speak, then act—and when in doubt, the other way around, if the door is already open. He learned who pronounced his names as if they were coins; who whispered them as if they were confessions; who avoided them as if a name could be a knife. He memorized faces like weather: not because they were beautiful, but because they portended storms.

His mother once told him that a ruler remembers tables: who pours his drink, who pours and waits, who pours and counts. "Count back," she said. He did. The innkeeper received a smile, the clerk a thank you, the mercenary a commission, the bishop nothing—because bishops create the greatest scandals out of nothing.

The boy grew as Bart grows: first embarrassed, then defiant, then self-assured. The daggers became lighter in his hand, the jugs heavier in his head. He understood that courage isn't a firework, but a furnace: it burns when you feed it, and it goes out when you trust protocol. So he fed it: with small deeds that no one saw. A bundle of wood in a farmer's cart, a few words with the maid's

child who had grown up too quickly, a look that told an old knight: You haven't completely lost the world yet.

And then came the moment that no one recorded. A gray morning, the castle on the hill acted as if it were eternal, the crows acted as if they belonged there. The boy found a man in one of the lower corridors, a face that didn't belong there, a knife that felt as at home as a spider in the corner. It was no big deal, just two steps and the decision as to which step would be the other's last. The boy did as the stable boy had taught him: everything is quick - even the life of a stranger intent on that of a boy who was not yet emperor. When it was over, the air smelled of iron and milk. He stood there, not trembling, took a deep breath, picked up the dagger. On the way to the well, he thought: So this is how stories are born - first as rumor, then as rite, finally as law.

Later, he sat at the table again. Jugs, bowls, voices. The world acted as if it were normal. He held the cup to his lips without drinking. Something shifted into place in his mind, as if he had stared at a chair for a long time and finally understood how to sit on it. He was still a boy. But between daggers and jugs, you are never just that. You are the product of too much metal and too little sleep, of oaths made and traps left unlaid.

The monks will later write that virtue shaped his early life. The knights will say it was valor. The innkeepers will claim he paid well. No one will note that a boy stood in the courtyard, with sticky hands and a head full of voices, and chose not to look away. That is the true birth: not from the mother, but from doubt.

The dagger was cleaned, the jug empty. The day crawled forward like a wounded dog that can still bite. And somewhere between the metallic taste on his tongue and the bread too hard to lie softly, the boy knew what songs would later sing about: Not about shine. About grips. About the silent movement of the hand before the noise begins. About a heartbeat that says no and a brow that nods yes. About a boy who, amidst daggers and jugs, stops seeking what is right and starts doing what is necessary.

Staufer against Guelph, and no one washes their hands

The empire was never a home. It was an inn where anyone could walk in, but no one wanted to pay the bill. The Hohenstaufen and the Guelphs – two families, two packs, two greedy mouths. They didn't play chess. Chess has

rules. This was dice rolling with knives, and every cup of wine was a signed declaration of war.

The Hohenstaufens: hard, cold, like iron that has lain in the fire for too long. Persistent, taciturn, and with that arrogance that drips from castles like water from old walls. It is said that they wanted to keep the empire together. Nonsense. They wanted to possess it. A distinction that only matters in the monks' sermons.

The Guelphs: loud, fast, like dogs who smelled blood too soon. Rich, complacent, always with a smile too wide to be honest. They drank, they boasted, they swore—and kept their vows as long as it suited them. Gold flowed in their pockets, and when it didn't, they simply poured it in with marriages, tributes, and blackmail.

The empire lay between the two houses like a woman between two bad lovers: each tugged, no one asked. Hohenstaufen versus Welf meant feasts that ended in bloodshed. Churches that became courtrooms. Fields that were taxed twice because two lords imagined themselves to be the same.

Barbarossa grew up in the midst of it all. A boy who learned that loyalty is worth no more than the price of the next mug. Today, they swear eternal loyalty; tomorrow, they sell your honor for three horses and a bride they didn't want. The empire was a market stall full of promises, and the customers were armed.

Once—the chroniclers write it differently, but they write everything differently anyway—there was a feast at which the Hohenstaufen and the Welf dynasties sat at the same table. The wine flowed, and so did the tongues. First laughter, then mockery, then the kind of silence that hangs like a rope over the beams. Knives were drawn, but not used. Not yet. Instead, they stared at each other, as if one could crush the other with a single look. In the end, they laughed again, but it was this laughter that carries more poison than any prayer.

The monks preached peace. The peasants cursed. The knights armed themselves. And no one washed their hands, because everyone knew they were already red, whether from the enemy's blood or the fat from the banquets.

Barbarossa realized early on: He would have to choose. And there was no victory in this choice. Only the hope that the dagger he received in the back would at least be from his family.

The hall was crammed like a pig before slaughter. Hohenstaufen on one side, Guelphs on the other. Between them a table laden with meat, bread, barrels – as if war could be killed with sausages. First there was discussion. Then there were arguments. Then men roared, their faces so red you'd think they'd already been beheaded. One of the Guelphs slammed his cup on the table so hard the wine overflowed. "Your law is only valid as long as your sword is sharp." A Hohenstaufen leaned back, smiled thinly, and ran his finger over his dagger. "Then see if yours isn't already rusting." It was quiet. Much too quiet. The hall vibrated like a dog about to bite. In the end, everyone continued drinking – every sip a silent stab. The war had been postponed, not prevented.

A wedding—a Welf marries a Hohenstaufen. Peace, they said. Brotherhood. A dance, a meal, a vow. But while the women sang and the candles dripped, the men sat in the corners. The Welfs with too much gold on their fingers, the Hohenstaufens with too much silence on their faces. At some point, a bone flew from the table, as if by chance, as if in jest. It struck the wrong man, and the wrong man stood up. A dagger flashed. A scream. Wine cups tipped, and suddenly the feast was a slaughter. Blood splashed onto the white veils. Dogs howled in the courtyard. In the morning, they claimed it had been a misunderstanding. Misunderstandings leave long graves.

A village caught between two fronts. The Hohenstaufens claimed it, the Guelphs claimed it. The peasants had no voice, only fields that grew the wrong thing: debt. The Guelphs rode in first, taking grain and cattle. A note on the door read: "In loyalty." Three days later, the Hohenstaufens rode in and burned the barn down. "In justice." Ashes remained, and children who knew more about daggers than bread. No one asked about justice. Justice was the sword, still warm.

Barbarossa often stood by, like a squire carrying the wine and devouring the votes. But he saw everything. He realized that in this empire, one doesn't become great because one grows up, but because one is forced to draw one's dagger earlier than the others.

One night, in a castle cellar, torches flicker. Two men, a Welf, a Hohenstaufen, both too drunk for diplomacy, too sober for silence. One pushes the other against the wall, words like nails. "Your blood is cursed," hisses the Welf. "And yet we all drink from it," growls the Hohenstaufen. Barbarossa stands beside him, cup in hand, still a boy, still without a crown, but his gaze speaks louder than his years: he weighs things up, he counts seconds, he recognizes that peace doesn't fall from the sky, but from the better knife. He intervenes, not

with words, but with a hand that restrains one and pushes the other aside. Not a heroic act—just a reflex. But in that second, both understand: the boy has weight.

The next morning, they speak to him differently. More quietly. More suspiciously. He is no longer just blood waiting to be formed. He is the shadow that has grown into the hall while others have been drinking.

And outside, in the empire, hatred grows like weeds. The Hohenstaufens set fire to castles, the Guelphs emptied markets. Peasants crouched in the rubble, scraping the ashes from the ground, believing they would find grain in it. Preachers spoke of sin, women of hunger, children talked of weapons as if they were toys.

Barbarossa rides through one of these villages. Smoke still hangs over the fields, pigs scream in the rubble. A woman approaches him, holding a child in her arms, her eyes as empty as burnt-out candles. "Whose emperor will you be?" she asks. He doesn't answer. Because there is no answer. Not yet.

Later, by the fire, he hears the knights talking. "The Guelphs are chatterers," says one. "The Hohenstaufen are murderers," says another. Barbarossa doesn't laugh, he doesn't drink, he simply says, "Then there are four of us at the table." The men are silent, and in the silence lies this dangerous realization: The boy has the tongue of a ruler who knows that every word is a weapon.

And somewhere in the mountains, between the fog and the bells, the monks laugh in their books. They write tales of justice and honor, while outside the dogs divide the bones. Hohenstaufen versus Guelph – and no one washes their hands. But Barbarossa learns that sometimes it's better not to wipe away the blood, but to wear it as a symbol.

The imperial hat never fits properly

The crown, they said, was God's will cast in gold. Nonsense. It was a damned helmet, too heavy to carry and too hollow to make sense. They placed it on his head as if he were a cask being sealed. Applause, bells, wine, prayers—all in the same way you would bless a sow before slaughtering it.

Barbarossa sat there, under his hat, and just thought:*This thing presses like a damn millstone.*On the left, it slipped, on the right, it tilted, and a monk had to

repeatedly readjust it, as if God himself had no hand for measurement. The imperial hat never fit. It was made for saints, for statues, for men who live in the books of their fellow church members—not for a man of flesh, beard, and doubt.

The princes around him smiled like butchers. Every applause was a contract, every genuflection a new lie. "Your Majesty," they said, meaning:*We give you our loyalty today, and tomorrow we will stab you in the back when the wine becomes cheaper.*He knew that. Everyone knew that. But in the Reich, this theater was played out, as if the world hung on the rope of ceremony.

The Pope sent words of blessing that sounded like bills. A few drops of oil on his forehead, a few Latin phrases, and he was supposed to be God's representative on earth. He knew, though, that the Pope would excommunicate him just as quickly as an innkeeper would throw out a drunken peasant if the bill wasn't right.

And while the crowd cheered, he saw the looks in the back rows. Farmers, traders, women with children, faces covered in dust. They didn't clap, they didn't shout, they just stood there. For them, the imperial hat was nothing but a piece of metal high above their heads. Their world remained the same: hunger, taxes, fear. Whether Hohenstaufen, Guelph, or Emperor – it was always the same shoe standing on the back of their necks.

That evening, as the wine flowed and the songs rang out, Barbarossa took off his hat and placed it on the table. He looked at it as one looks at a stranger. "The Reich," he murmured, "fits as little as this hat." Then he reached for the tankard, and the beer slid into him better than any title.

He knew: The crown doesn't carry you. You drag it. And it never sits right, no matter how much the world pretends it has the perfect head for it.

Intrigue tastes like cold beer

One thinks that with the crown comes power. But in truth, only the bill comes. Barbarossa had barely taken off his imperial hat when the first people knocked on his door – princes, prelates, ambassadors. Each with the same expression on their faces: "Your Majesty, we are your loyal servants... but." This*but*was the true ruler of the empire.

One wanted more land. Another wanted less taxes. A third insisted on an ancient law that no one had ever written down, or if so, only in the ink of a drunken monk. Everyone brought parchments, seals, witnesses—and everyone simultaneously shoved a dagger under the table in case the answer turned out to be wrong.

Barbarossa listened, drank, and remained silent. A young emperor must learn that the empire is not a castle, but a pub where everyone wants a seat at the regulars' table. And anyone who doesn't get a seat simply overturns the table.

The first decisions weren't victories, but bets. Who do you give in to without looking weak? Who do you kick in the shin without bringing the whole family with them? It was politics in the form of a bar fight: fist on the left, knife on the right, and in the end, everyone is lying on the floor claiming they've won.

One evening, in a small group, he confronted his knights: "How does one hold such an empire?" he asked. An old warrior, half-blind, half-drunk, laughed and said: "You can't hold it, sir. You just ride until the horses die and hope the others die faster." Barbarossa drank, thought, and the next morning he signed five documents, all of which contradicted each other.

The princes were satisfied. For now. The empire was creaking, but it wasn't falling apart. Not yet.

And so Barbarossa learned the first lesson of an emperor: The crown never sits properly. It slips. It pinches. And while you're trying to straighten it, people are already stealing the bread from your table.

The Coronation and the Hangover Breakfast

The coronation was a theatrical piece. Gold, incense, bells—everything was so lavish that you'd think God himself was about to sit at the table and drink his own wine. Barbarossa stood there, with oil on his forehead and a crown on his head, and the people cheered as if someone had halved their taxes. Yet everyone knew: tomorrow they'd pay double.

The night was a frenzy. Knights sang, monks prayed, princes drank as if each cup were another insurance policy against death. Women danced, dogs howled, and somewhere in the shadows, the clerks were counting the debts again.

Barbarossa drank along because there was no other option. An emperor without a cup is like a warrior without a sword—no one takes him seriously. The wine flowed sweetly, the mead burned, and at some point, faces blurred into grimaces, voices into growls. Everyone wanted to get close to him, everyone wanted to be seen, everyone wanted a piece of the newly crowned cake.

And then morning came. No ringing bells, no cheering, just a headache. The emperor's hat lay askew on the table, as if he'd drunk himself. Barbarossa lay awake in a room that stank of cold flesh, wax, and men's breath. A clerk was already squatting there, with parchment and quill, as if nothing had happened. "Your Majesty, the first requests have arrived."

He reached for the jug, empty. The second jug, also empty. On the floor of the hall lay knights who had spoken of valor yesterday and were now snoring open-mouthed, as if they were peasants after a bad market. Remnants were everywhere: broken bread, spilled wine, a crumpled veil whose owner no one wanted to know.

That was the true beginning of the reign: the hangover breakfast. A table full of empty plates and new demands. No music, no fanfare, just the nagging question: Who's sitting at the door now, wanting something?

Barbarossa pulled his hat toward him, looked into the cold metal, and growled, "You're worse than the drunkenness. At least that's over."

And so the empire began, not with a celebration, but with the bitter taste of stale beer and too many promises that already smelled in the air like meat that had hung for too long.

Italy is burning, and the cities are spitting back

Italy wasn't a country; it was a damned backyard full of squabbling neighbors. Each with its own walls, its own coins, its own stone gods. Milan, Cremona, Verona—cities that had more pride than grain, more bells than bread, more walls than reason. Barbarossa came down like a man who thought he could bring order, but order is a foreign word in Italy, one whispered only in confession.

He rode in with banners and trumpets, and the cities looked at him like a merchant with rotten wares. They nodded, smiled, accepted blessings—and then spat in his back. Tolls raised, gates closed, messengers sent back with their ears cut off. That's what Italy was like: a wedding in the morning, an execution in the evening.

Milan was the first. A city full of towers, full of merchants, full of guilds that believed they were greater than God. Barbarossa besieged it, strangled it like a tight shirt, made hunger work where sword and fire couldn't cut fast enough. He waited, and the city cursed. He waited, and the city starved. Finally, they surrendered—and he made them realize that an emperor wears not only a crown, but also torches. Houses fell, walls collapsed, people fled, and the smoke over Milan turned the sky so black that even the angels closed their windows.

The other cities watched. Some caved, others secretly swore they would get even. For Italy was not defeated. Italy was a beast with a hundred heads—you cut off one, two new ones scream. Bologna, Verona, Venice—they murmured, they negotiated, they conspired.

And then came Legnano. A battle, a field of dust, and the towns spat back. Farmers, merchants, blacksmiths—not knights in shining armor, but men with hammers, with poles, with the fury of a hundred markets, tired of funding the emperor's hat. They stood against him, a wall of naked determination.

Barbarossa stormed, raged, and commanded. But the cities held firm. An emperor against his citizens, and this time the pavement laughed. He lost men, lost prestige, lost that smooth self-confidence with which he had marched south. An emperor can win many battles—but when the cities spit, his beard won't stay dry.

As he left, he remained silent. No victory, no celebration, no song. Only the realization that Italy was not an empire to be owned, but a witch's cauldron that would bite you if you dug in too deeply.

And somewhere behind him, the city bells were ringing again, not for him, but against him. Italy was burning—and the emperor was just one more who had burned his fingers.

Popes are just old men in clothes

Rome smelled of incense and old urine. Pilgrims trudged barefoot over cobblestones in the streets, while in the palaces, men in robes distributed the world as if it were a piece of bread that never sufficed. Barbarossa arrived as emperor—and encountered not God, but bureaucrats with halos.

The Pope—Hadrian, later Alexander, and another after him, as if the Church spit them out by the dozen—stood there in gold and silk, his hands raised as if he could sort out heaven and earth with a wave of his finger. But in the end, he was just an old man with soft fingers that had never felt the hilt of a sword. One who preached while others bled.

Barbarossa knelt because one had to kneel. But he didn't kneel for God. He knelt to show that he could stand up again. The Pope blessed him as if he were a student needing tutoring in obedience. And then came the business: "Protect the Church." - "Pay tithes." - "Remember who holds the keys to heaven." All demands, wrapped in Latin, sounded like threats in a robe.

But Barbarossa wasn't the type for spiritual fairy tales. He knew: A ban is only paper until an army enforces it. So he argued with the popes, rode against their cities, and kicked their envoys out. And every time one of them excommunicated him, he laughed briefly, took a sip, and said: "Again? Send me someone who can fight."

The popes were cunning, no question. They wove nets, they sent letters, they whispered into the ears of princes. But behind all the pomp and ritual, Barbarossa saw only wrinkled faces, afraid of losing their importance. Men in robes who talked of heaven but feared the earth.

Once, at the court, a legate dared to say that the emperor was only emperor when the pope wanted it. Barbarossa stared at him as one stares at a dog that has peed on the carpet. "I am emperor because I take it for myself," he growled. And the hall fell silent—except for the scratching of the scribes, who knew full well that they were never allowed to put those words on paper.

And so it continued: bull of excommunication, reply, war, peace, betrayal. A dance that no one could finish. In the end, what remained were two images of old men: one with a crown, the other with a miter. Both heavy, both crooked, both uncomfortable. And both so human that one wondered why millions of people shed their blood for one to wear a piece of metal and the other a piece of cloth.

Because popes are just old men in clothes – who pray that no one notices how much skin is trembling underneath.

Merchants, whores, alleys – the real Rome

Rome wasn't a holy place. It was a bazaar disguised as a temple. Among the ruins of ancient grandeur stood stalls that reeked of fish and adulterated oil. The streets were so narrow that even the sun thought twice about fitting in there.

The merchants shouted louder than the priests. Spices, fabrics, wine—all with prices higher than the towers of the basilicas. Everyone swore by their scales, and everyone had hidden the lead in their weights. Gold changed hands faster than confessions crossed lips. And Barbarossa saw how these men with dirty fingers had more power than entire synods of bishops.

The whores stood on the corners, lips red as spilled wine, eyes tired like old soldiers. They laughed, they seduced, they cursed. Some wore crosses around their necks, because even sin does business in the shadow of the Church. Rome was full of them—women who knew more about politics than the senators, because at night they had the ear of the men who made laws by day.

And the alleys? They were a living belly full of fleas, jugglers, thieves, and children with knives. Dogs fought over bones, beggars held stumps in the air, and somewhere a tuneless lute droned, as if to remind the world that even in misery, music is born. The dirt ran in rivulets down the mountain and collected at the bottom—just as the truth always ends up in the shadows.

Barbarossa rode through this Rome, and he smelled more truth in a breath of foul alley air than in a week of Vatican liturgy. Here, in the streets, the empire was negotiated: in the price of a barrel of wine, in the grip of a whore, in the throw of a dice.

One of the merchants yelled at him: "Emperor, do you want to rule the empire? Start here, at the market. Because here everyone pays, even if they don't want to." Barbarossa laughed weakly and thought:*The alleys have more teeth than the cardinals.*

Rome – the real Rome – was not to be found in the cathedral, but in the voices that were dirty, raw and unpolished, but more honest than any blessing.

The Emperor as a dog in a stranger's garden

Italy never accepted him as its master. Italy accepted him like a knife in the back: inevitable, painful, yet something one survives. Barbarossa marched in with trumpets, banners, and shining armor—and people looked at him as if someone had let the neighbor's dog into their own vegetable patch.

The princes whispered, the merchants calculated, the cities closed their gates. They gave him feasts, but the wine tasted weak, the bread was hard, and the hosts' smiles were as genuine as a copper piece plated with silver. They let him drink, they let him eat—but they just waited until he left again.

Barbarossa felt it with every step: the streets couldn't support him. He was the stranger, the intruder, the barbarian in imperial garb. Italy loved its own lies more than foreign truths. And so he was seen not as a ruler, but as a guest, to be politely tolerated until he was drunk enough to be thrown out the door.

Once, in Verona, he heard children laughing. "The Emperor is coming! The Emperor is coming!" – and they threw rotten apples. Men pretended to scold the children, but their eyes laughed along with them. He rode on, his beard covered in dust and resentment, thinking:*A dog never becomes master of the garden. He's always chased out.*

The bishops were no better. They bowed low before him, kissed his fingers, swore loyalty—and the next morning they sat again with the envoys from Milan and Venice, as if he were already dust beneath their feet. They gave him titles, but no goals, promises, but no troops. All words, all smoke.

And he? He barked back. With fire, with sword, with spells. He burned fields, demolished walls, and took hostages. But every victory was just a stolen piece of bread: barely swallowed, already lost. The cities always rose again, like rats that couldn't be killed, no matter how often you swung your club.

In the end, Italy wasn't an empire for him, but a cage full of cats that hissed whenever the dog entered. He could scare them, he could tear them apart—but tame them? Never.

And so he remained the emperor in a foreign garden. With a crown on his head, with dust in his throat, with a truth that weighed more heavily than any

armor: A dog is still a dog. And Italy spits in his face, no matter how loudly he barks.

Bloody battles and bad poems

Battles stink. They smell of iron, of sweat from fear, of horse urine, and entrails that have landed in the wrong place. Barbarossa already knew this after the first one: fame is only a word you utter in the evening, while you're still sitting upright by the fire. Everyone else is lying somewhere in the dirt, unable to say anything more.

But the chroniclers—ah, the chroniclers!—they sat in the tent, far from the dust, writing verses about "glorious victories," while outside men stuffed their intestines back into their bellies with both hands. They painted pictures of valor, as if blood were a pigment generously splashed over parchment. Every sentence a lie, every rhyme a betrayal.

Barbarossa rode through the battles like a man who knew he had to be seen. Always at the front, always visible. Not because he desired a heroic death, but because otherwise the empire would laugh: "An emperor who hides is no emperor." So he rode. Arrows hissed, lances cracked, swords hacked. The sun was merciless, the dust clung like a curse, and everywhere this sound: metal on metal, an endless snarling that lingered in the ear like a tinnitus from hell.

He won many battles. And yet each one felt like a defeat. Because victories are nothing if the country only hates you more afterward. Milan broken, Verona conquered, Brescia tamed—all successes that were lying in the dirt the next week, because cities have more lives than armies.

And when the dead were buried, when the field was silent, the poets came. With their trumpets, their pens, their voices that sounded like the aftertaste of old beer. "Oh, noble emperor, conqueror of tyrants, bringer of light..." – and as they sang, the horses still smelled of burnt flesh.

Barbarossa listened, drank, and remained silent. Sometimes he even laughed, that harsh, dry laugh that chilled the hall. "Just write," he thought. "Write your bad poems. Maybe someone will believe it in a hundred years. But I know what blood tastes like, and that doesn't rhyme with anything."

Thus, fame piled up in parchments, while the truth lay in mass graves. Battles, victories, poems—all part of the same lie: that war is anything other than a prolonged hangover with corpses in the trench.

Legnano: Pride shatters on cobblestones

It was the morning when the empire thought it would shine—and by evening, it stank of defeat. Barbarossa marched against the Lombards, proud as ever, his beard blowing in the wind, his banner raised. An emperor who thought he could break cities like dry wood. But Legnano was not wood. Legnano was stone. Hard, stubborn, cold.

The Lombards weren't knights with heroic courage and tournament histories. They were citizens, farmers, blacksmiths. Men with hammers, women who carried water, children who threw stones. No court, no splendor. Only rage. A rage that turns walls into swords.

Barbarossa charged. Horses ahead, iron flashed, trumpets blared. Dust rose like smoke. And then he slammed into something he hadn't expected: a wall of men chained together, shoulder to shoulder, with long spears that looked like a forest that had decided to strike back.

The first attack failed. The second too. Horses squirmed, knights fell, the dust turned into a mud of blood and sweat. Barbarossa rode, shouted, and urged his men forward. But the city stood. Every step he took cost men. Every blow he struck brought him closer to the ground.

Then he fell. The emperor, Redbeard, the man who had burned cities, lay in the dust himself. His horse down, his beard covered in dirt, his crown lost. No one sang. No one cheered. Only the panting, the pounding, the metallic howl as armor broke.

Legend says he was dead, for a moment. That the empire stood headless, the emperor swallowed by the pavement. Later, he rose again—but he was no longer the same man. Something had broken there, not just shields and bones, but that unshakable pride that had carried him through Italy.

In the evening, the Lombards marched back to their city. Bells rang, women sang, children danced. For them, it was a victory; for him, a disgrace. Legnano

was not a field fertilized with blood; it was a scar. A scar that would bleed into the history books.

Barbarossa dusted his beard and remained silent. What could he say? The cobblestones had spoken, louder than any speech. And pride, once shattered, sticks worse than blood.

Wine in the tent, dust in the mouth

The camp after Legnano was a graveyard without graves. Tents hung crooked, horses lay limp in the dust, men crawled around like insects that had survived a kick. Everywhere was the smell of sweat, of iron, of blood that had clung to the armor for too long. No song, no laughter. Only the creaking of leather and the groans of the wounded.

Barbarossa sat in the tent. The crown lay in a box, not on his head. Before him was a jug that tasted of more than he could handle. He raised it, drank, put it down, wiped his mouth—and the dust still remained between his teeth. The wine flowed, but it quenched nothing. Not the shame, not the anger, not the damned realization that an emperor can also fall.

His knights spoke little. One muttered something about "the next victory." Another swore that God would test them. All empty words that tasted like cold soup. Barbarossa listened, nodded, but only this image echoed in his mind: himself in the dirt, beard covered in dirt, crown somewhere among horse hooves.

The messengers brought news: cities rejoice, princes whisper, the Pope smiles. Every enemy drinks to his shame. Every friend remains silent, as if his silence were loyalty. He knew: silence is poison. It eats more slowly than daggers, but more surely.

He stared at the flame of the lamp, which trembled in the wind. "An emperor must not fall," he murmured. And yet he had fallen. The men who still looked at him saw not a god in gold, but a man in dust. And that was worse than any wound.

So he drank. Every sip was a fist against his own pride. Every drop an attempt to drown the memory. But the dust remained. The dust in his mouth, the dust in his beard, the dust in history.

Wine in the tent, dust in the mouth—that's what defeat tasted like. No heroic poem would ever describe it like that. But the men who experienced it knew: The emperor was just one of them. A man who bled, who fell, who drank because there was nothing else left.

Beatrix – Love in a duvet, politics in the morning

Beatrice of Burgundy. A woman with eyes that knew more than an entire court full of old men. For Barbarossa, she was not a fairy tale at first, but a contract. A piece of land, a new power base, another building block in the princes' chess game. But when he saw her, he realized that contracts can also have legs, soft skin, and a voice that carries more weight in the darkness than any Latin oath.

In her duvet, she was no queen, no duchess, no figure on a map. She was a woman, warm, quick, with a smile that didn't ask, but took. He rarely laughed, but with her he laughed—briefly, harshly, like a man who forgets himself for a moment. Between the sheets, between breaths, he was no emperor. He was just a guy with a beard and a hunger.

But in the morning, when the fire went out, the bed grew cold. Then she no longer spoke of desire, but of land. Of castles, of tolls, of alliances. "Burgundy belongs to us now," she whispered, "but Burgundy also eats." Every kiss had a price tag, every smile a bill. She was clever, she knew it, and he loved her for it—and sometimes hated her too.

At court, men whispered: "The Emperor is by her side." They said it with mockery, but also with envy. For Beatrix was no decoration. She was a gambler. Her presence gave him more than comfort—she gave him cards he would never have had on his own. Whoever wanted Burgundy had to take Beatrix. And whoever took Beatrix got Burgundy for good, whether they wanted it or not.

They often argued. Loudly, wildly, like two who knew neither should give in. He yelled, she lashed out, and in the end, they ended up back in the same bed, because war and love sometimes speak the same language.

Thus, he lived between two truths: In her feather bed, she was Beatrice, a woman with heart and soul. In the morning, she was Burgundy, a princess with chain mail beneath her dress. And he knew: he needed both. Both would save him or ruin him.

Because even emperors need someone to tell them at night when they are still men – and when they are just rulers.

A kingdom between the thighs

Emperor or not – in the end, it always ended in bed. Not on the battlefields, not in churches, not in magnificent halls, but between a woman's thighs. There, alliances were formed, heirs conceived, empires expanded or squandered. The rest was just theater.

Beatrice knew this. Barbarossa too. When she entered the tent at night, the armor fell away, but not the politics. Her laugh was soft, her grip hard, and every time he felt: the empire suddenly had a face, a heartbeat, a heat that reminded him that even emperors are made of flesh.

He took her not just as a wife, but as a country. Burgundy, that wild piece of earth, lay between them, as safe as the sheets. Every kiss was a shifting of boundaries, every cry an oath, every embrace a contract. In the morning, the bed smelled of sweat and the future. "A son," she whispered, "and our blood continues to grow." She didn't speak of love. She spoke of succession, of securities, of power flowing through skin and blood.

And him? He sensed how closely manhood and ruling were intertwined. In war, he shouted orders; in bed, silence followed. Then he wasn't the emperor; he was simply Frederick, the man who knew that an empire without children was an empire without tomorrow.

The chroniclers will never write it that way. They will babble about "marital bliss," about "noble Beatrice," and "the virtuous ruler." But the truth was harsher: A kingdom often depends on lust, on a man's ability to procreate at the right moment, and on the stamina of a woman who knows that her body is both a map and a weapon.

And when he lay awake at dawn, his arm heavy over her body, he didn't think of God, not of Rome, not of Italy. He thought only:*The kingdom lies here, between the thighs. Everything else is an accessory.*

Laws that no one follows

Barbarossa loved order. At least, he pretended to. He wrote charters, promulgated peace treaties, and swore that the empire would no longer be a fairground of robbery and revenge. Laws—fine, round words, cast in ink that smelled of iron.

And what happened? Nothing. Nothing at all.

The princes laughed as soon as they had read the parchments. Some didn't even laugh that much – they had their scribes read them aloud, threw them into the fire, and spat on the wood afterward. "Peace?" grumbled one. "Peace is when I've killed my neighbor."

Barbarossa signed, sealed, and distributed. In Mainz, in Worms, in Nuremberg. Grand Imperial Diets, grand words. "Robbery is forbidden!" – and outside, as soon as the imperial hat had disappeared from the hall, the same knights were robbing peasants of their horses. "Feuds are forbidden!" – and the next morning, another barn was burning.

He knew it. Everyone knew it. But a kingdom without laws is no kingdom at all—so he had to invent some, even if no one followed them. Politics was like painting a rotten wall: From a distance, it looks tidy, but up close, you can hear the worms laughing.

Sometimes he'd hang someone. A minor knight who had robbed too brazenly, or a count who slaughtered the wrong peasant. Then the monks would cheer: "See, the Emperor ensures justice!" But the great men, those who truly broke the rules, stood by and clapped politely. Because they knew: tomorrow it would be their turn—or they'd buy their freedom.

Once, after a long session full of sermons on law and order, Barbarossa reached for his cup and growled: "Laws are like cobwebs. The flies stick. The hornets fly through." His men didn't laugh. They knew: This wasn't a joke, this was the Reich.

Thus he created the Peace, the ban, and the Imperial Law—all great, all difficult, all beautiful. But outside, in the streets, in the fields, in the castles, only the dagger and the cup still counted.

And so Barbarossa became the legislator of an empire that prefers to sign in blood rather than ink.

Peace, which is only called that

The emperor proclaimed peace, and the bells rang. Blessings were heard, rejoicing was heard, and it was written down in books: "No more blood, no more plunder, no more fire." It sounded beautiful, it sounded grand—but outside, behind the walls, the empire laughed.

Because peace in the Middle Ages was a phrase like "free wine." Everyone wanted to hear it, but no one believed it.

Barbarossa traveled through the country, summoned the princes, raised his hand, and swore: "From today on, the feud is suspended." They swore back, bowed deeply, perhaps even kissed his fingers. And as soon as he moved on, the same old shit started again. One stole an ox, another burned a mill, and a third killed the messenger who was supposed to deliver the ban.

"Peace" meant a break as long as the emperor was within two days' travel. "Peace" meant: Put your knife away until he disappeared over the next hill. After that, everything went back to normal.

The peasants were the quickest to notice. When the emperor came, they paid twice: once to the prince, once to the empire. And when he left, they paid again – this time with their livestock, their daughters, sometimes with their lives. For them, peace was just another word for new taxes.

Barbarossa knew it. He wasn't stupid. But what could he do? He was a man who wanted to mold order out of dust and blood—and order always stuck between his fingers like wet clay. He could fight battles, burn cities, excommunicate bishops—but peace? Peace was like a cup that always had a crack. You could fill it as often as you wanted—in the end, it ran dry.

So he gave speeches, signed documents, and rode on. He cursed in the saddle, drank in the tent. And at night, when the men snored, he looked into the embers and thought:*Peace is just a space between two fires. And I'm the idiot who preaches it.*

This is what the chronicles said: “The emperor brought peace.” But everyone who experienced it knew: It was a peace that was only called that.

The Guelphs laugh in the shadows

The Guelphs were never silent. When they weren't fighting, they laughed—that laughter that isn't loud, but quiet, sharp, like the hiss of a snake. And whenever Barbarossa bled, they secretly cheered, as if they had wielded the knife themselves.

They were the second pack in the empire, greedy, loud, and brilliant. Always with enough gold in their pockets to buy peasants, lure knights, and convert priests. Where the Hohenstaufens built walls, the Guelphs spread rumors. Wherever Barbarossa besieged a city, they whispered in the defenders' ears: "Hold on, he won't hold."

And sometimes they were right.

Whenever the emperor stumbled—in Italy, at Legnano, in the eternal quarrels with the popes—the Guelphs stood there, seemingly innocent, with clean swords. "We are faithful," they said. "We are loyal." And behind their backs, they held the barrel full of wine ready to toast the emperor's enemies.

Barbarossa knew it. He knew their game. But he couldn't destroy them. Too strong, too rich, too intertwined with everyone who carried weight in the empire. If you kill a Welf, two new ones grow up – one with gold, one with prayers.

At court, they grinned at him as if they were brothers. At the princely assemblies, they swore a loyalty that tasted like thin wine. And in the shadows, where no scribe sat with a pen, they laughed at him. At his defeats, at his outbursts of anger, at the imperial hat that never really fit him.

And sometimes he heard that laughter, late at night when the camp was silent. Not a real sound, just an echo in his head. He would then reach for the cup, drink deeply, and murmur, "Just laugh. Your day will come, too."

But deep down, he knew: As long as the Hohenstaufen family existed, the Guelphs would also laugh. And this laughter was worse than any sword—because it never stopped.

Brother Hate, Brother Power

In the empire, family was no comfort; it was a curse with a coat of arms. The Hohenstaufens stuck together, people said. Nonsense. They held knives behind their backs while embracing each other. Every brother was a friend in the morning and a rival in the evening. Every cousin smiled like a mirror, but one that distorted its face.

Barbarossa had learned: You fight enemies, but you bleed family. Cousins who wanted land. Uncles who claimed titles. Brothers who swore to act "for the Reich" – and by that, meant their own piece of land, their own tower.

Sometimes they sat together at the table. A feast, a fire, a barrel of wine. Laughter, voices, the clinking of cups. And there was poison in every laugh. Everyone waited for the moment when the emperor weakened, when the crown slipped, when the empire tottered. Then one of them would jump up and say: "I am also a Hohenstaufen. I am also of the blood."

Blood was the currency, but blood was also the poison.

Once, after a long night, when the candles were still smoldering, Barbarossa heard his younger brother whisper: "Why him, not me?" A sentence that weighed more heavily than a thousand oaths. Barbarossa stood up, approached, placed his hand on the man's shoulder, and said: "Because I drew first." Then he left, leaving the sentence hanging in the air like a blade.

And he knew: brothers are not brothers when it comes to power. They are mirror images, waiting for you to blink.

So he lived with them, side by side, table by table. And every time he laid down his sword, he asked himself:*Which of you will raise it against me first?*

Brother hate, brother power – two sides of the same coin, always paid for in blood.

Banquets where wine flows like blood

The banquets were wars of knife and fork. Long tables laden with meat, bread, and fish that smelled even before they were served. Candles dripped wax like melting fat, dogs snuck under the tables, and over everything hung that

murmuring that always comes when men have more wine in their bellies than sense.

Barbarossa sat in the middle, his beard shining, his eyes tired, his crown heavy. To his left and right were the princes, the knights, the clergymen. Each with a cup in their hand, each with a smile so smooth you could feel the blade beneath it.

The wine flowed like a battle. First sweet, then bitter, then heavy. Men swore loyalty, kissed hands, toasted each other—and under the table, they kicked each other's shins. One toast to the Empire, a second to peace, a third to the Emperor. And everyone knew: tomorrow everything will be forgotten. Tomorrow, all that matters is who laughed the loudest, who kept the most wise silence, who was best at tipping the cup at the right moment.

There were nights when the feasts ended in blood. One wrong word, one askance, a knife pulled too quickly from the belt. Suddenly, the table was no longer for bread, but for corpses. And the next day, they said it was an "accident." A misunderstanding. But the children of the dead knew better.

Barbarossa drank along because he had to. An emperor who doesn't drink is no emperor. But he drank more slowly, more carefully. He knew: There was not only truth in wine. There was also poison. And sometimes both at the same time.

Once, when the hall was filled with laughter, he leaned toward Beatrix and whispered, "They're celebrating me. But they're already celebrating my downfall." She smiled, bit into a piece of meat, and murmured, "Then eat faster before they take your plate away."

That's what the banquets were like. Feasts that sounded like songs and smelled like slaughterhouses. Wine like blood, blood like wine. And in the midst of it all, an emperor who knew: This isn't just about drinking. This is about drinking history.

The Emperor and his endless road

Barbarossa was never at home. He had no home. His realm was the saddle, his roof the sky, his bed the earth—sometimes soft, mostly rocky. An emperor in

the Middle Ages couldn't hide in a castle. He had to ride, always ride. For an empire that didn't see him forgot him as quickly as a bad vintage of wine.

The road was his throne. From castle to castle, from city to city. Today in Mainz, tomorrow in Speyer, the day after tomorrow in Italy. No day was the same, no place safe. And everywhere the same routine: shaking hands, signing documents, passing judgment, drinking, smiling, threatening. Then on. Always on.

The empire was too large to stand still. Every prince had his own clock, and it only ticked when the emperor stood beside him. If Barbarossa left, they would reset the clock—more taxes, more robbery, more of their own laws. Only his presence meant power. Absence meant chaos. So he rode. Nights in tents, days in the rain, months on roads with more potholes than hope.

His men cursed, the horses suffered, the servants dragged like donkeys. And he? He remained silent. Because he knew: An emperor who stands still is an emperor who loses.

Sometimes, when the stars sparkled above him, he thought:*The kingdom is like a woman who is only faithful as long as you constantly hold her in your arms. If you let go, she'll immediately look for someone else.*

Thus, the road became his confession, his burden, his life. No quiet rule, no fixed throne. Only eternal movement, only the constant "forward." An emperor who grew old in the saddle and who knew: If he paused for too long, the empire would bury him along with him.

The road was endless. And the emperor was its prisoner.

Foreign countries, foreign knives

Barbarossa didn't just travel through his own empire. He rode out to places where the dialect sounded different, the beer tasted staler, and knives were drawn more quickly. Beyond the Alps, beyond the borders, a world began that looked at him like a man who wanted more than was his.

The castles there weren't his, the markets weren't loyal, the princes weren't his friends. They laughed politely, they held banquets, they gave speeches—and their eyes remained cold. Everyone wanted something from the emperor:

protection, titles, coins. But no one truly wanted him. One visiting ruler is one ruler too many.

And the knives? They were always there. Under tables, in alleys, in the shadows of halls. Foreign knives are more dangerous because you don't know their owners. At home, you know who wants to slit your throat. In foreign lands, they first smile, pour you wine, talk of honor – and the next moment the blade is at your throat.

Once, at a princely banquet in Burgundy, a servant refilled the jug too slowly. Barbarossa saw the trembling in his hand, the cold in his eyes. "Poison," he thought. He drank anyway. Slowly. Carefully. If it were going to kill him, at least he would have kept his eyes open. But nothing happened. Only the realization:*They've tried. And they'll do it again.*

Robbers lurked in the streets, unaware that they were targeting the emperor. A raid, a fight, arrows from the forest. Barbarossa rode right through the middle, his beard covered in dust, his sword in his hand. In the end, the robbers lay dead, but one still grinned as he died. And that grin said:*We haven't caught you. Not yet.*

This is what Barbarossa learned: In foreign lands, you don't wear the crown on your head, but on the back of your neck—as a weight, as a target. Everyone sees it, everyone wants it, no one will wear it for you.

And when he lay in his tent at night, with strange voices outside, strange wine in his stomach, he reached for the dagger under his pillow. Not because he was afraid. He had long since forgotten what fear was. But because he knew: Foreign lands mean foreign knives. And the emperor, great as he was, never slept without a cold knife within reach.

The cross in the sky, the coins in the pocket

Crusade. A word that sounded like trumpets and the Holy Spirit – but in the end, it smelled of gold and burnt flesh. The monks preached that God wanted it. The princes heard "God" and thought "loot." The cross was held high, but coins were already clinking in their pockets.

Barbarossa was no fool. He knew: faith is a banner waved so that no one reads the ledger books. Rome cried: "Jerusalem!" – and the empire heard: "Taxes."

Pilgrims saw the cross in the sky, merchants saw markets in the East. Everyone heard what they wanted to hear.

But the emperor knew he couldn't stay out. An emperor without a cross was an emperor without a face. So he let himself be persuaded, didn't push for long, and went along. Not because heaven beckoned, but because he knew if he didn't go, the Guelphs would ride there and take the glory for themselves.

The bonfires filled with vows. Knights swore they would liberate the holy sites. Peasants swore they would rid themselves of sins. And quietly, the merchants swore they would turn anything that didn't run away fast enough into money.

The cross was a pretext, and everyone knew it. But it was a good pretext. One that justified the blood that would soon flow across the sand again.

And Barbarossa? He nodded, raised his cup, and let the men talk. He saw the cross in the sky and thought only:*If we return, the kingdom will pay me. And if we die, God won't want to hear of it.*

The cross was just a shield. The bags were the target.

Crusade: Men march, women cry

The departure looked like a celebration, sounded like a nightmare, and smelled like a horse stable. Streets filled with men in irons, heads held high, stomachs empty. Women on the sidelines, children clinging to skirts, dogs barking as if they could bark at misery.

The priests brandished crosses, blessed, and cried out for the forgiveness of sins. "Whoever reaches Jerusalem will be pure as snow!" they roared. The men nodded as if they believed it. But in their hearts, they were thinking of gold, of glory, of something greater than the dung heaps at home.

The columns moved like a snake through the empire. Hundreds, thousands. Knights with banners, peasants with spears, servants with carts, carrying more misery than supplies. Dust everywhere, noise everywhere. A stream of people and animals, rolling eastward like a murky river.

The women wept. Some silently, with tears they didn't want anyone to see. Others loudly, as if they wanted to force heaven itself to hold the men back.

But no one turned back. The promises were too great. The pressure was too great for God to supposedly go along with them.

Barbarossa rode in front. His beard was blowing in the wind, his eyes hard. He didn't look left or right. He heard the screams of the women, the whimpering of the children—and he knew:*An emperor must not waver.*So he rode on as if he had already forgotten what he left behind. But he didn't forget. One never forgets the sound of tears falling on the ground.

At night, the army lay in camps that stank of sweat and smoke. Men cursed because the bread was already rotten, horses were lame, and the first to die before they even saw the enemy. Hunger, disease, fatigue—the first true enemies, still far from Jerusalem.

And somewhere in the darkness, Barbarossa heard the crying. Not that of the women who had stayed behind, but that of those who had gone along and already knew: Many of us will never return.

So the crusade continued, an endless procession of hope, greed, and self-deception. Men marched, women wept—and the emperor knew that history would later make songs of it. But the songs would lie.

Byzantium, a golden heap of intrigue

Byzantium. Constantinople. A city like a dream of gold and fire. Towers that soared into the sky, walls as thick as greed, and streets that glittered as if paved with coins. An emperor rides into the emperor's city – and Barbarossa immediately knew: Here is no brother, here is no friend. Here is only a mirror in which two men see that there is always only room for one.

The Byzantine emperor received him as one would a troublesome relative who drinks too much and stays too long. Smiles, feasting, gifts—and behind every cup, a dagger. The tables heaved with wine and meat, but the words weighed more heavily than the meal. "Friendship," said the emperor. "Alliance," said Barbarossa. Both meant "distrust."

Byzantium was a labyrinth of whispers. Merchants who came to you and charged you twice. Envoys who gave you messages that had already been turned over three times. Spies who stood at the edge of your tents as if they were just gathering wood. Everyone knew more than you, and everything you said was on someone else's table the next morning.

Barbarossa hated it. He hated the silky voices, the soft hands, the promises that sounded like honey and stung like bees. His men hated it too—they wanted to march, fight, plunder. Instead, they waited, negotiated, sat around in a city so rich that even the poor had gold in their eyes.

And the intrigues? They were like flies on old meat. New rumors every day. "The Emperor of Byzantium wants to betray you." - "No, he wants to help you." - "No, he wants to poison you." No one knew what was true. Maybe everything. Maybe nothing. But it was enough to make the army uneasy.

In the end, Barbarossa rode on, with supplies that were sold to him at too high a price, with alliances that had already rotted the moment they were signed, and with the bitter feeling that Byzantium was more enemy than friend.

Gold, intrigue, promises, betrayal – Byzantium was everything but an ally.

Thirst in Anatolia

After Byzantium came emptiness. Anatolia wasn't a land, it was a furnace. Dust so fine it crept into one's teeth. The sun was so brutal it heated the steel until one's fingers burned on the hilts of their swords. Water was the only thing that mattered—and that was precisely what was missing.

The army moved like a damned caravan of ghosts through a land made of nothing but stone. Men stumbled, horses collapsed, carts got stuck in the ground harder than iron. A barrel of water was worth more than a chest full of silver. A sip could save you—or start a fight that ended in daggers and blood.

Barbarossa rode in front. His beard was white with dust, his eyes red with heat. He drank less than the others, or at least pretended to. An emperor couldn't appear greedy, even if his tongue was already like a piece of leather in his mouth.

The sun wasn't light, it was a hammer. It struck down anyone who was too weak. Men fell from their horses, crawled in the sand, and died like dogs no one wanted to feed anymore. No enemy was needed. The steppe itself did the work.

The nights were hardly better. The cold bit into the bones, wolves howled, and the men huddled around meager fires, their eyes asking:*Why are we here?*No one said it out loud. The answer would have been too difficult.

Once they came across a spring. Men ran like mad, plunged into it, drank, choked, prayed. Two drowned because they couldn't wait. Barbarossa stood beside it, serious, silent. "Thirst turns us all into animals," he murmured, and no one heard because everyone was busy with their own throats.

That's what Anatolia was like: no war, no glory, only thirst. An enemy that couldn't be defeated, only endured. And everyone knew: those who didn't break away here would still move on, scratched, forever with sand in their hearts.

Heat, dust and damned prayers

The sun hung like an executioner over the army. No shade, no wind, only heat that burned every thought. The dust was worse than any sword—it ate into the eyes, the lungs, the dreams. Men coughed up dirt, drank sips that quenched nothing, and fell like flies.

The priests ran ahead, crosses raised, voices ragged. "Pray, brothers, pray!" they cried. But the men weren't praying for God. They were praying for rain. For a cloud. For a well that hadn't dried up. Every psalm was a cry for water. Every rosary a vain plea that remained stuck in the dust.

Some became fanatical. They saw signs in the sky where only the sun burned. "God is testing us!" one cried before collapsing. Another knelt in the sand, raised his arms, and laughed as he died of thirst. Faith was no consolation. It was just another face of the same despair.

Barbarossa was silent. He rode with his head bowed, his beard matted with sweat and sand. His men looked at him as if he himself could make rain. But all he could do was keep riding. That was his prayer: the next step, the next breath, the next village on the horizon.

At night, things were no better. The heat dropped, the cold bit. Men shivered, whispered, and prayed louder. Some argued and fought over the last drink. One slit another's throat for just half a barrel of water. The next morning, the dead man stood upright, propped up by the sand, his eyes full of dust, his mouth open as if he still wanted to drink.

So the army grew smaller. Not through battles, not through enemies, but through heat, dust, and damned prayers that no one heard.

And Barbarossa? He saw it, accepted it, and rode on. Because an emperor may not pray. An emperor can only march, even if every step drags him deeper into the desert.

The emperor is sweating, death is already waiting

The sun nailed the army to the earth. Every step was a punishment, every breath a struggle. Barbarossa rode in front, sweat running down his back, collecting in his beard, mixing with the dust until he looked as if he were molded from clay. An emperor made of dirt who still believed he was unbreakable.

The men behind him stumbled, gasped, and fell. The procession was no longer an army, but a funeral procession in installments. One after another, they fell to the ground, and no one had the strength to pick them up. The horses snorted dryly, tongues hanging out like rags from an old barrel.

Barbarossa felt the weakness within him, but he denied it. "An emperor doesn't sweat," he muttered, and his shirt clung wetly to his body. Every drop was a betrayal, every drop of sweat a reminder that he was only a man, not an immortal god.

And somewhere beside him, invisible, inaudible, but tangible—death rode. He was not an enemy in armor, not a knight with a sword. He was the heat in his head, the pressure on his chest, the fatigue in his bones. Death had time. He didn't have to fight. He only had to wait.

The priests spoke of trials. The knights spoke of honor. The peasants stopped talking altogether. And Barbarossa remained silent. He remained silent because words took too much air. But deep down, he knew:*Death is here. It has already chosen me. I just don't know when it will strike.*

At night, he lay in his tent, his beard still damp with sweat, his eyes open. He heard the men snoring, the sick whimpering, the horses creaking in their half-sleep. And he knew: It's not a question of whether death will come. It's only a question of whether it will catch me in the saddle—or in the river.

The emperor sweated. And death waited. Patiently. Certainly.

A river cold as a knife

The Saleph meandered through the land, inconspicuous, harmless as a strip of glass in the sun. Men saw it and cheered. Water. Finally, water. After days of dust, of burned throats, the river was like a miracle, a gift no one believed possible anymore.

They rushed in, knights and squires alike, horses and dogs. They drank, they dived, they splashed like children. Water ran over lips, into beards, into suits of armor. One wept with joy, another laughed like a madman. Thirst was stronger than reason.

Barbarossa dismounted. His legs were heavy, his beard matted, his eyes tired. He saw the river, and something inside him longed for purification. Not just for water in his throat, but for this one moment without dust, without burden, without a crown. Perhaps he simply wanted to forget that he was emperor. Perhaps he just wanted to feel once again what it was like to have the world not weighing down on him.

He stepped into the water. Cool, sharp, like a knife on hot skin. A breath that tasted like release. He went deeper. The current was stronger than it looked. It grabbed him, pulled, tore. His armor heavy, his body tired, the water greedy.

A scream, a splash. Men saw it, ran, grabbed, but too late. The emperor disappeared beneath the surface. No heroic death, no final blow, no chorus of angels. Just bubbles, mud, and the sound of water flowing over a body as if it were nothing.

The river took him as it had taken a thousand stones before. Indifferently, without pathos. A man, an emperor, a myth – swallowed by cold water.

On the shore, someone shouted, "The emperor is dead!" Others remained silent. Some wept, others just stared. Because what do you say when the man who seemed like a mountain suddenly lies in the mud?

The Saleph continued to flow, cool and calm. As if it had done nothing special.

A river as cold as a knife – and sharper than any sword Barbarossa had ever wielded.

Saleph eats the Redbeard

The men stood on the bank, stunned. A few stared into the current, as if the emperor might resurface at any moment, snorting, cursing, his beard dripping, ready to give the next order. But the Saleph remained silent. Only waves, only mud, only this eternal flow, as if it had swallowed nothing in particular.

Barbarossa was gone. No sword had defeated him, no army, no pope. Only water. A river, indifferent like a god unknown to anyone.

Chaos erupted in the army. Some screamed, others wept, many whispered, as if they were afraid to utter the word "dead." Knights debated: Who will lead us now? Priests raised crosses in the air as if they could conjure the emperor back. Servants ran around like headless chickens, searching for instructions, for support.

One suggested keeping the death a secret. "Say he's alive! Say he's riding in front! Otherwise everything will fall apart." And so the myth began, right on the riverbank. The emperor hadn't died, they said. The emperor had merely

disappeared. He would come back. Maybe tomorrow, maybe in a hundred years.

Others knew better. They had seen him sink, had seen the whirlpool that pulled him down. They had recovered the body, heavy, cold, with his beard covered in mud. But even when they saw him, they didn't believe what they saw. An emperor couldn't die like that. Not so banally.

So the army talked itself into courage. Some swore he was only sleeping until the empire needed him again. Some said God had taken him to himself to send him back as an angel of war. And some simply remained silent, drinking water, as if they wanted to swallow the emperor himself so as not to lose him.

But the truth was simple, cruel, banal: The river had swallowed him. And he wouldn't give him back.

Men stand still, the empire falters

After the Saleph, time stood still. The army, a moment ago a stream of iron and dust, became a mass that didn't know where to go. Without Barbarossa, every step suddenly became difficult. Men simply stood still—knights, servants, bishops. They looked at each other as if they had forgotten why they were there.

Some wanted to go to Jerusalem. "Onward! For the Emperor!" they cried, their voices hollow because the man they were shouting for had long since been thrown into the river. Others wanted to go home, back to the empire, back to their fields, wives, and castles. "Without him, we are nothing," they murmured. And still others immediately began calculating: Who will take over? Who will lead? Who will inherit?

The camp was full of rumors. "He's still alive!" - "No, he's with God!" - "No, he's sleeping in the mountain and will come back." Everyone sought support in a lie that was better than the truth. For the truth was a gut-punch: The emperor who had borne it had fallen like any other man.

The princes whispered. Some saw their hour approaching. "Now we count," their eyes said. The emperor was dead, the empire was open like a gate

without bars. Everyone wanted in, everyone wanted to take hold. Even in the tents, maps were being drawn, successions discussed, alliances forged.

And above all: silence. A silence that weighed more heavily than any roar of battle. Men simply stood there, swords in hand, eyes empty. They had never felt so clearly how much the empire had rested on the shoulders of a single man. And now—gone. Washed away by a damned river.

The empire staggered. It staggered like a drunk who had just proudly stomped through the tavern and was now staggering, grasping at the wall. And everyone knew: without Barbarossa, it could collapse at any moment.

Men stopped. The empire stopped. And no one knew if it would ever start again.

An emperor becomes a legend because nobody wants to see the dirt

Barbarossa was dead. So simple, so banal. Drowned like a peasant who goes too deep into the water. No heroic death, no final sword in the belly of the enemy, no angel to retrieve him. Just an emperor who drowned in the river while his men watched and did nothing.

But that was precisely what no one was allowed to say. Not in the empire, not in the chronicles, not at court. Too shabby, too ridiculous. So they turned mud into gold.

The scribes sat down, stirred their ink, and painted stories. Of a brave emperor who was miraculously transported. Of a man whom God took to himself because he was too great for the earth. Of a ruler who didn't die but disappeared. Each stroke of the pen a plaster to cover the ugly truth.

The princes told their subjects that the emperor wasn't dead. "He's asleep," they said, "he'll come back." The peasants nodded, wanting to believe it. After all, who wants to hear that the most powerful man in the world collapsed in the water like a drunken pig?

And so the legend began. The emperor who wasn't dead. The emperor who slept in the mountain. The emperor who would return when the empire needed him. A fairy tale that tasted better than reality.

The truth—a beard covered in mud, eyes empty, a body heavy as a stone—disappeared into the mists. What remained was a hero, a myth, a promise.

An emperor doesn't become a legend because he was great. He becomes one because no one wants to see the dirt. And Barbarossa died the dirtiest of all deaths. So they made him the greatest.

The mountain does not sleep, only people dream

They said Barbarossa wasn't dead. Not in Saleph, not in Anatolia, not on the Crusade. No—he was sitting deep in Kyffhäuser, in a stone hall where no wind ever blows and no rooster ever crows.

There he sits, at the table. Not just any table, but a block of rock as heavy as the empire itself. Before him, no wine, no meat, only silence. And his beard—that damned beard—keeps growing. It doesn't grow gently, not gracefully. It grows like roots, like a fist of hair, eating its way through wood, through stone, through everything in its path.

People said the beard had grown so long that it had pierced the table. Red hair pierced the stone as if it were trying to fight its way to the surface. A beard that didn't stop, even when the man slept. As if it were more alive than the emperor himself.

Sometimes, the peasants said, he opens his eyes. Heavy, tired, red as embers. He raises his head and asks the dwarf guarding him: "Are the ravens still sleeping around the mountain?" And the dwarf nods. "Yes, sir. They're still asleep." Then Barbarossa lowers his head again, and his beard continues to grow, grows deeper, grows through the table, while outside the centuries pass.

The children listened with wide-open eyes, the elderly murmured their prayers. They wanted to believe that the emperor hadn't drowned like a peasant, but that he was still there. Deep down, asleep, but ready.

Thus, the beard became a symbol. Not a sign of age or weakness—but of time, of patience, of that uncanny waiting. An emperor who sleeps while his beard pierces the earth. And outside, people dream that one day he will rise again, break the table, and rebuild the empire.

The mountain never sleeps. Only the people dream. And their dream hangs on the beard that has grown through the table.

We drink to Barbarossa because he never comes back

The years passed, the centuries. Princes came and went, popes died, cities burned, the empire crumbled and was patched back together like an old cloak. But the name remained. Barbarossa. The Redbeard. The Sleeper in the Mountain.

At first, they whispered reverently. Later, they told it louder. Farmers at the harvest, knights at the fire, merchants in taverns. "He sleeps. He wakes up when the empire needs him." And every time a new war came, every time the empire faltered again, the old story was brought out like a bottle that had been opened a thousand times.

And in the end? In the end, all that remained was the intoxication. No waking up, no emperor on horseback, no beard emerging from the stone. Just men in bars, their tongues heavy, saying, "Redbeard will be back. Someday." Then they tip their cups, wipe their mouths, laugh—and know they're lying.

Because Barbarossa isn't coming back. Not from the river, not from the mountain, not from history. He's dead, and he'll stay dead. But people need him alive, because otherwise they'd have to see that they're alone, that no one is coming to save the Reich.

And so they drink. In huts, in castles, in inns. They drink to an emperor who will never return. They drink because myth is easier on the stomach than the truth. They drink because each cup is a small lie that feels warmer than the cold earth on the Saleph.

We drink to Barbarossa because he'll never come back. And perhaps that's the only truth that remains.

imprint

Author: Michael Lappenbusch

E-mail:admin@perplex.click

Homepage:https://www.perplex.click

Year of publication: 2025