

Götz von Berlichingen

The Knight with the Iron Hand



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Contents

The end of an era	3
The young Götz	28
Sword and Honor	46
The acid test	61
Friendship and enmity	80
The family legacy	96
In the service of the emperor	111
Love and betrayal	127
The Call of the Adventurer	146
The fire of Landshut	161
Blood and iron	172
The amputation	178
The Birth of the Iron Hand	186
The man with the iron fist	192
The fear of the opponents	198
Chivalric freedom	204
Bloody business	210
The new identity	216
The Peasants' Revolt	220
"Tell him yourself!"	227
Burn the country!	233
Imprisonment and intrigue	239
The Imperial Ban	245
On your own	251
The Hunt for the Rebel	257
Lost Friends	262
The last great battle	267
The tired sword	273
The voice of old age	278
The family and the future	282
The pen replaces the sword	287
The Rebel's Legacy	292
The death camp	296
The man, the legend	300
imprint	305

The end of an era

Germany, 1500-something. Everything stank of horse manure, cold beer, and rotten meat. The peasants crawled through the fields like rats, the princes stuffed themselves with roast meat and belched Latin prayers, and somewhere in between squatted the knights—old idiots in iron cans who didn't understand that their time was long gone. The sword was a damn museum piece, while the cannons heralded the future. Poof, boom, and the knight, complete with shining helmet, flew through the air like an expensive pile of scrap metal.

But what are you going to do? The world doesn't change because a few guys in shining armor cry for their honor. The world changes because some bastard fires a cannonball into your face while you're still thinking, "Lord Jesus, help me."

And it was in this filthy, stinking, goddamn circus that a child was born who wouldn't be fobbed off with a rotten apple and a crooked grin. Götz. Götz von Berlichingen. A name that later sounded like a punch in the face. But when he crawled out of his mother, he was just another little screamer, full of milk and shit.

His childhood? Forget the fairy tale of gentle nursery rhymes. The only thing that lulled him to sleep was the creaking of the castle beams and the occasional whine of rats in the pantry. The old Berlichingen clan wasn't exactly rich. They had a castle, yes. But a castle is just a crappy, drafty stone house if you don't have money for wine, weapons, and women.

The boy learned early on that "knight" was just another word for "thug with a pedigree." His father, a grumpy man with a stomach that was always growling, told stories of honor. "Honor, my son, is the only thing we have left." Bullshit. Honor doesn't stuff bread into your belly. Honor doesn't warm you when you're freezing at night like an abandoned dog.

But Götz absorbed the words like any other brat absorbs cheap wine from the cellar. Honor. Blood. Sword. Strike first, or you'll be struck. That became his prayer.

And outside, the world raged. Peasant revolts here, princely wars there, and everyone wanted a piece of the already moldy pie. Little Götz eventually stood on the castle walls, spat on it, and swore to himself that he wouldn't become one of those poor bastards in the dirt. No. If he were to fall, it would be with a

sword in his hand. And if he were to live, it would be so that people would still be puking and cursing his name over the beer keg.

He was no angel. Angels didn't exist, only drunkards, sons of whores, and murderers with pious faces. He started fighting early, knocking teeth out of other brats' mouths, learning the harshness of life in his blood. Once, the story goes, he stole a farmhand's knife just to see how it felt when the tip scratched against his skin. The farmhand howled like a pig, and Götz laughed like someone who already knew: pain is power.

His father soon sent him away as a squire. "You must learn, my boy," he grumbled, "learn what it means to be a knight." And Götz just thought: *A knight? A knight is a dog in a tin coat who dances for the nearest sack of coins.* But he nodded. Because he knew: learning means fighting, and fighting means surviving.

The day he left was cold and gray. No heroic song, no trumpet blast. Just the rain pissing into the puddles and a boy with a mouth full of defiance. He rode off, accompanied by an old horse that stank like a brewing kettle and a dream that tasted more of blood than incense.

And so it began: the journey of a bastard of olden times, who would rather lose his fist than give in. A boy who would soon become a legend. Not because he was good. Not because he was fair. But because he hit harder, screamed louder, and swore dirtier than all the other hypocrites around him.

The morning smelled of wet leather, bad breath, and the cowardly sweat of men who claimed to be unafraid. The courtyard they sent the boy to wasn't a courtyard at all, but a mouthful of rotten teeth: a few crooked stables, a tower that looked as if a tired giant had molded it from clay while peeing, and a well whose water should have been painted, it was so murky. This was where you learned to be a knight, they said. This was where you learned how to kill with dignity and then sleep with dignity on a full stomach. Dignified, my ass.

The master of the house, for whom Götz was to serve as a squire, was named Dietrich von Irgendwo—names are all the same when the mouths are full of beer. Dietrich had a face like a beaten loaf of bread, one eye milky, the other cunning, and a belly that juttied out so far that he carried it like a small fortress. "Discipline," he grunted, "is the mother of honor." And Götz thought: *If discipline is the mother, then hunger is the father, and both beat their children.*

They gave him a bed that smelled of dead fleas and a rag of blanket that had more holes in it than the teeth in a farmhand's mouth. He still slept like a log. When you learn early enough that the world doesn't love you, you'll sleep anywhere. Morning didn't wake him; it trampled over him—hooves on stone, shouts, the tugging of ropes, a hoarse cough that sounded like someone was wringing his lungs like a wet rag.

The drill began with wooden swords heavier than the lies in the chapel. "Hands up!" yelled an old instructor, Ulrich, a scar on his neck as if someone had tried to cut him open like a sausage and then forgotten to finish the job. "Don't wave your hands! Hit! On purpose!" Götz hit. He hit until his hands burned, until his breath scratched in his throat like straw. He wasn't a genius, just stubborn. Stubbornness is a virtue rarely depicted on frescoes, but it gets you through the day.

After the drill came the lowly tasks: greasing armor, darning belts, scooping horse manure, listening to the stable master compliment the sows. The knights talked of tournaments, of pedigrees, of ladies who had bestowed favors upon them, while their servants scraped the remains of feces from under their iron boots. The world was a theater, and the stage was covered in manure.

At lunch, there was soup so thin it could have disappeared through a sieve. Götz learned to hold the spoon as if it were a dagger, because the other boys were wolves with hunger in their eyes. One of them, Jörg, had hands like shovels and a brain like moist bread. "Give it here," he growled, and his breath smelled of old cheese and regrettable decisions. Götz pretended to pass the bowl and tipped the rest into himself with the same grace with which a drunk kisses the churchyard. Jörg struck. It wasn't an honest blow; it slapped like a bucket against a wall. Götz staggered, felt the metallic buzzing in his head—that little bell that rings when the world briefly stops being serious—then he struck back. No frills. Straight, short, mean. The wooden spoon end caught Jörg's lower lip, which split like a bad sausage. The tall boy stared at him, surprised, as if a sheep had bitten him.

"Enough!" Ulrich roared, and his shadow fell over them like the lid on a pot of boiling stupidity. As punishment, both of them had to scrub the armory until the spears gleamed like undeserved medals. Jörg cursed the whole time, but Götz remained silent and scrubbed. He understood: whoever works faster in the dirt has more time to fight. And he wanted to fight. Not because he sensed some holy mission in his gut, but because fists were honest. More honest than priests, more honest than coats of arms. A fist doesn't lie; it either hits or it doesn't.

That evening, Dietrich rode into the courtyard with two real knights. Real iron, real horses, real faces worn by habit and brutality. "Tomorrow we're off," he called. "A little border trade. Those swine from over there have again levied tolls they're not entitled to. We're taking what's ours." Border trade—that's what they called it. Others call it raiding. Words are the cowardly cousins of deeds.

At night, Götz couldn't sleep. He lay on the flea grave, staring into the dark beams above him, listening to the rain secretly shagging with the wind. He thought of his father and the word "honor." It burned inside him, irritating him like a shoe that was too tight. *Honor* was a nice word when you were full. When you were hungry, *Honor* was a smile without teeth. He fell asleep, just before dawn, and dreamed of a metal arm screwing into place like a suit of armor that could never be removed. As if the body itself already knew what lay ahead.

The next day's procession was small but loud. Two knights, a few thralls, a wagon with beer barrels—peasants bribed to pry open doors—and three squires who were taken along so they could see what the world really looked like. "Look," Ulrich said to Götz, "and remember: Always look first, then strike. But when you strike, do so in such a way that you don't have to strike again." Götz nodded. He didn't like Ulrich. But he liked his tone, the dull metal in it.

The landscape passed by like an angry dog: dingy villages with fences made of dead branches, fields that looked as if they'd been beaten by the sky, and faces so tired they considered even smiling a job. A few women stood by the road, their skirts heavy with mud, watching them with that mixture of fear and hope that only people who've been sold too often and asked too rarely can manage.

"We'll talk first," said Dietrich, as the customs house came into view. It was a wooden shack pretending to be a wall. Next to it sat a man with a pike that had seen better days. A customs officer stepped out, wearing a plumed hat that bore more arrogance than brains. "In the name of—" he began. "In the name of my patience," growled Dietrich, "you are levying taxes that aren't yours." The discussion quickly smacked of trouble. Words were thrown around like dogs throw bones. The plumed hat grinned. "The prince decreed it so." Dietrich's kind eye twitched. "Your prince can—" and then the first fist flew.

It wasn't a heroic fight. No singing of blades, no courtly bowings. It was stumbling, pushing, biting. Götz was first on the sidelines, watched Jörg, the Laughing Ox, wrestle with the toll man's pike, looking as if he were dancing with an oversized toothpick. Then the toll man stumbled, his hat flew, and the world screamed for a decision. Götz leaped forward, groped for the wooden

pommel on his belt—the training sword, ridiculously short for the big words—and struck. Not pretty, not sweeping. Short and mean, again. The blow connected with the toll man's jaw. A cracking sound, no heroic song, just the honest breaking of bones lying close to the surface. The man sank as if the plug had been pulled out of his mouth.

"Good," said Ulrich. Just that one word. It tasted in his mouth as if he hadn't believed it and was now surprised that it was possible. Dietrich stomped over to the cottage, dragged out the box of receipts, tore it open, and laughed dryly. "Paper," he said, "paper is a second kind of chain." He threw the slips of paper into the wet grass, trampled them down until they became innocent mud. "We'll take a barrel," he said. "For the journey. A lesson learned."

They rolled the barrel onto the cart, and the customs officer lay beside it, bleeding silently into the morning. Götz looked at him. Not out of pity. Out of curiosity. The blood was dark, almost polite. A beautiful, calm shade of red, reflected in the raindrops. *So this is what it looks like*, he thought. Not the color of the flags, but the color that remains when the flags are taken down.

On the way back, the men talked. One bragged about a prostitute in town, her eyes like cold honey and a price like the penance after confession. Another cursed his horse, which had more guts than sense. Dietrich remained silent and drank, which was odd, because silence and drinking don't like to share a bench. Götz remained silent too. A new thought was working inside him, a small, sharp worm: You can talk, and the world laughs. You can write, and the world yawns. But when you strike, it holds its breath for a moment.

Back at court in the evening. The stable master wanted to beat knowledge out of him. "Why didn't you fend off that toll man before he raised his pike?" he snapped. Götz shrugged. "Because I wanted to see what his face looked like when he realized he was losing." The stable master raised his hand, then let it fall. "You'll end up burned, boy." "Then I'll burn bright," said Götz, only later understanding that some sentences are like iron: once said, they'll carry you if you have nothing else.

That night, sleeplessness again. The window was a black maw that had devoured the stars. Götz sat upright, his legs cold, his hands still warm from the memory of the blow. He didn't think about mercy. He thought about weight, angles, the distance between intention and success. He thought about how his father had once told him that one must fear the sky. *Why?*, thought Götz. *Heaven is far away. The fists are here.*

A few weeks later, another small group rode out. This time without a barrel, but with anger in the corners of their eyes. A farmer had refused to pay tithes. "That fellow is stubborn," said Ulrich. "Stubborn is good," said Götz. "For hitting, I mean." The farm lay behind a grove, the wind held its nose. The farmer stood at his door, a man who bore his hardship like a wet coat. "I have nothing left," he said. "You took everything last year, even the seed." Dietrich raised his hand. "A law is a law." The word fell heavily, like an axe used too often.

Götz watched the man. He saw his expression, which had already broken before the blow came. *This is the worst*, he thought, *if someone gives up beforehand*. The farmer spat in the dust as if it were the only thing left his. "Take the cart," he muttered. "Take the cow. Leave me my son." A boy stood behind him, thin, with eyes that saw too much. Something stirred in Götz, a brief, ugly reflex, something like pity that grits its teeth before it can find words.

"Leave him alone," Götz said quietly to Ulrich. "Why?" he asked. "Because the boy will fight later anyway," said Götz, "and if he loses everything today, he'll be fighting for the wrong people." Ulrich looked at him for a long time, as if he'd found a coin in a dung heap and wasn't sure if it was real. "You're young," he said. "You'll learn that most people will fight for whoever shouts in their ear first." "Maybe," said Götz. "But not today."

They took the cart and the cow and left the boy. It wasn't a victory, just a reprieve on the front lines against uselessness. Sometimes that's the best thing you can do.

Later, in the forge, Götz learned the sound of fire like a second heartbeat. The blacksmith, a silent rock with arm hair like wire, showed him how steel becomes patient when properly tortured. "Heat, blows, water," he said, "everything in its own time." Götz held the tongs, felt the steel give way, not out of kindness, but because laws lived within it that were more honest than the laws of princes. He thought: *It's the same with people. Heat, blows, water. Everything in its own time.*

At the edge of the anvil lay a pair of oddly shaped tongs, with grooves, a thread that glittered in the flame. "What are they for?" asked Götz. "For something yet to come," said the blacksmith. "For the day when someone needs something to replace the hand that bit off the world." Götz touched the metal. It was cold, but in his head he heard that distant hum again, as if a cannon were slowly consuming gunpowder beyond the wall.

When he closed his eyes that night, he knew two things: First, that the word *Honor* needs a long coat so no one can see its dirty knees. Second, that his own path wouldn't wear a coat. He wanted to walk it naked, with bruises, with blood, with laughter and curses that would insult the saints. If the world was a barrel, he would roll it. If it were a castle, he would run into it until his teeth wobbled. And if it took a hand away from him—well, then he would shove a hand of iron back into its face.

The courtyard was a zoo with no tickets, and the animals wore armor. Götz quickly learned that a knight's strength wasn't achieved through prayers, but through the weight of his fist and the speed of his lies. Every man there had a story, and they all stank of beer, garlic, and fear.

The nights were worse than the days. During the day, you could sink your teeth into the drill, swing wooden swords until your palms burned, groom horses until your fingers bled. But at night, when the fire burned down, when the straw rustled like the whispering of invisible rats, hunger came. Not just in your stomach. In your head too. A hunger for more, for something other than the endless scraping of an iron helmet.

One night, Götz lay awake, listening to the snoring of the other squires. A chorus of the lost, each note a small mockery of what their parents had dreamed of. Jörg, the big ox, snored like a dying bear. Somewhere in the corner, someone wheezed, who would probably choke on his own vomit if no one turned him over. Ulrich, the instructor, sat by the fire, drinking silently from a clay jug and staring into the embers as if she were the only honest person he knew.

"You won't remain one of them for long," he murmured, without looking at Götz. "Why?" asked Götz. "Because you see too much." "And what does that get me?" "Trouble. And maybe a name, if you don't die first."

Götz remained silent. A name. Yes, that's what he wanted. Not the pathetic rambling of people who will be forgotten tomorrow. He wanted to become a word that tasted like a blade when spoken.

The next morning, traders arrived at the farm. A cart full of barrels, fabrics, and two prostitutes who acted as if they were just passing by. The men stared after them like wolves who had forgotten they themselves were in a cage. Götz too. Not because he saw love, but because he understood that even in this accursed world, something other than blood and soup existed.

The merchants took their time, touting their wares as if they were holy relics. One pulled out a dagger with a horn handle, the blade so sharp it grinned in the light. "A true piece of craftsmanship," he said. "For a young knight who wants to do more than just swing wooden poles."

Götz stared at the thing. It was small, inconspicuous, but it held this promise: I can change your fate in seconds. He felt for his purse. Two copper pieces, begged, swindled, stolen—who cared? Not enough.

"Forget it, boy," Ulrich muttered behind him. "That thing will only get you into trouble." "Then it's exactly what I need," Götz replied, his voice so dry that it surprised even him.

He didn't get the dagger. Of course not. He was a squire, a nobody. But he kept the image in his head: the blade grinning in the light. And he knew that someday he would take one of those things. Not buy it. Take it.

That same evening, they got into an argument. Jörg, the ox, had gotten into a fight with one of the merchants because he wouldn't give him another piece of cheese. It ended in a brawl in the courtyard, beer barrels rolling, a cart tipping over. Ulrich roared, Dietrich came with his hammer-like voice, threatening to make heads roll. But chaos ensued, and in the middle of it stood Götz, his fists clenched, his heart pounding, ready to strike.

He didn't. He watched. And he learned: He who shouts loses. He who waits, wins. When it was all over, when the merchants rolled away cursing and the prostitutes fished a few coins out of the drunks' pockets, Götz stood on the sidelines and thought: This is my school. Not the sword. Not the sermons. But this chaos.

A few weeks later, the first real test came. A messenger arrived at the farm: a neighbor had refused to pay dues, and Dietrich smelled blood. He gathered his men and equipped them. Not a crusade, not a campaign. Just a dirty little revenge raid. But for Götz, it was the first opportunity to see real blood, not just grazes from a wooden sword.

They rode off at dawn. The fog hung over the fields like a foul breath. The farmer's farm was miserable—a few huts, a few pigs, a fence that looked as if it had already given up. The farmer stood outside, his arms crossed, a man with a face that looked as if life had cut a new notch into it every day with a blunt knife.

"Pay up!" Dietrich barked. "I have nothing!" the farmer shouted back. The men jumped off their horses and charged forward. It wasn't a fight. It was a slaughter of pride. They pushed open the door and plundered what little was there. Women screamed, children howled, and the old man stood there spitting in the dirt as if it were his last possession.

Götz watched. He saw a farmhand snatch an apple from a child's hand, another catch the chickens. He felt anger, but not against the farmer. Against the whole damned farce, against the fact that they were standing here in the name of "honor" and yet were nothing more than thieves with a pedigree.

Then Ulrich grabbed him by the arm. "Come," he said. "It's time you learned." He shoved a sword into his hand—not wood, real iron. "If you want to become something, boy, you have to know what it sounds like when bones give way."

Götz stared at the blade. It was heavy, cold, and it demanded blood. The farmer knelt before him, held by two farmhands. "Show him!" one yelled. "Show him how to obey!"

Götz raised his sword. He didn't tremble. But he didn't strike. He stared into the farmer's eyes, into that gray that had seen everything, and he knew: If I kill him now, I'll be nothing more than another dog in a tin can.

He lowered the blade. "Coward!" Jörg roared. "No," said Götz. "I'll raise my sword when I want to. Not when you want to."

Silence. Then a blow. Ulrich's hand, hard as iron, hit him in the face. "You'll learn," he growled. Götz spat blood and grinned—a toothy, bloody, defiantly crooked grin. "Maybe," he said. "But not today."

Later, back at court, Dietrich came to him. Not with anger, but with that strange, appraising look. "You're dangerous, boy," he murmured. "Because you don't do what you're told. That's a virtue and a curse." Götz just grinned. "Then take both."

He knew he'd crossed a line. But he also knew he'd taken a piece of himself. A piece of the name he wanted to leave behind.

That night he slept soundly. No rat rustling, no snoring disturbed him. He dreamed of a metal arm, of a fist that struck harder than any lie a prince had ever uttered. And when he awoke, he swore that he would never again be a mere spectator. Next time, he would not hesitate. Next time, he would strike—not for them, not for their laws, but for himself.

The morning came like an innkeeper who doesn't like you: too early, too loud, too sober. The fog lay over the land like a dirty sheet, and somewhere a dog barked, smarter than its master. Ulrich kicked Götz in the soles of his boots. "Get up. No practice today. Today we count." "Count what?" "Heads, damn it."

Dietrich had received word: A troop from the neighboring territory was about to march through the forest, heavily laden—grain, salt, a few crates that smelled of something worth more than the teeth in a knight's mouth. Officially escorted, unofficially careless. And carelessness is the favorite food of men like Dietrich. "We'll take them at the ford," he said. "Quickly. Hard. No talking." Those were the best words he'd ever said.

They rode off, early as thieves and silent as bad thoughts. Jörg, the ox, puffed beside Götz as if he wanted to blow away the fog. "Today is your day, little one," he grinned. "Today you will become a man." Götz thought: *I was a man when I realized that honor is just an excuse to empty people's pockets.* But he said nothing. Words are soap; they smooth everything out. Today he needed friction.

The forest absorbed them like a mouth. Damp, dark, full of teeth shaped like branches. Ulrich made hand gestures that looked like he was swatting invisible flies. *Left, down, quiet.* Quiet wasn't the troop's specialty, but greed muffles noise better than any prayer. They reached the ford: a wide, knee-deep stream pretending to be a river, and a shallow spot where wagon wheels squawked as they lost their pride.

"Here they come," Ulrich murmured. Götz saw first horses' ears, then helmets, then faces—those typical long, tired soldier faces, the kind that look as if they stopped dreaming yesterday and have forgotten why today. Five riders in front, four behind, in between two wagons, each with four oxen, and a pack of foot soldiers who loved the world as much as they hated it. Not a large troop, but big enough to hurt. Big enough that the blood, once it started flowing, would tell stories.

Dietrich raised his hand. Silence. Only the splashing of oxen, the clatter of iron, the impatient snorting of horses. Götz felt his heart catch the beat. No cowardly rustling, no hollow space filled with fear—only that hard, clear beat that says: *Now. Not later. Now.*

The signal was a whistle, short and ugly. A bird insulting the forest. Then all hell broke loose. Arrows that didn't like poetry whizzed out of the undergrowth, striking leather, flesh, screams. Jörg roared and charged, a living ram's head.

Ulrich pushed Götz forward. "Go for it, boy! To the flank, you know what I said: First look, then strike. Then do it so he can't get up."

Götz ran. The cold water splashed down his shins, his boots soaked, becoming heavy as guilt. In front of him was a man with a spear, half-turned, half-surprised, his mouth open like a silly fish. Götz didn't stop. He ducked under the spearhead, felt the draft like a brief forgiveness, and rammed his shoulder into the man's stomach. It wasn't a noble move; it was a fight. The spear fell, hands groped, searched for purchase, found Götz's collar. Too late. Götz snatched the dagger—not the merchant's dagger, for which he lacked the coin, but a blunt farmhand's dagger he had "borrowed"—and stabbed. A short, ugly path, under the ribs. It didn't matter. *clang*, it didn't *buzz*. It made that quiet, intimate sound that a knife makes in meat. A sound that has more to do with cooking than singing. The man wheezed. Götz suddenly smelled leeks, sweat, and something sweet that he would later describe only as "too late."

He drew back the dagger, the blood trailing behind it, dark and insulted. The man fell. Götz stood there a second too long, watching the legs twitch, the hands search for something that was no longer there. Then someone roared, and the world grabbed him by the neck and threw him forward.

To his left was Jörg, swinging a pike like a broom, the wrong handle, the wrong end, but no matter—he was an avalanche in human form. To his right, a rider forcing his horse through the stream, foaming at the mouth, blade raised. Götz jumped to the side, slipped, fell one knee deep into the mud, felt the pain ripping through him like a knife blade making friends. The rider came, blade down, brutal, straight. Götz instinctively raised his arm, steel striking wood—his pitiful round shield vibrated, pretending it was more than painted board. The force wrenched his arm back, and he cursed, briefly, tersely. Then he was in front again. The rider raised the blade again, ready to deliver the second blow, this assured, clean one that would excuse the first. Götz dove under the horse's neck, smelled animal, fear, steam, and plunged the dagger into the soft spot behind its foreleg. Not fair. We're not at a tournament. The horse screamed, a horrific, human scream that everyone despises and no one forgets. It reared, stumbled, toppled. The rider came with it. Iron, flesh, and water met, finding no compromise. The man landed half on Götz, heavily, damned heavily. A blow, unaimed, unsightly, ripped across Götz's forehead. Warm blood ran into his eye, and the world took on a red headline.

"GÖTZ!" someone yelled. Ulrich? Jörg? Whatever. He rolled, out of reflex, out of defiance. The rider pushed himself up, searched for his sword, found only gravel and shame. Götz was faster. He grabbed the brim of his helmet, jerked

his head to the side, and rammed the dagger into the man's throat, sideways, where the plates ceased to be polite. It felt like a door you don't want to open, but which opens anyway. The man wheezed, reached for Götz's hand, found it, squeezed hard, begged silently. Götz withdrew the dagger, and the man let go. The blood spurted. *So, that's what my name tastes like*, thought Götz, and he didn't know whether to laugh or vomit. He did both internally.

The middle was a tangle. The wagons were stuck, the oxen were spinning, tearing at the yokes, one broke his leg and screamed in the animal dialect. Dietrich rode into it like a man sure the world wouldn't send him a bill. His sword worked. Not elegantly, not boastfully. It was the work of a butcher on a long day. Two men fell, one screamed for his mother, who certainly had better things to do. A third ran. Ulrich followed him, cold as a payday, and caught up with him. There were no questions asked.

Someone at the wagon yelled "Fire!" and one of the guards, an ambitious fool, actually tried to light a torch on the tarpaulin. "No!" Dietrich shouted. "We won't burn what we're going to carry!" The fool was late in realizing how fools are, and he was lucky that Ulrich was busy. Otherwise, he would have been hung from a tree as a warning, at eye level with the crows.

Götz kept fighting. He lost count. There were only angles, sounds, pain, the brief satisfaction of a hit, the sheer surprise of a counter. A man with a beard and scars and that "I've done this thirty times before" look came toward him, axe low, footsteps bouncing. Götz's shield was little more than a pile of splinters, but sometimes a pile is enough. The axe man struck, Götz parried, not beautifully, just in the way. The second blow came from above, deadly as a tax bill. Götz jumped aside, felt the axe cut through the edge of his world. He stepped forward, hard, stupidly, his knee between the man's legs. The man made a noise as if the pipes had been bent on an organ. The axe fell. Götz brought the blade up, short, mean—chin, neck, end. The man fell, searching again for something that was no longer there. *How many times should they look for it?*, thought Götz. *Until they realize there's nothing there except what you beat into it?*

When it was over, it wasn't over. Silence after a battle is never silence. It's a space where the dead and the living share the same breath, just before one of them realizes they no longer have the right to it. The ford was reddish-brown, the wagons leaned, men whimpered, some praying, others calculating. Dietrich sat on his horse, pulling on the reins as if it had all been a walk in the park. "Gather up," he said. "The crates first. Salt is silver. And see what's in the locked ones."

Jörg and two farmhands pried open a crate. Inside lay bundles, neatly tied, like good consciences. Ulrich tore one open, smelled it, and smiled briefly. "Spices," he said. "And here—" He picked up something wrapped in oilcloth, heavy and immodest. A rifle, a handgun, the new era cast in metal. "Two of them," he murmured. "Look." Dietrich's eyes flashed. "This isn't for peasants. This is for people who like weddings with the roar of cannons." He looked at Götz. "Remember the face of the future, boy: short, loud, impatient."

Götz nodded. His hands suddenly trembled. Not from fear—that had served its purpose—but from the aftershock. The body is a terrible accountant; it writes everything down and presents the balance sheet when you think the bar is already closed. He knelt by the stream, washing the blood from his hair, from his eyes, from the wrinkles in his hands. It didn't completely go away. Blood never completely goes away. It stays in your nose, in your dreams, in your next laugh.

A young enemy lay nearby, barely older than Götz. A cut across his forehead, his hair sticking to his head, his eyes open, as if they wanted to see something else not as stupid as this ford. Götz squatted down. He placed his hand on the cold leather of the dead man's vest. "What's your name?" he asked quietly, quite senselessly, quite humanly. The name didn't come. Only the stream rippled, insulted that it had been turned into a slaughterhouse. Götz took a small medallion from the boy—no jewelry, just a wooden disc with a symbol carved into it, perhaps a luck that had run out. He put it in his pocket. Not out of greed. Out of memory. *One of us will move on*, he thought. *I'll remember that you were there.*

"Götz!" Ulrich cried. "Don't dream. Touch. Wear. Learn." Götz stood up. "I'm learning," he said. His voice was hoarse like an old rope. "What?" "That in this world, you don't ask if you may. You ask if you can." Ulrich nodded, a curt, unsentimental nod. "And?" "I can."

They rehabilitated the oxen, repaired what seemed to be wheels with ropes, and turned plunder into wealth and blood into profit. Dietrich assigned two men to do the math. "I want to know what this is worth," he said. "Not approximate songs. Numbers, damn it. Numbers are the only truth that blades respect."

The return journey was difficult. The wagons groaned, the men creaked, the forest held its breath, as if it didn't want to witness. Götz walked beside the first wagon, his hand on the wood, his ear to the sounds of his own joints. He felt every scratch, every blow like a little bell ringing somewhere inside him. No

heroic cries, just the tinkling of reality. And beneath it, deeper, something else: a humming, dark and warm. *So this is how it feels*, he thought. *Not the songs, not the crests. Just the moment when you strike and the world pauses for a moment, whether it wants to or not.*

At court, the usual drama awaited them. Cheers, as if heroes were coming. Envy, as if thieves were coming. Dietrich did what men like him do: He dished out so that everyone was dissatisfied, and kept enough to buy respect. Ulrich disappeared into the armory with the handguns. "New times, old sorrow," he murmured. "Watch your fingers, boy. Otherwise the future will take them away. And it won't ask if you're ready." Götz wiped his forehead, felt the crusted wound that would later become a line on his face, one on which stories cling. "Let it come," he said. "It will find me."

At night, he sat alone behind the smithy. The sky was polished bright, stars like nails in an oversized slate. The blacksmith came and sat down without a word. He handed him a cup, something strong and honest. "You stink of death," he said. "And of life," Götz replied. "The same, just different days."

They were silent. The fire inside the forge coughed. Götz remembered the handguns, the rifle, the short, cowardly noise. He thought of the horses, the men, the stream. The boy with the medallion. He thought of his hand, which had found what it was looking for today. And somewhere in his head, where other people have a quiet voice holding them back, something hard was forming. Not a resolution, not a prayer. A form. Metal in the embers, knowing that one day it will be an edge.

"Blacksmith," Götz finally said. "Can you build a hand that doesn't hurt?" The blacksmith looked at him as if he'd asked a stone if it wanted to fly. "You can build one that works," he said. "It'll still hurt." Götz nodded. "Good. I just wanted to know if we're being honest."

As he lay down, he still smelled blood in his hair, despite the water, despite the smoke. He closed his eyes, saw the ford, saw the dagger, heard the short, ugly song of the blade in this man's throat. His stomach rose and fell. No vomiting came. Only air. Only life. And behind it, deep, that humming he now knew: *You struck. The world listened.*

He fell asleep like someone who'd found a door that only opens from the inside. Tomorrow they would practice again. Tomorrow they would count. And someday, he knew, the world would take away the hand that had gripped him so surely today. Then he would twist it back, something harder than all flesh.

But until then, until then, he would strike. Hard. Short. So that no one would ask for a second blow.

The rain came like a punishment. It wasn't the pleasant drizzle you sing about in songs, but an endless, gray pissing from the sky, soaking you to the bone and grinning like a shabby pawnbroker. The yard turned into a mud pit, horses stood up to their hocks in mud, and the squires ran around like idiots, as if they could chase the weather away with brooms.

Götz stood in the middle of it, his cloak heavy as a wet sack. "Faster!" roared Ulrich, the old bruiser. "The enemy doesn't wait for good weather!" "Screw the enemy," muttered Götz. "The rain is worse." "What?" "Nothing," he growled and trudged on. Sometimes the wisest thing to do is keep the muzzle yourself.

They had to fetch wood, for fire, for arrows, for everything you need in war. So they set out, three squires, two thralls, and a wagon that groaned like an old dog with every turn. Jörg was there, of course. The ox was in the mood of a drunk who'd had his jug taken away. "Stop whining, little one," he sneered as Götz pushed the wagon. "If you want to become a knight, you have to learn that work stinks." "Then you're already a saint," Götz shot back.

The forest was dark, full of drops that fell from the branches and crept down their necks like cold fingers. They chopped wood, stacked it, sweating in the wet, and at one point the wagon was so full that the oxen cursed, for they didn't know human words.

On the way back, it came. At first, it was just a noise, a branch cracking. Then another. The air tensed, became thin. Ulrich wasn't there—that was the problem. Only the boys, who half-believed they were already men.

"Did you hear that?" someone asked. "A deer," said Jörg. "Or your ass." But Götz felt it in his gut: That wasn't a deer.

Then they burst out of the undergrowth. Five, six, maybe more—robbers, ragged, dirty, faces like rotten loaves of bread. One had a club, one a rusty blade, one just a look that said, "Today I'll take what I can."

"Nice car," grinned the one with the club. "Unload it, boys. Then you can go home and kiss Mom." Jörg snorted. "Fuck off." The robber's smile vanished. "Wrong answer."

And then everything happened so quickly that the rain itself held its breath.

The first robber rushed forward, club raised. Jörg swung the axe, striking him on the side of the head with a dull thud, like crushing a pumpkin. Blood spurted, the man fell, and suddenly the world was red.

Götz drew his dagger. Not a heroic sword, just a knife, but it was all he had. The second robber was coming at him, a blow from above, rough, without technique, just hatred. Götz dodged, felt the wind of the blade, stumbled, rolled in the mud. The man laughed, raised it again, and then Götz stabbed. Once. Twice. Somewhere in the stomach, again and again, until the man stopped laughing.

The servants screamed, ran, one fell, his skull bursting under the blow. Jörg roared, hacking like a madman, and Götz stood there, his knife dripping, and watched as one of the robbers saw the gap. He didn't run at Jörg, not at the servants—he ran at the wagon. At the loot.

Not the car Götz thought, and something inside him hissed like iron in fire. He jumped, grabbed the man from behind, and pulled him down. They rolled in the mud, thrashing blindly, growling like dogs. The robber stank of rotten flesh, his breath was death in anticipation. Götz bit his cheek, tasting blood and dirt. The man roared, and in that scream, Götz found the gap. He thrust the dagger under the chin, straight up, until the hilt warmed.

Silence. Only rain, heavy, cold, merciless.

Three men were lying. Two were running. One stayed and whimpered, his leg open like a slashed sack. Jörg kicked him in the skull, and the whimpering stopped. "Cowardly dogs," he spat. "They come in sixes and leave in twos."

The squires stood there panting, mud and blood mixed together, their hands shaking. One vomited. The other just stared, his eyes wide, as if he had just seen the truth—and he didn't like it.

Götz sat down in the mud. He laughed. First quietly, then louder, until Jörg stared at him. "What the hell are you laughing about?" "Because they thought we were children." Götz's voice was hoarse. "And now they're lying there like slashed pigs."

Jörg grinned crookedly. "You're sick." "Then maybe being sick is the only thing that's healthy here."

When they returned with the wagon, covered in blood and wood, Ulrich looked at them, examining them like a butcher examines meat. "What happened?"

"Robbers," said Jörg. "We've sorted it out." Ulrich nodded slowly. "And you?" he asked Götz. "I've learned." "What?" Götz wiped the knife on his trousers, mud and blood smearing into a color no painter had yet invented. "That you don't wait for the blow to come. You go towards it."

Ulrich's eyes flashed briefly. "Good. You won't live long. But when you die, it won't be quiet." Götz grinned. "Quiet doesn't suit me."

He couldn't sleep that night. The rain drummed on the roofs, the rats danced in the walls, but that wasn't what kept him awake. It was the faces. Not the dead. They were simply gone, like extinguished candles. No – it was the moment before, that instant when they realize it's over. That naked, helpless wonder. It gnawed at him. And at the same time, it made him bigger, heavier, stronger.

He stood up, went outside, and let the rain pour down on him. He stretched out his hands as if to drink the water, to wash away the blood. "More," he murmured. "If that's the game, then more."

And somewhere, behind the thunder, the world laughed.

The messenger arrived at dawn, soaking wet, his eyes so hollow as if the night had sucked his brains out. "Campaign," he gasped, "orders from the Count. Congregate at the old hedge mill. Two days. Provisions for a week. No hesitation." No hesitation—that was the favorite phrase of men who weren't themselves in the front line.

Dietrich stood in the gatehouse, folding his arms over his stomach as if he had to secure his own barrel. "You heard me," he grumbled. "No drama. We're off." Ulrich nodded curtly, the kind of nod that tells you the man has made his peace with hell. Jörg grinned, bloodthirsty like a dog that believes bones fall from the sky. Götz was silent. Something inside him stepped forward, grasped his helmet, and tightened the straps. Not honor. Not duty. Something else. The silent will, **not** to be overrun by other people's shoes.

The courtyard was an organ of clanging, snorting, and cursing. Suits of armor were closed, horses were bitten because men tinkered with them as if they were broken gates. The blacksmith yelled for coal, for tongs, for peace that never came. He gave Götz a new ring armor for his left arm, heavy as a threatening idea. "You won't like it," he said. "But it'll hold something back until the world takes something away from you."

Götz nodded. "Then let her try."

They set out. Not with trumpets. With teeth. Carts of bread so hard it could be made into arrowheads, barrels of thin beer, ropes, tarpaulins, spare spears that look like arguments no one wants to hear. It didn't rain, but the land looked as if it had stopped drying. Villages lay there like beaten dogs no one wanted to pet anymore. Mothers peered through cracks in doors. Men pretended not to stare. Children counted horses' hooves and in doing so understood something that would never leave them.

Half an empire was standing around the assembly point. People from everywhere, coats of arms like colorful lies, shouting at each other. A captain—one of those bleached-out, yelling voices with a voice made of chain mail—paced up and down the front line. "The Egersdorf Bridge," he shouted. "We'll take it. Whoever holds the bridge holds the road. Whoever holds the road holds the enemy's tongue in a vice." Well said. The stream didn't care.

The formation was a textbook no one wanted to read: riflemen in front, pikemen behind, knights in a wedge formation on the flank, light cavalry in reserve. Ulrich pressed a round shield into Götz's hand, freshly covered in leather, still smelling of animal. "Hold that thing as if it were your last prayer," he growled. "And pray briefly. Long prayers cost fingers."

They marched. The bridge lay like a narrow mockery over a dark stream, willows on both sides, the village in the background—a few houses, a mill, a tower that only kept watch in stories. Beyond the bridge: pikes in a neat line, bright spikes, behind them archers, behind them a handful of horsemen who looked as if they'd rather be somewhere else. Not a large force, but cleverly positioned. It would hurt.

The first signal was the whistle of a man who believed the air obeyed him. Arrows whizzed, not many, but enough to tell us: We're here. One hit a man two rows in front of Götz in the eye; he fell as if someone had pulled a thread through his heart. "Shield up!" someone yelled, as if it were a new idea. Shields went up. A second hailstorm. A third. The air became a sieve. The men turned to bread.

"Forward!" roared the captain, and the philistines marched, poles like teeth about to dig into something. Götz ran at the flank, Ulrich beside him, Jörg two steps ahead, the axe smiling broadly. The bridge was narrow; in a place like this, men learn what it means to **row** to have. He who stumbles dies; he who steps forward lives—for the moment.

The first made it onto the planks. Arrows pierced the wood, bounced, and searched for flesh. The leading spears thrust, hit, pulled, and shoved. A dirty, smacking rhythm. The opponents held their ground: thrust, counterthrust, shield edge in the face, spearhead in the belly, the path to the water short and icy cold. Two of us fell over the parapet, flawless men who now lay in a stream, wanting nothing more. The village watched. The mill pretended to be deaf.

"Over to the right!" Ulrich shouted. "Past the pillars!" And then Götz realized that cleverness outlives courage. They didn't run **above** the bridge; they went **under**. She walked along the bank, where willows dipped their thin fingers into the water. The bank was slippery, low, but manageable. "There!" Ulrich pointed to the pillar, a massive block of stone, mossy and cold. "Through!"

Arrows whined, they didn't like it. One scratched Götz on the hip, so close that the pain sounded like a laugh. Jörg cursed, ducked, and kept running, heavily but fast. Three of the enemy men jumped down the embankment, clubs, short swords, their faces twisted as if war had given them a mask that was too small. The first one charged Götz. Götz didn't wait – he leaped forward, drove his shield against the man, felt ribs give way, twisted around, struck short, diagonally, blade across chin – there was blood, there was calm. The second came from the left with a club, and Jörg caught him with a blow that looked like he was lecturing a tree. The man slumped, leaving only a fragment of his memory of the club.

"On!" Ulrich's voice: the kick in the back you thankfully hate. They pressed themselves against the pillar, smelling the coolness and algae. Above, the bridge roared like a rickety stage on which too many bad actors were shouting the same lines. "Ladder!" one of us shouted, and a wooden ladder was handed over—God knows where. Ulrich grabbed it and placed it at an angle against the edge of the bridge. "You first," he growled at Götz.

Götz climbed. The steps were slippery, his hands wet, his fingers burning. Above him, shadows—shields, legs, gasping throats. He jumped up, grabbed the edge, pulled himself, felt the pain in his arm, as if the muscle were about to give up. An opponent leaned forward, a spear thrust downward. Götz yanked his shield up, the spear hit, slipped, slid over leather, the tip bit into the wood, stuck. Götz pulled, tore at the edge, was on top, half, then all the way, a fist, a knee, a curse that helped nothing and yet did everything. The spearman cursed, tried to pull the spear back; Götz let him pull—and at the same time thrust forward, briefly, ugly. The man made that too-late face that Götz knew, and fell backward, disappearing between legs, shields, history.

Jörg came up beside him, stomped the last few rungs like a beast that doesn't like stairs. He started as if he were collecting debts. Two fell, one escaped, not far. Ulrich was suddenly there, as if the pillar had spat him out. "Wedge!" he roared. And they formed him as best they could: shield points together, shields close, blades like tongues that don't recite poetry.

They pushed. The enemy pushed back. The air smelled of metal, of men, of fear one doesn't want to admit. "Forward!" Ulrich yelled. "One more time! One more—" An arrow nicked his shoulder and lodged. He cursed as if a god had spit in his soup. "I don't have time for you!" he growled at the arrow, broke it off, and pressed himself back into line, as if pain were merely a polite reminder.

A horn blew on the left. Our riflemen had found space somewhere. Salvo. The enemy wavered. Our spearmen took advantage, pushed, felt flesh give way like bad dough. A man slid past Götz and jumped into the water, better wet than dead—a sensible thought that most people have too late. "Now!" roared Dietrich from behind, never one to miss his moment. Knights stormed the left flank. Not a heroic gallop, more of a rough push, but it was enough. The enemy line buckled like bread in thin soup.

The bridge belonged to us. Not by gods. By **Weight**. By the relentless will to put one foot in front of the other, while everything inside you is screaming to finally stay home.

On the other side, they started running—not all of them, but enough to make the rest doubt. Doubt is a dagger that always finds the right place. An enemy with a flag made the mistake of standing still. Götz ran at him, jabbed him in the ribs with his shield, the flag fell, and so did the man. Götz picked up the flag, saw the symbol—a wheel, a silly, smiling thing—and hurled it over the parapet into the stream. "Swim, honor," he growled.

"Halt!" Ulrich shouted. "Don't chase! Line!" The word "line" rarely tasted good, but this time it was gold. He who chases dies alone. He who holds line dies together—or lives. They advanced, pushed the edge of the bridge clear, and deployed skirmishers who made escape costly. Dietrich rode up and down, counting, dividing, grabbing two men who were trying to get too far forward, and explained the world to them with a short sword.

There was no silence. But something pretended it was. The bridge finally lay still, only the water beneath it acted as if it were celebrating a private victory. Men gasped, blood ran in furrows as if the wood were made for it. Someone prayed. Someone laughed. Someone wept without realizing it.

Götz stood in the middle of the bridge, breathing in the world, tasting iron, smoke, the cheap sweat of worry. A broken spear was stuck on his shield; he didn't pull it out. Sometimes you leave things where they hurt, so you don't forget what they're called.

"Well done," said Ulrich, as if praise were an illness one briefly allowed to take. "Why did you go under the bridge?" "Because everyone up above was shouting," said Götz. "No one down below was shouting. You can hear yourself thinking." Ulrich nodded. "Remember that. Never think for long. But think. And when you hit, hit in such a way that you don't have to repeat it."

Dietrich came over and wiped his face, as if he could sort out the wrinkles. "The street is ours," he grumbled. "The village will pay. Not today, not honestly, but it will pay." He looked at Götz, examining him. "You're still whole." "Yet," said Götz. "Don't get used to it," said Dietrich. "The new age is in a hurry. It devours fingers, hands, men, names. And it only spits back those made of iron." Götz looked at his hand. It was bleeding from two knuckles, small tributes to the day. Iron, he thought. If necessary.

They secured the village, which meant: They stood in kitchens, pretended to defend the world, and quickly counted what they could carry. The priest brought a key, the innkeeper brought beer that tasted like a cow had been bathed in it. Someone found an old hand pipe in the mill, too short, too heavy, but it spoke the same language as the new ones. Ulrich held it up like a grim gospel. "Here," he said. "This will eat away the old dance. No shield, no pedigree, just gunpowder and a spark."

By evening, smoke hung over Egersdorf like a blanket no one had washed. A crow perched on the bridge post, looking at Götz as if asking how long he intended to remain interesting. Götz sat down on the plank, legs above the water, helmet beside him, his eyes on the current. He still had the medallion of the dead boy from the ford in Block 4 in his pocket; he took it out and turned it between his fingers. **Remember**— not romantic, just true.

"You're sitting there like a poet," Jörg growled, standing next to him and belching his day's work. "I'm just counting," Götz said. "What?" "Steps. Punches. Chances." "And?" Götz put the piece of wood away. "That was enough today."

Ulrich stepped up, tying his shoulder with a strip of canvas, as if settling a dispute. "Tomorrow we'll march on," he said. "The count wants to nail down village after village. Street after street. Whoever holds the roads holds their

necks." "And who will hold us?" asked Götz. Ulrich looked into the current, as if there were a floating answer there. "No one," he said. "Only yourself. And when the time comes: the blacksmith."

The night grew cold. Men snored, others stared, one laughed too loudly and was silenced. Götz lay down in a tent that smelled of wet dog. His hand throbbed. No great pain, just this intrusive reminder that one is not made of stone. He thought of the ladder, the pillar, the spear in his shield. Of Ulrich's arrow, which hadn't had time to grow. Of Dietrich's sentence about the new era. He thought of **iron**.

Then he fell asleep like someone who had realized that a bridge isn't made of planks, but of steps that wouldn't give way. Tomorrow he'd start again. Another bridge, another stream, other men with the same faces. The world rarely had imagination. But Götz had willpower. That was enough for now.

Winter came like a fat, smelly dog that simply settled into the castle and wouldn't leave. The walls sweated cold, breath hung in the air like smoke, and every step sounded like walking on wet wood. Men became small in such winters. Their voices shrank, their hands trembled, their eyes emptier than the storerooms.

It was worse for the miners. No supplies, no respect, no warmth. Götz slept on a straw sack that had long since become more made of mice than straw. Every night he heard them gnawing, squeaking, running. "If you're hungry," Jörg murmured one evening, "catch one." He laughed, but it wasn't the kind of laughter that warms the air. It was the kind of laughter that says: We're all going to die, and I know it.

During the day they practiced. Sword against wood, shield against frost, hooves in the mud. Ulrich drove them like a man who knew that standing still was worse than death. "Movement keeps you alive," he yelled, "and if not, at least warm." He hit someone with a stick if they showed signs of weakness. It wasn't a school; it was a torture chamber for the unfinished.

Götz gritted his teeth. He was no genius, no born fighter. But he was stubborn. Tenacity is an ugly virtue, but it gets you further than prayers. And so he stood there, sword raised, arms burning, hands open, and when Ulrich asked, "Still?", he growled, "Still."

One evening, the wind howling through the battlements like a drunken choir, a troop of messengers brought news: a major advance would soon be made. No

robbers, no villages—a small siege. A neighbor, an adversary, as they all called them, had refused to pay tribute. So he was to be ridden down, with fire and iron, as was customary.

"This is your test," Ulrich said to Götz. "No more petty raids. You'll see what war is." "And what is war?" "A hole that's always hungry," Ulrich growled, "and you're its food."

They set off, in the slush, in armor that was too cold, and boots that were too thin. The enemy's castle was little more than a tower with palisades, but it held. Inside were peasants, farmhands, a few men with courage in their hearts but not enough flesh on their bodies. Outside: them, with torches and ladders and the patience of dogs.

The first night was screaming and smoke. Arrows hissed, men fell, the fire didn't catch because the snow smothered it. The second night was worse, because no one believed it would be easy anymore. Hunger bit from within, fear from without. But Götz stood there, shivering, freezing, holding the ladder while men crawled up to catch arrows. One fell right next to him, his face pierced by a bolt, one eye gone. Götz stared. He couldn't look away. So this is what the end looks like. No singing, no glory. Just a hole that swallows you whole.

On the third day, the tower fell. Not through heroic courage, but by a chance hit: a flaming arrow that hit the roof, which was dry enough. Smoke, screams, then they broke through.

Inside, it wasn't a fight. It was a slaughter. Men screamed, women screamed, children screamed, and the iron made no difference. Jörg raged like a beast that finally smelled food. Ulrich was precise, silent, as if settling scores. Dietrich laughed, that short, ugly laugh that had more to do with numbers than with blood.

And Götz? He stood in the courtyard, sword in hand, and felt his body making the decision alone. A man leaped at him, a farmhand with a rusty axe, eyes filled with panic. Götz parried, struck back, not beautifully, not cleverly, but hard. The axe flew, the man fell. The next man came, stumbled, Götz kicked him in the face, heard the bone crack. No thinking. Only movement. Only survival.

When it was over, the yard was full. Smoke hung like a heavy blanket, the snow was reddish-brown, the screams diminished until only whimpers remained.

Dietrich gathered the loot: sacks of grain, a few crates, a few pieces of jewelry. "Everything's fine," he grumbled, "it's worth it."

Götz sat down in a corner. He wasn't shivering from the cold. He was shivering because the world smelled different now. Blood, smoke, fear. It settled into his skin, his teeth, his hair. He felt it as if he would never get rid of it.

Ulrich came over and sat down next to him, both staring into the fire. "How was it?" "Shit," Götz muttered. Ulrich nodded. "Then you're on the right track."

That night, Götz dreamed. Of an iron hand that no one could break. Of a fist that laughed when others cried. He woke up drenched in sweat and knew: The world would take something from him. But he would strike back. Harder. Colder. So that no one would forget.

And outside, the winter dog continued to howl, spreading itself over the castle like a stinking, rotten carpet, and the men snored beneath it like little, tired flies.

The winter dragged on like a bad joke no one wants to finish. Every day was the same: chill in the bones, hunger in the stomach, the smell of smoke that never left their clothes. The men drank, swore, slept when they had the chance, and died when they had to. Nobody made a big deal about it anymore. Death was routine, like shoveling shit or biting your nails.

Götz observed everything. He spoke little, laughed rarely, and sometimes fought with the other squires, simply to remember that he was still there. He realized that the world gives you nothing you don't take yourself. That no one waits until you're ready. And that "honor" was just a word the princes used to wrap their raids into prayers.

One evening, when they returned from the siege and the storeroom was half full again, he sat down in the smithy. The blacksmith, silent as ever, pushed iron into the fire, hammered, and remained silent. Götz stared into the embers as if searching for an answer.

"Why do you hammer the metal for so long?" he finally asked. The blacksmith didn't look up. "Because otherwise it won't hold." "And if it breaks anyway?" "Then you reforge it. Harder. Colder. Until it stays."

Götz nodded. That's exactly it. That's life. You get beaten, you get broken—and if you're not reforged, you'll remain scrap.

The weeks passed. Men came, men went. Some died, others deserted, still others turned to dust, remembered by no one. But Götz persevered. He learned to eat what others wouldn't touch. He learned to sleep in the rain, to march in the snow, to fight in the dirt. He learned that you'd better strike before someone tells you why you shouldn't.

Once, he got into a fight with Jörg—not joking, but serious. It was over a piece of meat, barely the size of a fist, that someone had stolen from the kitchen. Jörg wanted it, and so did Götz. There were no words, only fists. Jörg hit hard, but Götz didn't fall. He kept getting up, like a dog that doesn't know when it's dead. In the end, he spat blood, laughed, and bit Jörg's neck until he screamed. Ulrich separated them, cursing, but there was a twinkle in his eyes: The boy is learning.

And then came the day that changed everything. No major fight, no battle. Just a patrol, a small skirmish at the edge of the woods. An arrow, suddenly, out of nowhere. It struck a squire beside him—through the chest, straight, clean. The boy was dead before he fell. Götz stared at him. A face that had been laughing yesterday, today already cold.

Then Götz knew: every breath is borrowed. Every blow could be the last. So you had to strike as if it were always the last. Without hesitation, without asking for permission.

That night he lay awake. The rats ran, the wind whistled, and this image grew in his mind: an iron fist no one could break. A hand that was more than flesh. Something that remains when everything else rots.

He clenched his fists, felt the trembling, the pain, the cold. "Come on," he murmured into the darkness. "Take what you want. I'll reforge myself. Tougher than you."

Thus ended the first chapter of his life. No brilliant beginning, no fairytale hour. Just a boy who had learned that in this world, you don't ask politely. You take. You hit. You stay standing when others fall.

And somewhere, quietly, he already heard the song that people would later sing when they cursed or praised his name:

Götz von Berlichingen – the one who doesn't give in.

The young Götz

The castle where Götz grew up was no fairytale palace. No white tower, no fine halls, no singing minstrels. It was a damp, stinking block of stone that accumulated more cold in winter than any tomb, and smelled of sweat and dung in summer. "Jagsthausen Castle" they called it. To Götz, it was a damned cage with rat holes.

He wasn't the only child, but he was the loudest. Even as a rascal, he had a voice that frustrated the servants. When he screamed, it wasn't out of fear, but out of defiance. Once, they said, he climbed out of the crib, ran barefoot across the stone floor, straight into the kitchen, where he stole a piece of bread while the maid chased him. He grinned like a little devil with baby teeth.

The father, a knight of the old school but with an empty purse, tried to drill the children. "Honor, Götz," he grumbled, "honor is the only thing we have left." But what good is honor to an eight-year-old when he hears mice at night and his stomach growls? Götz listened to the sermons, nodded perhaps, but his mind was all about the question: How do I get the next piece of bread? How do I keep the others away from my neck?

The mother was gentler, spoke softly, tried to bring order to the mess. But even she knew: You couldn't soften the world. Not here, not now. So she let the boy get away with it when he once again fought in the yard until one of them bled. "He's a Berlichingen," she would murmur. "And Berlichingens don't stop until one of them is down."

The farm was a school without books. Götz learned from farmhands how to kick a horse when it disobeys. He learned from peasant children how to throw stones without being seen. He learned from the old men that alcohol replaces any prayer. "Here, little one," one said, pressing a horn of beer into his hand when he was nine. "You'll soon realize that water is only good for washing." Götz drank, grimaced, coughed, but laughed. It tasted of the future.

He wasn't popular, but he was feared. If someone provoked him, he struck. No hesitation. No waiting. Once, he broke another boy's nose just because the boy had stolen his wooden sword. Blood spurted, the boy howled, and Götz stood there with sparkling eyes. "That's mine," he growled. From then on, they kept their distance.

The castle itself was his playground, if you defined "play" broadly enough. He climbed the walls, spat down, and aimed at the chickens. He sneaked into the

pantry at night and stole cheese that the rats would have eaten anyway. He ran through the rain, fell in the dirt, and got back up. He knew: If you fall, you get up. If you don't get up, you'll remain dirt.

The winters were the worst. The cold gnawed like a hungry dog. The blankets were thin, the stoves rarely glowed, and there was never enough food. Once, Götz lay awake all night, listening to the wind whistle through the cracks, and swore to himself: I won't remain a freezing dog. I'll be one who bites.

In the morning, he went out, still half asleep, and hit one of the farmhands who was laughing at him because his feet were blue from the cold. The farmhand hit back, hard, but Götz bit. Teeth in flesh, blood in his mouth. He spat it out, laughed—and got a beating for it. But the laughter persisted. Beatings hurt, yes. But they also prove that you're alive.

Once, a traveling merchant came to the castle. He had blades, daggers, and jewelry. The adults haggled over prices, while Götz stalked around like a cat. There lay a small dagger, no bigger than his forearm, with a simple blade. He reached for it, felt the metal, cold, heavy, honest. "Hands off!" barked the merchant, slapping him on the hand. Götz glared at him, his eyes black as coal. "One day," he murmured, "I'll get one of those. And then I won't ask you."

The merchant laughed, that patronizing laugh adults use when they think children are harmless. But Götz was serious. He knew: guns weren't toys. They were keys. Keys to food, to respect, to everything.

The years dragged on, every day a small battle. Against hunger. Against boredom. Against other children. Against his father's sermons, which always spoke of honor and never of bread. But Götz absorbed it all. The mockery, the beatings, the cold. He absorbed it like iron in fire, which grows harder the more it is struck.

And then, one evening, he stood on the wall, spat into the courtyard, and whispered into the night: "I will be more than this filth. I will be more than freezing and begging. I will be a name. A name that will remain long after the rest has rotted away."

The wind carried his words, whistled them through the trees, and carried them across the fields. No one heard them. But Götz heard himself. And that was enough.

The castle was stone and wind, but the heart of it was the family, and that was no better than the walls: cracked, cold, full of holes.

The father – Reinhard von Berlichingen, a knight who acted as if the world were still as it had been a hundred years ago. "Honor, Götz," he murmured, "honor is the only thing we have left." He sat in the evenings by the fire, which gave off more smoke than warmth, a mug of thin beer in his hand, and talked of the old days. Battles, tournaments, horses that galloped like gods. But his armor was rusting in the corner, and the wine no longer came from Italy, but from the neighbor's sour barrel.

Götz listened, but he also saw the calluses on his father's hands, the lists of debts on the table, the messengers with their demands. Honor, he thought, doesn't feed mouths. Honor doesn't warm when the wind whistles through the cracks. And yet, when his father spoke, something flashed in his eyes, a remnant of brilliance that wouldn't let Götz go. Perhaps honor was worthless, but it made the old man straight, while everything else bent him.

His mother was the opposite: soft, quiet, with hands always mending something—clothes, wounds, moods. She spoke softly, almost in a whisper, as if she knew that too loud words could shatter the walls. She kept the business running when his father once again drank too much or remained too silent. And she looked at Götz when he came home with a bloody lip after a fight and said simply, "You're a Berlichingen. That means you fall down, but you don't stay down."

There were siblings too. Too many, too loud, too hungry. Brothers who fought with him, sisters who cursed him for stealing their last piece of bread. One of his brothers, Konrad, was older, stronger, and often held Götz's head in the puddle, just to show him that size counts even underwater. But Götz bit his wrist, kicked, spat, laughed—and got back up. Konrad scolded him, his mother separated them, his father grumbled about "knightly virtue"—but everyone in the yard knew: This boy wouldn't let himself be drowned.

The worst were the evenings when father started preaching about honor and mother tried to make the pot of thin soup seem fuller than it was. Then they all sat around the table, the wind rattled the window, and everyone knew: Tomorrow wouldn't be any better. One of the brothers belched, a sister cried, father cursed princes who wanted too much and peasants who gave too little. Götz chewed his bread, bit down harder, as if it were a throat, and remained silent.

There were days when his father took him to the armory—a dark chamber hung with shields that had seen better days, swords with notches, helmets with dents. "Do you see this?" he asked, holding up the old iron gauntlet. "This is our inheritance. No gold, no land. Only iron. This is the only thing that remains when everything else decays."

Götz took the glove, too heavy for his thin arms, and pulled it on. He clenched his fist, felt the weight, the clinking. Something clicked inside him. This is what power feels like, he thought. Not words, not prayers—iron. His father looked at him, serious, almost proud. "One day you will wear this. And you will know what it means." "What does it mean?" asked Götz. His father was silent for a long time. Then he murmured, "That the world hates you, but must respect you."

His mother tried to shape him differently. She spoke of humility, of compassion. "Not every enemy is your enemy, Götz. Sometimes he's just a hungry person." "Then he should fight like me," the boy growled. She sighed. "You have more fire than the others. Be careful it doesn't burn you." He just grinned. "Then I'll burn. But brightly."

There were also moments that seemed almost like childhood. When he ran through the yard with his siblings, rolled around in the snow, and bashed wooden swords until his fingers went numb. But it always ended in blood. A broken tooth, a split lip, a knee full of splinters. And Götz was always in the thick of it, always the last one standing. Not because he was stronger. But because he never accepted that it was over.

Once, he ripped a brother's shirt in a fight over a piece of cheese. His father came over, yelled, and hit him. Götz staggered, fell, and got up again. "Again!" he cried, his face red, his eyes sparkling. His father stared at him, surprised. Then he laughed bitterly. "You're a fool. But maybe you're the fool we need."

The family wasn't a haven. It was a battle, day after day. Love was there, somewhere, but it lay buried under layers of hunger, anger, and pride. And Götz absorbed it all. His father's pride, his mother's toughness, his siblings' rivalry. It forged him. Not soft, not friendly. But hard, stubborn, unbending.

And one evening, as his father was once again raving about the old ways of chivalry and his mother was quietly filling the bowl, Götz thought: You're talking. You're dreaming. But I'll be the one who really strikes.

He placed his hand on the cold iron glove hanging next to the door and whispered, "Wait and see."

The yard wasn't a training ground. It was a pit into which boys were thrown to see who would crawl out as a dog. Götz understood this early on. No one told him the rules, so he made his own. Rule one: Hit first. Rule two: Hit in such a way that you don't have to look for a third rule. Rule three: Get back up.

In the morning, when the fog hung over the battlements like an old rag, the wind carried the smell of wet wood and horse breath through the holes in the walls. The stable master woke them with a voice that sounded as if he'd eaten nails for breakfast. "Come on! Wooden swords! Straps tight! Feet under your ass and brains out!" He was a man who knew no patience, only a waste of time. "Guardia!" he roared when they tried to appear noble. "Are you a peacock or a fighter?" And then he struck. Not with tenderness. With conviction.

Götz always stood at the front, not because he was allowed to, but because he went there. The wood in his hands made his fingers numb. The swords were too heavy for boys' arms, intentionally, they said. "So you learn." Learning meant bloody palms, hard forearms, shoulders that ached at night like debts. When the stable master called "Hit!", wood clapped on wood, and the yard became a drum. The other boys howled or pretended to laugh. Götz was silent. He hit. And if someone came too close, he used the edge, a tiny, nasty angle that caught the other in the fingers. "Ouch!" - "Learn."

Jörg—the big, dumb bull, already known from Block 1—was the favorite opponent. Not because he was elegant, but because he was like a millstone: If you don't dodge him, you're flour. He hadn't liked Götz ever since the little guy had bitten his ego out of his face. So he singled him out. "Hey, little one. Ready for some new holes?" Götz grinned crookedly. "Always."

They approached each other, boots in the dirt, wood on wood. Jörg swung broadly, like men kicking down doors. Götz ducked, parried narrowly, felt the force in his teeth. He did what awkward people do: he didn't put on a show, he took the gap. A quick step to the side, a blow to the back of Jörg's hand, another to the forearm, then a prod with the pommel to his stomach. Jörg wheezed, surprised that air wasn't infinitely available. "Foul!" someone yelled. "Learn the rules!" the stable master yelled back. "Rule one: Breathing is for winners."

In the end, Jörg was not lying, but he knew again that he was lying. And that was enough for Götz. He walked away, his wooden sword casually at his shoulder, his palms burning like fresh sins.

After the drill came "duty." That meant dirt. Greasing armor, mending chainmail, oiling belts, shoveling horse manure. None of it was heroic; all of it was war. Götz memorized how the rings interlocked, where the weak points were, which buckle would break in an emergency. "Look, boy," the blacksmith once said, "here's the rivet. If it breaks, your beautiful pride will suddenly be a hole." He banged with the hammer. "Everything has a point where it gives up. You just have to know where."

In the evenings, when the yard emptied and the fires in the pans sizzle softly, Götz often stayed behind. He took two wooden swords and practiced against an imaginary enemy, one more honest than the real ones: He didn't lie. He ran along the edge of the wall, jumped, rolled, and got back up. He didn't count the blows, he counted the breaths. Once, he fell, landed hard, saw stars that didn't exist, and laughed into the dust. A farmhand saw this and shook his head. "The boy is sick." "Then perhaps illness is the only thing that will make me healthy," murmured Götz.

The first "real" fights didn't take place in the field, but in the yard. When men drank too much. When farmhands thought a squire should learn respect. When merchants counted dishonestly. One market day, wet and windy, a cloth merchant shoved a hand onto a girl's hip that didn't belong there. The girl's brother screamed, the merchant laughed. Götz saw it, and before his head could agree, his hand was already out. The blow came from the hip, short, hard. The merchant staggered, staring in surprise at the blood on his lip. "Brat!" He grabbed a pole and swung wildly. Götz dived, thrusting – with his shoulder, his elbow, his head. Not noble moves, just honest ones. The man fell, the cloth in the mud. The girl's brother yelled "Thank you!", the guards came, saw Götz, saw the merchant, saw the girl, the world rearranged itself as it always does: after the loudest argument.

Ulrich, who later became his instructor, stood on the sidelines and said nothing. When it was all over, he nodded to Götz. "You look right. You hit right. Now learn. When you stop, and you might die later." Götz wiped the blood from his forehead and nodded back. "Later is enough."

He also learned to lose. Once, an older squire challenged him – Heinrich, thin, nasty, with eyes like two ice-cold nails. "Well, dog boy? Want to show how you bark?" They fought with sticks, not wooden swords; sticks are more honest.

Heinrich danced, light-footed, slashing at hands, knees, calves, hitting, hitting, hitting, until Götz burned like a pyre. Götz wanted in, wanted to grab hold, wanted to break – Heinrich wouldn't let him. In the end, Götz lay in the dust, his knee twisted, his breath whistling. Heinrich didn't laugh. He nodded. "You'll be back. I can see that." – "I'm coming now," hissed Götz, tried to get up, but his knee said **No**. He lay there, cursing, biting his sleeve. Heinrich offered him his hand. Götz took it, reluctantly, stood up, and limped away. He hated him for being fair. Fairness is a knife without a handle.

That same week, Götz sat in front of the smithy at night, his knee cold, his ego hot. The blacksmith came out, sat down, and silently handed him a piece of stale bread. Götz chewed, chewing, tasting iron dust and honesty. "How do you do it better?" he asked. The blacksmith tapped him on the forehead. "In there first. Legs heal. Brain learns." - "And when the legs are healed again?" - "More brain. And then hands. In that order." Götz nodded. That was the only sermon he liked.

In the spring, when the ditches at the edge of the fields began to stink, the squires were given "exits." This was a big word for short walks around the castle. They were allowed out into the meadows, under supervision, as if the world were a farm that had only grown larger. They were supposed to "know the area." They already knew the area: They could smell who was hungry.

On one of these rounds, they met three boys from the village. Farm boys, but not lambs. "Hey, you castle-eaters," called the tallest, "have you got your golden panties on?" Götz went over. No one held him. "Show me yours," he said. The blow came without a drumroll—the farmer was fast. Götz swallowed blood, felt joy. They tangled up like two dogs on a chain too long. One of the squires tried to intervene; Ulrich held him back. "Leave him alone," he murmured. "He's just learning."

They threw themselves, wrestled, slapped with their open hands until their fingers burned, kicked, and stumbled into a puddle. Götz was smaller, but he was difficult to push. He clamped himself onto the farmer's belt, twisted his hip, and suddenly the other man was on top. Götz sat on top, slapped, once, twice, three times, not nicely, just firmly. "That's enough," Ulrich said dryly, and pulled him up. The farmer spat blood and laughed. "You're not one of those soft castle brats." "No," said Götz. "I am me."

But he also learned his limits. At the river, on a later lap, he slipped, hit his shoulder against a rock, and the world briefly leaped away. The water wanted him, cold as an enemy. Jörg pulled him out by his collar, cursing: "Don't die on

me before I hit you myself, little one." Götz coughed, laughed, and spat water. "You have to be faster, bull." They both laughed, and in that laughter was what unites men who otherwise take everything: space.

His father now tested him more often in the armory. "Come on, boy. Let's see if you're a man yet." He gave him a blunt short sword and a shield, and competed with a long stick himself. "Your reach is shorter. So what do you do?" - "Closer," said Götz. - "How close?" - "Until you don't like my breath." His father nodded, and then they approached each other. The stick whipped quickly, Götz felt wood searching for his skin. He pushed, parried, received, got under the stick, thrust - his father twisted, blocked, smiled thinly. "Good. You won't fight pretty. That's honest." On the third round, Götz hit him dully in the hip. His father paused, looked at him, not angrily, not proudly - attentively. "Again," he said. And they continued until sweat replaced words.

The first**real**The fight that remained in Götz's head's chronicle occurred one Saturday, after the mass that no one liked. A servant—Ludwig, broad, rude—had taken a knife from a younger squire. Just because he could. The boy was crying, very unknightly. Götz intervened. "Give him the knife." - "Do me." Ludwig grinned, his teeth yellow, his heart empty. He swung his arm, not too fast, because he believed time was on his side. Götz stepped forward, parried at the wrist, twisted, just as the blacksmith had shown him when they had once discussed blade angles. Ludwig let go of the knife reflexively, surprised at how quickly fingers learn. Götz caught it, held it, twisted the tip toward Ludwig. "Enough," he said. Nothing theatrical. Just the word that should count. Ludwig nodded—a man who had understood that today was not his day. The younger squire took a breath as if he had drunk water. Later, alone, Götz's hands trembled. Not from fear. From the aftermath. The body remains in the battle, even if the mind keeps running.

In the evening, he lay in the smithy again, his shoulder against the warm wall. The blacksmith was grinding iron, smelling of coal. "Today you haven**not**escalate," he muttered. "That's harder than striking." - "When do you striken**not**?" - "If you have already won." - "And when do I beat**despite it**?" - "If someone wants to steal your future." Götz liked that. Future was a big word for a boy, but he liked big words, as long as they felt like blades.

In the summer, the tournament days came in the next town, a miserable spectacle without glamour, but with music, beer, and fake feathers. The knights rode as if they were legends; the horses bore the mockery. Squires ran, sweated, tied straps, held shields, and got kicked when they wobbled. Götz watched, studied angles, speeds, the way mistakes look.**before**They pass. A

rider lost his seat, just a finger's breadth too far to the left, and his opponent hit him on the edge of the shield—whoosh, off his horse. The crowd roared as if justice had been served. Götz only saw: Too far to the left. He memorized it. Head first, head first.

On the way back, they clashed with city servants—tolls, always tolls. Dietrich wasn't there, so one of the local heroes took over. "Toll!"—"For what?"—"For the road."—"The road is dirt."—"Then that's dirty money." It quickly went into fists, as such conversations always go. Ulrich let them. "Don't die stupidly, just be useful," he said, and kicked himself when necessary. Götz took the one with the big mouth, because big mouths hope for small teeth. He broke his hope cleanly, two blows, one on the bottom, one on the top, and then held his hands still so no one could see them vibrating. "Enough," Ulrich finally said, "we're not bricklayers, we don't build ditches out of corpses here."

At night, in the hay, Götz counted again. Not coins, not opponents—moments. The moment before Jörg's blow came. The moment when Heinrich's cane changed angle. The moment when Ludwig realized that knives change the rules. The moment when the rider slipped to the left. They were tiny instants, holes in time through which one could reach if one was awake enough. That's where it lies, he thought. Not in the roar. In the seeing.

He was still a boy. He raged, he laughed, he fought with siblings over cheese and blankets, he cursed in his sleep. But something had changed. Not the size of his fists, but the choice of his punches. He didn't become nicer. He became **more precisely**.

One evening, his father placed him in the armory again. "With a blade today," he said, and drew two blunt one-handed swords. They stood facing each other, the light on the edge casting honest lines. "Why do you want to become a knight, Götz?" - "Because it's better to strike than to be struck." - "And if no one strikes?" - "Then I'll strike the silence." His father laughed briefly, without mockery. "You will live or die like a Berlichingen. There's nothing in between."

They fought. The room resounded with metal and breath. Once Götz hit his father on the helmet; once his father hit Götz on his pride. In the end, they stood there gasping for breath. The father put down his sword and offered the boy his hand. "You won't fight well," he said. "But you will stay." "That's enough," said Götz.

And outside, behind the walls, the world was preparing for the next winter. The cold had time. Götz didn't. But he carried on. Every morning, every wooden

sword, every fist, every look. The first battles had given him nothing—and that was precisely the gift: He owed it to no one. Only to the one who struck and got up again.

The castle was his cage and his school, but outside, beyond the walls, another world lurked. Not a world of songs and heroic tales, but a patchwork of hunger, sweat, dirt, and that sharp air that reminds you every time: Out here, you are nobody.

When they opened the gates, creaking and heavy, and Götz was allowed out—with servants, with brothers, sometimes only secretly—then he absorbed the world like an addict. Villages, crooked and poor, huts that looked more like insults than houses. Children playing with bare feet in the dung, and mothers watching them as if they had long known that their sons would someday return to the same dung—only deeper.

The peasants looked him over. He wasn't a royal child, but he had a name and blood and the thin aura of those who sleep behind walls. Some looked down, others stared back defiantly. They have more fire than half-knights, thought Götz. But their fire was short-lived, like a straw that burns and then leaves nothing behind. He wanted to be more. Permanent. Metal instead of straw.

At the market, when traders arrived from the city, chaos raged. Carts laden with fabrics, cheese, beer, weapons, toys for the rich. The castle servants quarreled with merchants over prices, women screamed for cheap salt, children grabbed at crumbs. Götz wandered through the middle of it all. He saw the knife stand, the gleaming blades, and felt his heart race. Iron. That is truth. Not the coins, not the sermons, not the mockery. Metal. It was honest. You had it, or you didn't. You led it, or it led you.

Once, he stole a dagger. Small, but real. He tucked it into his boots, his heart pounding. The merchant didn't notice—or pretended not to. At home, Götz drew the blade in the shadows, examined it, held it up to the light. It grinned coldly back. He swore he would keep it, no matter what. It wasn't a child's toy. It was a promise.

Then there were the mercenaries. Traveling folk with scars on their faces, beer on their breath, and death in their eyes. They sometimes camped nearby, laughing loudly, fighting even louder. To the village children, they were monsters; to the farmhands, a nuisance. For Götz, they were a preview. "That'll be you in ten years," Jörg once said. "If you're lucky." "And if I'm unlucky?" "Then you'll be one of the bones they're sitting on."

Götz watched the mercenaries for hours. He saw how they tended their weapons, how they laughed even though they had nothing, how they ate, drank, and cursed as if the world were one big whore's joke. One of them, an old man with a scar across his skull, noticed him. "Hey, kid. What are you staring at?" "I want to know how to stay when everything wants to eat you." The old man laughed, coughed, and spat. "Stay? You stay if you chew harder than what wants to eat you." He handed him a sip from his mug. Strong, bitter, burning. Götz choked, spat, and coughed. The old man grinned. "Good. Your first mistake. Now keep going."

It was also encounters with farm children that sharpened him. They didn't play, they beat people. Stone against stone, stick against stick. Anyone who fell got kicked. Götz joined in, not because he had to, but because he wanted to know if he was better. Most of the time he was. Not stronger, not bigger – just tougher. He stood longer, hit back, bit, scratched, laughed when the others cried. Once he hit one of them so hard that blood turned the earth dark. The girl next door shrieked. Götz stood up, wiped his face, and grinned. "Now you know how it works." They hated him, they feared him, they respected him. All the same.

The world outside was hunger and trade, filth and danger. But it was also freedom. In the castle, there were rules: father, mother, sermons, rituals. Outside, it was only: hit or eat, hit. That was a language Götz understood.

In the evenings, when he returned, he often crept onto the wall and looked out at the hills, the forests, the villages. He spat down and laughed. "Just you wait. I'm coming."

Winter didn't come as a silent guest; it came like a rotten king with a stinking cloak and sat down in the middle of the courtyard. It didn't bring white flakes that inspire children's songs. It brought gray slush, frozen breath, and stomachs that cried like starving dogs.

The castle became an ice coffin. Every beam creaked as if about to give up, every hole in the wall sucked in the wind like a greedy mouth. The fire in the fireplaces was too small for the rooms, the smoke too thick for the lungs. The men pulled blankets over their armor, the women wore the same clothes for three weeks, the children stuffed straw into their shoes until they looked like limping scarecrows.

The pantry was emptier than his father's purse. The bread was cut thinner, until the slices seemed like dizziness. The stew was more water than hope, the

turnips were counted like coins. Götz chewed anyway, as if he were kicking hunger in the face. But at night, as he lay awake, he heard his siblings' stomachs growling, quieter, more desperate.

The father spoke of honor. Still. "A knight endures the winter like a man!" he roared, his fingers trembling on a mug of beer he'd bought with the last of his pledge. The mother was silent. She had dark circles under her eyes that were darker than the shadows in the courtyard. She tried to name leftovers: "That's a meal." But it was only a shadow of a meal.

Götz started stealing. First from the kitchen. A piece of cheese, a few dried peas, a turnip. He stuffed them in his pocket, sometimes sharing with his younger siblings, sometimes not. Then he stole from the farmhands. Once, one of them caught him. A big, smelly kid with hands like frying pans. "Hey, brat, that was my piece of bacon!" He grabbed Götz by the collar and pulled him up. Götz bit him, right into his hand, drawing blood. The farmhand screamed, hit him, Götz fell, laughing until he bled. "Your bacon tastes like shit." From then on, they left him alone—or they were more careful.

The nights were hell. The wind crept through every crack, biting into the skin as if it wanted to devour the bones. The children lay huddled together, a miserable heap. Götz lay among them, staring into the darkness, cursing, quietly, against God, against winter, against everyone. If life is only cold, then I will become fire.

The worst day was the day a horse died. It was the old bay horse, the one with more bones than meat. He simply collapsed in the stable, his legs creaking, his eyes staring blankly. The farmhands dragged him out. "What now?" one asked. "Feed," muttered the other. And by evening, there was meat in the kettle. Tough, sinewy, tasting of death. But they ate. All of them. Götz too. And he swore to himself: I'll eat horse if I have to. But someday they'll eat my name.

Once he crept into the village. The wind burned, the snow cut into his skin, but he went. He wanted to see if the farmers had it any better. They didn't. A child lay dead in front of a hut, the mother sat beside it, staring up at the sky as if she were asking someone who wouldn't answer. Götz stood still, no longer feeling the cold. This is the world, he thought. No one will save you. You eat, or you'll be eaten.

He stole a piece of bread from a kitchen, was caught, and ran. The farmer behind him yelled, hurled a stone, and hit him in the back. Götz fell, got up, and kept running. He held onto the bread, so tightly his fingers turned white. He

didn't share it. Not that evening. He ate it alone, in the shadow of the wall, the crumbs in the snow. Guilt tasted bitter, but hunger laughed at it.

The father grew thinner, the mother quieter. Ulrich, the instructor, was the only one still yelling. "You're learning now! Those who are weak in winter are dead in summer!" He made them train, even if their fingers were stiff, even if their breath shattered like glass. "Hit! Again! Again!" Götz hit. He hit until he felt nothing. And when he looked at the hands at night, cracked skin, blood in the furrows, he thought: These are weapons. Not hands. Weapons.

One evening, as snow covered the yard, Jörg grabbed a bundle of straw meant for the horses. "Mine," he growled. The other children protested, but he laughed. Götz stood up, his face pale with hunger, but his eyes black as coal. "Put it back." "Do me." The fight was short, hard. Fists, kicks, blood in the snow. In the end, Jörg lay on the ground, his face red, his breathing labored. Götz stood, the straw in his arms, and spat. "No one eats alone, you ox."

The weeks wore on. One of the servants died of a fever. A girl disappeared – rumors said she had been sold. The castle had become quieter, emptier. But Götz grew tougher. Every day was a battle. Every bite a victory. Every breath a defiance.

At the end of winter, he stood on the wall, the sun timidly returning. The snow melted, smelling of dirt. Götz looked out, spat in the mud, and grinned. "I survived, you sons of bitches. And if you want to beat me a hundred more times—I'll get back up."

And in that moment, between frost and thaw, he knew: Winter hadn't broken him. It had forged him. Harder. Darker. More complete.

Winter had almost devoured the castle. But the father – Reinhard von Berlichingen – didn't give up. He was a man who had more memories than coins, and he defended those memories like other men defend their courts. He spoke of "honor" like a preacher of the apocalypse, always with that voice that boomed more than it convinced.

"Listen to me, Götz," he growled one evening as they stood in the armory. "A knight lives and dies by his honor." Götz, barely thirteen at the time, stared at the rusty helmet on the wall. "And if honor lets you starve?" His father turned his head, slowly, like a wolf deciding whether to bite. "Then at least you won't die like a dog." Götz grinned crookedly. "A dead knight is just a dog, only with an iron around his neck."

The blow came swiftly. Not a chastisement, not a disciplinary blow—a true, full-throated punch with the fist. Götz staggered, blood in his mouth, teeth chattering. He spat red-faced and laughed. "Thank you. Now I know what honor tastes like." The father growled, about to strike again, then stopped. He looked at the boy—thin, full of defiance, his eyes black as lumps of coal—and shook his head. "You'll put me in the grave." "Then at least you won't be lying alone."

It wasn't hatred between them. It was a war of the worlds. His father believed in a time that no longer existed—in tournaments, in minstrelsy, in flags fluttering in the wind as if they meant something. Götz saw the cracks, the debts, the starving servants, the peasants who cursed more than they prayed. For him, honor was an empty barrel that no one could fill anymore.

And yet – sometimes, when his father was lost in old stories, Götz listened. He heard of brothers-in-arms who stood side by side until their last breath. Of sieges that lasted for years. Of victories that lived on in song. He felt a glow within himself that he couldn't explain. Perhaps honor wasn't an empty jar after all; perhaps it was just a damned drug that made men addicted.

One day, his father took him along on a small skirmish. It wasn't a major war—just a neighbor who owed a tribute. They rode out, six men, two squires. The snow hadn't melted yet, the sky gray as an old beard.

"Watch out," said his father. "Stay behind me. Watch. A knight doesn't strike blindly." Götz nodded, but something else burned within him. Not to observe. To strike. To see it as it is.

They encountered their neighbor—three men, tired, poorly armed, but with eyes that said: We won't give in. Words were exchanged, threatening, empty ones. Then came the first blow. Steel on wood, blood on snow. Götz rode alongside, short sword in hand, his fingers sweating.

A man approached him, his face contorted, a pitchfork in his hand. Götz parried, thrust. It wasn't deep, not fatal, but the man stumbled back, blood spurting. Götz gasped. His father saw it and nodded. "Good. But next time, you'll follow through."

They won, of course. It wasn't a fair fight. In the end, three men lay in the snow, two groaning, one silent. The knights gathered what they wanted and rode back. Götz stopped briefly, staring at the dead man. So this is how it ends, he thought. Not in song, but in the dirt.

His father placed a hand on his shoulder. Heavy, warm, unexpectedly tender. "That's honor, Götz. Not the killing. Staying with it. So that your name doesn't disappear." Götz nodded. But a voice inside him screamed: No. Honor is when they curse your name. When they can't forget it. When they know you're tougher than they are.

At home, they often argued. Father said "honor," Götz said "survival." Father said "duty," Götz said "strike first." It almost always ended in screaming, sometimes with blows, sometimes with silence. The mother intervened, her hands raised as if she were trying to save the world with both arms.

Once, after a particularly heated argument, Götz stood outside on the wall, the cold biting. Konrad, his older brother, stepped up beside him. "You're taking him too far." "He's taking me too far." Konrad laughed softly. "He was like you. Back then. Until the years softened him." "Then I won't soften." "Everyone softens, Götz." "Not me."

And yet – deep down – the old man was right. It wasn't fighting alone that made a knight. It was that people remembered you. That they said: That was someone who stood his ground. Only Götz defined "standing" differently. Not for princes. Not for coins. But for himself.

So he stood between two worlds: his father with his rusty honor, and the future that knew only blood and iron. He knew that at some point he would have to choose. But not yet. He was still learning, still absorbing everything: the pride of the old man. The harshness of winter. His mother's silence. The hatred of the servants. Everything became a forge within him, glowing, even if no one saw it.

And in this forge, the image that would accompany him slowly took shape: not a knight in shining tin, but a man who turns his fist into truth.

It wasn't a glorious death, not a martyr's end, not worthy of a ballad. It was the death of a boy—almost still a child—who was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. And Götz was there, not as a hero, but as a witness.

Spring had just dragged the castle out of a winter of hunger. The air was damp, the earth muddy, meltwater dripped everywhere like old candles. The servants had to go out, fetch wood, secure supplies, the usual. Götz pushed his way into the group, wanting to get out, away from the walls, see the dirt, smell the breath of the world. Ulrich let him. "If you think so, then learn."

They were five squires and two farmhands, poorly armed—sticks, a few daggers, no armor. It was just a trip to the village, just a bit of wood, a bit of trade. But the village was poor, hungry, and angry. The peasants' eyes were like knives. And somewhere lurked the other kind: robbers, outcasts, men who had nothing left to lose.

They were almost finished, the wagon half full, when it happened. A whistle, short, shrill. Then a heavy stone came out of nowhere and hit one of the boys – his name was Martin, thin, pale-faced, a year older than Götz – in the temple. A dull thud, like crushing an egg. Martin simply fell over. Not a scream, not a word. Only silence before he hit the ground.

The robbers stormed out of the bushes, three, four, maybe five. No heroes, just desperate men with clubs and rusty blades. They wanted the wagon, the wood, maybe more. The squires screamed, the farmhands grabbed at anything sharp. Götz felt the world shrink. Everything rustled, everything smelled of sweat and damp wood.

He ducked, grabbed a stone, and hurled it at the first man. It hit, not hard, but enough to make his opponent curse. Then Jörg was there, bellowing like an ox, swinging his axe. Wood against bone, a crash, blood spurting. Another rammed his fist into a farmhand's face, teeth flying, the farmhand falling.

And in the middle of it all lay Martin. Motionless. His eyes open, staring up at the sky as if searching for something that wasn't there.

Götz fought. He stabbed with the dagger, short, clumsy, but powerful. He struck a robber in the side, heard the scream, felt the blood. The man stumbled, cursed, ran. The others broke off as quickly as they had come. The wagon was half empty, two servants injured, and Martin lay in the mud.

"Lift him!" someone shouted. But there was nothing to lift. The blow had been enough. Blood seeped from his temple, dark, thick, final. Ulrich knelt beside him, placed two fingers on his neck, and shook his head. "Stop."

The others stood still. Even Jörg, the bull, stared like a calf who doesn't understand the world. One cursed, one cried. Götz stood beside him, his heart pounding, but he felt nothing. No pity. No curse of mourning. Only emptiness. A cold, hard emptiness that said: That's how fast it goes. A stone. And you're gone.

They didn't speak on the way back. The wagon squeaked, the oxen snorted, the wind bit. Martin's body lay in the back, covered with a sack, as if he were just cargo. A boy who was laughing yesterday, a package today.

Silence reigned in the castle when they arrived. Martin's mother screamed, his father remained silent, his sisters wept. The body was wrapped in a cloth and carried into the small chapel. A priest murmured, everyone pretended to hear. Götz stood in the back, felt the cold stone pavement beneath his feet, and thought: One stone. It takes so little.

He couldn't sleep that night. He saw Martin's face, the look that no longer saw anything. He turned, gritted his teeth, clenched his fists. That could have been me. A stone. Coincidence. He laughed softly, bitterly. "Shit honor. Shit God. Shit coincidence."

He went outside and stood in the courtyard. The wind cut, the moon hung like a blunt knife. He drew the dagger and stared at the blade. "Not me," he murmured. "Not me. I'm staying." He rammed the blade into a beam, again and again, until his hands bled. Every thrust was an oath.

In the morning he was calm. Quiet, but harder. Ulrich saw it and nodded. "Now you know." "What?" "That you're no longer a child." "And what am I then?" "Someone who knows death. And when you know that, then you begin to truly live."

Götz grinned crookedly, his lip split. "Then I'll live twice as much from now on."

Martin's death still hung in the castle like smoke that wouldn't dissipate. People spoke more quietly, ate faster, and didn't laugh at all. Even his father was often silent, as if he had finally understood that words aren't shields. But Götz—Götz didn't remain silent. Something gnawed inside him that was louder than any prayer.

He had seen how quickly it could be over. One stone, one blow, one false step – and the story was over. He was no philosopher, no priest, but he understood: if life was so cheap, then you had to make it expensive. Whoever wanted him would pay. With blood. With bones. With everything.

In the weeks that followed, he was a different person. Tougher, faster, quieter. He trained more, fought longer, slept less. Ulrich watched him, sometimes grumbling, "The boy is growing into the iron." Even Jörg, the fat ox, kept his distance. Not out of fear of the fists—but of the stare. Götz looked at people as

if he wanted to pull out their innermost being and test whether it would hold up.

The siblings noticed it too. Konrad once said, "You're not the same anymore." "Then the old one was gone," murmured Götz. "And the new one?" "The new one stays."

His mother looked at him for a long time when he came into the kitchen one evening with bloody knuckles. "You'll burn yourself," she whispered. "Then I'll burn brightly," he growled. She wept silently but said nothing more.

His father tried to restrain him. "Honor, boy! You have to understand, it's not just about hitting, it's about justice, about reputation, about..." "About survival," Götz interrupted. His father whirled around, his eyes wild. "Without honor, you're nothing!" Götz laughed harshly, dryly. "With honor, you starve faster."

The blow came. Of course. But this time, Götz caught the arm, pushed it down, and stood nose to nose with the old man. For a breath, there was silence. Then he let go. His father gasped, looked at him, and there was no anger left, only something like recognition. "You won't become a knight like me," he murmured. "No," said Götz. "I will become Götz."

The decision wasn't made in one moment, but in a thousand small ones. In every fist he raised. In every blow he took. In every breath that smelled of blood. But one evening he stood on the wall, the sky black, the stars sharp, and he spoke it out loud:

"I will become a knight. But not your knight. Not the dog of princes, not the singer in your songs. I will be the one you fear. The one who remains. And when you curse my name, then I know: I have made it."

From then on, he was no longer just a boy. He had a will. An iron defiance in too-young bones.

The others saw it. Ulrich saw it and nodded. Jörg saw it and growled. His mother saw it and cried. His father saw it and remained silent.

And Götz? He grinned. Not happy, not satisfied—just determined.

The chapter of his childhood was thus closed. He was no longer a child fighting for bread, no longer a boy who fought in the yard because he had to. He was now someone who decided to fight because he wanted to.

And the world outside—the world of blood, hunger, and cold iron—would soon learn what it meant when a boy decided to become a name.

Sword and Honor

The first real sword didn't come with trumpets, holy water, or a preacher whispering ancient words. It came in a coarse cloth sack that stank of coal and grease. The blacksmith placed the sack on the anvil as if there were a vicious cat inside, about to break free at any moment. "Get it, boy," he grumbled. "But lift it with both hands. Iron isn't history."

Götz approached. The smithy was hot and honest. Sweat smelled like work, not despair. The embers breathed, the hammer breathed, the blacksmith breathed—all to the same rhythm. Götz untied the sack. The metal grinned at him: a one-handed sword, not magnificent, but clean. Blade just under a meter long, a narrow fuller that looked as if it could drain blood like a gutter drains rain. No decorations whatsoever, just a tightly wrapped leather handle, a crossguard that promised to keep fingers where they belonged, and a pommel that gave the thing weight. Not a ballad. A statement.

He picked it up. The weight ran from his wrist to his shoulder, through his back, and into his teeth. Not too heavy, but consistent. As if someone were saying to him: *If you lead me, then completely.* He swung it lightly—and that was his first mistake. The blade drew back as if it had a will of its own. The blacksmith grabbed his arm. "Don't wave. Lead." He tightened Götz's hand around the handle, his left hand on the pommel. "You dictate. But you also listen."

The father stood in the doorway, his silhouette as hard as a nail. There was more to his eyes than just pride. There was also fear. Not fear of the sword—fear that the boy with the sword would become someone he didn't recognize. "Show me," he said.

Götz entered the courtyard. The sky was leaden gray, the castle smelled of rain, stables, and dust. Ulrich was already waiting, a wooden practice sword in his hand. "No wood today," he growled, throwing a shield to a servant. "Today you'll learn the first rule of iron: It takes what's soft. So be careful what you leave soft."

The servant – Matthias, a tough dog – raised the shield. Götz placed the blade against it, feeling the leather, the wood beneath. "Don't stroke it," said Ulrich.

"Ask the shield if it can speak." Götz swung, not a big one, just clean, and struck. The shield responded with a dull thud. *Clank*, a vibration reaching into the shoulder. Götz held the blade low, drew it back, and struck again. *Clank*. Wood splintered. The servant clenched his teeth, his eyes steady. With the third blow, a piece of leather cracked, and with the fourth, wood dust rose. Götz's arms burned, but something inside him grinned. *That's it. That's the language the world understands.*

"Enough," said Ulrich. "Now move. One, two. Forward, out, in." He tapped Götz's feet with the tip of his staff. "Your feet are the general. Your hands are merely messengers." Götz nodded, stepped forward, half left, blade angle flat, guard high, grip firm but not tense. He felt the point of the blade drawing a line in the air, as if there were invisible rails one could ride on once one found them.

The father stepped into the circle. "Honor," he said. "You fight with honor." Ulrich snorted. "He fights with a blade. Honor is for the evening." "Without honor, a sword is a knife for robbery," the old man snarled. "And without a sword, honor is a prayer without bread," Ulrich retorted. Götz didn't finish listening. He heard the iron. And that told him: *Lead me. I'll show you where.*

They let him cut—air, sackcloth, bundles of straw. No drama, no parade. Ulrich called the shots, like a lazy priest who still believes in the mass. "Outline. Edge flat. Don't chop. Pull. You want to cut, not saw. And when you stab, don't do it with your arm, with your step." Götz stabbed. Uncertainly at first. Then harder. The bale of straw took the sting as if it deserved it. It pulled back, jumped sideways, stung again. The world became smaller, more precise. Angles. Paths. Breath.

Later, as the courtyard grew emptier, his father confronted Götz. Not a mock battle. A test. Both carried blunt blades. "Guardia," said the old man—the old language still used when people pretended names were more powerful than deeds. Götz raised the blade, feeling the weight like a question. His father approached slowly. Not a dance, a march. The first contact was a kiss of metal. *Clank*. Blade to blade. Strike. Deflect. Edge. Pressure. Götz dodged, not backward, but sideways. Step, turn, shoulder, hip. He felt his father searching for and finding his balance. *This is how someone who doesn't come from stories fights*, thought Götz. *This is how someone who is still here fights.*

They exchanged three, four, five blows. No big swings, just quick, ugly hand-to-hand combat. Götz looked for the gap. His father didn't show it. He seemed to

offer his shoulder—bait. Götz didn't take it. He played stubbornly. *Not yet. I'll take it when I feel like it.* On the seventh beat, it came after all. Not because his father was losing his attention, but because Ulrich grumbled behind him: "Now." Götz thrust – not a pretty thrust, but honest, deep into the hip area, where armor used to cease to be polite. His father blocked, late, the blades slipping, hilt on hilt, hand on hand, they stood chest to chest. Götz smelled the old man's breath – beer, iron, tiredness. "Good," he murmured. Then he pushed him away, hard, not angrily, just correctly. "Again."

They continued until both arms ached. As they finished, the father shoved the sword into its scabbard, which was only a rag. He patted Götz on the shoulder. "You don't fight beautifully," he said. "That's your honor." "My honor is that I stay," Götz replied. His father looked at him. He didn't smile. But in his gaze, there was that little glint that said: *Maybe the boy will become something that lasts longer than stories.*

In the afternoon, Ulrich led him to the edge of the woods, where there was a shooting range—a line drawn with rope, a few target stakes, rolls of straw with painted circles on them. "This today," he said, heaving a handgun onto the table. Black, short, furious. The future in a mouth of iron. "Because the world doesn't ask whether your honor shines when powder speaks." He explained powder, pan, and match. "You don't ignite. You decide." The gun barked, the recoil jerked Götz's shoulder back. The target—a circle of straw—ripped open. Not a song. But it was a different kind of truth. Loud, final, cowardly, and yet relentless.

"Don't think that will become your friend," said Ulrich. "It eats fingers, moods, lives. But if you need it, take it. And if you don't have it, then take the sword. It pays more reliably." "And honor?" Ulrich shrugged. "Honor is when you take the final step even when no one's looking anymore."

That evening, Götz sat in the forge, his sword on his knees. He examined the blade in the coal light. Every notch he had carved into it today was a little letter to the future: *I'm practicing. I'm getting tougher.* The blacksmith sat down next to him, handed him a rag and a small pot of grease. "Tending, boy. That's half the battle." "And the other?" "Doing it when no one's looking."

Götz rubbed the blade, slowly, carefully. He felt the metal slide beneath the rag, like taut skin. "Why did you make it so simple?" he asked. "No decoration. No cross. No inscription on the blade." "Because inscriptions become blunt," said the blacksmith. "And decorations lie. This one doesn't lie." "Does it have a

name?" "You give it one when it deserves it." Götz nodded. *Maybe I won't mention you until you cost me something.*

Later, in the courtyard, a small group had gathered. Men with beer, women with tired eyes, children who pretended not to listen. The father stood, his armor half-donned—a gesture, not a necessity—and spoke again of honor. Of victories that begin not in blood, but in the gaze. "Honor," he said, "is when you don't lie, when you are without witnesses." A farmhand coughed. One giggled, then quickly stopped. Götz leaned against the wall, his sword in its sheath. He thought of the cane, of Ulrich's sentence, of the shield that had given way, of the moment when his father was so drunk you could have smelled his age. *Honor, he thought, Maybe it's not a song. Honor is when I don't look away when things get ugly.*

Late. Stars. The court emptied. Götz stayed. He drew his sword once more. Just for himself. No audience. No reconsideration. He wielded it slowly, like palpating a wound. A step forward, a cut, shallow, line over line, the air giving way. A thrust, short, at head height, then deep, groin, out, turn, backhand. He heard his own breathing. Calm. Not victorious. Present.

"You'll lose it," said a voice behind him. The blacksmith. "Sooner or later, everyone loses their sword." "Then I'll get it back." "Maybe. Or you'll get a new one. And someday, boy, you'll get something else: a hand that's no longer real, but does what you want." Götz looked at his fingers. They were torn, bloody, a few blisters had burst. He clenched them. "If it has to be, I'll screw iron into my bones." "That's the tone," murmured the blacksmith. "Keep it. But don't forget: iron without a head makes you a beast. A head without iron makes you a preacher. You want both? Then learn when to be which."

When Götz lay down, he placed the sword next to the cot, not on top of it. The closeness felt good. Not a love affair. A pact. *You and I, he thought. I lead, you follow. And if I fall, it's because I lifted you too late, not because you betrayed me.*

Half asleep, he heard the crackling of embers from the forge, as if an animal lay nearby, quietly feeding in the night. He saw his father before him, erect, foolishly proud perhaps, but not broken. He saw Ulrich raising the pipe and saying, "You decide." And he saw the targets: straw, wood, shield, all things that can be cut through. *People are no different, he thought, just louder.*

In the morning, before anyone was awake, he rose, took his sword, and went into the courtyard. The sky was still dark, a cold that wouldn't bite, only

remember. He stood in the center, closed his eyes, and felt the hilt as if it were part of his hand. "Honor," he whispered. "I will give you new meaning. If I stay, you are mine."

The blade didn't answer. Good thing. Words are cheap. Steel is expensive. And from today on, he would pay daily. With skin. With pain. With time. Until what lay in his hand was no longer an object, but a way in which he corrected the world.

And somewhere, deep in the back of his skull, a rough little voice sang: *Sword first. Honor later. But both together, if necessary.*

Holding a sword was one thing – wielding it without killing yourself was another. Ulrich, the old warhorse, knew this and made no secret of it. "Iron loves no one," he growled. "You treat it wrong, and it eats you. You treat it right, and it eats the others."

The exercises began at dawn, when the farmyard still steamed with the horses' breath and the manure stank as if the earth itself had been through a drunken stupor. The squires lined up, sleepy, shivering, most of them carrying wooden swords. Only Götz carried iron. Not a gift, but a test. Ulrich had him compete against anything with legs: brothers, farmhands, older squires, sometimes even against himself.

"Feet!" he yelled. "Lead with your feet, not your hands! If you fight with your arms, you lose. If you fight with your legs, you survive." Götz ran in circles, stabbed, parried, leaped back, then forward again. The blade didn't sing, it gasped. After ten minutes, his thighs burned like fire; after twenty, his fingers were numb. Ulrich laughed. "This isn't dancing, boy. This is work. And work never stops."

They practiced cuts: diagonal, from shoulder to hip, then the other way around, then horizontal, deep, then up again. The same movements for hours, until the sword no longer seemed like a tool, but like an additional bone. "Don't make it look pretty," Ulrich said, "do it right." Götz listened, gritted his teeth, and hit, hit, hit, until the air itself groaned.

Then came the parries. One of the brothers attacked with a wooden sword, again and again, and Götz had to block, redirect, and absorb the pressure. Each time, he felt the trembling in his arm, the vibration reaching his heart. Once he was too slow, the blow hit his shoulder, and he staggered. Ulrich stepped

forward and spat. "If it had been real, you'd be a cripple by now. Remember that." "Then I'll go faster," Götz panted. "Or harder."

The toughest exercises were the ones with weights. Ulrich had him carry stones, one in each hand, up and down the courtyard, over and over again, until his fingers bled. "If you can hold the stones, you can hold your sword. And if you can hold your sword, you can hold your life."

Then he had to drop the stones, grab his sword, and strike immediately. No hesitation, no gasping for breath. Muscles that were already burned still had to fire. And Götz did it. Panting, sweating, but he did it. Ulrich just nodded. "You'll be one of the tough guys. Maybe even one of the crazy ones." "Then better crazy than dead." "Good saying," Ulrich grumbled. "Imprint it on your bones."

And then there were the duels. No tournaments, no brilliant games. Real men, real blows. Wood against iron, shield against sword, sticks, daggers. Ulrich pitted Götz against Konrad, the older brother. Konrad grinned, axe in hand, wide as a gate. "This time you'll break me, little one." "Then break me."

The fight was brutal. Konrad thrashed like a blacksmith, Götz dodged, jumped, stabbed. Once, a blow knocked him to the ground, his sword flying. Konrad raised his axe and laughed. "Now you're done." Götz rolled, grabbed dirt, threw it in his brother's face, grabbed his sword again, jumped up, and stabbed at the throat. Konrad threw his axe up, narrowly blocked, and stumbled. Ulrich shouted, "Stop!" They both gasped. Konrad wiped the dirt from his eyes and cursed. Götz grinned, bloody and dirty. "That's how a dog fights," Konrad panted. "That's how a person survives," Götz snarled.

The exercises lasted weeks, months. Each day was a new game of sweat and pain. But something changed. The sword was no longer just a piece of iron. It became the answer to every question. Hunger? Blow. Fear? Blow. Doubt? Blow. Every cut was a sentence, every parry an exclamation point.

And sometimes, when he laid the sword beside him at night, he listened to its weight. It said nothing, of course. But Götz still heard something. I'll stay. As long as you stay.

It was one of those evenings when the sky hung like lead over the castle and the wind howled through the cracks as if it wanted to devour the walls. The squires lay wearily in their straw beds, the farmhands snored drunkenly in the stable, and even the father had talked himself to sleep with one too many. Only

Götz was awake. He sat alone in the armory, his sword on the table before him, the torch flickering, the smoke scratching his throat.

He stared at the blade as if it were a mirror. But it reflected nothing but darkness and the flickering tongue of fire. His fingers glided over the handle, over the cold metal. He felt every notch, every bump left over from training. And he knew: This piece of iron was more than a tool. It was a contract. A bloody, silent contract.

Ulrich had given him the lesson of his life that afternoon. They had fought, hard, without mercy. Ulrich was old, but he fought like a stone determined to crush the mountain itself. In the end, he had Götz pinned to the ground, his knee on his chest, the blade at his throat. "And?" he growled. "Do it," Götz gasped, "or get up." Ulrich laughed harshly, stood up, and offered him his hand. "You're not finished, boy. But you're not one to tuck your tail between your legs anymore either. Make something of it. Or the earth will take you."

The words drilled into his skull. Make something of it.

So he sat there, alone with the blade. And he swore. Not with his mouth, not before God, not with a priest as witness. He swore within himself, against himself, with himself.

"I won't be a dog that begs. Not a farmer that waits. Not a singer that lies. I'll be a sword. And when life hits me, I'll hit back. Harder. Deeper. Until nothing can take it away."

He cut his hand, a small gash, blood dripping onto the blade. It hissed, as if even the iron was surprised. "That is my oath," he murmured. "And if I break it, then the iron itself shall eat me."

The next morning, his hand was bandaged, but he didn't mention anything. The squires saw the wound, and Jörg grinned: "Did you cut yourself peeing, little one?" Götz grinned back, darkly. "Just wait. One day I'll have my sword at your throat, and then you won't laugh anymore." Ulrich heard it, but said nothing. But he saw the look in Götz's eyes. He knew: The boy was no longer in training. The boy was at war—even if he was the only one who knew it.

In the days that followed, Götz trained harder than ever before. Not because Ulrich demanded it, not because his father preached it. But because he had sworn to himself. Every blow was a reminder: You have blood on your blade. Your own. Now you must pay for it.

At night, he practiced alone. Step, strike, stab, parry. Over and over. Until his hands were sore, until his breath burned, until his legs gave way. He fell, got up again. Fell, got up again. And each time he laughed, quietly, hoarsely. "Not you, Iron. Not you. I decide."

The father noticed the change. Once, he stepped into the yard and saw Götz wrestling with a bale of straw as if it were the devil himself. "What are you doing in the middle of the night?" "I swear," said Götz. "On what?" "On me." The father snorted. "You swear honor to God, not to yourself." "Then stick to your God," Götz snarled. "Mine is made of iron."

The old man wanted to rage, wanted to scream, but he remained silent. He realized that he was seeing something he himself had never possessed: a defiance that came not from words, but from flesh and blood.

The oath changed Götz. From then on, the sword was no longer training, no longer play. It was a promise. He fought differently—more purposefully, more furiously, harder. Every blow sought a face, every stab sought a heart. Even the older squires kept their distance. "The boy is crazy," one murmured. "No," Ulrich replied. "The boy is real now."

And deep in the night, when the castle was silent, Götz laid the sword beside him, rested his hand on the hilt, and slept. Not like a child seeking security. But like a man who wants to be sure that his promise lies beside him, ready when the world strikes again.

The opportunity came sooner than Götz had expected. No great battle, no splendid tournament—just a small, smelly feud, the kind that flared up somewhere every day these days. A neighbor had allegedly cut wood that didn't belong to him and refused to pay tribute. Reason enough for blood, as the knights called it.

The father gathered a few men, two farmhands, three squires. Ulrich was in command because he knew where to strike if you didn't want to just shout. Götz was allowed to come along. Not as a fighter, they said, but as an observer. But he carried his sword. Iron at his side, like a secret smile.

They rode off at dawn. The sky hung low, the fog clung to the trees, the horses steamed. Every hoofbeat was muffled, as if they didn't want to wake anyone. Götz felt the weight of the blade, the tug in his belt, his father's gaze on his back. "No arrogance," the old man grumbled. "Honor also means keeping a

sense of proportion." Ulrich laughed crookedly. "Honor means having no one left to spit in your face."

Götz remained silent. But his head buzzed. Today. Today I will show that my vow is no child's play.

The village they ravaged was small: a few huts, a miserable tower, a farmyard full of chickens. The men there weren't soldiers. They were farmers, with forks, with rusty blades, with faces that knew more hunger than courage. But they surrendered. They always surrender. Because no one simply stands by while others take what's left.

"Final warning!" shouted the father, high on his horse, his voice deep. "Admit the guilt, or we'll take it by force!" "We won't give anything!" yelled one back, his face red, his hands white around the pitchfork. "You're thieves in iron coats!"

Then the first stone flew. That was the signal.

They rode off. No battle plan, no drumming. Just violence, raw and dirty. Horses ran through the yard, chickens flew, women screamed, children fled. Götz ran with them, his sword drawn. He felt it vibrate in his hand, as if he knew what was coming.

A farmer stood in his way. A club, raised, eyes wide. Götz struck. Not elegantly. A cut, diagonally. The wood cracked, the man screamed, blood spurted. For the first time, Götz felt iron sever flesh. No straw, no sack, no training. Real flesh, warm, alive, now cut. His stomach churned briefly, then something inside him laughed. This is it. This is the proof.

A second man came, stumbling, stabbing with a rusty blade. Götz parried, felt the blow, kicked, and plunged the point into his stomach. The man gasped, fell, his hands curled. Götz gasped, blood dripping onto his boots. And again, that laughter was there, deep within him. You stay. He doesn't.

The feud didn't last long. It wasn't a fight, it was a hunt. The knights burned down two huts, took sacks of grain, three goats, and a box of old tools. Ulrich led the way firmly but pragmatically: "Don't kill if it's not necessary. But if someone stands in the way – get out of here." His father preached about justice, but no one listened. The farm smelled of smoke, blood, and burnt wood.

When they left, the village lay half-destroyed. Children wept, women screamed, men groaned. Götz looked around once more. His heart pounded, his hands were sticky. He felt guilt—but guilt was quiet. Loud voices inside him screamed: You did it. You wielded the iron. You drew blood. You are no longer an observer.

On the way back, he rode next to Ulrich. "How was it?" he asked. "Like breathing," said Götz. Ulrich laughed. "Then get used to it. You have to breathe every day."

The father intervened. "Think of honor, boy. Not blood. Honor is what remains." Götz looked at him, his eyes dark. "Blood lasts longer than words." The old man wanted to rage, but he remained silent. Because he knew the boy was right.

That night, Götz couldn't sleep. He saw the faces, the screams, the hands reaching for him. But he also saw the blood on the blade, smelled it. And he whispered into the darkness: "I swore. And I won't break it. Never."

The sword lay beside him, gleaming faintly in the moonlight. It was no longer just iron. It was a part of him. And Götz knew: This was just the beginning.

It wasn't the first man-to-man fight, but it was the first where the whole castle was watching – and where honor was suddenly not just a father's word, but a razor-sharp mirror.

The occasion was ridiculous: a game, a dice roll, a piece of cheese belonging to a farmhand. But trifles become battles when men have too much beer and too little brains. Heinrich, an elderly squire, thin as a whip, with eyes as cold as iron at dawn, stood before Götz. "You think you're special, Berlichingen? Just because you wear iron? Then show it. Here. Now."

The courtyard was packed in minutes. Servants, maids, brothers, even the father, who watched with folded arms. Ulrich stood at the edge, his hands tucked into his belt, his expression neutral. "Good," he murmured. "Time for the boy to show off his fire in front of an audience."

The weapons were chosen: blunt iron, but with real weight. No wooden sticks, no games. Shield or not? Heinrich didn't take one. Neither did Götz. Sword against sword, blade against blade. No excuses.

"Until someone falls," said Ulrich. "Or until someone gives up." He looked directly at Götz. "Giving up is also a victory, if you survive." Götz grinned, bloody even before he began. "Not my word."

They entered the circle, the crowd grew closer, the ground was muddy, the air smelled of manure and tension. A rooster crowed, then all was silent.

The first blow came from Heinrich. Fast, precise, a slash to the shoulder. Götz blocked, the blade vibrated, his arm burned. Heinrich grinned. "Too slow." Another blow, low, then high, then a thrust. Götz parried, stumbled back, the crowd roared.

He felt the weight. The sword wanted to lead, not follow. So he let it. He ducked, thrust forward, cut diagonally. Heinrich dodged, parried effortlessly, struck with his backhand. Blade against blade, clang, sparks, sweat.

Minutes passed. The fight wasn't a dance, but a quarrel between two animals who now spoke only through blades. Götz's breathing was harsh, his arm was heavy, but the oath burned within him. I will stay. I will not break.

Heinrich was better, no question. He was faster, more experienced, had more tricks. But he wasn't tougher. And it showed. Every blow he landed made Götz stagger, but Götz bounced back. Always.

At one point, Heinrich knocked the blade out of his hand. The crowd screamed. Götz fell to his knees, immediately grabbed some dirt, threw it in Heinrich's face, jumped up, and raised the sword again. The crowd roared, Ulrich laughed. "There! There he is!"

The fight tipped. Heinrich wiped the dirt from his eyes, furious, striking more wildly, less precisely. Götz saw the gap. One step, one deep thrust, not pretty, but honest. Heinrich staggered, stumbled, and fell into the mud. His sword at his throat, Götz over it, panting.

"Enough!" Ulrich yelled. "Stop!"

The crowd cheered, cursed, and murmured. The father still stood with his arms crossed. He said nothing, but in his eyes glowed something Götz had never seen before: respect. Difficult, reluctant, but genuine.

Heinrich spat blood, wiped his mouth, and looked at Götz. "You're a pig," he gasped. "No," said Götz, the sword still at his throat. "I am me." Then he stood up and offered him his hand. Heinrich took it, reluctantly, but he took it.

That evening, Götz sat alone in the smithy, his hands covered in blisters, his arms shaking. The blacksmith placed a piece of bread before him. "So?" "He almost has me." "But not quite." "Never quite."

He bit into the bread, chewed hard, and muttered, "I won't break it. Never."

The duel had brought him fame, but fame is like thin wine—it quickly goes to your head and makes you wobbly at the knees. Ulrich knew this and immediately countered. "You've shown that you can stand. Now you'll learn what happens when someone doesn't get back up."

Less than a week later, the opportunity arose. A small procession to the next village, collecting tribute, the usual drama. Götz was allowed to go again, this time not as a spectator, but as part of the chain. He wore his sword openly, and everyone in the village saw it. Some lowered their gaze, some spat in the dirt.

The knights demanded their grain. The peasants growled. One, a strong man with arms like ropes, dared to say "no." Just that one word. "No." Ulrich stepped forward and nodded to Götz. "Your problem."

His heart pounded, but he stepped forward. The farmer had only a club, but he held it as if he'd never held anything else. The crowd was silent, even the children. Götz drew the blade, felt the weight, felt his oath. I stay. He doesn't.

The farmer struck first, hard, from above. Götz parried, the blade stung, his arms burned. One step forward, a cut, flat across his arm. Blood spurted. The farmer roared, stumbled, struck again. Götz ducked, kicked, and thrust. The steel penetrated his stomach. Warm flesh, a scream, then silence.

The man fell, the club clattered into the dirt. Blood flowed, dark, spreading across the stones. The crowd gasped, the women screamed, the children wept. Götz stood there, his sword red, his heart pounding.

It was the first conscious death he had chosen himself. No robbery, no chaos, no stone like Martin's. Just him. He and the blade. He had decided. And he had taken.

For a moment he wavered. Guilt crept up, disgusting, like cold smoke. But before it could consume him, the other feeling came. Harder. Clearer. I'm alive. He's not. I've decided.

Ulrich stepped beside him and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Bloody lesson, huh? That's what it feels like." "How?" Götz gasped. "Like nothing. And like

everything." Ulrich took the sword from him, wiped it on the dead man's cloak, and handed it back. "Now it's truly yours."

His father came to him later. "Was it necessary?" "He said no." "And?" "And I say no to no." The old man was silent. Then he nodded, slowly, like someone who doesn't know whether to be proud or sad.

The night afterward was terrible. Götz kept seeing the man in his mind's eye: the blood, the eyes. He was twisting, sweating, grinding his teeth. But in the morning, it was different. Clearer. Harder. He drew the blade, saw the sun on it, and thought: This is me. I decide. I strike. I stay.

In the courtyard, he was now a different person. The squires viewed him with a respect that had nothing to do with friendship. Heinrich, his opponent, merely nodded curtly, no more mockery. Jörg avoided him. Even Konrad, the older brother, said nothing. They all saw it: Götz had taken blood, deliberately. He was no longer a boy.

Ulrich grinned, that rough grin. "Now you can talk about honor if you want. But never forget: without blood, honor is just a song. And songs never satisfy anyone." "I'm not talking about honor," Götz growled. "I'm talking about myself."

The feuds and the first deaths were one thing—raw, ugly, over quickly. But a trial by fire is different. It tests not just the arm, but the head, the heart, the spine. And Götz's trial by fire came when his neighbor not only said "no," but answered with torches.

It was summer, the air was heavy, the manure steamed like old beer. Suddenly, in the night, the sky was ablaze. A farmhand stormed into the yard, his face white as chalk. "Fire! They're setting fire to the fields!" And indeed: on the horizon, behind the trees, a red glow appeared, as if hell itself had opened a crack.

The knights saddled, the servants grabbed axes, the squires were shouted together. Ulrich yelled orders: "Helmets, iron, water, everything! Go, go!" His father shouted of honor, of punishment, of justice. Götz heard only his own blood rushing. This is it. This is the test. Now or never.

They rode out. The smoke stung their eyes, the heat came like a wall. The fields burned, the grain crackled, flames licked at the timbers of the huts. Farmers

ran away screaming, a few stood with torches in their hands – enemies, not victims. It was clear: this was no accident. This was war.

"Grab them!" yelled the father. "No mercy!" Ulrich simply raised his axe. "Short and ugly, boys. Just the way it should be."

Götz jumped from his horse and drew his sword. A farmer rushed at him, torch raised, eyes filled with hatred. Götz parried, struck, the man screamed, fell into the fire, and disappeared into the flames. The smell of burnt flesh gnawed at his nostrils, disgusting, sweet, unforgettable. Götz choked, but continued to strike anyway.

The trial by fire wasn't a duel, not a fight—it was chaos. Smoke everywhere, sparks in people's hair, screams, children running between their legs, men screaming in the fire. Götz fought as if in a dream: see, hit, keep going. He didn't know who he was hitting, only that he couldn't lie down.

Once, someone grabbed him from behind, almost dragging him into the fire. Götz bit, kicked, and stabbed blindly backward. Warm blood, a scream, and the hilt slipped. He rolled away, his clothes singed, his hair stinking of smoke. He stood, panting, his sword black and red.

In the end, after hours, it was over. The fields were ash, the huts charred. Ten farmers lay dead, the rest fled or surrendered. The father rode into the embers, proud as if he had won a battle. "Honor!" he shouted. "That's it!" Ulrich wiped blood from his face and laughed dryly. "Honor? That was a filthy fire, nothing more. But it didn't consume us. That's what counts."

Götz stood there, black with smoke, sword in hand, eyes red. He felt no pride, no honor, no victory. Only hardness. Only this knowledge: I can stand in the fire. I will not fall.

Later, in the castle, he still stank of smoke. His mother placed her hand on his shoulder, saying softly: "You'll be harder than iron, boy." "Then no one will break me." "Or you'll break yourself." "I'd rather break myself than have the world do it."

The trial by fire had changed him. Not the killing, not the blood. He was already familiar with all of that. It was the burning. The chaos. The feeling that everything around him was crumbling – and yet he remained standing. From then on, he knew: He was no longer a boy who told himself he was strong. He was.

And he swore to himself: If fire comes, I will be the fire, not the ashes.

After the trial by fire, the castle hung heavy in the air, as after a storm that had torn down everything except the walls. Men drank more than usual, women spoke less. The children sneaked away, the screams of the burned peasants still ringing in their ears. And in the middle of it all stood Götz, dirty, sooty, his hands sore, but with eyes no one could ignore.

But with the fire came the gossip. The peasants swore revenge, the neighbors hissed with arrogance, even among their own servants, whispers rang out: "Too much. That was too much." And that meant a verdict was needed. Not that of a judge, but that of the castle itself.

One evening, Father called everyone together in the great hall. The torches were sooty, the beer was thin, but the tension was thick. "We're talking about what happened," he began, in that voice that wanted to boast but was brittle. "We defended our fields, upheld our honor. But some here say we went too far."

Glances flew. Some at Ulrich, who snorted. Some at Götz, who stood still, the blade at his side, as if he wanted to listen himself.

"Honor," the father continued, "is that you don't become a murderer if you're a peasant. And that you don't become a robber if you're a knight. We meted out punishment, yes. But it was right."

Ulrich stepped forward, folding his arms. "Legally? It was necessary, nothing more. And the boy understood. He stood in the fire, and he stayed. No more judgment is needed."

Then Heinrich, the slender squire who had once challenged him, spoke up. "That boy... he knows no bounds. Today he burns the village, tomorrow he burns us." A murmur went through the crowd.

Götz stepped forward before his father could answer. His voice was rough but clear: "I'll burn if I have to. But not us. Never us. I swear it on iron." He drew his sword, raised it high, the torchlight gliding over the blade. "I am not a farmer who flees, not a dog who whines. I am a Berlichingen. And if you want a verdict—then pronounce it now. But remember: I stand here. And I will stay."

Silence. Only the crackling of the torches. Ulrich grinned broadly and murmured, "There you go."

The father nodded slowly, gravely. "So be it. This is the verdict: He stays. He bears iron. He bears our honor, in his own way. And if he falls, he falls as one of us."

The crowd dispersed, murmuring and whispering. Some were satisfied, some weren't. But no one questioned him anymore. Götz had received his verdict: not from priests, not from princes, but from his own people.

Later, alone in the courtyard, he stared up at the sky, the stars cold and clear. He placed his hand on his sword and spoke softly: "The sentence is passed. I am iron. I am fire. I am me."

And he knew: From here on there was no turning back.

The acid test

The wind smelled of dry hay and a guilty conscience as they set out. No trumpet blast, only the clatter of oars, the snorting of horses, the groaning of a wagon that was already old yesterday. "Fire on the border," said the messenger. "They're burning the outbuildings. If the mill falls, the bridge falls." That was all. That's all war needs to set you off.

Ulrich rode in front, his shoulders like an anvil. His father trotted beside him, holding honor in his mouth like a rein the horse had long since lost touch with. Götz walked beside the first wagon, hand on his sword, eyes on the horizon. There was a narrow, dirty streak of red in the gray air, as if someone had slashed the lip of the sky. "Do you smell it?" Ulrich asked without looking. "That's not sunset. That's a reckoning."

The procession became a ribbon of breathing and curses. Servants muttered prayers that bored even the saints. Jörg stomped nearby, axe on his shoulder, grinning like someone who wants to see something burning. "If it crackles, it cracks better," he grumbled. "Then I'll hear them giving up." "You only hear yourself," Götz growled. "That's enough," said Jörg, spitting into the dust.

Along the roadside, fields appeared to be surviving the summer. A few women watched the procession as if it were a weather forecast that couldn't be changed. Children had the healthy instinct to watch and not wave. Götz saw them and thought of the castle, of the winter of hunger, of Martin with his cut

temple. *Fire doesn't extinguish anyone. It only makes room.* The thought tasted of iron.

They reached the outbuilding shortly before dusk: a millyard, breathing deeper because the water flowed beneath it. The weir chattered softly, the stream acted as if it wanted to help. But help was scant: smoke lay flat between the buildings, and torches danced behind the granary. Shadows moved—not ghosts, just men who loved the flames as long as they lived in other people's houses.

"Dismount," said Ulrich. He distributed voices like tools: "Two to the weir, put out the wedges so the water can flow. Jörg with me to the gate. You—" his finger was heavy, like a judgment, "—Götz: secure the powder wagon. If it blows up, we'll all exchange names with the crows." His father began: "Negotiate first—" "You don't negotiate with fire," Ulrich cut him off. "Fire is a bad listener."

The yard was a mouth catching its breath. Straw lay in the gateway, smelling off. "Bad luck," muttered Götz. A torch came like a thought too bold, and suddenly the world crackled. Jörg roared, jumped forward, kicked the burning bundle away, and laughed, because laughter is better than holding your breath. "More to come," said Ulrich. "They're testing the gates, then you, then the rest."

Götz ran along the edge of the walls, where the smoke was thicker. Behind the attic stood a small cart, covered with canvas. He lifted it, smelled sulfur, smelled the future. Two narrow crates with half-torn seals. "How far is far enough?" he asked the air. The air didn't answer; it burned.

He grabbed the front crate by the edges. The boards were warm, not hot. Not yet. He pulled, the cart jolted, the wheel wept for fat that no one had been happy to give it. "Help me," he called to a farmhand who didn't know if he was there right now. "Help me, or I'll kill you and then the crate alone." The farmhand chose life and Götz, and reached in. They pulled the cart backward, shape and weight against the pull of the fire, which had decided by now that gates tasted better than straw.

"Left!" Ulrich yelled somewhere, then there was a crash of wood and the axe spoke sentences that will never be forgotten. A figure leaped from the shadows, torch in front, a face of soot and courage. Götz let go of the shaft and thrust forward, his sword out of its sheath like a man of practiced rage. The man struck, Götz threw up the shield he didn't have; instead, he threw his left

shoulder forward, taking the blow to cloth and skin. The flame kissed him, a quick, evil tongue. He smelled himself. It went small for a moment in his head. Then it grew large again. The blade cut flat, once, diagonally, the torch man became a man without a purpose. The torch fell, hissing in the wet dirt, and so did the man.

"Forward!" Götz said to himself; to the farmhand, he said, "Pull!" They dragged the cart into the shade of the mill wall. The stream grew louder because someone was working on the weir. Ulrich's plan was simple: more water, less fire. Plans are rarely wise, but sometimes they are useful.

The other side also had a plan: burn until people stop having plans. Two more torches flew over the gate. One stuck in the crossbeam like an ugly flower. Jörg jumped, ripped it down, kicked it out, kicked it again, because he liked the way things stop. "Just a minute!" he shouted. "Come on! I'm warm!"

The father stood in the middle, his sword bare, his gaze the way one would in prayer. "Hold! For the honor! For—" An arrow whizzed into the post next to his head, quietly reminding him that gods don't hear well in smoke. The old man blinked and nodded. "For the castle," he said more realistically.

Götz felt his shoulder. Skin clung to the fabric, the fabric to his skin; a smell like a bad meal. It burned, but the burning was just one of many voices. "Put down the blanket," he said to the servant, yanking away the linen. There lay the wood that changed the world: powder kegs, small but not shy. "We'll drag them to the water," said Götz. "And if anyone asks, we'll say the saint wanted it that way."

They brought the first barrel close to the weir. Ulrich came, short, eyes like nails. "Good. Push them out into the cold. When it cracks, I want to hear the stream singing, not us." - "And the gate?" - "The gate will die if it wants to die. You guarantee us that we'll still be able to survive tomorrow."

Behind them, someone screamed; a scream with metal in his throat. Götz turned around. A young squire—not much older than him, perhaps younger—had made the mistake of trying to extinguish a fire torch with his hand. His hand was now burning, and everything else with it. He staggered, flailing for air with his arm, as if air were water and could extinguish it. It smelled the way only humans smell when they start writing in smoke.

Götz ran. Not out of charity, out of necessity. A burning man doesn't just scream, he no longer thinks. One less on your side is quickly too many. He

threw him into the dirt, rolled him, pressed his burning sleeve into the mud. "Let the air out!" he yelled, "Let the air out, damn it!" The boy gasped, gagging sounds that don't belong in mouths. The fire went out, hesitantly, like a bad guest reaching for a cup one last time. All that remained were embers, all that remained were skin that would never be the same as yesterday. "You're alive," said Götz, "so get up." That was consolation in the language he knew.

Only now did he notice that his left hand was also burning. Blisters like burst shutters that no one had closed. *So. That's how fire talks to you.* He smiled crookedly, because smiles sometimes heal faster than ointments. "Later," he said to the hand. "Not yet."

The fight spiraled, as battles do when one doesn't give up. The weir opened, the water gushed, the flames at the gate grew fierce and then tired. One opponent tried to climb over the mill wheel, which was so stupid that even the stream laughed briefly. Ulrich caught him with his backhand, the man fell, and the wheel turned him into a memory that no one will write down.

"Advance!" shouted the father. "Press!" His voice had that old-fashioned strength that men like when they don't want to think. They stormed across the yard, which was now only half burning. Götz didn't lead the way. He walked where things happen that no one sees: at the edge, at the side, where barrels are positioned incorrectly and wounds are positioned correctly. He dragged the second barrel into the water, he pulled the half-dead squire to the mill wall, he stamped out a torch that was trying to relight.

And then there was the granary. The door glowed, the beams above sang the song of "right away." Inside, there was a small bang, like the applause of rats. "There's another one in there," someone called. "I can hear him." You could hear him, indeed: a rumble, a cough, a "Help—" that the flames tried to consume.

Father stopped, looked into the embers, and calculated. Ulrich looked at him, calculating faster. "Nothing more to be done," he said curtly. "The roof's about to fall." - "Honor demands—" the old man began. "Honor demands that we still fight tomorrow," Ulrich said sharply, looking away. *The verdict has been pronounced*, thought Götz, and realized that his body had already made its decision.

He ran.

The smoke grabbed him like hands that want too much. He held his breath as best a person can, his eyes half closed, the cloth over his mouth that stank like old grease. The door gave way as if it had been waiting. Inside, the world was small and red. He groped, stumbled, hit his shin, cursed, heard the coughing on his left, grabbed into the darkness and found fabric and bones. "Come!" he barked, because a voice often carries more than arms. The man - a miller's apprentice, recognizable by the smell of flour that would never be white again - was half hanging from his neck. Götz pulled, pushed, drove his shoulder into the spar wood, which crunched like bad teeth.

Behind him, something that had once been a beam creaked. In front of him, the door acted as if it belonged to another house. He walked through it, taking a piece of it with him. Air hit him in the face like a cold servant. Hands were there, suddenly, pulling, holding, carrying. Ulrich, Jörg, two servants, all cursing, all alive. The miller's boy coughed up flour and soot, curled up like fresh bread. "You idiot," Ulrich gasped to Götz. "That's how you die when you still have something planned." - "Not today," said Götz, and made the world expand.

The granary collapsed as if it had lost its enthusiasm. Sparks rose, the night embraced them as if paying. The courtyard smelled of victory and fire and that sweet something that always lingers when people have been near where fire wants to be.

"Passed the trial by fire," said Jörg, half mockingly, half more honestly than he could sound. "You burn well." "I burn properly," replied Götz, tying his hand with the hem of his shirt, which wasn't tailored for it.

His father approached him. Not a preachy expression. Something else. Perhaps what fathers have when they realize their sons are doing things that can no longer be explained. "You could have died," he said. - "Could have," said Götz. - "Why?" - "Because someone was there." The old man nodded, slowly, like someone moving a chair to the right table. "Honor," he murmured. Ulrich snorted, wanted to object, but didn't. Sometimes a word is allowed if it behaves.

Later, they sat by the weir. The water rushed like an animal that's just lain down again. Men mended oars, women wept quietly over wet bundles that would be buried tomorrow. The miller's boy slept, his arm in a splint, his face sooty. The powder kegs stood in the shade, dry and insulted.

Götz looked at his left hand. The skin was taut over blisters, red as a threat. He clenched his fingers as far as he could and laughed quietly. Not happily. More

like someone who's realized a bill has begun. *One day the fire wants more*, he thought. *Let it come. Then I'll give it something it can't digest*. He had no idea how literally the world takes wishes. But the idea of iron beneath flesh had awakened and stretched.

"Sleep," Ulrich said behind him. "Tomorrow we'll count what's left." - "And if there's not enough?" - "Then we'll get more. Or we'll die. Both can be done properly."

Götz lay down near the roar, his sword in his arm, his hand throbbing, the smoke still hanging in his lungs. The sky above the courtyard was black again, without red. He closed his eyes. The trial by fire hadn't asked if he was ready. It had taken what it wanted and left him what he needed: certainty.

He slept, and in his sleep he passed through the door again, through the smoke again, past the moment when the world says "right now." And each time he kept his mouth firmly closed on the throat of the day, until the day began to listen to him.

The morning after the trial by fire was not like any other. Normally, a camp smells of horse manure, cold beer, and men snoring too loudly. This time, the acrid stench of wet wood and burnt flesh hung over everything. The smoke still hung low, as if it wanted the right to stay longer than the people.

The men crawled out of their tents like animals emerging from holes, coughing, cursing, their armor still sooty. Some acted as if nothing had happened. Others stared into space, as if they could erase what they had seen yesterday with their eyes. Fire doesn't just burn houses. It also burns images into skulls.

Götz sat on an overturned barrel, his sword between his knees. His hand was bandaged, the fabric sticking, and every time he moved his fingers, it tugged like a memory that wouldn't go away. But he grinned. Not broadly, not childishly—a hard, silent grin. He had pulled through. He hadn't broken.

The father gave a short speech. He called it a "thanksgiving prayer," but it was more like a sermon in the ashes. "We have preserved our honor. We have defended the castle. We have shown that we are not soft." The men nodded, some murmuring an "amen" that barely escaped their lips. Ulrich stood beside them, his arms crossed, his brow furrowed. When the old man was finished, he simply grumbled: "Honor doesn't fill stomachs. Get some bread before someone else bites into the ashes."

Götz heard both. His father's pride. Ulrich's pragmatism. And within himself, he heard something third: the laughter of the fire. Honor, bread, none of it matters. What matters is that you burn without being burned up.

The camp was a hospital. A squire lay with burned arms, his skin like melted wax. A farmhand limped, his legs covered in blisters. One wept without tears – the smoke had dried his eyes. Götz walked around, looked at them all, and he knew: Yesterday had been the border. Some had crossed it, others had been broken by it. Not him.

Jörg came and sat down next to him, the axe still blackened at the edge. "You overdid it, little one." "I survived." "Yes," grinned Jörg, "and that's the trick." He took a sip from a mug and passed it over. Götz drank; the beer tasted of ash. He swallowed anyway.

At midday, the farmers arrived. The survivors. Women, children, the elderly. They wanted to bury their dead. They carried simple spades, old cloths, and blank faces. No one dared to resist, no one raised their voice. They walked through the camp as if through a stable that didn't belong to them. The father nodded to them, patronizingly, as if he had bestowed mercy. Ulrich just grumbled. Götz saw the procession of wretched people, and something inside him twitched. Not pity—more of a realization: This is what the losers look like. I never want to look like that.

In the evening, as the camp settled down again, Ulrich gathered the squires. "You saw yesterday how it goes. Fire doesn't ask if you're ready. It takes whomever it wants. Whoever stays, stays. You—" he pointed to Götz, "—have confessed. Everyone remembers that. But remember: The price is still to come. Always."

"What price?" asked Heinrich, the thin squire. "Sleep, skin, years, someday a piece of you. Maybe an arm, maybe an eye. The fire always takes. But whoever survives is never the same."

Everyone nodded, nervously, uncertainly. But Götz grinned again. His hand throbbed, his skin was sore, but that didn't matter. If Feuer wants more, he thought, let it come. I have enough to give him.

Later, alone, he removed the bandage. His skin was red, blisters glistened, and the pain stung like needles. He clenched his fist as hard as he could, blood oozing, and he whispered, "Not today. Today I win."

Then he lay down, his sword beside him, and fell asleep amidst smoke and coughing. And in his dreams, he stood in the fire again, laughing, and walked through it without looking back.

The smoke slowly dissipated, but it lingered in your body like a bad thought. You didn't simply cough it out; it settled in your lungs, your skin, your dreams. And out of the smoke grew the scars. Some were immediately visible—red blisters, cracked skin, burn marks on hair that stank so badly that even the flies politely kept their distance. Others were invisible. They were deeper down, where words no longer land.

Götz woke up the second morning after the fire with a hand that looked like an injured fruit. The skin was tight, itchy, burned, and ached. He tore off the bandage, gritted his teeth, and examined the fire's work: blisters that glittered yellow in the center; edges red like freshly injured wounds; small, black dots where fiber and skin hadn't spoken to each other for long enough. "You're not beautiful," he murmured, "but you're mine."

The blacksmith came, as taciturn as ever, and brought an ointment that smelled of bacon and smoke. "Rubber it on," he said. "Don't skimp." "Does it heal?" "Everything heals. But nothing will be the same as before." "Good," said Götz. "I didn't like it before."

He sat on the edge of the cart and greased his hand, slowly, deliberately, as if greasing a knife he loved. The fingers moved heavily, but they obeyed. He clenched his fist and felt pain and will enter into a brief, bitter marriage. "Go," he said. "Go enough."

In the camp, men hobbled like poorly repaired chairs. One carried his shoulder in a strap, another had burned his hair and wore a cap to protect him from ridicule. The miller's boy, whom Götz had dragged from the granary, lay on a blanket. His face was sooty, his eyelashes half-scorched. He breathed laboredly, but he breathed. As Götz passed, he raised his hand as if to say something, but the words stuck in his throat. Götz just nodded. Words were a luxury. Breathing was a duty.

Heinrich, the thin squire with the cold eyes, had a burn mark on his forearm like an ugly smile. "Looks like hell has marked you," said Götz. Heinrich twisted his mouth. "Hell has bad taste." "Or good." "We'll see."

Ulrich stepped up and looked at both their hands as if he were examining horses. "Movement," he growled. "Scars eat away at mobility if you let them."

"How do you prevent that?" "Movement." "So pain." "So life," said Ulrich, gently nudging Götz with his finger against the burning spot. Götz didn't flinch. "Good," said Ulrich. "You stay."

In the afternoon, they had to count. Not loot—that was paltry—but losses, damages, debts. Father stood with a piece of parchment fluttering in the wind, doing what he loved best: writing order in shards. "Two oxen dead. A wagon axle broken. Three roofs gone. Five seriously wounded. No one among us dead." He raised his eyes, his voice firm. "That is honor."

"That's luck," Ulrich grumbled. "And luck lasts as long as a thin shoe in a swamp." "You're making everything small," hissed his father. "No," said Ulrich. "I'll make it fit."

Götz listened, and yet heard something else: the quiet hum in his own head that lingers after a battle. Not music, more like the whirring of a vein that still has its wits about it. The hum said: You walked through fire. And you didn't melt away. He looked at his hand and wondered how far fire can go before it melts out something that can't be replaced. The thought stuck, like a spark in the dry hay of his brain.

As the sun dipped, the priest arrived from the village. A thin man, too small for his hat. He asked for words, for comfort, for help with the burial. The father nodded magnanimously, as if he had personally ordered the dead. Ulrich released two farmhands: "Digging is more honest than preaching." Götz went with him. Not out of piety. He wanted to see things disappear.

The cemetery was a patch of earth with a fence that no one took seriously. They dug two holes, wide, not deep – the ground was unruly, didn't like people. Women brought cloths containing bodies that lay so still, as if they wanted no more effort. The children watched without blinking. Götz helped. One body was light, frighteningly light. "She was almost gone before," one murmured. Götz placed the dead in the earth as carefully as his hands allowed, and realized that scars don't just grow on people. They also grow in villages. In streets. In glances.

When they returned, the camp was quieter. Jörg was sitting on a small barrel, carving a piece of wood that was far too small for his fingers. "Do you make art?" asked Götz. "I'm doing it quietly," grunted Jörg. "When the hand is doing something, the head isn't thinking so loudly." "And what will it be?" "A nothing that fits." He held up the piece: a rough, unfinished thing. "Like me."

At night, the pain returned like an uninvited dog. Götz lay awake, feeling his hand throbbing. He placed it on the sword lying beside him and noticed that the metal was cool, like an honest lie. He closed his eyes. Images came back, not as a nightmare, more as inventory: the door giving way; the boy gasping; the flame that had kissed his shoulder. So that's how flames talk, he thought. Briefly. Without repetition. You hear it or you die. He twisted his hand, stretched his fingers, gritted his teeth, held the position until the muscles trembled. Then he let go and laughed softly. "Not you. Me."

In the morning, Ulrich sat him down at the edge of the camp, where an old wagon was parked. "Cut the edge," he said. "Again and again. Flat, clean, slow. And stretch your fingers every now and then. If you go easy on them, they'll forget you." "And if they scream?" "Then they scream. Noise isn't death."

Götz cut. The blade devoured fine shavings from the cartwood, as if it had a hunger for rest. He shifted from his right to his left hand, as far as he could. His left hand trembled. "More," he whispered. "More, you swine. You're needed." He held on until the ointment sweated from the edges.

Heinrich approached, watched, said nothing—and then sat down, picked up a piece of wood, and began cutting next to it. A silent admission that scars don't heal on their own. After a while, he raised his eyes. "Do you know what the worst part is?" "That it happens again?" "That you get used to it." "Then I'll really get used to it."

They continued cutting, wood shavings gathering in a small pile that looked like a soft bed for mosquitoes. The sun rose higher, as if trying to make amends.

Around noon, his father arrived. He looked at Götz's hand, the work on the cart, the pile of shavings. "Scars are seals," he said. "They tell the world that you've paid." "And if I have to pay more?" "Then you'll be more expensive." The old man nodded, tired, proud. "I have scars too," he added quietly, as if excusing them. "Only most of them aren't visible anymore because they're older than the men who are watching now." Götz returned the look. He suddenly saw how few years of honor had left in his father and how much defiance still remained. "I'll make some that people will see," he said. "Do it," murmured the old man. "But make sure the name is visible, too."

In the afternoon, they practiced again. No fighting, no strength. Just lines. Ulrich stuck stakes into the ground, marking passages. "Through there. Edge flat. Turn. Step. Hands quiet. Feet silent." Götz ran, cut, stabbed, twisted. Each

time, his hand pulled like a bad joke, but each time he went through. "Yet," Ulrich said when Götz paused. "Yet, until the pain loses its pleasure."

The miller's boy sat at the edge and watched. His hands were still shaking, but his eyes were guiding again. "You're the one who got me out," he said when Götz paused. "I was the one who was inside," Götz answered. "The stream and chance got you out." "No," said the boy. "You." He reached to his chest and pulled out a small, charred piece of wood—a cross, crudely carved, half-burned. "I don't have that anymore. You take it." Götz took the piece of wood, examined the edges the flame had finished carving. He put it away. "I don't collect crosses," he murmured. "I collect reasons."

In the evening, when the sun had finally persuaded the smoke to rise higher, the three of them sat at the weir: the blacksmith, Ulrich, and Götz. Water flowed as if nothing had happened. That's the mean thing about water. It's always innocent.

"Scars are the only writing that can't be erased," said the blacksmith, stirring the stream with a stick as if clearing a pot. "I've seen men show theirs with pride. And I've seen men hide them until they choked." "And you?" asked Götz. "I have too little time to be ashamed," grumbled the blacksmith. "And too much work to boast."

Ulrich pointed with his chin at Götz's hand. "From now on, Weather will live in there. When it gets cold, she moans. When it rains, she knocks. Listen, but don't obey." "And if she orders me?" "Then give her something to do." Ulrich grinned. "Chop wood. Or heads. Both are calming."

They were silent, letting the stream speak. Götz felt the new map within him: a hand that no longer forgot; a shoulder that responded to fire; a head in which sat a spark that never went out. He thought of the blacksmith's words: Everything heals. But nothing will ever be the same. That's a good thing. Before was a place for others.

When the stars came out, he lay again at the edge of the camp, his sword beside him, his hand on the hilt. He ran his fingertips over the leather, feeling the seams that reminded him of nerves. "One day," he murmured, "you'll grab more than skin." He looked up at the dark sky, which looked as if a god sat behind it, not listening. "Then you'll have it," he said into the night—not to the god, to the fire. "But only if I give it to you."

The wind shifted. The smell of fire no longer reverberated. It smelled of metal, water, sweat—the honest trinity of his life. He closed his eyes. The scars still burned, but now they told a story. Not of weakness. Of possession. Of a body that writes its story into its skin so the mind won't forget it.

And somewhere in the darkness, just for a moment, Götz heard what he always wanted to hear: his own breathing. Calm. Not heroic. Just there. Proof that he's still here. Tomorrow the hand would scream again, the drill would bite again, his father would talk of honor again, Ulrich would contradict him again. And him? He would raise the blade as far as he could and let the scars do the work.

Because that was the lesson: Not that scars are ugly. But that they become tools when you touch them.

Everyday life reigned again in the camp—as well as one could call it everyday life when scars sprouted everywhere like weeds. Men mended straps, soaked leather, and straightened arrowheads. Women washed blood from cloths that never completely disappeared. Children collected charred wood to burn later, as if the circle were a game. But a new tone hung over everything: the talk of Götz.

He had walked through the fire, dragged the miller's boy out, and secured the powder. And that was fodder for tongues. Some said "courageous," some said "crazy." And in a tavern or a camp, courage and madness are brothers, and no one wants to distinguish them.

The mockery began in the evening. The men sat in a circle, mugs in hand, their voices hoarse from the smoke and beer. Jörg recounted loudly: "And then the brat jumps into the middle of the fire as if it were a dance! I swear to you, I thought he'd come out without a hair!" Laughter. One shouted: "Does he still have eggs, or are they fried too?" More laughter.

Heinrich, the slender squire, twisted his mouth. "Honor is one thing. But stupidity is another. You put out fire with water, not with children." The men grinned and nodded. "Perhaps he wanted to play the hero." - "Perhaps he wanted to get his face into the songs." - "Perhaps he's simply lost his mind."

Götz sat a little way off, jug in hand, sword beside his leg. He heard every word. And he remained silent. Not because he didn't have an answer. But because he knew: sometimes silence is the knife that cuts longer.

The father stood there, drank, listened. And he also remained silent. But his eyes glowed every time someone laughed. It was a quiet pride he didn't express for fear of breaking the weight.

Ulrich, on the other hand, grinned. "Leave him alone. You call it stupidity? I call it proof. None of you ran. But only one went in." He toasted Götz without looking at him. "And that's why he's sitting here. And so is the miller's boy."

The next morning, things got serious. Heinrich approached Götz, his voice calm but his eyes cold. "You think you're more than us because you went into the fire?" Götz looked at him, long and calm. "No. I just know I'm no less." "Prove it."

"When?" "Now."

A circle formed. Men love circles when it smells like a beating. Ulrich stepped forward. "No blades. Fists. Until one of them can't get up anymore." He grinned. "You can't conjure up a fire, so choose the nearest hell: each other."

They stood facing each other. Heinrich, sinewy, experienced, hands as quick as whips. Götz, younger, broader, one hand still bandaged, but full of defiance. "Ready?" asked Ulrich. "Always," growled Götz.

The fight began. Heinrich struck hard, fast, a hook to the ribs, a thrust to the stomach. Götz staggered, spat blood, laughed. "That's it?" Heinrich struck again, this time in the face. Götz staggered, held his ground, struck back. Broad, rough, raw. No technique, just power. His fists connected, his bones screamed.

The crowd roared. "Go!" "Knock him down!" "Knock him down!" Beer splashed, voices roared. It was no longer a fight, it was a ritual.

Heinrich was faster, but Götz was harder. Every blow he took was like a vow: I'll stay. His lip was bleeding, his nose was crooked, his ribs throbbed. But he stood. And at some point, after the twentieth blow, after the thirtieth, Heinrich realized the boy wasn't falling.

Then the moment came. Heinrich's fist struck, but Götz caught it with his forehead. Blood spurted, both gasped. Götz laughed, deep, throaty. "Now you." And he struck. Once, twice, three times. Heinrich staggered, fell, lay there. Silence. Then cheers.

Götz stood there, panting, bloodied, but smiling. "Anyone else?" he asked the crowd. No one answered. Ulrich stepped forward and raised his hand. "Enough. The verdict is in."

Heinrich lay in the dirt, groaning, spitting blood. He raised his hand as a sign. "He stays."

The men nodded. The mockery was over. From then on, they spoke of him differently. No longer "child." No longer "fool." They called him "the one who stood in the fire."

That evening, Götz sat alone at the weir, his hand bandaged again, his face bruised. He stared into the water, listening to the rushing. He knew: mockery is just a test. A different kind of fire. And he had survived that too.

He grinned crookedly and muttered, "Laugh while you can. Someday, only my name will be laughing."

He had survived the first fire, but the second came faster than he would have liked. Not in the storehouse, not with torches and gunpowder, but within the people. A fire that didn't burn, but consumed.

It started with the stench. At first, everyone thought it was just the smoke hanging in their clothes. But the stench was different. Sweeter, more putrid. Dead bodies that no one cleared away because they had no free hands. Flies that didn't flee even in the smoke. Then the first men, who staggered when they stood up, even though they hadn't drunk. One spat blood, one coughed his lungs out, one simply collapsed, in the middle of a drill.

"Plague," Ulrich murmured. The word was heavy, harder than any sword. "If this continues, we'll soon have more dead than victors."

The men whispered, the women packed away their children, the servants kept their distance from one another. But war doesn't take a break when illness strikes. His father spoke of discipline, of prayer, of honor. Ulrich spoke of boiling water, of carrying shit from the camp, of work. Götz heard both and knew: The second fire burned invisibly, and it wanted to test him.

The miller's apprentice, whom he had pulled from the flames, was one of the first. Coughing, feverish, shaking. He lay in the shadows, his lips blue, his eyes glassy. "I'll pay you back," he whispered, but his voice was as weak as a mouse in winter. Götz knelt beside him, pressing his forehead against his fist. "You won't pay me anything. You stay. Understood?"

The boy nodded, but the nod was only a twitch.

The camp order collapsed. Men wanted to flee, servants wanted to go home. The father raged: "Treason! Whoever leaves loses their place!" Ulrich growled: "Whoever stays loses their breath." Arguments, screams, divisions. And Götz was in the middle of it all, his hand still scarred, his face still blue from Heinrich's fists.

He walked through the lines at night. Faces were shadows, bodies twitched. He heard whimpers, coughs, curses. And he understood: The second fire didn't want him to fight. It wanted him to stand without striking. To stay while others fell.

By the third day, half were sick. By the fourth, the first died. A farmhand, barely twenty. He wheezed, vomited blood, rolled his eyes, and was silent. The men stood around as if he were a chicken that had been slaughtered improperly. No one wanted to touch him. Götz stepped forward, grabbed the body, and pulled it himself to the edge of the camp. "Dig," he said. "Now." And he dug. With his hands, with the hilt of his sword, with anything. Ulrich watched, nodded. "That's how you fight fire that has no light."

The plague lasted a week, then subsided. Why? No one knew. Perhaps there was finally enough water, perhaps the dead had paid enough. But the camp was different. Quieter. Emptier. Harder.

And Götz? He had seen the second fire. He had seen the men cry who usually laughed. He had seen the strong men who usually carried everything falter. And he had dug. More than once.

As the sun rose again over a half-still camp, he looked at his hand. The burn scars ached, the blisters burst as he wielded the spade. But he felt no disgust. Only certainty: Fire always takes. But I only give what I want.

In the evening, when the silence returned, he sat at the edge of the weir. Ulrich sat down next to him, staring into the water. "You stood your ground. Two fires, and you're still here." "I'm staying," murmured Götz. "Then get used to it. Because that was just the beginning. Fire always has more."

Götz grinned crookedly, clenching his burned hand. "Let them come. I have room."

The second fire had barely died down when the third came: not a fire, not a plague, but words. And words can sometimes cut sharper than any blade.

The news spread quickly: a council was about to meet. No priest, no prince, just the old men from the houses—fathers, uncles, those who had more scars than teeth and believed that experience was the same as truth. They wanted to discuss what to do next. Too many losses, too many dead, too much gossip in the surrounding countryside.

Götz's father got up early, strapped on his sword, and donned the old coat of arms, which had long since become threadbare. "Honor," he murmured, "we must uphold it, or we will fall apart." Ulrich laughed harshly. "Better hold on to your men. Honor won't run away. But hunger will."

The hall was full when they entered. Torches flickered, the walls stank of smoke. The elders sat on wooden benches as if they were thrones. They looked tired, but their voices still had a sharp edge. "We've lost too much," one began. "The farm is half burned, the fields desolate. And we stand here like beggars in armor."

"We showed strength," the father replied. "We survived the fire. We preserved our honor."

"Honor?" Another spat on the ground. "Honor doesn't burn grain. Honor doesn't fill storehouses. We need peace. A truce. Otherwise, we'll soon be nothing more than a song no one sings."

The voices grew louder. Some wanted peace, others revenge, still others raids to make up for the loss. Ulrich held back, standing in the shadows and watching. Götz sat beside him, his hand in a sling, his eyes hard.

Then his name was mentioned. "The boy," said one, an old knight with a nose like a broken plow. "He walked into the fire, yes. But that was foolishness, not courage. And if we make him an example, the boys will only learn madness."

The father jumped up, his voice trembling: "My son has shown more courage than many here in three wars! He saved gunpowder, he pulled a man from the flames!" "And almost lost his life!" "Better to lose a life than lose all honor!"

Ulrich stepped forward, folding his arms. "You talk like traders about prices. But the boy did something none of you did: He went where no one wanted to go. You can call it foolishness. I call it proof. If we don't have men like him, all we have left is complaining."

Silence. The old men murmured, nodded, cursed. Then one said: "And what if he doesn't come back next time?" Ulrich's eyes flashed. "Then at least he did

something while he was gone. Not like some of the people here who sit and do math."

Finally, the eldest, a man whose hands had more scars than fingers, stood up. "Enough. We now pass judgment. The boy showed courage. Perhaps it was foolishness, perhaps it was greatness. But there is no courage without foolishness. We need men who stand. And he stood. The verdict is: He remains. He wears iron. He fights. And he bears responsibility. If he falls, he falls not alone, but as one of us."

The crowd murmured, then nodded. The verdict had been passed.

Outside the hall, the father grabbed Götz by the shoulders, his eyes moist with anger or pride—perhaps both. "See? They've accepted you. You're part of us. You're my son."

Götz looked at him, the burn scars glowing beneath the bandages, his fist clenched. "No. I am me. And you've only finally noticed."

Ulrich laughed loudly, slapping him on the back so hard he almost stumbled. "That's the way someone who's understood the verdict speaks. Not words, boy. Fire. Fire decided. And you got out."

That night, Götz slept soundly, his sword beside him. For the first time, not because he was afraid of losing it, but because he knew: He himself was the sword. And the judgment of the fathers was only the beginning.

The sentence had been passed, the men had nodded, the father had claimed him as "son," and Ulrich had celebrated him. But at night, when the voices fell silent and only the wind whistled through the cracks, something came that struck harder than any enemy: doubt.

Götz lay on his bunk, his sword beside him, as always. His hand throbbed, the blisters burst in the darkness, clinging to fabric and skin. He stared at the ceiling, heard the others breathing—snoring, wheezing, sometimes cursing in his dreams. But he also heard something else: the echo. An echo of voices, of faces, of fire.

The miller's boy he'd pulled out. Coughing, fragile, maybe dead, maybe not. The farmhand who disappeared into the flames, whom no one ever found. The women who placed cloths over burned bodies. All of this crept into his head like rats into an empty grain barrel.

He stood up, quietly, barefoot, and walked out into the courtyard. The sky was black, the stars were harsh, the smoke still hung like an invisible blanket. He sat down by the wall, his sword across his knees.

"Was it courage?" he whispered into the darkness. "Or was it just stupidity?"

The wind didn't answer. But sometimes silence is louder than words.

He thought of his father. "Honor." Always honor. But what was honor worth when you couldn't sleep at night because the screams lingered in your ears? He thought of Ulrich. "Pragmatism." But Ulrich had no cure for the burning in his bones either.

Then he thought of himself, of the oath he had made by the blade. I will not break. Never. But doubt is a sword without a blade. It presses, it does not cut, and that is precisely what makes it unbearable.

He sat there for hours. Memories flooded back. The first blow with the real weapon. The farmer he stabbed. Heinrich's face in the dirt after the fight. The fire that kissed him and left scars. Everything piled up like barrels in a cellar, ready to explode at some point.

"Am I still human?" he asked himself. "Or already just iron?"

His burned hand responded with pain. "You're both," he murmured. "Still."

A noise tore him away. Footsteps. Heinrich, the slender squire, stepped out of the darkness. He sat down next to him without a word. For a long time, they both remained silent, staring at the same sky, the same stars, acting as if the misery didn't concern them.

"Why did you leave?" Heinrich finally asked. "Because someone was there."
"And if it had cost you?" "Then I would have been worth it."

Heinrich nodded. "I wouldn't have done it." "I know."

"And yet..." Heinrich looked at him sideways, "...everyone's talking about you now. Not about me anymore."

Götz grinned crookedly. "Then stand in the fire if you need it." Heinrich laughed bitterly. "No. I don't want scars. But I see you do. Maybe that's your curse."

When Heinrich left, Götz was left alone again. But something had changed. The doubts hadn't disappeared. But they had been tamed, like dogs on a chain that could only bark.

He stroked the sword, slowly, almost tenderly. "If I have any doubts, then you take them. You eat blood, you can also eat thoughts." He closed his eyes. "But let me stand. Always stand."

Morning came, gray and hard as an old bone. Götz washed his face, re-bandaged his hand, and stepped into the courtyard as if nothing had happened. But deep down, he knew: Doubt will return. Always. And perhaps that was a good thing. Because without doubt, courage turns to madness.

And he needed courage. Not madness. Not yet.

The night after the doubts was blacker than usual. No moon, only a sky that pretended to forget the earth. The camp slept restlessly, men groaned, children whimpered, dogs growled in their dreams. And in the middle of it all, Götz sat alone again, his sword across his knees, his burned hand on the hilt.

He was tired, but sleep didn't come. Too many voices in his head, too many images behind his eyelids. Flames, screams, the miller's face, the glint in Ulrich's eyes, his father's sermons. All a chaos that choked him. Then he knew: He didn't need prayer, judgment, or honor. He needed his own law.

He took the blade, drawing it slowly until it glittered in the dim light of the torch. Then he cut his hand over the old burn scars. Just a small cut, just enough for blood to drip onto the blade. He held it up, watching the red run across the metal, like a mark that could never be erased.

"Listen," he whispered into the darkness. "I'm not like the others. I'm not a farmer who screams when there's a fire. I'm not a knight who sings songs. I am me. And I swear: I'll stay. Always. When fire comes, I'll go through it. When doubt comes, I'll devour it. When death comes, it'll bite off my hand, but not my will."

His voice was quiet but cutting. No grand ritual, no witnesses. Just him, the blade, and the darkness. But that was enough.

He placed the hand with the fresh wound on his chest, feeling his heart pounding. "I am iron. I am fire. I am Götz. And no pig in this world can make me smaller."

The wound burned, his hand throbbed. But he laughed. A deep, hoarse laugh that sounded as if he had spat in the face of the darkness itself.

When he crawled back into the bunk, he was still awake, but calmer. The doubts hadn't disappeared—they still sat there, like ravens on a branch. But now he knew: They belonged to him. He had burned them into the oath, along with the fire, along with the iron.

He fell asleep with the sword in his hand and blood on the hilt. And in his dream, he stood in the fire again—this time not as a victim, not as a savior, but as a master.

The next morning, he stepped into the courtyard, his hand freshly bandaged, his eyes glowing. Ulrich saw him and grinned. "So, sworn again?" "Always," said Götz. "Good," said Ulrich. "Such oaths last longer than sermons."

The father approached and looked at his son. He saw nothing of the night, knew nothing of the blood. But he felt it. "You've changed." "No," Götz replied. "I've found myself."

Thus ended the trial by fire. Not in a sea of flames, not in the judgment of the elders, but in the silent vow of a boy who had decided to belong to himself.

And from that day on it was clear: the knight with the iron hand was born, even before the iron had grown on his flesh.

Friendship and enmity

Friendship, the old men said, was something sacred. In the camp, the only thing sacred was the moment when the beer briefly washed away the dirt in one's throat. The rest was a bargain: you give me your back, I'll give you your eyes; you share bread, I'll share blood. Those who expected more got fewer teeth.

The fireplace was at the edge of the camp, where the smoke from the mill no longer smelled of ash, but of wet wood and fat. Three stones, a pan, a pot that had more dents than a bottom. Götz sat with Jörg, the ox, and a quiet fellow everyone called Lenz because he had joined the train in the spring and hadn't left since. Lenz was thin, but not weak; he had that kind of calm you get when you've learned that shouting doesn't make the world go faster.

Jörg poked around in the pot, stirring a soup that was somewhere between peas and despair. "If the cook lies to me again and says there's meat in it, I'll cut it out of his ass myself," he grumbled. "Then at least you have proof," said Götz, grinning crookedly. His hand, the one marked by the fire, was warm and alive beneath the coarse bandage, as if it had a heart of its own. Lenz blew the ash off a piece of bread. "Meat is overrated. Teeth are more important. For chewing and threatening."

They laughed, that short, dry laugh of men who've breathed too much smoke. Behind them, a horse snored; somewhere, a couple who pretended not to know each other during the day were arguing. Henry sat further over, by another fire, with the fine-faced squires who tightened their belts when things got serious, so that their knees wouldn't be visible. He sometimes glanced over, cold, razor-sharp. Rivalry has unblinking eyes.

"He doesn't like you," Lenz murmured, without looking. "He likes what fits him in the mirror," said Götz. "I don't fit him." "And you like him?" Jörg slurped the soup as if to punish her. "I like that he stays when things stink," said Götz after a moment. "That's rare enough."

They were silent and listened to the fire. Flames are the best storytellers—they never repeat themselves, and in the end, all that remains is what you throw over them.

Dietrich, the quartermaster, came by, a bag on his belt, one eye half-closed because at some point a shoe had hit him that wasn't meant for him. He smelled of cellars, of lists, of things you don't say out loud. "Good evening, you two and the mute," he croaked. "I've got something to ease your conscience." He pulled a piece of bacon from the bag, small as a lie, but real. Jörg grabbed it, Götz was faster. "What do you want?" "A favor, someday," said Dietrich, smiling the way only people who know what guilt means. "Write it on a stick and burn it," said Götz, dividing the bacon into three unfair pieces, the largest going to Lenz. "I'll pay today. I'd have to like you for tomorrow."

Dietrich left his smile hanging like a knife in a door. "You'll come," he murmured and disappeared, as quiet as a bill.

Lenz sniffed the bacon as if it were wine. "You'll give me the biggest piece?" he asked matter-of-factly. "You have the smallest words," said Götz. "They have to grow." Jörg snorted. "He's giving it to you because you had his back yesterday when the peasant rascals were throwing stones. Don't be stupid, Lenz. Take it for what it is: a contract without parchment."

Friendship always has its test. Sometimes it announces itself like a thunderstorm. Sometimes it hits right in the middle of the plate. This time it came as a whistle from the darkness, long, shrill, not theirs. The dogs stopped before the men did. A shadow ran between the wagons, one, two, three—light feet that knew too much. Ulrich's voice came like a blow: "Up! Up, you idiots!"

Götz was already on his feet before his mind had finished the sentence. Lenz reached for the bow he always carried like a secret, and Jörg grabbed the axe as if it were his breakfast. They ran to the edge of the camp, where the tents were less densely packed and the night tended to swallow things up.

Three figures, maybe four. Fast. Too fast for peasants. No torches, just intent. One was on the reins of the best draft horse, the other had his hand in the sack of a mercenary who didn't understand sleep. The third stood guard, so sloppy, as if he didn't believe that chance was at work tonight.

"Left," whispered Lenz, already on one knee, the bowstring singing. The arrow flew, making this quiet *ptack*, which confirms the truth in the darkness. The waking man fell without discussion.

The others ran. Götz was faster than his knees, Jörg faster than his mind. They got the one with the leash first. He tried to pull the knife, but got Götz's shoulder. Not the burned one, the other one, the one who still liked to talk. A blow with the butt, a second to the kidney – the body gave way, the way things give way when they weren't promised. Jörg got the pickpocket. No trick: a blow to the legs, the feet said "No," the man said "Shit," and stayed down.

Ulrich surfaced as if the night itself had spat him out. "More?" "One gone," said Lenz soberly. "The forest will get him. Or the forest will get him." Ulrich nodded. "We'll count the dead later. Now count stuff. If you're short of something, scream before you cry."

They dragged the two arrested men to the fire. Men approached, smelling of sleep and fear. Heinrich stood there, arms crossed, eyes on Götz. "Nice shot," he said to Lenz, as if praise were something to be stolen. "He didn't flinch," Lenz replied, not proudly, just registering. "Makes it easier," Heinrich murmured. He looked at Götz. "You could have thrown him, too." "I threw him," said Götz. "Just differently."

Ulrich bent over the prisoners, smelling them as if they were cheese. "Not a village. A city. Too clean. Not enough dirt between the nails." He grabbed one of them by the chin. "For whom?" The man spat something at him that was no

longer saliva. Ulrich smiled toothlessly. "Good. Then your hand talks to my axe."

The father came, a shawl over his shoulder, his face serious. "No blood in the camp," he said. Ulrich shrugged. "Then outside." "Mercy," murmured the father, "is part of honor." "And holes in the supplies are part of hunger," Ulrich countered.

They agreed on something in between: no axe, no blood—but no bread, no shoes, no leash. The men were allowed to run, naked from the cold, the night as a judgment. "This is grace that teaches," said the father. "Mercy that returns," Ulrich growled. "But okay. No more death today."

Back by the fire, the soup was cold, the bacon greasy, the beer warm. Jörg sat down, groaning. "I hate racing when there's food waiting." "You love racing when there's heads," said Lenz. "Food is just an excuse." "You talk too much for someone who says so little," Jörg grumbled.

Götz placed his hand over the pan, feeling the residual heat, as if measuring his own heat. He looked over at Heinrich. Heinrich had taken the scene without mockery, which was rare. He nodded to Götz—a short, dry nod, the kind men do when they know: I'd be more tired today without you.

Later, two more joined them: Veit, a broad fellow with the hands of a miller, and Sigi, a fellow who was always cold, even when a stove was dying next to him. They sat down as if they'd been sitting there for years. "Listen, you had a visitor," said Veit, showing teeth any dentist would consider a reason to resign. "The night likes us," said Lenz. "Then bring her flowers," growled Sigi, holding his hands to the fire as if it were a woman he didn't understand.

The stories that always follow when men overtake danger on their way back followed. Veit told of a mill where rats had eaten the priest – no one believed it, but everyone laughed. Jörg boasted that he had once killed two at once with an axe... "One was a dog," Lenz interjected dryly. Jörg shrugged. "A dog is a number, too." Sigi told of a winter so harsh that an entire company had learned to chew snow without losing teeth. "We still managed it." - "What?" - "Losing teeth."

Götz listened and felt something settle. No heroic song, no grand oath. Just this quiet feeling: *They stay when it stinks.* Jörg, who yells when it wants to be quiet. Lenz, who hits the target before anyone realizes he's aimed. Veit, who laughs

when the world wants to cry. Sigi, who freezes but still comes. Friendship is the sum of people who don't ask if you're worth it.

Heinrich later approached, but remained outside the firelight. "You have a circle," he said, as matter-of-factly as if he were reading a list. "You have one too," Götz replied. "Mine listens to me." "Mine runs with me." Heinrich's mouth twisted into something that wasn't a smile. "Watch out, Berlichingen. Circles turn into wheels. And wheels sometimes run over those who built them." "Then sit in the front," said Götz. "Or jump in time."

Heinrich left. Götz watched him go and realized: Enmity is not war. It's a road that runs alongside yours and sometimes crosses yours. You just have to know when to look.

Later, as the stories grew thinner and the beer more honest, Lenz laid the bow down next to him as if laying down a child. "Why did you refuse Dietrich the favor?" he asked, without looking in Götz's direction. "Because memories last longer than thanks," said Götz. "And because I'd rather carry you out of the fire than his debts." "He'll pay you back," murmured Sigi, who always knew when shadows were present. "Let them wait." Götz stroked the bandage on his hand. "I'll pay those who hold my bones first."

The night crept on, grew thicker, and settled on our shoulders. Someone played a flute so crooked it almost fit again. A dog lay down next to Götz's boots, as if he knew those feet would run when there was a fire. Jörg was half-snoring, Lenz was asleep with his eyes open, Veit mumbled something about bread he would never eat, and Sigi spotted a star that wasn't one.

Götz stayed awake, his sword at his side, his hand under the leather strap that smelled of grease. He looked into the embers, which slowly turned black. Friendship, he thought, is a fire shared so it burns longer. Enmity is the wood someone secretly wets. And in the morning, you see whose fire is still warm.

He scanned the faces in his mind: Jörg – loud, loyal, like a doorframe. Lenz – quiet, deadly, like a shadow with a tendon. Veit – broad and cheerful, until the world realizes he can also cry when he kicks. Sigi – tired, reliable, a man who carries the cold in his pockets. And Heinrich – the slender blade beside him, which doesn't belong in its sheath, yet remains.

"I'll take you," Götz whispered, barely audibly. "And I'll take what you take from me." No big words, no oath—just an inventory. A contract without parchment,

just as Jörg had said. He felt his hand pulsing beneath the blindfold. Yes, he thought. That's the price. But tonight I'll gladly pay.

When he finally closed his eyes, he didn't dream of fire. He dreamed of a circle of men looking in the same direction. No one was singing. No one was praying. And yet it was quiet. So quiet that even Doubt lay down and pretended to be tired.

In the morning, new whistles would come, new shadows, new bills. Maybe Dietrich would smile, maybe Heinrich would smile, maybe no one would smile. No matter. He had a fire that was more than wood. He had comrades. And he had enemies who were already testing the path.

Friendship and enmity – two knives in one sheath. You carry both, you draw them when necessary. And when your hand burns, it reminds you which one you grabbed first. Today it was friendship. Tomorrow... Tomorrow the fire decides.

Friendship sounds noble in songs, but in the camp it was nothing but a contract of sweat and dirt. By day they trained, at night they squatted around the fire, and somewhere in between it became clear who had your back—and who would stick a knife in you at the first gust of wind.

The test came not during a campaign, not at a tournament, but on a fetid afternoon when the sky was grayer than a beggar's rag. A few of Ulrich's men had brought supplies from a nearby village—officially tribute, but in reality, whatever they could grab without killing the peasants immediately. A wagon full of grain, another full of wood, and a few pigs squealing so loudly they could have been mistaken for warriors.

The wagons had to go through a narrow passage, a depression between two slopes, where the path was as muddy as manure. "Quickly through," Ulrich growled, "there are always hungry people lurking up there."

And indeed – as soon as they entered the hollow, stones rained down. Not huge chunks, just fists, but enough to make horses shy and men curse. Farmers, Götz thought, but more organized than usual. No wild screams, just well-aimed throws. One flew so close to his head that he felt its warmth.

"Cover!" Ulrich yelled. Men jumped from the wagons, raised shields, and scrambled for purchase in the mud. Jörg cursed, raised his axe, and gave the slope the finger. "Get down, you bastards! I'll chop the land out of your heads!"

Lenz had already fired two arrows, coolly and quietly, as if he were in the garden, not in ambush. Two shadows toppled over, the others screamed. Sigi ducked behind the wagon, pale as ever, but he held on. Veit laughed, as he always did when things got serious.

And Götz? He grabbed the reins of a horse that flailed in panic, almost overturning the wagon. He held it with both hands, pulling, cursing, while stones rained around him. His burned hand screamed, but he didn't let go. "Stay, you bastard!" he growled, "otherwise all the bread will be in the dirt!"

Then it happened. A stone hit Veit on the head, and he fell to the ground. A farmer seized the opportunity and slid down the slope, pitchfork in front. He aimed directly at the fallen man. Jörg was too far away, Lenz was too busy, and Ulrich was shouting orders. Götz saw it – and ran.

He let go of the reins, leaped through the mud, threw himself at Veit, and raised his sword. The fork crashed against it, vibrating like a broken song. Götz lunged forward, roughly, brutally, directly. The farmer gasped, blood spurted, and he fell.

"Get up!" Götz yelled in Veit's ear, "or you'll rot here!" Veit blinked, scrambled to his feet, blood running down his forehead. "You owe me beer," he slurred. "You owe me your life," Götz growled.

They fought their way through. Jörg ran up the slope, roaring, his axe like a storm. Farmers jumped aside, some fell, others fled. Lenz shot, cool as ever. Ulrich was everywhere, like a wolf driving his pack. Finally, the ambush was broken. The farmers ran, the field full of bodies that would never yield a harvest.

The wagon made it through, the pigs continued to squeal, and the grain remained intact. They dragged Veit back to the camp, set him by the fire, and bandaged his wound with a rag that had once been a shirt.

That evening, they sat in a circle again. Jörg toasted Götz. "You saved his ass. I wouldn't have thought you were so fast, with your burned paw." "She runs faster when she screams," grinned Götz, sipping from the mug.

Veit laughed, even though it hurt. "If I survive, I swear, you'll get the first pitcher, no matter where." "Then drink faster," Sigi said dryly.

Lenz just nodded. No praise, no mockery. Just this silent nod, which was worth more than a hundred words.

But not everyone was silent. Heinrich stepped to the edge of the fire, his arms crossed. "Well played, Berlichingen. But if you hadn't let go of the reins, the wagon wouldn't have almost tipped over." "If I hadn't held them, the grain would have rotted in the mud," Götz snarled back. Heinrich smiled coldly. "Or you would have survived. Being a hero is no good if you're dead." "And no good if you're a coward," Götz shot back.

The crowd murmured. Ulrich laughed hoarsely. "Quiet, you two. The boy pulled one out, and that counts. More than words. So eat, drink, and save the fight for the next fire."

Later, as the flames burned down, Götz sat alone, staring into the embers. He knew: Today he had made friends—Jörg, Lenz, Veit, Sigi. Men who stood with him, who would fall with him if necessary. But he had also made an enemy. One who would always be there, with cold eyes and a sharp tongue. Heinrich hadn't disappeared. He was only now truly there.

Götz placed his hand on the blade, the scars throbbing. Friendship and enmity, he thought, two sides of the same damn coin. And I can flip it whenever I want.

The ambush in the hollow had bonded the camp together—or so they thought. But friendship is like a coat: it keeps you warm as long as no one tugs at the fabric. And sometimes you only notice in the rain that the thing is full of holes.

It was a week later when they were tasked with securing a small granary. Just a miserable storehouse in the next village, but full enough to feed a few more mouths. Ulrich wanted to strike fast and hard. "No big deal," he growled, "in, out, done." But it's precisely in small things that the biggest cracks appear.

They set off at dawn, fog in the fields, the air damp and sharp. Götz was assigned to the group with Jörg, Lenz, Veit, and Sigi. Heinrich led a second small group. Even on the way, it was clear that the mood was off – Heinrich rode too far ahead, spoke to no one, and cast glances back that were more venomous than protective.

"He'll soon cut himself," Jörg murmured. "Or us," Lenz replied.

When they arrived at the granary, everything was quiet. Not a dog barked, not a farmer in sight. Ulrich raised his hand. "Quickly, get in." Two men broke down the door. Behind them: sacks of grain, stacked high. A dream for a hungry winter.

But then—a noise. A scream from outside. A dozen farmers rushed forward, carrying scythes, pitchforks, and stones. An ambush.

Everything happened quickly. Götz pushed the first one back, Jörg screamed as usual, Lenz shot, Veit almost tripped over a sack, Sigi tried to hold the horse. Chaos. Farmers in front, smoke from the sides.

And Heinrich? He stood at the edge, saw it, and didn't move. His squad retreated, leaving the others in the dirt. "Stop them!" Ulrich shouted. "Stop them, damn it!" But Heinrich continued to retreat, as if waiting to see who was left.

A farmer lunged at Sigi, who fell, his scythe hanging over him. Götz jumped, thrust his sword between them, and sparks flew. Sigi gasped, Götz struck, and the farmer fell. But his rage boiled over. Heinrich should have been there.

When it was over—five peasants dead, three fled, the granary secured—they sat in the dirt, breathing heavily. Ulrich yelled, "Where the hell was your troop, Heinrich?"

Heinrich just shrugged. "Tactics. Retreat to lure the enemy." "Bullshit!" Jörg thundered. "You almost let us die!" "You did it," Heinrich replied coldly.

The crowd roared, voices screamed. Lenz said nothing, but his gaze spoke volumes. Veit wiped blood from his forehead and stared at Heinrich as if he wanted to kill him with his eyes.

Götz stepped forward, his sword still red. "You betrayed us." Heinrich's mouth twisted. "I survived." "On our bones." "That's war."

The silence that followed was heavier than any screaming. Ulrich clenched his fists, about to strike, but held back. "That's the last time, Heinrich. One more retreat like that, and you're no longer one of us."

But everyone knew: words change nothing. A rift existed. And rifts grow.

That evening, they sat by the fire in silence. Jörg pounded his fist on the ground. "Next time, I'll strike him down myself." "Don't do it," Lenz muttered. "He'll betray himself. Sooner or later." "And if he kills us first?" "Then I'll bring him down."

Sigi remained silent, as always, but his eyes were fixed on Götz. As if asking: And you?

Götz pulled the bandage off his hand and examined the scars. "He's my enemy. And you don't let enemies go. But you choose your hour. And when it comes, he'll get me in front of everyone. Not behind my back."

Betrayal had poisoned the camp. Friendship endured, but enmity grew, sharp and silent. And Götz knew: Heinrich was no longer a mocker. He was a knife that would shine in the night someday.

The betrayal hung over the camp like a rotten cloud. No one said it out loud, but everyone knew: Henry had sold the men, even if he hadn't betrayed them with gold, but with cowardice. And something like that rots faster than meat in the sun.

In the evening, they crouched around the fire again. The bacon was long gone, the beer was as thin as piss, the soup was more water than food. But the embers were hot, and in the embers, the faces Götz watched burned. Jörg, whose axe was always within reach. Lenz, calm, silent, his bow across his knees. Veit, with a bandage on his forehead, his scar fresh but his grin broad. Sigi, who was always cold, but stayed. They all looked at him—not with words, but with their eyes. Say it. Join us.

Götz took the sword and placed it over the embers. The iron became warm—not red, but warm enough to make the air crackle. He drew it back and placed his hand on it, the burned, the bruised one. It hissed, the skin smelled of flesh. He didn't flinch.

"I swear by iron and fire," he said harshly. "Friendship is only valid here. Whoever stands beside me stays. Whoever betrays me dies. No matter when, no matter where."

He cut his own hand and let blood drip onto the sword. "This is my oath. Whoever wills, follows. Whoever does not, shall leave."

Jörg growled, grabbed his knife, cut his hand, and let the blood drip down the blade. "I stand. Always. And when I fall, I fall so loudly that the earth hears."

Lenz followed, silent as ever. He drew his dagger and cut his fingertip, just a drop, but clear. "I stand as long as the bow is bent."

Veit grinned, bit his thumb, and blood trickled. "I'll stand as long as the beer flows. And if there isn't any, I'll stand out of spite."

Sigi hesitated briefly, then drew a small knife and slashed at the skin. His voice was barely audible. "I'll stand, even if I'm cold."

The sword now lay red with blood and warmth between them. No priest, no oath, no parchment. Just five men, a blaze, and words that can never be taken back.

"Heinrich?" asked Jörg, spitting into the fire. "Not him," growled Götz. "He's outside. Always. Whoever stands outside doesn't get his back hurt."

They all nodded. The verdict had been passed, not by council, not by age, but by blood.

Later, when the embers were almost black, Götz was still awake. He looked at his hand, which now bore two scars: one from the fire, one from the oath. And he understood: friendship isn't warm and soft. It's sharp. It cuts you. It costs blood. But when it holds, it's harder than iron.

He looked over at Heinrich, who was sitting by another fire, alone, staring, his eyes full of venom. And Götz murmured softly: "Your hour will come. And then we'll talk with Stahl."

They say enmity is silent. That it drips like poison, quietly, secretly, and eventually takes effect. But Henry wasn't one for silence. He was an open knife—and open knives don't stab at a moment's notice. They stab immediately, and everyone sees the blade.

The days following the oath were seemingly quiet. Camp life, drills, preparing, distributing bread, grooming horses. But every step crackled when Götz and Heinrich were within the same radius. Men held their breath as one passed another. And at some point it became clear: There had to be a bang.

It happened during training. Ulrich had called all the squires into the courtyard. "Fight in pairs, without blades. Wooden swords, until one falls." The dust was dry, the sun harsh. Men stood in a circle, hungry for sweat and blood.

Heinrich immediately spoke up. "I challenge Götz." A murmur went through the circle. Ulrich grinned. "Finally." Götz stepped forward without hesitation. "Good. Then you go down first."

They were given wooden swords, crude, heavy, but honest. Heinrich stood light-footed, nimble, eyes narrow, mouth cold. Götz was broad, rough, his burned hand tightly gripping the hilt.

"Go," Ulrich yelled.

Heinrich struck first. Fast, precise, like a stab in the ribs. Götz parried, felt the blow through his arm, struck back, roughly, heavily, the force like a hammer. Heinrich dodged, laughing coldly. "You are strong, but slow." "And you are fast, but cowardly," growled Götz.

The fight raged. Wood crashed against wood, men screamed, voices cheered. Heinrich jumped, struck, dodged, lashed out like a shadow. Götz held his ground, took hits, parried, struck back. Ever harder, ever more brutally.

A blow struck Götz in the shoulder, staggering him, but he laughed. "That's all you have?" He charged forward, knocking Heinrich over with his force. Both fell into the dust, their swords flying. Now fists, elbows, dust in the mouth.

Heinrich tore at his throat, Götz struck, blood spurted from his lip. The circle raged, Ulrich grinned like a wolf.

Then the moment came. Götz's burned hand grabbed Heinrich's neck and squeezed. Heinrich gasped, kicked, and hit. Götz's eyes were black and cold. "This is what enmity looks like," he growled. "Openly. Here. In front of everyone."

"Enough!" Ulrich finally shouted, stepping in and pulling Götz back. Heinrich lay in the dust, coughing, blood on his face. Ulrich grinned. "That's enough. The verdict is passed. Heinrich, you're still alive, but only because he wanted you to be."

The men nodded and murmured. For them, it was decided: Götz was the stronger. Heinrich had lost. But in Heinrich's eyes, gleaming red and furious, there was no surrender. There was an oath, silent but deadly: Not yet. But soon.

That evening, Götz sat by the fire again, his hand aching, his body covered in dust and blood. His men grinned and nudged him. "You almost broke him," Jörg laughed. "Almost isn't enough," Götz murmured.

Lenz looked at him for a long time. "It's best to cut open knives before they come back up." "Let him come up," said Götz, his eyes dark. "Then I'll break him so that no one can put him back together."

The battle had torn the camp open like an old coat: sewn up in front, full of holes in the back. On the outside, everything was the same—drilling, guard

duty, feeding, the constant hauling of water. But inside, between the men, there was a tension thicker than smoke.

Some stood behind Götz. Jörg, Lenz, Veit, Sigi—they had sworn blood, and they kept their word. They told everyone how he could have choked Heinrich to the dust, how he could have broken him if Ulrich hadn't intervened. For them, the matter was clear: Götz was stronger, tougher, more honest.

But others—those who liked Heinrich, or who simply enjoyed fighting with their mouths—whispered that it was unfair. "Wooden swords are a joke. Götz is just a thug. Heinrich is better with a real blade." So the rumors spread like rats on beams.

The next morning during drills, it was palpable. Ulrich made the men run, hitting shields, poking them with poles. "Faster! Harder! You're not peasants, you're iron!" he yelled. But behind the commandos, the rift crackled.

Heinrich stood in his line, his face pale, his eyes cold. Every blow against the wooden shield sounded as if it were meant for Götz. And Götz knew it. He heard it in every crash.

"The camp smells of fighting," Lenz muttered as they took a break. "Fighting always smells the same," Jörg growled, "like blood that's still inside." "Or like blood that's about to come out," Sigi added.

Götz clenched his burned hand, feeling the ache of the scars. Let him come. I'm standing.

That evening, at dinner, the ranks split. Two fires were set up. At one sat Götz and his men. At the other, Heinrich and those who believed him. The rest swayed back and forth, depending on their mood, depending on the beer.

It wasn't open war. Not yet. But every laugh sounded like a blow, every silence like a threat. Even Father sensed it. He tried to preach honor, talked of unity, of brothers in battle. No one listened. Ulrich said nothing—he just grinned, as if waiting for the pot to boil over.

The rift showed up in small things. When watch duty was assigned, Heinrich cursed louder. When bread was distributed, someone didn't get enough if Götz was at the table. Horses were saddled incorrectly, straps were tightened incorrectly. Small pinpricks that seemed bigger because everyone knew where they came from.

"He's playing with you," said Veit, "drawing it out." "Then let him," replied Götz. "Long games end louder."

One night, it became clearer. A fight at the water barrel. One servant pushed, another shouted, and suddenly Heinrich and Götz were eye to eye again. Hands on the handles, men around them, wanting to see more than just water.

"Again?" Heinrich snarled. "If you want," Götz growled. But Ulrich intervened, his voice like iron. "Not here. Not now. If you fight, it'll be outside. With blades. And only one will come back."

A murmur went through the crowd. Heinrich grinned thinly, coldly. "Good. Soon." Götz returned the grin, only wider. "Tell me when. I'll wait."

The night that followed was quiet, too quiet. Even the fire crackled more quietly. Jörg slept with his axe in his arm, Lenz flexed the bowstring in his dreams, Sigi shivered, as always. Götz lay awake, his hand on the blade, and knew: The rift in the camp was no accident. He was the vanguard. The open breach was imminent.

And he swore to himself: When the time comes, I won't fall. Not here, not against him. He is my enemy. But he will be my proof.

The camp slept as always: restless, filled with snoring, choking in dreams, the pawing of horses that had never known trust. But tonight, something hung in the air, heavier than smoke, thicker than fog. It was the kind of silence that screamed louder than any horn.

Götz lay on his bunk, his sword across his legs. He had learned never to sleep without a blade. His burned hand pounded like a drum, never letting up, whether he was resting or not. He blinked into the darkness and knew: Something was coming today. He felt it in his gut, in his bones, in the smoke from his scars.

The dogs barked first. No barking, no rage—just that deep growl that instantly wakes men up. Götz sat up, his fingers already on the handle. Next to him, Jörg wheezed, immediately jumping up like a startled bear. "What's up?" "Night," murmured Götz. "And knives."

He was right. A shadow detached itself from the edge of the tent, silent as a thought that wants to kill. It came with the knife in its hand, shimmering in the starlight. Straight at Götz.

But he wasn't fast enough. Lenz, who barely slept, drew his bow in the gloom. The arrow flew, barely audible, and tore the shadow sideways into the dirt. A scream, short, strangled. Men jumped, voices rose.

"Alarm!" Jörg yelled. "Enemy in the camp!"

More shadows started running—three, four, maybe five. No peasants this time, too quiet, too determined. Paid blades.

The camp roared. Men grabbed swords, women screamed, horses kicked. One of the attackers leaped straight at Götz, his knife flashing. Götz parried with his blade, sparks flying, the blow tearing through the air. He countered roughly with his shoulder, knocking the man to the ground and kicking the wind out of him.

Veit emerged from the darkness, swung a club, and struck another in the face, his teeth rattling like flint. Sigi stood pale but firm, stabbing with his dagger, the trembling in his hand making him unpredictable. Jörg was a berserker, the axe singing, blood spurting.

The men screamed, steel on steel, voices in the chaos. Ulrich came running, half-naked, blade in hand, his face a grimace of rage. "Who dares, here? Who dares, with me?" He struck, and one of the shadows fell, its head almost off.

The father stumbled after him, calling for honor, calling for protection, but no one heard.

And in the middle: Heinrich. He stood at the edge, his eyes glowing, his hands empty. He didn't strike, didn't take a step. He just watched. And in his gaze there was something that Götz immediately understood: That's his knife. His attempt. His hostility.

As the last attacker fell, gasping, bleeding, the camp filled with screams, Ulrich stepped forward. "Prisoners!" Two were still alive, semi-conscious. They were pulled into the light. Unfamiliar faces, thin, hard, their eyes betraying money. Mercenaries, paid by whom? Ulrich questioned, hit, threatened – they remained silent.

But Götz stared at Heinrich. And Heinrich stared back. Not a word. But it was clear: He had let her in. Maybe not himself, but he knew. Too quiet, too cold, too fitting.

Later, when the bodies had been dragged out and the men were sitting around the fire again, which this time smelled like battle, Lenz quietly approached Götz. "That was him." "I know." "You said it?"

Götz shook his head. "Not yet. Not until he betrays himself. In front of everyone. Then I'll take him."

He placed his hand on his sword, feeling the scars burn. The knife in the night is cowardly. But mine is open. And when it comes, everyone will see it.

The morning after the attack smelled of cold blood and burnt canvas. The camp was on its feet, but no one spoke loudly. They mended tents, scraped bloodstains from the ground, fed the horses—all with that quiet rage that carried more weight than any shouting.

Götz sat by the fire with his men. Jörg held the axe on his knees as if to warm it. Lenz greased the string of his bow, calm as ever, as if the night had been just a training session. Veit wore the bandage around his head with pride, as if it were a medal. Sigi shivered and remained silent, but his eyes were more alert than usual. They formed a circle, tighter than ever before.

"They didn't come by chance," murmured Jörg. "Nothing happens by chance," replied Lenz. "Then who?" Veit looked into the embers as if searching for names. No one pronounced it. But everyone thought of it: Heinrich.

Heinrich sat by another fire, his face bare, his hands clean, too clean for a night of blood. Men whispered around him, but not like they whispered around Götz. No respect, no fire—only doubt.

Ulrich saw everything. He grinned, but said nothing. He was a wolf who knew that his prey would stumble at some point. His father, on the other hand, preached again about honor, about solidarity, about brothers who wouldn't betray one another. The words hung in the air like smoke, heavy, but quickly ripped apart by the wind.

In the afternoon, Ulrich called the squires and farmhands together. "Enough of the half-shadow!" he yelled. "If you're a friend here, show it. If you're an enemy, let them show it too. I need men, not mouths."

The rows stood, restless, sweating, with downcast eyes. Then Jörg stepped forward. "I stand by Götz." Lenz followed, silently; a nod was enough. Veit stepped forward, grinning. "If someone saves my bread, then I'll stand by him." Sigi murmured quietly but firmly: "Me too."

A circle of four men around Götz. No song, no banner, just blood, scars, and trust.

Heinrich stood still, his hands behind his back, his eyes cold. "And I stand alone," he said loudly so everyone could hear. "I don't need bonds to bind me. I go my own way."

A murmur went through the crowd. Some nodded, most remained silent. Ulrich grinned again. "Good. Then we have it. Brothers here – and enemies there. And whoever chooses the wrong back dies first."

In the evening, as the sun bathed the camp in a rusty light, Götz and his men sat down at the weir. The water rushed as if laughing at all the oaths and feuds of the people.

"We're brothers," said Jörg, "even if we never sing it." "And you need opponents," murmured Lenz, "otherwise the blade will rust." "Then Heinrich is our whetstone," grinned Veit. Sigi just nodded.

Götz clenched the hand that burned, the one that had sworn. "Brothers and enemies. Both belong to me. But I say one thing: When the hour comes, I will not die alone. Nor will he."

Night came, cool and quiet. The fire crackled, the wind blew. Friendship and enmity – two swords, both sharp. Götz knew: he carried them both. And he would learn to strike with both.

The family legacy

In the songs, "homecoming" resonates with warmth, with open arms, with soup that was waiting for you. In reality, "homecoming" smelled of cold stone, of old smoke, of a courtyard that looked as if winter had counted its ribs and fallen asleep. The castle still stood, certainly, but it stood like an old warrior: erect out of habit, not strength.

The gate creaked, as if it didn't want to recognize Götz. In the courtyard lay puddles that never dried, and manure that told stories no one wanted to hear. A rooster crowed on the dung heap as if it were the last singer of a lost army. The walls bore cracks like scars that no one covered with lime, because lime is also money, and money has long been a rumor.

Götz rode in slowly, one hand on the reins, the other on the hilt of his sword. Jörg had dropped back – comrades belong on the road, not always at home. Lenz, Veit, Sigi: all stayed with the platoon, where Ulrich's curses made sense. Here, in the courtyard, Götz was a son again, not a leader. And being a son is harder when you've learned not to kneel on the outside.

The hall door opened. Father appeared, tall as memory and as stubborn as a boundary stone. His face bore more furrows than the fields after a dry year. "You're back," he said, no question, no welcome. "I'm back," Götz answered. "Still." "And honor?" "Lagging behind. But it's finding its way."

The old man approached, his eyes gliding over the burn scar on Götz's hand, lingering on the handle as if there were something there to be examined like a coin at a market. He briefly placed his fingers on Götz's shoulder—not a hug, just the minimum touching men allowed when others were watching. "You smell of smoke." "I was in the fire." "Good." The father nodded. "Fire cleanses."

In the hall, the past hung on the walls like heavy cloaks: shields with blind crests, spears no one had thrown since the songs went out of fashion. An ancestral portrait flickered in the torchlight, the paint peeling like thin skin. Men with solemn faces acted as if they could still give orders across the table. Below them, the large table, at whose ends dust dwelled.

The mother came from the side, silently, with the smile mothers retain when they know their sons talk more to Stahl than to them. Her face wasn't old, but her eyes were tired, like paths traveled too often. She placed her hand on his cheek, warm, tender, and something scratched inside Götz that had no language outside. "You could have written," she said quietly. "Writing is for people who stay," murmured Götz. "I walked." "And now?" "Now I'm standing."

She led him to a place at the table that had always been waiting for him, even when he was a boy, too small to lift a pitcher. A bowl of bread, a pitcher of thin beer, a piece of cheese that would have softened in tougher company. Götz ate, not greedily, but resolutely, like someone who knows that eating can also be an oath: *I'm still alive*.

His father sat down opposite him, his hands on the wood as if trying to intimidate it. "Reports." Götz reported. No songs, no embellishments. The first fire, the granary, the miller's boy, the powder at the weir. The plague that had consumed men like a second blade. The betrayal that had made Heinrich more

than a name. The nighttime raid, the shadows that Lenz had pinned into the silence. He told it as it was. Raw. Briefly. Upright.

The father listened, nodding now and then like a judge who already knows how to pass judgment. "You've become tougher," he finally said. "I have," Götz replied. "And honor?" "It's wearing iron now."

His mother served him bread, slicing it thinly as if trying to outsmart his hunger. "You're bleeding," she said, pointing to the bandage under his sleeve. "I'm still burning," Götz murmured. "Scar?" "Memory." "Good," she whispered. "Only stupidity heals smoothly."

The hall had ears: those of the ancestors, those of the servants, those of the walls themselves. And walls listen, to speak later. After dinner, the father invited him into the chamber they called "treasure," although the treasure had long since consisted of inventory. A chest that creaked more than it shone. Inside: a few chains that never quite fit, a handful of coins a thief would have insulted, two rings with stones that were only worth something in their own house. And a sword, old, venerable, tired—grandfather's sword, they said. The sword of a man who died in a war no one called by its name anymore.

His father raised it with a care Götz knew only when honor was at stake. "This is our heritage," he said, as if passing a star. "It has seen blood, the better kind. It has borne victories that last longer than words." Götz took it. The weight was different from his own—heavier in history, lighter in steel. The blade was blunter, but it still held his gaze. He swung it lightly, feeling the old hilt, the leather from a time when men swore before they struck. "Beautiful," he murmured. "But beautiful dies faster than strong."

"Order is beautiful," hissed his father. "And order is honor." "Honor has gunpowder in its pan today," replied Götz, putting the old sword back. "And a price tag."

The old man blinked. A small, painfully honest twitch. "Price," he repeated, as if tasting the word for the first time. "Yes. Price." He sat down on the chest lid as if the wood were a curb. "The bonds have grown. The tithes were meager. The fields..." He paused, swallowed. Men don't like to swallow. "The fields are no longer what they were. And the men go where the wages sound like a song. Those with too few hands or too much heart stay here."

Götz narrowed his eyes. "How much?" His father named a number that was less telling than the silence that followed. "And to whom?" "All those who like to wait: the bailiff, the mayor, the priest who preaches more corn than God."

The old man gave a short, toothless laugh. "We are rich in obligations. Poor in coin. Honor is cheap. Bread is not."

The mother stood in the doorway, the cloth in her hands, kneading it as if it were a neck. "We'll get through," she said, and in her voice lay the strength that holds walls together when men think they hold the world. "We've always gotten through." "Through is also a word for 'through below,'" murmured Götz.

They didn't speak for a while. The wind blew through a crack in the window frame, singing a song of drafts and the past. Götz ran his finger along the edge of the chest, feeling the ridge. "Tell me clearly, Father. What does the house require?" "That you not only strike, but carry." The old man looked at him, so straight it was almost respectable. "That you keep the name when the coins fall. That you defend the farm when the fields are weary. That you are a man, not just a blade." "And if I refuse?" "Then you refuse yourself."

He thought of Ulrich's faces, Jörg's laughter, Lenz's arrows, Veit's foolish courage, Sigi's cold loyalty. Outside, the meaning was simple: Stay. Strike. Move on. In here, he was entangled. Obligations don't have blades, but they cut deeper.

"I won't stay long," said Götz. "The train needs me. And I need it. But I'll be back. And when I come back, I'll bring more than the smell of smoke." "Prey?" The father raised his eyebrows. "Proof," said Götz. "That the name doesn't just wander, it bites." The mother blew air softly through her teeth, a sound only mothers can make. "Bring yourself, not just prey. Prey burns. Men stay. Sometimes."

In the evening, the hall filled with those who were still there: servants, two old riders, a boy so thin he cast two shadows. They wanted to hear what it was like outside, and Götz told them again—not boasting, not complaining. Then he stood up and leaned against the pillar that had already delivered many a speech. "Listen," he said, "I am not a singer. I am a blade. And the blade says: We hold because we bite. Those who stay, work. Those who leave, bring back something that is more than stories. I bring it. But you hold the gate. And if someone comes who thinks our walls are tired, then you show him what can become tired: his breath."

A murmur, not applause. Applause doesn't belong in old halls. The father nodded, just once, so briefly that it barely carried any weight, yet it was heavier than any praise. The mother smiled, that small, sad smile that says: *Good. Live. But come back – alive.*

Later, in the dormitory, the straw smelled of the years he'd missed. Götz laid his sword beside him, as always. He looked at the beams above him: notches carved by boys' hands who believed every mark was a victory. He found his old notches, counted them, and laughed softly.*Child.* Then he placed his burned hand over it, the new, large notch over the old, thin ones. "I'll keep paying," he whispered. "Just with different wood."

He didn't fall asleep right away. Thoughts are louder in old houses. He heard the cracking of wood, the groaning of walls, his mother's footsteps checking the fire once more, the cough of a servant who weighed too little. And somewhere deep in the castle, he heard his father's honor trying to sing once more. It sounded hoarse. But it sang.

Before falling asleep, he got up one last time and went into the hall, alone, the torch small as a thought. He approached the ancestral portrait that hung the least crooked. The man in it—perhaps his grandfather, perhaps an uncle, it didn't matter—gazed at him as if he knew how precious the future was. Götz raised his hand, not in greeting, but more like a man threatening a mirror. "Listen, old man," he murmured. "I bear your name. But I'll make it new. Not clean. Really. When I come back, you'll know who I am. You won't call me son anymore. You'll call me the one who makes you audible again."

He turned around; the light flickered. On the chest lay the old sword, steady, heavy. Götz raised it once more, briefly, feeling the dust of years in the blade. "Sleep," he said to the sword, "you've done enough. Tomorrow the boy will work." He laid it down gently and laughed bitterly.*Boy.* Hardly. But old enough to tell the castle that it can hold out for a while longer.

When he finally sank into the straw, the yard was silent. The rooster had surrendered, the horses dreamed of meadows that no longer existed. The castle breathed. Götz breathed with it. Homecoming was no balm. Homecoming was an iron plaster. It didn't stick well, but it held. For now. For the night. For the name—until the road called again. And it would call. Soon. Very soon.

The hall smelled of smoke, sweat, and old grease that had hung in the rafters for decades. Every footstep echoed, as if the floor were saying, "Someone has been here before you. And he was heavier." The torches cast long shadows on the shields hanging on the walls. Most had gone blind, their colors blurred like the faces of dead men remembered too long ago. Some still bore notches, cracks, traces of battles long since sung.

Götz walked slowly through the hall, his fingers tracing a helmet hanging from a hook. The edge was dented, as if someone had struck it with a rock. "That was your great-uncle," growled his father, following him. "He fell in Bohemia when the imperial flag was worth more than coins. They said he died with honor." "And the helmet says he died with a hole in his head," murmured Götz.

The old man snorted, as he always did when honor was insulted. "Honor remains. Holes disappear." "Strange," said Götz, "I see the hole. I only hear honor from you."

They continued on. Wooden coats of arms, half-rotted. Spears whose tips were blunt because no one cared for them anymore. In a niche hung a sword, large, two-handed, far too heavy for the thin arms that were now meant to look at it. "That was your great-grandfather," said the old man. "He carried it into the war against the Hussites. With the sword, he held a bridge until sunrise." "And then?"

"Then he died." Götz grinned crookedly. "That's the punchline of every one of your stories, Father. Always at the end: 'And then he died.'"

The mother approached, quietly, as if trying to quell the anger. "And yet we're still standing. Everyone held us a bit. Even if it was only with their last breath."

Götz stopped in front of a picture. A knight with a black beard, his eyes stern, his mouth thin. The name beneath it, half-blurred: Berlichingen. "Was he tall?" asked Götz. "He was loyal," said his father. "Loyal to whom?" "The emperor. The church. The country." "And himself?" Silence. Only the crackle of a torch.

"You can see that he gave orders," murmured Götz. "You can see that you're contradicting him," growled the old man.

They continued walking until they came to a chest standing in the corner, black with age. The father lifted the lid, creaking like an old bone. Inside lay parchments, letters, debt registers, seals that had long since lost their power. The old man took one out and held it up. "This is our inheritance. Not just steel. Also words. Also obligation."

Götz laughed dryly. "A mountain of IOUs? A nice inheritance." "It's a name, damn it!" His father's voice broke. "And that name is worth more than coins." "Then pay with it at the bakery."

His mother placed her hand on Götz's arm. "Your father doesn't mean what it sounds like. He lives for the name. He is the name." Götz shrugged his

shoulders. "And me? I don't want to be a name. I want the name to carry me. Not the other way around."

His father stepped in front of him, so close that their noses almost touched. "You are Berlichingen. Don't forget that. You can fight, you can have enemies, you can love women as you please—but in the end, your blood is your inheritance. And if you gamble it away, you're nothing."

Götz looked him in the eyes. "Then I'd rather have nothing than a promissory note on two legs."

The mother sucked in a sharp breath, as if she'd seen a knife. The old man trembled, his fist on the hilt of his belt sword. But he didn't strike. He knew: This boy was no longer the boy who carved notches into the beams. He was a man who carved notches into faces.

They were silent for a long time. Only the torches crackled, only the wind whistled through the cracks in the hall. Finally, the father spoke, quietly, wearily: "You will learn. Each of us learns. Too late or too soon. But you will learn: Honor is the only thing that remains when coins and men fall."

Götz didn't answer. He looked again at the picture of the bearded man hanging above them. Its eyes seemed to be examining him, stern, cold, full of expectation. You are my blood, they whispered. And I won't give you peace until you justify me.

Götz clenched his burned hand, the scars taut. Then be quiet, old man, he thought. I'm not justifying anything. I'm rewriting.

The chest stood open like a slashed belly, and within lay the pride, the burden of the house. Between parchments that stank of mold and seals no one recognized anymore, it rested: the old sword.

It wasn't a showpiece. No precious stones on the handle, no golden pommel, no ornamentation for tournaments. A sword that had been worked. The blade was blunt, full of notches, the leather on the handle cracked like old skin. But it had weight. Not a weight of metal, but of history.

The father picked it up, slowly, reverently, as if he were carrying a relic. "This," he said, "is older than you, older than me, older than your grandfather. With this blade, men have borne our name. With it, land was defended, blood was shed, and justice was dispensed."

Götz watched him, his eyes narrowed. "And how many who wore it died without anyone knowing where they were?" "That doesn't matter," the old man growled. "They're in history. They're part of the name."

His father held out the sword to him. "Take it." Götz took it. It was heavy, not because of the iron, but because of anticipation. The blade pulled him down, as if it wanted to show him that it was more master than servant.

He swung it slowly, testing it, and felt how unwieldy it was. A tool from another era, made for men standing in lines, shield to shield, blow to blow. Not for quick skirmishes, not for raids in the dark, not for gunpowder and bows.

"It's tired," he said quietly. "It's venerable," the father corrected. "It's old." "And you're young. Together you are the balance."

The mother stood on the sidelines, watching the scene with silent eyes. "It's not a toy," she said, "or a decoration. It's responsibility."

Götz laughed harshly. "Responsibility? I already have responsibility—for my men, for my life, for my sword. I don't need any more burdens." His father slammed his fist on the chest. "You have responsibility for the house! For the blood that made you! For the walls that protected you when you were still too small to lift the jug!"

Götz raised the blade, saw it in the flickering light. He imagined all the hands that had wielded it still embedded in it. Hands that had beaten, stabbed, and died. Hands he didn't know, that he didn't like, but whose pressure he now felt.

He held it up against the torches and said, "If this iron wants to hold me, let it bite me. If it wants me to carry it, let it help me, not stand in my way. Otherwise, it will stay here, with you, between dust and debts."

The father wanted to rage, but he saw his son's eyes – and remained silent. Sometimes you realize that the fire in others is greater than your own words.

The mother stepped closer and placed her hand on Götz's shoulder. "Carry it, not for him," she said quietly, "carry it for yourself. So you know you're more than a puppy that just barks. So you know you're part of something, even if you want to rewrite it."

Götz lowered his sword and stared at the blunt blade. He thought of his burned hand, the oath by the fire, Heinrich's cold eyes, the spear that had almost

impaled Veit. All of that was now within him. And this old piece of iron wanted to show up, uninvited.

"Good," he finally murmured. "Then I'll wear it. But not because you want me to. Because I want to. And I want the world to know: The sword isn't old. I'm making it new."

He placed it on his knees, stroking the cracked handle with his burned hand. The scars burned as if they had recognized they had found a brother. "Old or not," he whispered, "you belong to me now. And if we both die, at least it won't be in the dust."

The torches crackled, the hall held its breath. And for a moment, it was as if the ancestral portraits on the wall nodded. Not out of pride, not out of love. Out of necessity.

The night after the sword felt harder than any battle. Not because of blood, not because of fear—but because of the invisible chains hanging from Götz's shoulders. Names like iron rings. Berlichingen. A word that sounded more like a curse than a promise.

He lay on the old straw sack in his room, his sword beside him. Not his own, the shiny, sharp iron he'd wielded outside, but the old one, his inheritance. It lay there like a sleeping dog, ready to bite at any moment. Every time the wood creaked or the wind blew through the cracks, he heard it whisper: You are not just you. You are all of us. Carry us.

He hated voices that had no faces.

In the morning, his father called him into the hall. Two of the stewards were already sitting there, crooked men with ink stains on their fingers, scribbling debts on parchment as if they were notches in flesh. On the table lay lists, sealed letters, and bills that looked like paper daggers.

"This is your inheritance," said the father, tapping the stacks. "Not just swords, not just battles. Numbers. Demands. Men who want to bring grain, but also see coins. Priests who talk about heaven but demand tithes like butchers."

Götz stared at the pages. "Those aren't my fights." "Yes, they are. These are exactly them. You can strike down ten peasants with a blade, and they'll come back. But if the priest doesn't get his tithes, the emperor will come. And he eats more than all of them combined."

The mother brought water and bread. She placed her hand on Götz's shoulder. "We carried as long as we could. But we're tired, Götz. Your father is older, I'm weaker. You are the blade we still have."

"And when the blade gets blunt?" he asked bitterly. "Then you're still our son," she whispered.

The father heard this and snorted, as if the word "son" irritated him. "Being a son isn't enough. A son is blood. An heir is steel. You are no longer a child. You are the name."

Götz stepped to the window and looked out into the courtyard. A farmhand was carrying water, barefoot, his shirt torn. A horse was lame because no one had time for the farrier. Children played with sticks as if they were swords and shouted "Berlichingen!" without knowing what it meant.

He clenched his burned hand. "If that's the name—hunger, debt, cracks in the walls—then the name isn't worth dying for." His father stepped behind him, his voice as hard as a shield's edge. "Then make it worth it again."

Tension hung heavy in the room. Two men who bore the same name, but with different meanings. The old man: honor, duty, blood. The young man: action, fire, reality.

Finally, Götz turned and looked his father in the eye. "I bear the name. But I bear it my way. Not with papers. Not with prayers. With iron. With blood, that's what counts. With the fear the name inspires, not with pleas."

The mother wanted to speak, but paused. The father pursed his lips, but nodded – slowly, reluctantly. "Then go. Do as you see fit. But don't forget: If you fall, the name falls." "If I fall, everything falls. Then the world won't give a shit about names."

That night, Götz sat again in the Hall of the Ancestors. The old sword lay before him, blunt and heavy. He drew his own next to it, bright and sharp. Two blades. Past and present. Both reflected the light of the torches, but differently.

He placed his burned hand on both handles, feeling the pull of the scars. "I'll carry you both," he murmured. "But I decide where we strike."

And the shadows of the ancestors on the walls seemed to nod—not in agreement, not in rejection, just in resignation. As if they knew that someone would come who would take their honor and reforge it with his fire.

Debts aren't iron you can weigh in your hand. They're invisible, sticky, creeping into every room and settling into the beams like mold. Heavier than any sword, harder than any armor, because you can't kill them. You can only pay. With coins, with grain, with blood.

Götz saw the parchments lying on the table, stacked upon stack, with seals that seemed to carry weight. Letters from bailiffs, priests, and shopkeepers. Everyone wanted something. No one gave. And everyone talked about "Berlichingen" as if the name were a cow that would give milk forever.

The father had rolled them up, stacked them, and sorted them. "We owe everyone. The bishop, the mayor, the miller, even the blacksmith." Götz grinned coldly. "The blacksmith? Then they should forge their own swords." "It's not that simple!" roared the old man. "Give them the blacksmiths when they think you'll give back. Otherwise, they'll close their hearths for you. Then you'll have no more blades, no armor, no horseshoes. Then you'll be naked."

The mother placed bread on the table, dry, hard, but still edible. "We've learned to live with little. But men who follow you want more than crusts. They want pay. Or booty."

Götz bit into it, the bread almost splintering between his teeth. "Then they'll get the booty." "And who are you stealing it from?" his mother asked, tired, without reproach, just like someone who already knows what's coming. "The weak," Götz murmured. "Like everyone else does." His father nodded. "That's chivalric law. If you don't take it, someone else will."

But there was poison in this simple truth. Götz sensed it. He remembered the granary, the farmhand he had stabbed, the peasants who threw stones because they would otherwise starve. Was that honor? Or just theft with a coat of arms?

The parchments laughed at him like little white hyenas. "Pay us," they cried, "or you're no knight, just a beggar with a blade."

He clenched his burned hand, the scars throbbing. "I won't pay with coins," he growled. "I'll pay with fear. I'll pay with dread. When they hear my name, let them tremble more than count."

His father looked at him sharply. "Fear fades. Coins remain." "No," Götz snarled. "Coins rot. Fear eats away. Anyone who fears me won't even come to

demand coins." "And if they do?" "Then they'll be doubly afraid when they see me."

The mother sighed but said nothing. She knew the boy was unstoppable.

In the evening, Götz sat with his comrades in the courtyard. Jörg chewed on a piece of bacon, Lenz mended his bowstring, Veit lay in the grass, and Sigi rubbed his hands by the fire. Götz threw the parchments before them. "What are these?" asked Veit. "Debts." "Then burn them." "They don't burn," murmured Götz. "They grow. And we won't pay them with parchment. We'll pay with steel."

Jörg grinned. "Finally, back to work." Lenz nodded curtly. "Against whom?" "Against anyone who thinks we're weak."

That night, he cut a notch into the beam of his room with his dagger. A notch thicker than the old childhood notches. "Debts," he wrote quietly. "And debts aren't paid. They're smothered."

The castle creaked as if it had understood. The ancestral statues watched, silent. Some seemed to nod, others looked away. But Götz didn't care what they thought.

"Your inheritance is a pile of parchment," he muttered into the darkness. "Mine will be iron. Blood. And a name that burns when spoken."

It began with breakfast. It was supposed to be quiet: black bread, cheese, and thin beer. But there was no silence between father and son. Only words that sounded like swords as soon as they left their mouths.

The father chewed slowly, his eyes fixed on the table as if counting every crumb. "You talk a lot about fear and steel. But fear doesn't pay interest. Steel doesn't make fields fertile. Steel doesn't hold a castle when the people are hungry."

Götz took a sip and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Steel stops anyone who comes too close. Steel takes loot. Steel makes people give me what they would otherwise refuse."

"That's robbery!" thundered the old man, and the bowl on the table trembled. "No," growled Götz, "that's what you call 'knightly rights.' I call it honest. We live by taking. And I'd rather take it myself than let someone else take it from me."

The mother placed her hand on Götz's arm, softly and soothingly. "You're both stubborn. He just wants you to learn to count with more than iron." "And I want him to learn that iron counts more than any parchment," Götz snapped back.

The father jumped up, placing his hands on the table. "You think because you survived two battles, you know more than I do? I held out for ten winters while you were still carving lines into the beams!" Götz also rose, his eyes hard. "And what did you hold out for? Mountains of debt so high you can see the sky from there. If that's your victory, then I don't want one."

Silence. Only the dripping of a leaky jug. The mother looked back and forth between the two, her face tense like a string about to snap.

"You are my blood," said the father, more quietly now, almost hoarsely. "You are the name. If you betray it, you betray yourself." "No," replied Götz, his burned hand throbbing as if to emphasize his point. "I only betray the lies you've built around it. I bear the name—but in my way. Not yours."

"In your way?" The old man laughed bitterly. "Your way is ruin." "Or salvation," growled Götz.

They faced each other like two warriors in the courtyard. Only this time, there was no sword between them, but a table covered with breadcrumbs and debts. The father clenched his fists, Götz held his gaze, motionless.

"Then go," the old man finally said. "If you know so much, then go out. Strike. Robbery. Retrieve what you think we're missing. But don't come back if you fail."

The mother took a sharp breath. "You can't talk to your son like that!" But the old man cut her off. "He wants to be a man. Then he should prove it."

Götz took his sword and shouldered it, the blade sharp and hungry. "Good," he said quietly. "Then I'll go. But when I return, it won't be as a son. Then as the one who makes the name heard again. And if you don't like that, then eat your own dust."

He turned around and walked out into the courtyard, his footsteps heavy but firm. Behind him, he heard his mother crying, his father silent. The silence was harder than any words.

Outside, a groom was grooming the horses. He looked up, about to greet them, but Götz's gaze silenced him. He saddled the horse himself, checked the girth, and tightened the reins. His hand burned, the scars glowed, as if they had understood: Now it really begins. Now it counts.

He rode off without turning around. The castle remained behind him, gray stone, heavy, old. The family legacy hung on his back like a rider who didn't dismount. But he would bear it—not for his father, not for his debts, not for his ancestors. For himself. For the name he wanted to rewrite.

The castle was heavy with silence after Götz had ridden out. His father stomped through the hall like a wolf who could no longer chew his own bones, while the servants made themselves smaller than usual, sensing: Something is burning here that no water can extinguish.

But the mother sat in the shadow of the window, the cloth in her hands, sewing, even though the fabric was already full of patches. Her fingers worked because otherwise she would have screamed. Every seam was a thought, every stitch an attempt to keep the two men she loved together, even though they were already torn far apart.

As her father passed her again, pale, his brow furrowed, she whispered, "You pushed him away." "He wanted to go," the old man growled. "No. He wanted you to hold him." "I don't hold men. Men leave when they have to go." "And if he doesn't come back?" "Then he chose himself."

She lowered the needle and looked at him, her eyes red but clear. "You know full well that he is your mirror. Only sharper. You told him of honor, but never of hunger. You gave him the name, but not the warmth. He will remake the name because he has no warmth from you."

The old man stopped and looked at her for a long time. Then he simply grumbled: "If he falls, he falls. That's his path." "And if he wins?" she asked quietly. "Then he's no longer my son. Then he's my master."

The mother didn't cry aloud. She only let a few drops fall as she continued sewing, as if she could hold the walls together with thread. She knew Götz was more fire than stone, more fist than word. But she also knew: his heart wasn't iron. It was soft, somewhere deep inside, hidden beneath scars and defiance. She had seen it when, as a boy, he had fed the cats, even though he was hungry himself. She had felt it when he once brought her a bouquet of wildflowers, secretly, so his father wouldn't see it as weakness.

She murmured softly, "He's not a robber. He's a heart with a sword. If you force him, he'll become harder than he needs to be."

At night, she crept into the chamber where the old sword lay. She lifted it, heavy and tired, and placed her hand over it. "Don't stop him," she whispered. "Accompany him. Make him not your tombstone, but your song."

The iron didn't answer, but the torch flickered, and for a moment she thought the blade had twitched.

In the morning, she stood in the gate as Götz grew smaller in the distance, the horse beneath him, its back stiff. She didn't raise her hand in greeting. She didn't pray. She simply murmured, "Come back. With your name. Not just his."

And when she turned around, she saw her father standing at the window, his hands behind his back, staring. He said nothing. But she knew: He felt the same way. He just couldn't say it. Men like him can never say what they fear.

The courtyard lay in the first gray of morning. Mist crept out of the ground like a ghost that didn't know where it belonged. Horses pawed the ground, chickens fluttered sleepily, a farmhand drew water from the well, so quietly, as if he didn't want to wake the stone.

Götz stood in the middle of the courtyard, his hand on the reins, his old sword at his side, his new one across his back. Two irons, two voices—past and present. He was alone, and yet not. The castle watched, the walls, the towers, even the cracks in the stone. They waited for a word, for a sign that he wouldn't brush the name off his boots like dust.

He raised his burned hand and clenched it into a fist, the scars white in the morning light. "Berlichingen," he growled, "you want me to hold you. You want me to carry promissory notes and polish ancestral statues. Forget it. I'll carry you, but in my own way. I won't pay with coins, I'll pay with fear. I'll write the name not with ink, but with blood. And if anyone thinks we're just dust, then they'll taste my iron."

A servant heard him, blinked, and tried to duck away. But Götz looked at him, and the boy froze. "Did you hear that?" Götz asked. "Yes, sir." "Then remember it. Tell others. The name lives on. And it lives on through me."

The servant nodded hastily and disappeared. Words don't need drums if they stay in people's heads.

The mother quietly entered the gate and looked at him. She said nothing. But she briefly raised her hand, very small, like a shadow of blessing. Götz nodded, just once, firmly. That was enough. More words would have broken everything.

The father wasn't there. He wouldn't come. He was a man who preferred staring at walls rather than his son. But Götz knew: He was watching, somewhere out the window, and was eating his stubbornness like stale bread.

Then he mounted his horse. The leather creaked, the animal's breath steamed. He didn't turn around. No knight looks back when he bears an oath. He rode out of the gate he had run through so often as a child. Now he rode out as a man, burdened, scarred, but free.

The fog swallowed him, but his oath remained in the stones, in the walls, in the hearts of those who heard him.

In the evening, one would say, "He has gone, like one who leaves and returns." And some would whisper, "Or like one who never returns."

But Götz knew it himself: He was coming back. Not as a son, not as a debtor. As a man who would rewrite the name. As a knight who would feed his heir with iron until it bites again.

In the service of the emperor

The day smelled of rain, but the sky remained overcast like a stingy innkeeper. Götz rode along a road with more holes than a sheep in its winter coat. Hooves pounded behind him, Jörg whistled off-key, Lenz remained silent, Veit babbled some tuneless song, and Sigi shivered as always, even when the air was still. It was a day like many others, with gray light and murky breath—until the messenger arrived.

He came on a horse too good for his rider's flesh, with a crest on his coat that gleamed as if it had just learned the meaning of brilliance. Two attendants, light armor, too clean for serious work. It was the kind of entrance that doesn't ask how you're doing. It comes as if it owned the path, your shadow, and your breath.

"Berlichingen!" he called, as one calls a knife. "In the name of the Emperor!"

Götz slowed down, the men didn't form up—they weren't a parade, they were a functioning group. The messenger tightened the reins, his horse snorted as if it despised him. He handed over a sealed letter, red wax, an eagle that looked as if it had teeth. Jörg leaned forward. "Seal, phew. When I see a bird like that, I feel like smashing it in a pan." "Shut up, Jörg," growled Götz. "Let's read it."

He broke the seal with his thumb, his burned hand twitching briefly—scars have memories. The text was long enough to feel important, short enough to command.

*In the name of His Imperial Majesty...
Knight Götz von Berlichingen is hereby...
subordinate to special services...
appear without delay at the governor's seat in N. to receive orders and pay...
If you refuse...*

"If you refuse?" Götz muttered, grinning crookedly. "If you refuse... what? Hold your breath?"

The messenger raised his chin. "Refusal threatens the displeasure of the Crown. And the displeasure of the Crown is like an illness—you can see it in yourself before you feel it." "I can already feel it," said Götz, his face unwrinkled. "It doesn't itch."

Lenz stepped beside the messenger's horse, so quietly that the man flinched when he noticed him. "Governor N.?" Lenz asked tersely. "N.," the messenger confirmed, "you will be escorted. The governor is in a hurry." "Who isn't in a hurry when they're riding on our backs?" Sigi murmured.

Götz rolled up the parchment and pinned it to his belt. "Good. We'll listen to what the guy wants." "You're not listening," the messenger corrected. "You're accepting it." "I'll listen," said Götz, and his tone was enough to make the messenger take a step back.

They rode.

The town of N. lay like a wet lump in the valley, its houses huddled close together as if they were acquaintances who couldn't stand each other. Above the gate hung a coat of arms so large it was almost shameful: the imperial eagle, doubled, as if power always needed a twin to dare.

"Look," Jörg grumbled, "an eagle that never hunts itself." "It hunts through others," Lenz replied. "That's the wisest way to hunt."

The courtyard of the town hall smelled of tar, leather, and regulations. Men were running who couldn't run because their boots were new. Clerks stumbled through gates with bundles of paper as if they were bodyguards of ink. A drummer smashed the air. Götz dismounted and threw the reins to Sigi. "Feed the horse, not the drummer," he murmured. Sigi nodded, pale, trustworthy.

A servant led them into the hall. It was wide, with a carpet worn by so many boots that it perhaps already tasted freedom. At the very front stood the governor: a man with a face that liked to smile but didn't know how. All around him: courtiers, officials, a priest who had more gold on his cross than God had in patience.

"Knight of Berlichingen," the governor began, as if he had already practiced the name. "Honor to greet you in the service of the crown." "I am here," said Götz. "That's enough for now."

He handed over a parchment—this time not just an invitation, but an order. The wording was thick as schmaltz, but the core was meager: rebellion in a county that preferred to squander its tithes rather than pay them. Roads blocked, messengers robbed, a village taken by a false lord. The emperor was too great to bend; so the province bent in his name. And that required men who didn't bend, but kicked.

"You lead a platoon," said the governor. "Quickly, decisively. You establish order, secure the route, and arrest the ringleaders. We pay well." He smiled broadly. "And we forget well, if necessary."

"Forgetting is better than paying," murmured Götz. "Both are doable," added the governor, as if he had dipped his tongue in honey. "Your reputation precedes you. Courage, toughness. They say you'll walk through fire if necessary." "People say a lot when they don't walk themselves," replied Götz.

Jörg leaned toward Lenz. "How much do they pay for forgetting?" "Enough to remind you of more than you'd like."

The priest cleared his throat. "In the name of the Emperor and God—" "God doesn't count," Götz said calmly. "Only the Emperor. And he wants his ways open."

The governor smiled as if someone had scratched his back. "You see, we understand each other. You swear to obey the order, to observe the rules..."—here he waved a thin piece of paper with rules written on it like pins—"...No

unnecessary blood, no plunder, unless—" "Unless it's necessary," Götz helped. "That's not what it says there." "That's what it says in the field."

A brief silence followed. Then the usual: seal, handshake, a cup of wine that tasted of tin. The courtiers acted as if they saw a new dog in the yard. Some feared it would bite. Others hoped it would bite for them.

"You'll get twenty mercenaries from the city, ten horsemen from Count von B.'s retinue, plus whatever you bring," said the governor. "And a banner—so everyone knows who you're fighting for." "I'll fight for myself," Götz replied. "The banner will come with you so you can sleep soundly."

He half-turned, looked at his men—the circle that told him more than any golden buckle in the hall. Jörg stood there grinning, as if someone had promised him that heads could roll. Lenz looked as usual: a drawn bowstring, his entire self an arrow. Veit counted inaudibly, as if he were already sorting the loot. Sigi had the look of a man who's cold and therefore stays awake.

"One question," said Götz. "What do you do with ringleaders who can pray?" "We let them pray," said the priest hastily. "Until they stop," added the governor, his smile suddenly genuine.

They left the hall with money in a pouch, orders in a folder, and a banner that smelled too much: of fresh dye and old lies. In the courtyard, Götz stopped, placed his hands on his hips, felt the scars on his hand. In the service of the Emperor. It sounded like a song with a long chorus. But songs don't fill pantries.

"So," Jörg grumbled, "we serve the crown now?" "We serve what pays us," said Götz. "Today it's the crown. Tomorrow, perhaps, hunger." "And the day after tomorrow, honor?" Sigi asked seriously. "If it pays," Götz replied dryly.

Lenz looked at the banner. "It's easier to lie with a sign than without. But people believe signs more quickly." "Good," said Götz. "Then we'll show them one—and give them something real to go with it."

He had the messenger ride up. "Directions. Fastest path to the county." "Via Kaltbach, through the lowlands, then Birkenhöhe," the man rattled off. "But the bridge at Kaltbach has been broken since the last flood—" "Then we don't need a bridge," Götz interrupted. "We need ropes and men who won't drown."

The procession set off: the twenty city mercenaries, well-armed, in a bad mood; the count's ten horsemen, whose armor rattled as if their bones lived

within them; and Götz's core, which didn't rattle because it wasn't hollow. The banner was carried by a young man, proud as a rooster, who had just discovered his voice.

The roads became narrower, the villages more weary. Children stood along the path, staring at the symbols on the banner as if a new sun were hanging there. Women held scarves over their mouths as if they could filter soldiers from the air. Men looked away, the kind of looking away that experience knows.

"They know what 'bringing order' looks like," Lenz murmured. "And they know who's paying the bill," Veit added.

That evening, they camped before Kaltbach. A stream too wide for jumps, too deep for boots. The bridge was gone, a few stumps gnawed by the river like a dog at bones. Jörg knelt, dipped his hand into the water, and cursed. "Cold as a widow." "Ropes," Götz ordered. "Stakes. We'll have the horses led upstream, men secure the way downstream. Those who swim will be fished, not mourned."

The city mercenaries grumbled quietly. The leader, a man with a beard who knew more features than his face, stepped forward. "We're not here to bathe, knight." "You're here to do what I say," Götz countered. "If you don't want to bathe, build a bridge. Faster." The bearded man looked at him, snorted, and spat sideways into the stream. "You're not a farm dog." "You guessed right."

They worked. Ropes taut, stakes creaked, men cursed, one laughed because his laughter always came when others thought it was out of place. Lenz tied knots that held, Jörg dragged stakes like other twigs, Veit fell into the water twice and acted as if he'd meant to, Sigi stood on the bank and offered his right hand to the wrong people and his left to the right people. In the end, they stood on the other side: wet, tired, alive. The bearded man nodded curtly. "You're not smooth-talking. But your orders don't sound wrong." "It'll be wrong tomorrow," said Götz. "Today we're just learning the way."

That night, Götz sat awake by the fire. The banner lay curled up beside him like a trapped eel. He stared into the embers and heard two voices arguing – his father's, singing of the name, and the governor's, grumbling of rules. In between, his own voice said: I serve no one. I use. But he knew that the world likes to trample such statements into the mud.

"In the service of the Emperor," he murmured, holding his burned hand over the embers. The scars prickled, as if they had a sense of future reckoning. "Good. I'm performing a service. Mine."

Jörg sat down next to him, using the axe as a pillow. "Tomorrow we'll give someone a beating?" "The wrong gentlemen," said Götz. "Are there any right ones?" "No," Götz replied, his grin tired. "There are only gentlemen who pay—or not. Tomorrow they'll pay us with fear. The day after tomorrow, perhaps with coins."

Lenz came silently and sat down without sitting down—he could squat like a shadow. "The Emperor is far away," he said quietly. "But his displeasure is swift," Götz replied. "Then be quicker."

"I am," murmured Götz.

He placed his hand on the hilt of his sword, looked into the dark line of trees beyond the fire. There, beyond the black and night, the mission awaited. Ringleaders. Order. Rules. Words that lay like stones in his stomach. But stones are good—you can kill with them or build with them. He was still undecided about what tomorrow would be. Maybe both. Mostly it was both.

The wind shifted, bringing the smell of rain and stables and something else, metallic, that he knew. Danger has a tongue, he thought. And it licks your face in advance. He smiled crookedly. Let her. Tomorrow she'll get something in return.

"Sleep," he said into the fire, to no one and to everyone. "Tomorrow we'll be tools. But not blunt ones."

He lay down, the banner at his back, the blade at his side, his burned hand covering both. In the service of the Emperor. For one night, the world could believe that meant obedience. Tomorrow, they would learn that with him, it was service with the Emperor—and never service under him. And if the Emperor didn't like that, he did. That was enough.

The city lay behind them, but the images stuck to their boots like dirt. Götz had seen the farm—and he knew immediately that he hated it.

He hated not only the governor, who grinned like an eel in a vat, nor the scribes with their inkblots who believed parchment was worth more than blood. He hated the whole idea of a place where men sit in velvet and think their words are swords.

The reception had been a spectacle. Golden curtains that smelled of moths. A carpet trampled by too many boots, but none of them dirty. Servants bowed so low they had to be careful not to leave their foreheads on the floor. And everywhere those faces: smooth, fat, sweet, as if they had never smelled the wind, never known hunger.

"This is the court," the governor had said, grinning broadly, his hands like a merchant's. "The heart of the empire." "Looks more like a belly," Jörg had murmured, "and a full one at that." Götz remained silent. But his eyes had taken in everything: the rings, the wine goblets, the greedy glances. Men who let others fight for them, yet still called themselves "lords."

As they left the hall, a few courtiers crowded around. One, a thin man with a nose like a dagger, smiled smugly. "Knight of Berlichingen? The young man with the fire? They say you have more courage than sense." Götz stopped and looked at him for a long time. "And they say you have more tongue than teeth." The courtier laughed uncertainly, as if he'd missed a joke, and stepped back.

Another, fat and perfumed, placed his hand on Götz's shoulder. "If you fulfill the task, knight, you will gain many friends. And friends at court are worth their weight in gold." Götz took his hand and squeezed it so hard that the man gasped. "I don't need friends made of sugar. I have steel."

In the courtyard, they encountered a priest who wished to bless the banner. "So that you may fight in the name of the Lord," he said, his fingers raised. "We fight in the name of the Emperor," the governor corrected. "I fight in my own name," Götz growled, pulling the banner toward him. "And if God wants something, he can come himself."

The men laughed, even Lenz snorted softly. The priest stared in horror, muttering something about sin. But Götz's words stuck.

That evening, in the tavern, where the smell of the farm still lingered in the air, Jörg finally said what everyone was thinking: "Those people in there have no clue. They think war is a play and blood is a red curtain. They'd starve if someone knocked the wine cup out of their hands." "That's why they're sitting there and we're riding," muttered Lenz. "And we're supposed to do their work," Veit spat into the straw. "Not their work," said Götz, "their lie."

They all fell silent, looking at him. He took the last sip of beer and wiped his mouth. "But I'll tell you one thing: I'm using them. I'm taking their orders, I'm

taking their money, I'm taking their banner. But I'm not serving them. I'm serving myself. And if anyone thinks they can treat me like a dog—I'll bite first."

The night was silent, only a distant rain drummed on the roofs. Götz lay awake, the banner beside him. He thought of the court, the faces, the words that clung to his tongue like mucus. Masks, all masks.

And he swore: I don't wear a mask. I'm made of iron. Anyone who laughs with me knows I have teeth.

The court loved oaths. They loved vows, seals, solemn words that resonated with old wine. But for Götz, an oath was only worth as much as the fist that supported it. Nevertheless, anyone in the emperor's service had to open their mouths and say something that sounded like obedience.

The governor had prepared everything. In the hall stood two candles, a crucifix that was taller than all the men, and a Bible that no one was reading. Next to the table lay the banner, neat and rolled up, like a dog waiting obediently.

"Knight of Berlichingen," the governor began, in a voice that sounded like himself, "you swear to serve the Emperor faithfully. His commands are your commands. His word is law. His victory is your victory."

A priest nodded eagerly, as if God himself had descended to take his notes. Two scribes scratched with quills, as if trying to preserve each syllable like blood.

Götz stepped forward, sword at his side, eyes straight. His men stood behind him, broad, rugged, silent—the kind of silence that is louder than any amen.

He placed his hand on the Bible, but it was the burned, scarred hand. It almost hissed against the leather, as if to say: No oath written here will remain clean.

"I swear," said Götz, slowly, roughly, "to serve the Emperor... as long as he doesn't stand in my way."

A murmur went through the hall. The priest turned pale, the scribe stopped scratching. The governor smiled thinly, as if expecting something unexpected.

"That's not the formula," whispered the priest. "Formulas are for alchemists," growled Götz. "I swear it like it's meant to be."

The governor approached. "And what does that mean, knight?" "It means," said Götz, "that I will fight for him if he gives me a reason. That I will defeat his enemy if he is also my enemy. But I will not lie in the dirt just because an eagle is printed on a piece of paper."

The silence crackled. Then Jörg broke it, laughing loudly. "That's the cleanest oath I've ever heard. Finally, someone who doesn't lie when they swear!" Veit grinned. "If the Emperor hears that, he'll start to sweat." Lenz remained silent, but his eyes sparkled: That's right.

The governor raised his hands in a placating gesture. "Good. Good. The oath has been spoken, and the seal of the crown accepts it." He glanced briefly at the scribes, who nodded uncertainly. "We have many knights who overpromise. Few who mean what they say."

The priest still muttered about sin and disobedience, but his words were drowned out. The men outside carried weapons, horses snorted, orders were shouted. War, not formulas, filled the air.

Later, as they stood in the courtyard, the banner fluttering above them, Götz placed his hand on the hilt of his sword. "I swore," he said to his men, "but not as they wanted. I did it my way." "And if they hang you for it?" Sigi asked, pale. "Then I'll hang someone else first," Götz replied coldly.

That night, he thought again of the oath. Of the candles, of the masks, of the cross that was taller than any man. He thought of how his burned hand had touched the Bible, and he knew: this oath wasn't a rope. It was a knife. And knives belong to him.

In the morning, boots drummed through the courtyard, metal clanged, horses neighed. The emperor needed men, and men needed reasons—money, blood, or both. Götz now had his assignment. No glorious campaign, no golden triumphal procession to Rome. No. A dirty job. As almost always.

The governor unfurled the parchment as if presenting a gift. "A county in revolt. The people are no longer paying tithes. They're blocking roads, ambushing messengers. A village has thrown out its imperial authorities, including the priest. You're supposed to restore order."

"Order?" Jörg laughed, scratching his beard. "In your language, that means: let heads roll and confiscate supplies." The governor didn't bat an eyelid. "You bring them to their senses." "And if they don't want to?" asked Veit, with a grin

that already smelled of blood. "Then you show them that the emperor has no patience."

Götz stood there, his arms crossed, his burned hand throbbing in his sleeve. "So, peasants." "Not just peasants," a clerk interjected, in that thin voice that has ink. "Apparently, a few renegade mercenaries too. Men who were once in the service and are now stirring up trouble." "That's why they sent us," Lenz murmured. "You don't need speeches against mercenaries, just arrows."

The governor nodded. "Exactly. You take twenty men from the city, ten of the count's cavalry, and whatever you provide yourself. Your duty: capture the rebels, secure the villages, open the roads. And woe betide the emperor if news reaches you that you have failed."

Götz took a step closer. "And what do I get?" "Pay, fame, the favor of the crown." "You can't eat fame." "Pay, yes." The governor paused, then added more quietly: "And freedom. For men like you, that can be more valuable than coins."

They rode off. The banner fluttered, fresh and ridiculous, but it gave the people along the way something to marvel at. The peasants stood by the fences, their faces tired and suspicious. Some spat in the dust as the imperial symbol passed by. Others bowed their heads, because hope was more dangerous than hatred.

"They hate us all," Sigi muttered, "regardless of whether we bring them bread or fire." "Then bring fire," Jörg growled. "At least that warms them." Lenz shook his head. "He who brings fire doesn't put out anything. He only makes more ash." "Ashes are honest," said Götz.

On the second day, they came across the first traces: an overturned cart, its wood blackened and burnt; two dead horses beside it, bloated, with flies like clouds around them. On the bike path lay scraps of banners—imperial, torn, smeared with dirt and blood.

"Farmers can shout," Veit muttered, "but this smells like a pro." Götz dismounted, knelt beside the cart, and stroked the burn mark with his burned hand. "Oil. Placed neatly. No accident. Someone here knew how to build a trap."

"Mercenaries," said Lenz. "Yes," replied Götz. "Farmers are burning haystacks. Mercenaries are burning streets."

That evening, they camped in the forest. The fire was small, the food dry. The men from the city grumbled, demanding wine, a warm place. Jörg hissed them down. "You'll be warm enough when the arrows fly."

Götz sat silently, his sword beside him, his eyes in shadow. The mission burned in his mind. To establish order. He knew what that meant: villages to be destroyed, men to be hanged, women to scream, children to cry. And at the end, a scribe wrote: "The Emperor has established order."

He looked into the flames, the scars on his hand glowing. "Good," he murmured, "then we'll sort things out. But to my standards."

The morning was cool, the fog hung between the trees like a swallowed curse. The procession wound its way through the forest, the banner fluttering dully, the mercenaries from the city cursing quietly as their armor rattled in the undergrowth. Götz rode in front, his eyes alert, his hand on his sword, as if he already knew that the forest concealed more than just birds.

"It smells like an ambush," murmured Lenz, his gaze gliding through the trunks like a knife. "Everything smells like an ambush," grumbled Jörg, "if you're that paranoid." "Paranoid people live longer," replied Lenz dryly.

Götz raised his hand, the train stopped. Birds fell silent. Horses pawed restlessly. Then, very quietly, a branch cracked. Not the random cracking of an animal. Planned. Intentional.

"There they are," murmured Götz. "Sons of Shadow."

And then it came: arrows, silent, then screaming in flight. One slammed into the shield of the foremost city mercenary, a second ripped open his throat. Chaos. Screams, blood, horses bucking. Men fell, the street transformed into a battlefield before anyone could yell "Emperor!"

Figures leaped from the undergrowth. Not peasants with pitchforks. Men in leather, swords, axes, crossbows. Renegade mercenaries, with the eyes of wolves. They bellowed, fell over the front line, and the forest devoured the train.

Götz dug his spur into his horse and drew his sword. He caught the first blade that came hurtling down on him with a blow that sent sparks flying. A kick, a scream, blood. He pushed forward like a battering ram of flesh.

Jörg raged beside him, his axe screeching through helmet and bones. Veit leaped into the back of an opponent, laughing as the man lay in the dirt. Sigi stabbed wildly, the trembling of his hand making him unpredictable. Lenz drew and fired, one arrow after another, each finding meat.

But the city mercenaries wavered. One ran, a second fell without a fight, a third tripped over his own spear. "You damned lot!" Jörg yelled, "Hold the line!" But lines only hold when men hold them.

Götz fought his way through, sweat burning his eyes, his scarred hand throbbing. A man with a scar across his face approached him, grinning, swinging his blade with the force of three winters. Götz didn't flinch. He blocked, thrust, grabbed the bastard by the collar, and slammed him against a tree. "For whom?" he snarled, the sword at his throat. The man laughed until it bloodied. "Not for you. For no one. For us." Then he spat in Götz's face.

Götz slit his throat without asking any further questions.

The battle was chaos. Screams, blood, arrows, steel. Lenz yelled, "Left!" and Götz turned, catching a blow before cleaving Sigi in half. Jörg stood over a pile of corpses, his beard covered in blood. Veit pulled a blade from a belly as if it were a wooden axe.

Slowly, with blows, with arrows, with blood, the battle turned. The mercenaries retreated, the city soldiers rallied, because fear sometimes fights better than courage. Finally, the enemies broke away, vanishing into the undergrowth, leaving behind dead and groaning.

The forest was silent, only the panting of the survivors remained. Bodies lay everywhere. Some in imperial colors, some in none. The stream beside it was red, as if it had drunk more than it could hold.

"That wasn't a peasant revolt," Jörg growled, the axe still dripping. "No," said Götz. "That was war. And the Kaiser calls it order."

That evening, they counted the dead. Six city mercenaries, three horsemen, and two of Götz's own men, nearly dead but still breathing. The losses were high enough that silence filled the square where laughter would have formerly stood.

Götz sat by the fire, wiping his sword. His burned hand trembled, not from fear, but because it sensed that this was just the beginning. He looked into the fire

and murmured, "Creating order. So that's what you call it. Good. Then we'll create more of it until no one breathes anymore."

The morning smelled of smoke long before they saw the village. Smoke that came not from hearths, but from the burning heart of a place. The horses snorted, the men raised their heads. A dog howled in the distance, then nothing.

"Those aren't farmers cooking," muttered Lenz, narrowing his eyes. "Those are farmers burning," growled Jörg, shouldering the axe more firmly. "Or farmers being burned," added Sigi quietly.

They rode over the hilltop and saw it: houses ablaze, roofs licking like torches against the gray sky. People were running screaming, some with buckets, others with children in their arms, still others with weapons that looked like toys compared to the blades that threatened them. For among the huts ran mercenaries. Men in leather, with crossbows, with rusty helmets, laughing as they fed the fire with jugs of oil.

"That's their order," said Götz coldly. "They burn it down so no one can object anymore." "And what is our order?" asked Veit, grinning as if already looking forward to the answer. "Our order," growled Götz, drawing his sword, "is that we burn when we want—not when they want."

He urged the horse on. The men followed. The banner fluttered, and for the first time, it seemed more than a rag: The villagers saw it and screamed, some falling to their knees as if rescue were at hand. Others screamed louder, thinking the emperor had sent more executioners.

The first blade struck a mercenary in the back before he realized the enemy was no longer coming from huts, but from the forest. Jörg chopped down two men as if splitting wood. Lenz shot, his arrows burning through air and flesh. Sigi stabbed blindly but hit, because fear sometimes leads to accuracy. Veit laughed as he kicked an opponent's legs out from under him and pushed him into the fire.

Götz himself blazed a path like a storm. His burned hand grabbed a sword by the back of the blade, ignoring the cutting edge, and swept it aside before slashing the man's throat. Blood, smoke, screams—the village turned into a cauldron.

But there was no victory without a price. A woman ran out of a burning house with a child in her arms. A mercenary grabbed her by the hair and pulled her back. Götz saw it, jumped from his horse, ran, and struck. The man fell, the woman stumbled, the child screamed. She looked at Götz, her eyes full of fear. No thanks, only fear. To her, he was just as much a demon as the one he slew.

"They don't see any difference," murmured Sigi, appearing beside him. "Then they should learn," growled Götz, "that at least we kill differently."

The fire continued to spread. Thatched roofs cracked, flames licked at barns. The men threw barrels into the water, trying to extinguish the fire, but it was too late. This village would not stand still. Even if the enemy fell, these people's homeland would continue to burn until it was reduced to ash.

"We can't save it," said Lenz, his voice hard but not cold. "No," replied Götz. "But we can prevent anyone from being left laughing."

They chased the remaining mercenaries through the alleys, pushed them into the flames, and hacked them down among the huts and rubble. No prisoners. No mercy. Those who had burned down the village died in its fire.

In the end, they stood in the smoke. The banner hung, sooty and limp. Children screamed, women wept, men lay still. Götz wiped the blood from his sword, his face black from the smoke, his burned hand covered in blisters.

The governor wanted "order." This was order: a pile of dead, a village in ashes, a name made louder by fear than by glory.

"So that's how it looks," murmured Jörg. "In the service of the Emperor." "No," growled Götz. "In the service of Hell. But with the imperial seal."

The village was reduced to ash before the sun rose at midday. Smoke hung like a black veil over the charred beams, and the screams of the survivors mingled with the hissing of the embers. Women knelt among the remains of their houses, children clung to legs, men stared blankly, as if they had lost everything they knew.

Götz stood in the middle of the courtyard, the banner flung limply behind him, his sword still bloody. The governor would have called it "order." Götz called it a grave.

"They look at us as if we did it," murmured Sigi, standing beside him, pale as ever. "Because we did it too," Götz countered. "We killed. Maybe not started

the fire, but we fed it." "We saved them," Veit contradicted. "Saved them?" Götz pointed with his burned hand at the smoking rubble. "This is salvation?"

An old man stepped forward, his back bent, his face black from the smoke. "You're the ones who're supposed to send the emperor? Look around! What have you brought but death?"

Götz looked at him for a long moment. "We brought what you already had: fire. We only slew the torchbearers." "And what do we have left?" The old man coughed, blood at his mouth. "Ashes. Your emperor takes grain, your enemies take lives. What do we take?" "Nothing," Götz said harshly. "You take nothing because nothing belongs to you. You are chess pieces on a board you can't even see."

The old man spat at his feet. "Then you are worse than those who came. They burned us. You robbed us of hope."

Götz took a step closer, his eyes cold. "Hope is a poor shield." Then he turned away.

The city mercenaries plundered, despite all the rules. One carried a pot, another a bag of grain, a third ripped a ring from a dead man's finger. Jörg growled, grabbed the last one by the collar, and threw him into the muddy water. "You're eating like rats while the houses are still burning." "An order is an order," the man snarled. "And my fist is law," Jörg growled, and struck.

Later, by the fire, Lenz said what everyone was thinking: "That's the price. Obedience means we're supposed to extinguish someone else's fire, but in the end, we ourselves are left standing in the smoke." "No," muttered Götz, his sword on his knees. "Obedience means the Emperor wins, no matter who loses. We strike, we burn, we pay—and he collects."

"Then we quit our service?" Veit asked, half-jokingly. "Can you quit the Emperor?" Sigi shook his head. "The Emperor will fire you—with a rope."

Götz raised his burned hand and clenched it into a fist. "No. We're not quitting. We're using. We're taking the pay, we're taking the name, we're taking the coat. But we're not wearing it for them. We're wearing it until it's useful to us. And when it gets heavy, we throw it into the fire."

The men nodded, each to themselves. They knew: the price of obedience was blood—not just that of the enemy, but also that of the innocent. And everyone knew: this wouldn't be the last time they stood in a village ablaze.

Late that night, as the smoke cleared, Götz walked alone through the rubble. He picked up a charred piece of wood that had once been a door beam and threw it into the fire. "So this is what the Emperor's service looks like," he muttered. "A shitty deal. But my deal."

And he swore to himself: I will never again fight for someone who sits further away than the fire in my face. If I kill, it will be in my name. Not in that of a man I've never seen.

The smoke settled, but it didn't go away. It lingered, clinging to clothes, hair, and skin. Even the water in the stream tasted of ash. Men coughed, women wept, children screamed, and somewhere a dog barked as if cursing the world once more.

Götz stood at the edge of the village that was no more. The banner fluttered over the rubble, ridiculous, like a royal cloak over a corpse. The governor would have written: Mission accomplished. Order restored. But there was no order here. Here was only emptiness, waiting like an open mouth.

"That was a victory," Jörg muttered, wiping his axe in the grass. "But it tastes like rotten bacon." "Victory means you're still breathing," Lenz replied dryly. "The rest is stories." "Then tell me a story that doesn't stink of smoke," Veit growled. Sigi was silent. He just stared into the embers, as if he might find answers there.

A few survivors ventured closer. Women with burnt clothes, children covered in soot, an old man who could barely stand. They looked at the banner, at the soldiers, at Götz. One stepped forward, his voice shaky: "You say you're bringing order. But what will we eat now? Where will we sleep? Who will pay us for what we've lost?"

Götz didn't answer immediately. He looked at his burned hand, the scars white against the black smoke. Then he said harshly: "No one pays you. Not the emperor, not me. You pay. Always you. That's how it is in the Reich."

The man tried to object, but his voice broke. He fell to his knees, weeping like someone who has no more tears.

Later, as they began their retreat, the governor didn't count the dead, only the heads of the slain mercenaries. "You served well," he said, with a grin that promised more reward than he would ever pay. "The Emperor will be pleased."

"The Emperor can go to hell," thought Götz, but he nodded. Sometimes nodding is the better weapon.

They received too few coins and too many words. They rode away, the banner in front, while behind them the sky was still black.

In the evening, far from the village, they camped in the forest. No one laughed, no one sang. Even Veit chewed silently, Jörg drank without mockery, Lenz carved silently, Sigi warmed himself with a blank expression. The fire crackled as if trying to fill the silence.

"That was a victory," Jörg finally repeated, "but not a good one." "There are no good victories," said Götz. "There are only victories that more or less stink."

He looked into the fire and placed his burned hand on the hilt of his sword. A bitter victory, he thought. But victory. And victory is the only thing that matters when the world is devouring your name.

Night took them, and the flames cast long shadows. Images burned behind Götz's eyelids: the village, the screams, the old man who had spat in his face. He knew he had won. But he also knew: a few more such victories, and the name he bore would be more ash than iron.

He turned to sleep, muttering into the darkness: "The emperor gets his victory. But the prize is mine."

Love and betrayal

The rain came late, as if it were ashamed. For hours he had considered whether he had the courage to wash away the filth of the world. When it finally fell, the land smelled of cold ash and wet skin. Götz rode into the rain as if into a cheap absolution—the banner furled, the men scattered in a cluster of dim huts at the side of a trade route, barely trading. The forest stood dark beside it, as if it had resolved to say nothing.

The inn, if you could call it that, was a bandy-legged hut with a sign painted with a tankard that looked as if it had been designed by a blind man at a gallop. Inside, the sound of stale voices echoed against the beams, as if tiredness were dripping from mouths. A stove pretended to be warm. Someone had been boiling swedes, insulting the air.

Jörg was already sitting at the table, his axe like a pet next to his boots, shoveling stew with the same attention he usually gave to splitting skulls. Lenz was a shadow at the window, his gaze silencing the pane rather than seeing through it. Veit was playing dice with a man too friendly to lose honestly. Sigi held his hands over the unlit embers and looked as if he would rather freeze than hope.

Götz stood in the doorway for a moment, water dripping from his nose as if the sky had laughed at him. He inhaled the air. Turnips, sweat, beer—the usual misery. And then there was a smell that didn't fit: rosemary, perhaps. Or just fresh water on skin that hadn't been rolling in dirt all day. His eyes found her before his mind had even finished counting the rest of the tavern.

She stood behind the counter, but not like the innkeeper's daughter. More like someone who had decided that counters were merely a kind of boundary. Dark hair, too clean for this area, tied back with a ribbon that wasn't made of rope. A cheek with a scratch that was just healing. Hands that knew how to carry pitchers, but also how to hold knives. Eyes that first assessed, then invited, then threatened—all in one breath.

"Beer?" she asked. There was no subservience in her voice, just a shortcut. Anyone who wanted to talk would have to pay.

"Two jugs," said Götz, "and if you're hiding something strong, three."

She pushed a beer toward him, which looked like it had come from an honest-to-goodness puddle. He drank, barely flinching. "Strong is for people on weak days," she murmured, placing a small bottle on the counter. No brand. Just a glass that knew more than it showed.

"And you?" he asked, "what are your days? Weak or strong?"

"Expensive," she said. Then she smiled briefly, but not in a friendly way. "My name is Mara."

"Goetz."

"You can see that." She examined the burned hand, the bandage, the scars on his ankle, the way his sword hilt lay on his hip like another bone. "Emperor or anti-emperor?"

"I am my own. The emperor will pay the bill if necessary."

"Everyone pays," she murmured. "The only question is: what?"

He drank half the bottle. It burned well. No lie, no sweet aftertaste. The rain breathed air into the roof. Jörg burped into his soup, Veit won a few coppers and grinned as if he'd bought the world. Lenz listened with his eyes, Sigi counted logs as if they were sins. The innkeeper did what innkeepers do: They kept the world out until it crept through the cracks.

"What are you doing here?" asked Götz, because he wanted to know why rosemary smelled in poverty.

"I tap," Mara said. "I do the math. I decide who I let in, who I let out, and who I forget."

"And who forgets you?"

"No one's tried it." She lifted the bottle and poured more. Her fingers briefly touched his burned hand. Not tenderly. More like a test. "Does it still work?"

"Always," he said. "Pain has a good endurance."

"Then you are related."

"Who? Me and the pain?"

"You and the people who come in here. Everyone's carrying something. Some scarred, some invisible. In the end, they drink the same thing."

"And you? What are you drinking?"

"Water." A little lie too long, a little truth too short.

He laughed harshly. "Clever."

"Stingy," she corrected. "It's smart not to ask where a knight comes from who fills the door like a storm."

"I am not a knight."

"You all say you're not. Until someone pulls out a tabard." She tapped the rolled-up banner next to his chair, pretending it was an old broom. "They say in the end, you'll bat for the one who tosses the bigger coin."

"In the end, I hit because no one else does."

"Most people call this *Beginning*."

Her eyes held his gaze without kneeling. There was no room for knees inside. Inside were tables, words, bills. He felt something tense inside him that wasn't muscle. A useless yearning, a damned touch of softness, like the first warm wind in March, which only exists to fool you because there's more snow in April.

"What do you want from me, Mara?" he asked, suddenly without any show.

"That you pay," she said, "and that you don't lie." Then a twitch in the corner of her mouth. "And that you keep an eye on that guy with the dice. He's about to lose honestly and will take it the wrong way."

Götz turned his head. Veit had won, too many times. The other man—thin lips, fingers groping for the knife handle before his head knew it—leaned forward. Götz saw the moment that wasn't yet one, but wanted to be.

"Veit," said Götz, his voice weightless and therefore heavy, "let him *this* time win."

"Why?" Veit grinned. "I—"

"Because I say so. And because you don't need unwashed fingers today."

Veit paused, nodded slowly, and rolled the dice, which turned out worse than his mood. The man grinned crookedly and pocketed the copper coins as if they were his honor. Jörg grumbled something about "mercy being for the faint-hearted," but he too let it go.

Mara had watched the scene without looking. "You can lose if you want," she said.

"I can count what I'll be missing tomorrow," he replied.

She nodded, as if he'd provided proof she'd already had. "Why are you really here, Götz? A tavern like this isn't an intersection, it's a dead end."

"Maybe I like dead ends."

"Nobody likes dead ends. You get stuck in them. Unless you dig."

"And you? Do you dig?"

"With questions," she said, pushing bread toward him that smelled better than it looked. "You have something in your eye that doesn't fit in with haste. A longing or a vow. I recognize that. Men bring things like that. Then they leave it here. Or they take me with them."

"You?" He laughed briefly. "Are you that light?"

"I am as heavy as one can carry me."

A gust of wind pushed rain through the cracks; somewhere a loose slat rattled, as if someone were clapping politely. Lenz's shadow barely moved. Jörg scraped crust from the rim of the jug. Sigi rubbed his hands as if he could warm the time with them. Veit was already pulling the dice again. The world acted as if it wouldn't change.

"Mara," said Götz, tasting the name. It had the consistency of something better not to chew. "Do you have someone looking for you?"

"Everyone's looking for someone who's me. No one can find her." She frowned slightly. "They say you saved a village."

"I killed men who burned it."

"It's not the same."

"For those who cry, yes."

Her eyes narrowed. "You talk like you're tired of being right."

"I'm sick of there being any law at all." He reached for the bottle again and drank. "Law is a shield for those already on the wall."

"And you want to be the wall."

"I want them to stop telling me what I'm dying for."

There it was: a small, too-quick breath, an unplanned look from her—not soft, not playful, but like a tiny crack in the glass. "You're not dying, Götz," she said quietly. "You're just making others afraid of it."

"That's enough," he replied. "For now."

A man at the next table coughed, the innkeeper clinked mugs because sometimes noise is cheaper than peace. Two carters argued about wheel ruts as if the sky cared. The door opened, the rain smelled clean, and with it, something tilted in the air—a shadow that didn't belong to the roof.

He saw him before the hand reached for the dagger. A face he might have seen before in the forest—the kind of face that hides in the crowd, but remembers in blood. The man stepped behind Jörg, too smoothly for coincidence.

"Not today," Götz said, loudly enough. Jörg was already turning; the man froze, his blade half out of its sheath. Lenz stood behind him, as suddenly as a second wall. No show. Just the present.

"Hands on the table," Götz murmured, and because his voice offered no alternative, the man's body obeyed faster than his brain. The dagger clanged on wood.

"Who sent you?" asked Lenz.

"No one..." The rest was sweat. The truth reeked of fear.

Mara moved, a single, clear line around the counter, faster than the man could finish his sentence. Steel glinted briefly in her hand—a slender, clean thorn, as domestic as a knitting needle and as friendly as a winter tooth. She pressed it against the guy's throat, as lightly as if she were just checking his pulse.

"He's lying," she said matter-of-factly. "People like that don't come to drink."

"Emperor?" asked Jörg.

"Mercenary friend," murmured Lenz. "The forest has brothers."

The man breathed deeply, a bird in a cage. "I... I just had to see if—"

"Whether I'm here," Götz finished. "Good. Then you'll see. And now you'll see your way out."

"I..."

"You're leaving." Götz's hand rested on the dagger, lifted it from the table, and pressed it back into the man's hand—blade first, gently, as if it were a cup. "And when you come back tomorrow, you'll come alone. Without those who sent you. Then we'll talk. Otherwise..." He nodded to Mara. The rest was clear in the air, as clear as an executioner's sentence.

The man stumbled backward, almost grateful. The door swallowed him, the rain washed him away. For today. Not for tomorrow.

Mara put the thorn away as if it had never been there. Her eyes returned to Götz, calm, considering. "You know your enemies."

"They smell similar."

"And your friends?"

"They smell like wet dog and cold stew." He nodded toward his table. "And sinew and smoke."

"And guilt."

"Everyone reeks of guilt."

She placed a piece of cheese in front of him, trying not to be rubbery. "Eat it. Men talk too much when they're tired." Then she leaned forward a little. Not seductively. More like she was examining a wound. "You carry too much on your own."

"Better one wrong than two wrong."

"Wrong is relative," she said, withdrawing. "I have a room upstairs. For people who want to sleep without being killed. It costs double. But I'm awake."

"In front of me or above me?"

"Both."

Jörg giggled, Lenz pretended he hadn't heard, Veit raised his eyebrows, Sigi did what he always did: shiver and nod, as if they were the same movement. Götz drank the last drop from the bottle, set it down so it wouldn't roll. Then he stood up, the wood creaking beneath his boots like old bones that still go along with the dance.

"Show the room," he said.

She took a candle, which was not in a good mood, and led the way. The stairs were narrow, the steps reluctant to count. Upstairs, it smelled of soap, wood, and that rosemary he had already fished out of the air down below. The room was small but tidy. A bed that didn't collapse when you breathed. A window that showed rain doing what rain does. A bowl of water that wasn't from the last bucket.

"I sleep in front of the door," she said. "Not out of distrust. Out of order."

"I sleep with the sword."

"You would have anyway."

He placed the banner in the corner as if it were a broom and laid the blade on the chest. His burned hand remained on the handle, out of habit, out of contract.

"Mara," he said, knowing he was using the name too often for a man who pretended not to collect names. "Why are you helping me?"

She leaned against the doorframe. The shadow darkened her eyes. "Because men like you cut open the world so it can breathe again. And because men like you suffocate the world if they stay too long."

"So I'll help you too. Briefly."

"Short is honest."

"And if I stay late?"

"Then you either betray me. Or I betray you. That's how the game works."

He nodded. He didn't like it. It was still the right thing to do. "Then we'll stay for a bit."

"Good." She extinguished the candle, leaving only the rain. Her voice lingered on the door, quiet as a needle. "Sleep, Götz. Tomorrow someone will come who needs you. And someone who hates you. And I want you awake when they both come in at the same time."

The door closed. The bolt slid. Götz stopped, the weight of the sword in his hand, the weight of her gaze somewhere between his ribs and his oath. He lay down, not softly, not hard, simply, as men sleep who know that dreams bite.

Downstairs, the tavern murmured a little more, then it too gave up. The rain continued to fall. And in the small room, which smelled of rosemary, lay the man who had vowed not to let anyone in—and realized for the first time in a long time that a door isn't just there to keep others out, but also to keep something in.

He fell asleep. Not deeply. But differently. And somewhere on the stairs, on the two boards that were darker than the others, sat a woman, keeping watch. Not out of love. Not out of mercy. For a reason that morning would explain—or reveal.

The morning came gray and cold, as if the night hadn't found a reason to make it right. Götz woke up before the rain stopped. He lay there, half-dressed, his sword at the ready, his burned hand on the hilt like a dog that never sleeps. The room still smelled of rosemary and smoke. No dream had gripped him, only that restless twilight in which one struggles more than rests.

He heard movement outside the door. Not a heavy footstep, not a mercenary's tread—light, steady, like a cat. Then the scraping of a bolt. Mara entered, a bowl of water in her hand, bread and cheese on a board. She seemed as if she had spent the night awake, but without fatigue. Her eyes were sharp, not sluggish.

"You sleep like one who never sleeps," she said. "And you wake like one who never dreams," replied Götz.

She set down the bread and placed the water next to the sword, as if it belonged there. "You saved your men's lives yesterday. And you didn't ask me why I helped you."

"I rarely ask questions when knives are at someone's throat," he growled, biting into the bread. It was hard, but better than what he'd experienced in camps. "Questions slow you down."

She sat on the chest, yesterday's candle in her hand, playing with the wick. "But you want to know. Not out loud, but inside."

Götz looked at her for a long moment. He felt something tense in his chest, not a muscle, not pain—something soft that he usually only felt with dead comrades, just before he threw earth over them. He hated it. He wanted it.

Down in the bar, life stirred. Jörg was already cursing because his mug wasn't full enough. Veit was yelling for dice, Lenz barely spoke, but you could hear the

scraping of his knife on the wood. Sigi coughed as if he were about to spit out his lungs. The usual misery that held him captive like an old song. But up here, it was quiet. Too quiet.

"You have a weakness," Mara said. "Not your hand. Not the scars. They're just skin. Your weakness runs deeper."

"And what would that be?" "You act like you're iron. But you're flesh, so afraid of being soft again that you make everything hard. Even your tongue."

He laughed briefly, bitterly. "Women like to talk in images." "Because men don't listen when we say it directly."

She leaned forward, the shadow of her hair falling across the table. "You thought you could trust me yesterday. Otherwise you wouldn't have stayed here last night."

"Or I would have killed you," he said, but his voice was too rough to sound like a threat.

"No." Her gaze bored into him. "You can kill anything. But not the thing that reminds you that you were once human."

The words struck him harder than any blade. And he hated them for it. Because they were true. He saw the images: his father, the name, the old sword, the burning village. All of it was iron, burden, anger. But somewhere, buried deep, there was that boy who once carved lines into the beams and picked flowers for his mother.

He felt the wall inside him crack, not loudly, not visibly, just a small crack. A damned crack in the armor.

He gripped the bread tighter, as if he had to crush it. "Don't trust me, Mara. Whoever trusts me dies. Whoever loves me dies faster."

She nodded, slowly, without protest. "Perhaps. But some people would rather die than never have loved."

The door downstairs slammed open. Voices, harsh, unfamiliar. A servant cried out, then silence. Lenz's voice, deep, like taut wood. "Visitors."

Mara looked at Götz, unhurried. "It's starting."

Götz stood there, sword in hand, scars burning. The crack in him remained. But this time it didn't bother him. He felt alive. Perhaps too alive.

"Then we'll bring her in," he muttered and went out.

The strangers downstairs were sent out – with Lenz's words like arrows, and with Jörg's axe at his back for emphasis. They were just two random guys who thought they could exert pressure in a tavern because they'd heard the word "Kaiser" somewhere. Götz didn't even have to draw his blade. The men disappeared into the rain, and the barroom calmed down again.

But the tension remained up above, like a knife that no one removed. Mara had looked at him as he left, and her gaze wasn't that of a barmaid glad that anger had dissipated. It was the gaze of someone who wanted to know how far a man would go before he broke.

When he returned, she was still standing by the chest, her arms crossed, her forehead in shadow. "You react too quickly," she said quietly. "Always the fist. Sometimes you gain more by opening your fingers."

"Open fingers lose coins," he growled. "And coins are hard to find."

"And closed fists lose people."

He remained silent. Her words gnawed at him more than he wanted to show.

The hours dragged on. The rain continued to fall, the men downstairs were laughing again, and the dice rolling began again. But Götz stayed upstairs, with Mara, as if the room were a second battlefield—only this time without blood.

She sat next to him on the edge of the bed. Not close, not far. Enough that he felt her warmth, too little to call it tenderness.

"You never really sleep," she said. "And you're always awake." "Maybe that's why we're sitting up here. Neither of us can help it."

She ran her fingers over his forearm, where there were no scars. "You're stronger than you think. But weaker than you want to be."

He grabbed her hand, held it tight, as if testing its authenticity. "I don't have time for weakness." "And even less for strength," she whispered. "Strength consumes you if it's not balanced."

They looked at each other. No flirting, no courtly play. More like a fight without weapons. Who would look away first, who would breathe first, as if they had lost.

Götz leaned forward slightly. He smelled rosemary, smoke, skin that knew no fear. Her lips were close, but he didn't kiss her. He didn't want to be soft. He wasn't allowed to.

"You're playing with me," he murmured. "No," she said. "I'm just reminding you that you are more than your sword."

The minutes dragged on, heavy as iron. Finally, she lay back, not lasciviously, not like a whore, but simply because her body needed space. "Lie down too," she said.

He did so. Beside her, the sword between them, like a third person in bed.

The silence was strange. No panting, no pushing, no hurry. Just the shared breathing of two people who didn't know if they dared to let go.

"If you go," she said at one point, "don't go without you." "I never go without myself." "Yes," she whispered, "always."

He stared at the ceiling, the beams, the rain dripping outside. And he knew: She was right. Somewhere in all the fighting, all the blood, all the noise, he had already lost a piece of himself. And he wasn't sure he ever wanted to find it again.

But that night, in that small room, next to that woman who looked at him not as a knight or an executioner, but as a man, he felt the crack. And for just one breath, the crack wasn't weakness. It was proof that he was still alive.

The morning after their time together came with clear skies, as if trying to make us forget the previous day's rain. But Götz knew that the world forgets nothing. Especially not a man who thinks he can be soft for a few hours without it going right through his bones.

Mara brought more bread, this time with a piece of meat that tasted like more than it was. She smiled slightly as she set the plate down. "You need strength," she said. "More today than yesterday."

"Why more?" he asked. "Because yesterday you were human. That weakens you. Today you must be iron again."

He looked at her sharply. But her eyes didn't waver. She knew what she was saying. And he knew she was right.

Down in the taproom, it was more restless than usual. Voices that didn't belong to travelers, clanging metal that didn't come from cooking. Lenz climbed the stairs, silently, but his gaze spoke volumes. "We have company," he murmured. "Too many to be coincidental."

"Who?" "The ones we had in the forest. One of them is here. And he brought friends with him."

Götz reached for the sword. His burned hand trembled, not with fear, but with anger. "Then we'll get her up."

But when he pushed open the door, he saw it immediately: They were already there. Three men with coats of arms he recognized—not the imperial banner, but that of an enemy nobleman. Men who hadn't just happened to show up here.

And they knew he was here.

"Knight of Berlichingen," said the leader, a man with a crooked smile and a sword that smelled of blood. "Finally. We thought the Emperor had put you back in his pocket. But no, there you sit, in a tavern, like a common reveler."

Götz stared at him. "How did you find me?"

The man grinned and glanced briefly at Mara. "Not every betrayal comes with blades. Some come with eyes."

It was as if someone had pierced him with a spear without touching his body. He turned to her, searching her face for the lie—or the truth. Mara stood there, calm, her hands clasped. No shock, no fear. Only this silence, which spoke louder than any words.

"You?" he asked roughly.

"Me?" She shrugged slightly. "I didn't betray anyone. But words travel, Götz. And men listen when women talk. Sometimes a look is enough."

Jörg jumped up, his axe half-raised. "Just say the word, Götz, and I'll chop off her head!"

"No!" Götz roared. The hall froze. His voice cut through the room like steel.
"Not a word. Not yet."

The enemy men laughed. "You see, Berlichingen? Even your dogs can sense it. Women make you soft. And soft ones break faster."

It all happened quickly. A punch, a kick, a chair broke. Blood splattered on the table, the dice rolled into the beer. The men fought, Jörg raged, Veit stabbed, Lenz shot, Sigi trembled and still hit. Götz was in the thick of it, sword in hand, anger in his eyes.

But the betrayal ate at him from within. He couldn't concentrate. Every blow reminded him of her gaze, every flash of her silence.

In the end, three opponents lay in the dust, one gasping, one pleading, one already silent. The coat of arms was bloody, the tavern destroyed. The silence that followed was louder than the battle.

Götz turned to Mara. "Was that you?"

She stood there, motionless, but something flickered in her eyes—perhaps pain, perhaps guilt, perhaps just a mirror reflecting his own mistrust. "What do you think, Götz?"

He wanted to grab her, shake her, force her to spit out the truth. But he didn't. He just looked at her, and he knew: Even if she hadn't said anything, the betrayal was already there. Because he had allowed someone to get so close to him.

"Enough," he finally said, his voice hoarse. "If it was you, then it worked. If it wasn't you, then it still worked. I've gone soft. And that's betrayal enough."

He turned away, his burned hand clenching the handle. The crack in the armor was no longer a crack. It was a wound.

The battle was over, but the rage continued inside Götz. Blood clung to the sword, to his boots, to his hands. But the real cut wasn't in the flesh of the fallen man—it was within him. A cut deeper than any blade. The betrayal wasn't a stab in the back. It was a look, a word too many, a crack that suddenly opened.

Mara still stood there, as if she herself were a piece of furniture in the tavern. No tears, no screams, no escape. Only eyes that looked at him, not like a lover, not like an enemy, but like someone revealing a wound and savoring the cut.

"You'll never know if it was me," she said quietly. "And that's exactly why you'll never trust me again."

"No," he growled, his burned hand on the handle, "I don't trust anyone anymore."

Outside, the rain roared, as if it had conspired with the earth to wash away the blood. But no rain washed away what was burned into him.

Jörg approached, panting, still full of anger. "Just say the word, Götz. I'll chop her in two before she blinks again." "No," said Götz. "Leave it." "Why?" Jörg spat into the straw. "She betrayed you." "Maybe," murmured Götz. "Maybe not. But the knife's in—and that's enough. I don't need another one."

The men grabbed the bodies and threw them out into the dirt for the dogs to retrieve. Sigi washed his hands until his skin was red. Veit grinned too much because he didn't know how to handle silence. Lenz watched Mara as if studying a caged animal.

And Götz? He was sitting. Sword on his knees, head heavy, heart heavier.

"You're not built for love," Mara finally said. She took a step closer, cautiously, as if walking through a minefield. "You're built for battle. For steel. For fear. Anything else will tear you apart."

"Maybe," he admitted harshly. "But for a moment, I believed something else was possible."

"That was your mistake."

"No," he said, rising slowly and lowering his sword. "That was my lesson."

He stepped to the window, looked out at the rain, the fields, the road, the world that never stood still. And he knew: This was the last vestige of softness he had allowed himself. Everything that came now would be harder.

"Love is betrayal," he murmured. "And betrayal is fire. Both burn. Both leave scars." He raised his burned hand, staring at the white lines. "I've had enough."

Mara remained silent. Perhaps she knew that words wouldn't change anything. Perhaps she knew she had won. Or lost. For him, it was the same.

He turned to his men. "We're leaving. Immediately."

"And her?" asked Sigi in his thin voice.

Götz looked at Mara for a long time. "She's staying here. With her truth. With her lie. With both."

Then he turned away and stepped out into the rain. His men followed. The sky thundered, the ground soaked the blood, and Götz knew: A part of him had remained in that tavern. A part he would never get back.

The rain nailed the world to its feet as Götz and his men left the tavern. The horse stamped beneath him, mud splashing up to his thighs. Behind him trudged Jörg, Veit, Lenz, and Sigi, silent as a funeral procession, but no one mourned. Everyone knew something was broken—not outside, not in the huts, but within Götz himself.

He didn't speak a word. The banner fluttered limply, heavy with rain, like a wet rag without pride. Jörg growled once, about to say something, but Götz's glare cut him off. Words weren't money now, but poison.

In the evening, they set up camp in the forest. A small fire, barely more than a spark in the rain. The meat was tough, the bread wet, the beer thin. But no one complained. Everyone waited for Götz to speak.

He sat there, his sword across his knees, his burned hand on the hilt. His eyes no longer glowed. They were dark. An oven burning inward.

"I get it," he finally said, quietly, harshly, as if speaking to himself. "Love is not a shield. It's a crack. And betrayal is the hammer that breaks it."

The men looked at him, but no one dared to answer.

"From today on," he continued, "I am stone. No more cracks. No more fissures. Anyone who tries will be shattered."

Jörg nodded slowly. "Good. Stone lasts longer than heart." Lenz looked into the fire. "Stone is cold." "Then I'll just freeze," Götz growled. "Better cold and whole than warm and broken."

Night crept on. The rain stopped, the stars blinked briefly, then the wind devoured them again. Götz lay with his eyes open, listening to the breathing of his men, the cracking of branches, the rustling of animals. Everything normal. Everything familiar. And yet different.

He felt the emptiness. Once, he had filled it with anger, with blood, with battles. Now, nothing filled it. Only cold. Only the determination to never be soft again.

The next morning, he seemed different. Harder. His words were shorter, his commands sharper. He didn't laugh. He didn't grin. Even Veit's jokes bounced off him like arrows on iron.

Sigi once dared: "Götz... was it really her?"

Götz looked at him for a long time, so coldly that the boy bowed his head. "It doesn't matter. It's enough that I believed it. That's worse than the truth."

They rode on, through fields, across roads, past villages where people stared at them like ghosts. And Götz swore to himself: Never again would anyone look at him the way Mara had. Never again would anyone come close enough to cut open his armor.

He was now more than a knight, more than a name. He was a stone with a sword. And anyone who tried to split him would only strike sparks—and burn.

They rode for days, and although the sky was clear, a shadow heavier than rain hung over the troop. Distrust sat like an invisible rider on each horse. No one spoke openly, but everyone knew that the night in the tavern had left its mark—on Götz, on the men, on the entire group.

Jörg started first. He couldn't stand the silence; it was eating away at him. "We should have left her there," he grumbled one evening as they sat by the fire. "Women are poison. Beautiful, soft, warm—but poison. They creep in and wear you down until you fall over."

"Shut your mouth," growled Götz, without taking his eyes off the fire.

"I'm just telling you how it is," Jörg continued. "We all saw it. You were... different. Not wrong, but different. And then, there they were in the bar. Coincidence? Forget it."

Veit grinned crookedly and spat into the embers. "He's right. Women can kill more men than swords ever can. And they don't even need blood."

Sigi was shivering as usual, but this time it wasn't just the cold. "Maybe... maybe she didn't say anything at all. Maybe it really was just bad luck." "Bad luck," laughed Veit, "is another word for stupid." "And stupid," grumbled Jörg, "is what we can't do."

Lenz remained silent. But his eyes, dark as an arrow in the night, rested on Götz. He was the only one who understood, without saying so: the mistrust wasn't just in the men. It was also in Götz himself. And it ran deeper than he wanted to show.

Once, two days later, they came to a farm. An old couple, ragged, with a sick child. The woman offered them milk, but the men wanted to refuse. But Götz took the cup, smelled it, and sipped. His burned hand trembled slightly. Then he threw the milk into the dirt.

"Poison," he growled. "Always poison."

The old couple stared at him in disbelief. The child coughed, weak and hungry. But Götz turned away. "We're riding."

Later at the camp, Sigi whispered, "It wasn't milk with poison. It was just milk." "Be quiet," Jörg snapped. "No," Lenz mumbled, "he smelled it. Not in the cup. In himself."

The days passed. Every look from a stranger, every word that didn't fit, every smile that lingered too long—everything was now a blade for Götz. He saw betrayal in every move. And the more he saw it, the more he changed.

He was more alert. Tougher. But also lonelier. Even between his men, who were as loyal to him as dogs, there now stood an invisible wall.

That night, when the others were asleep, he sat alone. His burned hand burned hot, as if it were fresh again. He stared at it and murmured: "You are my wife. You are my betrayal. And you will never leave me."

The sky was clear as they reached the hill. The wind blew coldly across the land, carrying the scent of earth, smoke, and horse—the familiar song of the roads. Götz stopped his horse, looked out over the fields, the villages in the distance. The sun shone, but there was no warmth within him. Only steel. Only stone.

The men gathered, waiting. No one asked where the path led. They saw it in his eyes: Götz was no longer the same. Something had died in the barroom – and what remained was sharper, harder, more merciless.

He dismounted, took the banner from his rider, and threw it into the grass. The eagle, which had fluttered for the emperor, lay there like a wet bird without wings. Götz spat on it.

"Listen," he said. His voice was rough, but it cut through the wind. "I allowed myself to be betrayed. Once. Enough. From today on, I swear: No woman, no friend, no emperor, no god will ever touch my chest again. I am stone. I am iron. And whoever thinks they can get more out of me will die before they know it."

Jörg nodded, satisfied. "That's how I like to talk." Veit grinned, as if he could already smell blood. Sigi shuddered, but he nodded because he knew resistance wasn't an option. Lenz just watched silently, but his eyes said: This was inevitable.

Götz drew his sword and held it high against the sky. "This is my heart," he growled. "Cold, sharp, without compassion. Whoever loves me betrays me. Whoever betrays me dies. It's that simple."

The wind tore at his cloak, the banner rustling in the grass like a dying snake. He plunged the blade into the earth, deep, until the hilt vibrated. "And if one day someone comes who wants to soften me, I swear: I'd rather cut off my hand than allow it."

The men were silent. It wasn't a solemn oath, not a court ritual. It was a threat, to the world, to themselves.

He drew his sword again and swung himself onto his horse. "Forward," he shouted. "No looking back."

The troop began to move, and something new reflected in the eyes of the villagers they passed. No admiration. No hope. Only fear.

In that hour, Götz von Berlichingen became not just the man with the burned hand. He became the man with the iron heart. A heart that could no longer be betrayed—because it no longer belonged to anyone.

The Call of the Adventurer

The sky was gray, like the mouth of an old whore who'd smoked too much. The world smelled of wet manure, rotten hope, and the sweat of horses who knew more than their riders. It was a shitty day, and Götz knew: it was the perfect day to break free from everything that had ever bound him.

The emperor, that pompous goose in a gilded cage, could shove his orders wherever he wanted. The governors with their fat faces, the priests with their crosses, the peasants with their constant complaints—they should all die, thought Götz as he tightened the reins. His burned hand throbbed as if it were laughing at the whole damned circus.

“Enough,” he growled into the wind, “enough with your filth, enough with your orders, enough with your fucking order.”

Jörg rode beside him, grinning, his face covered in beard and beer. "Now that's a sermon I'd like." "Sermon?" Götz spat in the dirt. "This isn't a sermon, it's a bullshit gospel: I'll just do what I want. Whoever wants something pays. Whoever doesn't pay bleeds. Period."

Lenz, that mute bastard, nodded almost imperceptibly. Veit laughed loudly, an ugly laugh that scared the crows away. Sigi was trembling, as always, but there was something in his eyes that almost looked like relief.

They came to a crossroads. To the left, the path led to the next official building, the next assignment, the next "In the Name of the Emperor." To the right, it led to nothingness: forests, villages, castles that had no name. Freedom. Chaos. Adventure.

“Where to?” Sigi asked in a shaky voice.

Götz stopped, tore the banner from the spear, and threw it into the mud. The emperor's eagle lay there, and a horse trampled over it as if it were a dead bird. "Not where we are called," said Götz. "Where we are feared."

And that's exactly where it began: the rift. No emperor, no order, no seal to tell him where to go. Just him, his men, and the world, which either paid or died.

He rode to the right. Without hesitation. And the others followed, because they knew: This was it. No turning back.

Later, by the fire, which stank of wet wood, Götz held up a mug that contained more mud than beer. "To the emperor," he roared, "the fat bastard on his throne!" He tipped the rest into the fire, which hissed like an offended dog. "To the governor who thinks he can feed me like a farm dog!" He threw the mug into the embers. "To the peasants who think we're their angels!" He spat. "And to the women who think they can boil me soft like a cabbage!"

He laughed, harshly, full of anger, full of pain, full of blood. "They can all go to hell. I'm Götz von Berlichingen. I'm my own boss. And if anyone comes near me, I'll smash their skulls so deep they'll eat their own thoughts."

The men roared, clinked mugs, laughed, and cursed. They weren't an army. They were a pack. And packs don't need an emperor. Packs only need hunger, blood, and loot.

Götz sat down, his sword beside him, his burned hand on his knees. He looked into the fire, and for a moment he thought of Mara, her look, the betrayal. Then he shook his head and growled: "Screw love. Screw honor. From now on, the only thing that matters is who hits the hardest."

The wind blew sparks into the night. Somewhere a wolf howled. Götz grinned, raising his sword as if he were about to slit the moon's throat.

"Cheers, you dogs," he roared. "To us. To the dirt. To freedom. And to every bastard who gets in our way!"

They drank. They cursed. They laughed. And the world outside trembled without knowing it.

For on this day the knight died in service – and the adventurer was born, who obeyed no one but himself.

They didn't come to the sound of drums and fanfares. They came from ditches, gutters, and stables where horses smelled better than the men who groomed them. They came from dismantled companies, from villages that no longer had a church because the priest had fled first, and then the roof. They came because word gets around when someone breaks the chains and laughs at the heavens.

Götz rode ahead, a shield of gazes. Behind him were Jörg, brushing his teeth with an axe, Lenz, speaking to the air, Veit, who only knew weakness when his jug was empty, and Sigi, who shivered like a bad omen—and yet stayed. A pack needs the scent of carrion for wolves to find it. They could smell it far and wide.

The first to join called himself a basket maker. Not because he made baskets—his fists made those when women came too close—but because he could strike with willow rods better than some could with iron. He had hands like roots and a face that looked as if a blacksmith had dented it. He suddenly stood by the path, his back against a tree, his shirt open, scars like maps.

"I heard you take the ones nobody wants," he said. "We take the ones who can do something," Götz replied. "Can you do what?" Korbmacher grinned, raised his switchwhip, and clipped the wings of a fly in mid-flight. "I silence things that can't hear." "Ride," said Götz. "And be louder than your switch when it counts."

The second was Hansel Red, so named because his hair burned like a roof ridge. A fellow with teeth too big for his mouth and legs that ran faster than his thoughts. He stole their pockets before Jörg could yell "Hey!" – and put everything back down when Lenz's arrow, pointless, passed his ear.

"You have nimble fingers," said Götz, unsmiling. "If you put them in my pockets, I'll break them in half." Hansel nodded hastily. "I can walk. I can climb. I can hear doors." "Then listen when I say 'run'—and if I don't, you'll still run, but in the right direction." "Which one is right?" "The one where your heart pukes." "Understood," said Hansel—and stayed.

The third was called Grete with the Knife. Not a whore, not a fine young lady. A stable maid who had been beaten too often until she learned that knives were better prayers than rosaries. She came with a sack over her shoulder in which nothing rattled—until you looked at her and felt as if everything was rattling.

Jörg laughed harshly. "We're taking women now?" Grete pulled the skin on his cheek so quickly that his laughter stopped in the middle. "One more syllable, grunt, and you'll be drinking straight through today." Götz raised his hand, and the world stopped. "No one laughs here until I give permission. And if she stays, she'll have the same pay and the same punishments as you, Jörg." Jörg growled, wiped away blood, and finally grinned. "Well, okay. At least she cuts clean." Grete stayed because no one asked if she was allowed—they just noted that she was already there.

Then there was Pfaffe ohne Gott—a deposed chaplain with eyes like ash and a mouth full of psalms that he translated into curses. He still wore the torn collar, as if it were a poor amulet. "I don't bless anything anymore," he said, "but I know how to make men die more quietly." "Can you close wounds?" Sigi asked shyly. "Not the real ones," Pfaffe murmured, "but the ones that bleed." "That's enough," Götz decided. "If someone wants to pray, you teach them to whisper."

And last but not least, Marshal Klein, a dismounted mercenary with armor that looked like an exhausted beetle. He threw a bag of nails into the fire, and they jumped like sparks. "I can build camps, break bridges, mend wagon wheels in my sleep. And I know when a horse is lying." "Horses don't lie," said Lenz. "Yes, they do," replied Klein, "for men who give them too much credit." "Then lie to me if it saves us," said Götz. "And tell me the truth if it hurts."

So the pack grew. No banner, no blessing, no lists. Only names, scars, skills that were counted in coins or corpses. In the evenings, they sat around the fire, and Götz passed around a jug that was rarely empty because everyone passed it on faster than they drank it. Talking was allowed, but lying was not. Those who boasted had to prove it the next morning. Those who remained silent had to sing in the evening – badly, but loudly.

The rules were as short as a knife:

1. **Whoever steals, only steals from the enemy.**
2. **Those who lie lie for the benefit of everyone – or not at all.**
3. **Those who flee first run to where the loudest bangs are.**
4. **Anyone who touches women or children will be expelled – without a horse.**
5. **Anyone who contradicts Götz either has a better idea or an open grave.**

Jörg grumbled about the fourth rule. "We're not monks." "No," said Götz, "we're monsters. But we're my monsters. And I decide who we eat."

Grete nodded seriously. "Then we'll eat those who are tired of being tired." Priest Without God crossed himself out of habit and cursed afterward, as if he had to wash away the reflex.

The world began to tell stories before the ink was even dry. In one village, the story went that Berlichingen had taken a bailiff's testicles as collateral – in reality, Jörg had only pulled the rings off his finger, but fairy tales take guts. Elsewhere, a peasant woman swore that Götz had carried her child out of a

burning house – true, but Grete had set fire to the house to drive out the mercenaries. In the riverside town, people thought he was blackmailing merchants – correct; he called it a "toll," and anyone who didn't pay learned to swim in iron boots.

And yet: there were other kinds of stories that were reluctant to be heard. That he left a village with its seeds because the winter would be long. That he hanged a miller for taking water without grinding grain. That he gave a beaten farmhand a knife and said, "You've been soft long enough."

The name "Berlichingen" took on two faces: one that was shown to children to make them behave; and one that men whispered secretly around the fire at night because it sounded like a promise—dark but honest.

One evening, when the moon hung in the sky like a badly cut coin, a merchant came into the camp, looking so clean that he was automatically guilty. He stepped cautiously toward the embers, holding out his hands as if he didn't want to burn himself. "Knight... sir... whatever you are," he began. "I'm expensive," said Götz. "Speak." "An escort. Three wagons, cloth, salt, something... special. Over the Birken Pass. Robbers... and a bailiff with too much tongue." "What are you paying?" "Fifty thalers." Jörg laughed, whistled, and spat. "One hundred," said the merchant hastily. Grete made a sour face. "He still has teeth. Press harder." "One hundred and fifty," the man panted, suddenly sweating like a horse. Götz was silent, staring into the embers. Escort sounded like boredom, Vogt sounded like anger, something special sounded like a lie.

"Two hundred," said the merchant before Götz opened his mouth. "Good," nodded Götz. "And a mouth from you if you lie." "A... mouth?" "You have two," said Götz, pointing to his head and crotch. "You always give one."

The merchant swallowed. "Two hundred." "Marshal Klein, equip. Lenz, paths. Basket maker, rods. Grete, knife. Jörg—" "Axe, I know." "Sigi, pack up the fear and bear it for half of us." Sigi nodded palely. "I can."

Before they left, the priest without God approached Götz and held out a small tin cross. "Not for your neck," he murmured, "for your purse. It clinks and reminds you that greed rings louder than conscience." Götz took it, threw it into the money bag, and the cross clanged like a mocking song. "Good," he said, "then both of them should sing."

He mounted, looked over his... his squad? No. Over his gang, his pack, his bad temper, the hooves that had. "Listen," he shouted. "We are not angels, not

devils. We are Sturm. And Sturm doesn't ask for passports, banners, or bulls. Sturm takes. But he also knows when to stop. I'm telling you. Until then—" He grinned crookedly, ugly, honestly. "—we'll ride them through life like a cart through soft shit."

Jörg yelled "Cheers!" Grete showed her sword, Lenz drew the bowstring, Sigi froze bravely, and Pfaffe muttered a blasphemy that sounded like a blessing. Hansel Rot climbed onto a wagon as if he were born to fall off things and yet land on top. Korbmacher let the rods sing. Marshal Klein ordered, cursed, ordered again.

The procession began to move. No banner at the front, just breath, metal, and the sound of boots that knew they wouldn't have to retreat today. And somewhere in the distance, a bailiff stood up, feeling a chill on the back of his neck, and didn't know its name was Götz.

It wasn't long before the world spat out the name Berlichingen like a hard lump that couldn't be swallowed. And everyone who uttered it peppered it with whatever they saw fit: fear, admiration, or hatred.

The peasants said he had hammered a bailiff's ass full of nails and made him run naked through the village. Merchants swore he demanded a "toll," as brazen as a whore collecting in advance—but woe betide you if you didn't pay: then you'd hang at the city gate like a badly roasted goose. The mercenaries sang songs by the fire: of a knight who laughs at the Imperials, blows up castles, and sows more fear with half a hand than ten with whole arms.

The first major coup came in a city that had too much trade and too little courage. Götz rode to the gates with three dozen men, no banner, no orders, just dust and Jörg's laughter, which sounded as if he already had blood in his throat.

The guards carefully pushed open the doors, curious as dogs who think it's just a cart. But Götz rode forward, his burned hand open, his sword loosely suspended from his saddle. "Toll," he said. "For the road. For protection. For your easy life."

"In the name of the Emperor?" one asked timidly. "In the name of my fist," Götz replied. "The Emperor can stick his seal up his ass."

The city councilors gathered, puffy men with bellies like wine barrels. They counted coins, grumbled, and cursed. One dared to protest: "This is robbery!"

Götz stepped forward, placed his burned hand on his chest, and pushed him against the wall. "No," he growled, "this is a treaty. I'll give you peace—and you pay. Whoever doesn't pay gets the war for free."

In the end, they paid. Gritting their teeth, but they paid. And Götz left the city with sacks full of silver, while the citizens murmured that they had opened the door to a devil and defied an emperor.

But not all stories were about loot. There was also a tale of the day he appeared in a village where robbers were plundering the fields. Instead of taking coins, he chased the thieves across the hills, hacked down three of them in front of everyone, and threw the rest into the fire. "Your grain is yours," he told the farmers. "But don't forget who you owe it to."

A boy asked, "Sir, why are you helping us?" Götz grinned, harshly and evilly. "Because I can. Because I want to. Because I don't want your blood on my sword today."

People bowed and whispered prayers. But at night, when they spoke of him, their voices were trembling. Helper or executioner—no one knew for sure.

And so his reputation grew. Some called him a hero of the people, others a robber in armor, and the foolish even said he was a saint with an iron heart. Götz laughed when he heard that.

"Saint?" he roared one evening by the fire. "I'm as holy as a shit-filled latrine after the market! I bless no one. I loot, I beat, I devour. But at least I'm honest. Those up there call it taxes, I call it prices. Makes no difference—except that mine is cheaper."

His men laughed and toasted. Grete sharpened her knife, and the priest without God spat an "Amen" that was more of a mockery than a prayer.

With every village, with every town, with every damned merchant who trembled and held out his purse, the myth grew. And like all myths, it was contradictory: for some, an avenger, for others, a demon. But everyone knew one thing:

When someone said, "Berlichingen is coming," everything fell silent. Dogs howled, candles flickered, women held their children tighter.

And Götz, the adventurer, just grinned and took another sip.

The Birken Pass was a shithole. A narrow gorge between two hills, where the trees reached into the sky like bony fingers. By day, it smelled of wet wood and horse dung, at night, of sweat from fear. Every merchant knew: anyone who rode through here without an escort might as well feed their will to the ravens.

And that's exactly where the merchant who had hired Götz wanted to go. Three wagons loaded with cloth, salt, and something else he couldn't name. "Special," he stammered. Especially my ass, thought Götz as he led the convoy. The only thing that was special was the dirt you get when you're too greedy.

High up on the slope crouched the highwaymen. Twenty men, filthy mercenaries who had long since carried no banner except the one made of blood. They had the courage of vultures and the hunger of pigs.

"Here they come," hissed one, "the merchant and his dog." "That's no dog," muttered another. "That's Berlichingen." "Screw Berlichingen," grinned the leader, "he's bleeding red too."

They waited until the wagons reached the narrows. Then the tree trunks crashed onto the road, blocking their way back. A horn blew, the birds flew up, and the mercenaries leaped out like rats from a dung heap.

"Pay or die!" yelled the leader, a fat bastard with a sword that was more rust than steel.

Götz rode forward, slowly, his sword loose, his burned hand open. "Pay?" he growled. "Did you steal this from the church? That sounds like a sermon."

The bailiff stepped out of the shadows, a fat man with velvet on his shoulders and a face glistening with too much wine. "Berlichingen," he said, "in the name of the county, I demand your gold and your lives."

"In the name of my fist, I demand your silence," Götz replied – and before the bailiff could catch his breath, he struck him in the face with his burned hand. So hard that the velvet man fell backward, his teeth in the mud.

Then all hell broke loose. Jörg bellowed like an ox and swung his axe as if he wanted to cut down the entire forest. Veit jumped on an opponent, pulled him to the ground, bit his ear, and laughed as he rammed the blade in. Grete danced among the men, the knife flashing, slitting throats like old rags. Hansel Red climbed onto a wagon, jumped on an enemy's back, and both tumbled into the dirt.

A priest without God raised a cross that had long since ceased to be a blessing, muttering curses that sounded like prayers while silencing a wounded man with a dagger. Lenz stood like a shadow at the edge, every arrow from his bow finding a face, a heart, an eye. Marshal Klein cursed, organized, shouted orders, as if chaos were just another kind of order.

And Götz? Götz was chaos itself. He rode right into the thick of it, his sword singing, his burned hand gripping blades that should have split him in half. He screamed, cursed, laughed. Every blow was an insult, every slash a "Fuck you!" in irons.

The bailiff crawled in the mud, his face covered in blood. "Berlichingen!" he whimpered. "We can talk... negotiate..."

Götz grabbed him by the neck and pulled him up. "Talk?" He spat in his face. "You're the reason peasants starve and men have to steal. You're the plague in velvet."

He pulled him to a cart and tied him to the wheel. "And do you know how to turn such a fat bastard?" he asked loudly so everyone could hear. Then he grabbed the wheel and pushed it. The bailiff shrieked as bones cracked.

"That's how you turn it!" yelled Götz.

The men laughed, roared, and the wheel continued to turn until the bailiff was nothing but a sack full of broken limbs.

When it was over, the mercenaries lay like garbage in the ditch. The bailiff hung from the wheel, groaning, barely human. The wagons stood untouched, and the merchant, that rat-dog, trembled as if he himself were about to be killed.

"Special," growled Götz, opening the cart. Inside was no salt, no fabrics—just crates full of weapons. Halberds, crossbows, sword blades. Intended for some petty rebellion, or for some overly ambitious lord.

Götz grinned. "Particularly, yes. Particularly stupid."

He took two crates and left the rest. "Your goods will get through," he said to the merchant. "But you'll pay double. For the lie."

The man stammered, counting coins until his fingers were bloody.

That evening, they sat by the fire, their weapons next to the beer, the bailiff still at his wheel, slowly dying. Grete cleaned her knife, Jörg laughed, Lenz remained silent, Veit played with an ear he had torn off. Sigi stared into the fire, the priest muttered his blasphemies.

"That was our first adventure," said Götz, his voice full of smoke. "And this is just the beginning. From now on, they'll know that we're not dogs barking for the emperor. We're wolves. And wolves will kill whomever they want."

He raised his cup. "To us. To blood. To freedom!"

They drank, they roared, they laughed. And somewhere in the country, another rumor began: that Berlichingen had invented a wheel that wasn't for wagons—but for bailiffs.

The bailiff was still hanging on his wheel when the sun rose in the morning. His bones creaked with every gust of wind, the birds were already circling above him. The peasants who had come from the surrounding hamlets stared at him like a stuffed animal at a fair: half fear, half triumph. Some laughed, some crossed themselves, some spat in the dust.

Götz approached the pitiful heap and raised his chin. "Look at him! Your bailiff, your leech, your master. That's what they all look like when their silk is stripped off." An old man ventured: "And you, sir... are you better?" Götz laughed, harshly, loudly, so that the birds flew up. "No! I'm worse. But I'm honest about it."

The farmers murmured, but they nodded. They had seen enough lies.

His men had set up camp at the edge of the forest. Jörg was still drunk from the victory, belching blood and beer. Veit whistled a tune while rolling his ear between his fingers like a toy. Grete sat on a rock sharpening her knife, which was already sharper than any prayer. Lenz stretched bowstrings and tested arrows, silent as always. Sigi shivered as if freezing in the sun. Priest Without God delivered a sermon by the fire, cursing and blessing at the same time. Marshal Klein built a scaffold, as if he had to maintain order even in chaos.

That was the gang. No army, no army, no emperor. Just dirt, blood, and will.

The merchant cautiously entered the camp. He was pale, thin, as if he'd spent the night on the wheel instead of the bailiff. He held up a sack full of coins, trembling. "Two hundred... and twenty... that's all I have." "You're lying again,"

growled Götz, grabbed the sack, and threw it to Sigi. "Count. And when he lies, he loses more than coins."

Sigi counted, his hands shaking, but each coin clinked correctly. "Right," he murmured.

Götz approached the merchant, his burned hand on his shoulder, heavy as a millstone. "Remember: I am not an emperor, I am not a bailiff. I am Götz. If you lie to me, you die. If you pay, you live. Simple deal, isn't it?" The man nodded so vigorously that his neck cracked.

As they set off, the bailiff remained at the wheel. He was still alive, wheezing, begging. Grete approached Götz. "Should I rescue him?" "No," Götz said coldly. "Redemption is for saints. I'm not one."

They rode on, leaving the wheel behind, and the farmers would later tell stories of how the bailiff died for days until only bones remained. A monument that lasted longer than any stone.

On the street, as the sun rose high, Götz raised the jug and drank. The wine tasted of blood, of sweat, of freedom. He laughed, for the first time in weeks, but it was a laugh full of scorn.

"Now," he cried to his men, "we are free! Free from emperors, free from women, free from that damned word 'honor'! Our honor is the sword, our oath is the coin, and our freedom tastes of blood!"

The men roared, raising jugs, axes, knives, and arrows. Even Sigi screamed, hoarsely, as if it were the first time he'd ever lived.

And so it began. In every inn, at every market, in every pub, people whispered: "Berlichingen has let the bailiff die on the wheel. He takes what he wants, but he keeps his word. He is no lord, no farmer, no priest. He is an adventurer. He is a storm."

And Götz, high in the saddle, the sun on his scars, felt it: This was no longer a duty. No assignment, no command. This was his path. And he would pave it with blood until no one asked who he served.

The days after the Birken Pass smelled of blood, sweat, and cheap wine. They rode through villages where people ducked their heads as soon as the word Berlichingen was mentioned. Some whispered "savior," others "devil." In the

end, it didn't matter. Everyone understood that his name was now a law—one that was harsher and more honest than all the emperor's parchments.

In a river town, a clerk dared to bar his door. A skinny fellow with inky fingers and a nose that looked like a broken quill pen. "You cannot enter here," he squeaked, "the council has—"

Götz grabbed him with his burned hand, pulled him up like a wet sack, and pressed him against the wall. "Your advice can go to hell. My hand writes in blood. Read this!" Then he pressed him until the writer collapsed unconscious.

"From now on," Götz yelled to the crowd, "the law is simple: whoever is strong enough enforces it. Whoever is too weak keeps quiet. Period."

Jörg laughed himself silly, axe in hand. "Finally, a law I understand!" Grete cut a curious boy's belt just to show how quickly one loses. Veit stole a cup from a merchant's table and toasted him with it. The priest without God muttered, "The law of the strongest—the only one God could never break."

Lenz nodded curtly, testing the wind as if to confirm that even nature was on Götz's side.

In the evening, by the fire, Götz laid down the rules – not in parchment, not with a seal, but with his voice, which was sharper than iron:

1. **No beggar, no woman, no child is beaten.**
2. **Those who don't pay bleed. Those who pay live.**
3. **Whoever steals in the squad loses the hand.**
4. **Whoever lies in the squad loses his tongue.**
5. **And whoever betrays me wishes he had never been born.**

It wasn't a law, it was an oath, cast in fire and beer. And everyone nodded, even Sigi, who could barely breathe with fear.

But the next day came the test. A gang of seven mercenaries, starving and filthy, dared to challenge the troop on the open road. "We want to go through!" they shouted, "without toll, without customs!"

Götz rode forward, looking at them as if they were flies on a carcass. "Then fight. If you're stronger, the road will be yours."

They fought. It didn't last long. Two fell under Jörg's axe, one ran straight into Grete's knife, three died from Lenz's arrows, and Götz grabbed the last one himself, pulled him from his horse, and broke his neck with his burned hand.

"That's the way it is," he growled. "The law of the strongest. And today we are stronger."

The peasants watching from the fields murmured prayers. One said, "That's not a knight. That's a storm in the saddle."

And that's exactly what Götz was now: a storm. Without an emperor, without a master, without any rules except his own.

The weeks that followed were a constant frenzy of dust, beer, and blood. Every ride brought new stories, and each story made Götz greater than he was. A man of flesh and scars became a legend that spread across the land like a disease—sometimes fear, sometimes hope, sometimes both at once.

In a village on the edge of the empire, it was said that Berlichingen had come, devoured the bailiff's tax lists, and then nailed him to the pigpen. In one town, whispers said he had kidnapped the mayor's daughter—the truth was: she had come along of her own accord, eager for adventure rather than spending time at home in bed. In a monastery, the monks swore that he had forced the abbot to drink wine from the chalice until he vomited, saying, "Now you'll really get a taste of your god."

Half of it was a lie, the other half was exaggerated—but it didn't matter. Stories don't need truth, they need teeth.

His band became a teeming pack, growing larger every day. Men came of their own accord, lured by the stench of freedom: scarred mercenaries, runaway farmhands, a few peasants who had decided they'd rather ride for a devil than starve for an angel.

Marshal Klein despaired because every new arrival had a different weapon, a different dialect, and no grasp of order. "This isn't an army, this is a bunch of pigs!" he roared. Götz grinned. "Exactly. But a bunch of pigs with teeth."

Grete maintained discipline—with a knife, not words. Jörg made it clear to everyone that there was no shame in being afraid, as long as you struck anyway. Veit got the new recruits to drink and play dice to determine who was brave, who was cowardly, and who was simply stupid. Lenz never spoke, but everyone knew: whoever felt his arrow had done something wrong.

In the cities, people began to call protection money "robbery" rather than "Berlichingen Toll." Merchants paid, cursed, paid again—and lived. A few tried to do without, and they hung them on the city gate as a warning. Children threw stones at the corpses and learned early on that the world was not a fairy tale.

And yet: there were also these other stories. Of villages to whom Götz left the last sack of grain. Of widows he spared while others would have stripped them. Of a child who took Grete in her arms while the rest of the gang was still dripping with blood.

This made him unpredictable. And unpredictable was worse than evil.

One evening, as the moon hung richly over the hills, Götz sat by the fire, his sword across his knees. "Listen," he said. "The world calls us robbers, scoundrels, executioners. Let them. But they will also say: When Berlichingen comes, there will be order. His order."

"Our order," Jörg grumbled. "No," Götz corrected, grinning evilly, "mine. And as long as you follow me, you'll have your share. But if anyone thinks they can break my law, I'll put them on the wheel more than the bailiff."

Everyone nodded. Some laughed. No one doubted it.

And so the bond grew into a legend. Not through parchments, not through seals—but through fear, through songs around the fire, through rumors that rode faster than horses.

Sometimes at night, when the embers were already cold, Götz thought: Am I still a man or already a ghost? But then he reached for the sword, felt the weight, and he knew: Ghosts don't drink beer and don't fuck widows.

He was a man. But a man who had become a storm.

It wasn't a coronation with gold and incense. No bishops, no organs, no God interfering. Götz's coronation came on dusty streets, in taverns, in robbers' dens, in the curses of merchants and the prayers of peasants. His crown was the reputation that preceded him, dirty, loud, unbidden—and unmistakable.

In a village, somewhere between two hills, a woman came to him barefoot, her face scarred by life, her eyes filled with rage. "Berlichingen!" she cried. "They've taken my husband, the count's mercenaries, because he couldn't pay the taxes. He's hanging in the tower now!"

People stared, wondering if she had the courage to say too much. But Götz grinned and showed her burned hand. "Then we'll get him back down."

And he did it. Not because he felt pity. But because he knew: every act like this forged the legend even more firmly. Every liberation, every rebellion, made him greater than the emperor, because he relied not on seals, but on steel.

In a riverside town, a merchant approached him, sweating and pale. "Lord Berlichingen, please escort my party! I'll pay double, triple, anything!" Götz drained the wine and spat into his cup. "I'm not escorting a party. But I'm riding ahead of you, and everyone knows: whoever comes too close to me will lose more than silver." The merchant paid. He paid gladly.

There were nights when they sang. Not beautiful songs, not psalms. They sang of the wheel, of the bailiff, of the blood in the dust. They sang of Götz, who made a city surrender with a single glance. They sang of Grete, who slit a mercenary's throat while he was still laughing. They sang of Jörg, who chopped more wood with one hand than ten men combined.

And in the midst of all the noise, Götz sat, drinking, laughing, cursing. But deep down, he knew: This wasn't a gang anymore. This was a myth on legs.

Once, a young lad came, barely a beard on his face, trembling, his sword too heavy for his arms. "Lord Götz," he stammered, "I want to ride with you." "Why?" asked Götz. "Because... because you are free." Götz placed his burned hand on his shoulder, heavy as a judgment. "Free means that no one protects you. Free means that you die every day—and sometimes wake up again. Free means that you have no home but the blade." The boy nodded, fear dripping from his forehead. "Then ride," said Götz. "But if you fall, you fall for yourself, not for me."

And so it came to be that people no longer just called him "Berlichingen." They called him the adventurer, the free knight, the storm in the saddle. Some called him a robber chief, others a savior. But everyone spoke of him, everywhere, in taverns, at markets, in churches.

He had no throne, but he ruled. Not over countries, but over the minds of men. His crown was fear. His scepter was an iron hand. His realm was the streets and forests where no emperor could show his face.

One evening, drunk, his head full of blood and beer, he raised his mug. "Look at me!" he yelled to his men. "I am no king, no duke, no emperor! But the world speaks my name louder than theirs. And this is my damned coronation!"

They toasted, laughed, and roared. And the fire spat sparks into the night as if it were applauding.

The fire of Landshut

The messenger arrived in the rain, a scrawny skeleton on a horse that already smelled dead. He stank of fear and cheap beer, and his words dripped from him like shit from a leaky barrel. "Landshut... is burning! War! Every man is needed! Whoever rides gets gold, loot, women, everything!"

Götz sat by the fire, his burned hand on the mug, and laughed. An ugly, hoarse laugh that made the messenger shrink. "Everything, you say? You have nothing but smoke and hunger. But smoke makes names. Hunger makes men vicious. Very well." He tipped the rest of the beer into the mud. "We're riding."

The men reacted like wolves being handed fresh meat. Jörg jumped up, axe in hand. "Finally, a real war again, not some stupid tariff dispute!" Grete grinned, the knife flashing. "Cities burn better than forests." Veit raised a toast: "Gold, women, beer – finally, some honest booty!" Sigi shivered, muttering: "A burning city... no one survives." Priest without God raised his cross, which had long since become nothing more than an iron hook. "Amen," he said. "An amen for all who perish." And Lenz remained silent, pulling the bowstring tighter, as if he could already see the smoke.

The road to Landshut was a hellish ride. Everywhere there were villages that had already been plundered, fields trampled, corpses hanging from trees, children with empty eyes. The war had no sides—only mouths that devoured everything.

A farmer lay in the dirt, his stomach ripped open, still alive. "Help... me..." he wheezed. Götz didn't even dismount. "Help yourself," he growled. "If you make it to Landshut, you'll get another blow for good measure."

His men laughed, but not all of them. Sigi choked as if he were going to vomit. Grete put her hand on his shoulder. "Get used to it. War is an open grave, and everyone falls into it sooner or later."

On the third day, they saw the smoke. Black, thick, like a fist piercing the sky. Bells rang, not in prayer, but in a cry. Landshut was no longer a city—Landshut was a pyre with walls.

People fled through the streets, carts full of belongings, women with children in their arms, men with pitchforks who looked as if they were about to stab giants. Everyone screamed, everyone ran.

And in the middle rode Götz. Upright, grinning, his burned hand on his sword. "Up ahead, you dogs," he roared, "up ahead, our feast awaits!"

A boy, barely thirteen, stopped him. "Sir Knight, help us! They're burning everything! They're killing everyone!" Götz looked at him for a moment. Then he placed his hand on his head. "Learn, boy. Either you eat or you'll be eaten. Today you'll be eaten."

The boy cried, and Götz rode on.

As they reached the outskirts of the city, they heard it: the screams of women, the crashing of beams, the clanging of iron on iron. Landshut was a single scream. Flames licked at the roofs, sparks flew like curses, and the air stank of burnt flesh.

Jörg raised the axe. "Finally!" Veit laughed and drew the blade. "Now it's time for a celebration!" Grete sharpened the blade on the stone. "Let's dance." Pfaffe murmured an "Amen" that sounded like a mocking song. And Götz? He grinned. A cold, hungry grin. "Come on, you bastards. Welcome to the fire of Landshut."

Landshut was no longer a place; it was a battlefield disguised as a city. Roofs were ablaze, walls were crumbling, and the streets were filled with a single noise: the screams of the dying, the clanging of iron, the bellows of men who thought they could scream at death until it yielded.

The smoke stung the eyes and burned the lungs. Horses shied, screaming like people. Bodies were everywhere, some still warm, others already reduced to ash. Houses collapsed, and the streets were so narrow that one hardly knew whether one was fighting the enemy, the flames, or one's own fate.

Götz rode into the middle of it. His burned hand on his sword, his face black with soot, his eyes like coals. "Forward, you dogs!" he roared. "If you want something, take it! If you hate something, burn it!"

Jörg was the first to respond: He hacked a man in two with his axe, his body bursting like a sack of cabbage. Veit leaped through a doorway, stole a drinking horn, and in the same breath stabbed the master of the house. Grete grinned, slit an opponent's throat, and danced through the stream of blood as if it were a rainbow.

A priest without God shouted psalms, but every "Our Father" ended with "Fuck you all!" – and his dagger found throats that prayed more silently. Lenz stood at the end of the alley, arrows flying, striking eyes, mouths, hearts. Marshal Klein tried to shout order into the chaos, but the chaos just laughed.

And Sigi? Sigi shook, trembled, stabbed, blind, but he survived. Always. Like a dog that doesn't want to die.

The citizens fought. Men with pitchforks, women with stones, even children who screamed and bit. But it was no use. Against steel, against flames, against madness, no resistance was great enough.

A woman rushed before Götz, her dress half-burned, her child in her arms. "Please! Have mercy!" Götz looked at her. He was silent for a moment. Then he ripped the child from her arms and pressed it into Grete's hands. "Take it out if you want." And to the woman he said: "There's mercy in churches. Here, there's only fire."

The woman screamed and threw herself at him. He pushed her away. She fell into the flames, her scream mingling with the crash of the burning beam.

Looting was the second battle. Men dragged chests from houses, carried sacks, and stole jewelry directly from corpses. Gold, silver, wine, furs—everything changed hands, everything smelled of smoke.

A merchant was dragged before Götz, his face covered in blood, his hands full of coins. "Take everything! But let me live!" Götz spat in his face. "Life costs more." And with a single blow, Jörg drove him into the ground.

But there were also moments that burned differently. A boy, barely older than Hansel Red, stood in front of his house with a rusty sword. His knees trembled, but he didn't back down. Götz stopped and looked at him. "Go away, boy." "No!" cried the boy. "This is my house!" "Then die in your house," growled Götz – and rode on. He left the boy standing there. He knew: the war would take him anyway, sooner or later.

Wherever he rode, he left fire and screams in his wake. And yet, deep down, he knew: This was the stuff his name was forged from. No seal, no crest, no prayer could top it. A man who rode through burning cities as if it were a jousting field—that was a legend that never died.

As night fell over Landshut, the city was no longer a city. It was a pyre, a grave, a memorial. The sky was red, the ground black. And in the middle of it all stood Götz, sword in one hand, burned hand in the other, laughing hoarsely as the smoke slashed his throat.

“Look,” he yelled, “this is war! This is freedom! Everything else is a lie!”

And the flames responded by devouring the city.

Landshut was no longer a battle; it was a massacre with organ music, bells, screams, and splintering wood. The war had dropped all masks, and what remained was a bare, stinking abyss.

Alleys filled with blood. Women screaming because they had lost children. Men screaming because they had lost their entrails. Children who were no longer screaming, but simply standing silently in the smoke, like forgotten dolls.

Jörg raged with his axe, foaming as if he were fire himself. “More! More!” he roared as he sliced an enemy in half as if splitting firewood. Veit had found a jug of wine and drank while looting, occasionally stabbing anyone who got in his way. Grete tore apart everything that moved with her knife—and didn't let go of the child in her arms, which she had grabbed during the first attack. A disgusting contrast: blood on her right hand, cradled comfort in her left.

A priest without God stood on the steps of a burning church, his cross raised, and preached: “Behold, your Lord is weaker than fire! Your faith is ashes! Only blood remains true!” Then he stabbed the altar boy who knelt before him and spat into the baptismal font.

Götz himself fought his way through an alley where citizens with pitchforks offered resistance. The first fell, the fork broke, and the iron pierced his chest. The second backed away, stumbled into the fire, and burned alive. The third—an old man, his hands covered in soot—threw stones. Götz kicked him in the face, causing his skull to burst open against the wall like rotten fruit.

A girl screamed and threw herself on the dead man. “Father! Father!” Götz paused. Only a heartbeat. Then he turned away. “Screw it,” he muttered, “war doesn't care about daughters.”

The cruelty had no goal, no direction. Men dragged women into the dust while houses burned behind them. Children were trampled by horses because no one was holding the reins. Old people were pushed out of windows because they blocked space for loot.

And yet—that was the damned truth: everyone was grinning. Everyone who didn't die felt alive for that moment. War was a feast for beasts.

Götz yelled at his men. "Get out of this mess! We'll take what we need—gold, wine, weapons! But no useless meat! We're robbers, not animals!"

Jörg spat blood and laughed. "We're both!" Grete glared at him. "Be glad he said so. Otherwise, I would have castrated you long ago."

A merchant was dragged before Götz, his face burned, his hands full of gold rings. "Please! Please, take this, but leave my daughter alone!" Götz grabbed him, ripped the rings from his fingers. "Your daughter? She belongs to the fire now." And he pushed him into the flames. The scream burned longer than the body.

As the night deepened, the city lay like a carcass, being eaten away from all sides. No house was without smoke, no square without corpses, no hour without screams.

Götz stood in the middle of the market square, his sword red, his face black, his burned hand throbbing. He grinned, ugly, angry, full of life.

"This is war," he yelled into the smoke. "This is what it looks like, this is what it stinks like, this is what it screams like! And anyone who says otherwise is lying to themselves!"

The streets of Landshut were narrow, like a maw swallowing all living things. Smoke devoured the sky, flames licked at windows, and the pavement was so slippery with blood that horses stumbled and men slipped in their own carnage. This was no battlefield—it was a labyrinth built of rubble, fire, and corpses.

Götz rode ahead until the horse shied. He jumped off, grabbed his sword, his burned hand throbbing like a second sun. "On foot, you dogs! Here we fight like wolves in a den!"

And they followed him. Jörg, who used his axe to smash a door behind which citizens had barricaded themselves – the wood splintered, the screams behind

it louder than the crashing. Veit plunged like a madman into the darkness, stabbing blindly, laughing as he waded through blood. Grete leaped over a barricade, her knife flashing, and she slit throats as effortlessly as if they were old ropes.

A priest without God stomped through the middle of the alley, his cross raised, muttering, "This is my body, this is my blood," as he plunged dagger after dagger into bellies. Lenz stood atop a balcony, shooting arrows through smoke and flames, each hit a death cry. Marshal Klein pushed barrels across the street, creating cover, organizing like a master builder of chaos.

Enemies? Everywhere. Mercenaries in rusty iron, citizens with spears, lads with clubs. One jumped at Götz, trying to wrest his sword from him. Götz roared, grabbed him by the face with his burned hand, and squeezed – until his skull cracked like an old jug. He dropped the corpse as if it were trash.

Another came with a halberd. Götz ducked, slashed, and the man fell screaming into the dirt with his arm half severed. "Too slow, bastard!" Götz roared and kicked in the rest of his head.

The streets were a slaughterhouse. Horses screamed as they ran into flames. Women screamed as they were dragged. Men roared as they died. And Götz stood in the middle of it all, laughing, cursing, fighting. Every blow of his sword was a judgment, every kick of his boots a gallows.

A barely armed citizen dared to attack him with a pitchfork. Götz grabbed him and hurled him against a burning wall. "You want to fight? Fight with fire!" The man screamed until the smoke suffocated him.

Suddenly, a squad of heavy mercenaries burst through a side street, shields up, spears forward. Discipline, order, like a small wall in the chaos. Jörg roared, Veit cursed, Sigi almost shrieked.

"Forward!" yelled Götz, running straight into the spears. One pierced his coat, grazing flesh. He grinned, gritted his teeth, and struck so hard that the first shield shattered like glass.

Then it was a constant battle. Jörg hacked from above, Veit leaped between the ranks like a dog, Grete cut the men's tendons. Lenz shot arrows into their backs, Priest shouted curses, Sigi stabbed indiscriminately and survived – again.

In the end, the mercenaries lay like scrap on the pavement, and Götz stood over them, his sword dripping. "This is how order dies!" he roared. "This is how chaos lives!"

He felt the burning in his chest, the throbbing in his burned hand. But he grinned. He knew: Here, in these narrow alleys, in this fire, his name was finally forged. Not at court, not in churches, not in the service of an emperor – here, where blood stained the streets red.

The flames continued to creep. The bells rang as if greeting hell itself. And Götz, in the midst of the inferno, raised his sword and shouted: "Landshut! You are my baptismal certificate! Born in fire, loved in fire—feared in fire!"

The next morning, Landshut was no longer a town, but a burned scar. Houses were mere skeletons, the ground steamed as if it were sweating blood. Bodies lay everywhere, some reduced to ash, some still warm, and dogs roamed among them, greedily tearing at them.

The bells were silent now. Only the smoke spoke—heavy, black, stinking. And in that smoke stood Götz von Berlichingen, sword in hand, his burned fist clenched, and knew: He was no longer just a man. He was a curse, a brand that everyone in the empire would know.

His gang gathered around him, each one marked by the inferno. Jörg was still laughing, his axe bloody up to the hilt. "By God, that was a celebration!" "By what God?" mocked the priest without a God, his hands red, his cross black. "Your God burns within these walls." Grete wiped the blood from her knife and the child from her forehead. "Cities scream more beautifully than men." Veit held a jug in his hand, drank, and boasted: "If the emperor himself comes, I'll send him back into the smoke." Lenz remained silent, as always, but the embers reflected in his eyes, as if he himself had become a shadow of the fire. Sigi stood there, his face gray, his lips trembling. "That... no one survives that..." "We," growled Götz, "we always survive."

The citizens who had survived crawled out of cellars, from ruins, from holes in the ground. They saw Götz, some with hatred, some with fear, some with that strange mixture of both that one only feels toward a man who stands above one like destiny.

A woman dared to shout: "Berlichingen! You are worse than those who besieged us!" Götz laughed hoarsely. "No. I'm more honest. I say I'll take—and I'll take. Your princes say they're protecting you—and they take anyway."

The crowd was silent. He was right, and that made him even more terrifying.

As he and his band rode out of the city, houses were still burning behind them. Sparks danced, smoke billowed, and in the distance, it looked as if the sky itself had a burn.

"Landshut," murmured Götz, "you will never forget me. And I will always carry you with me." He raised his burned hand and clenched it into a fist. "This is my second brand. You burned the first into my flesh. This one into my heart."

In the streets, people were already talking, while the smoke still hung in their clothes:

- "He was like a devil in fire."
- "No, he was like a judge with a sword."
- "He brought death, but also order."
- "He took, but he kept his word."

Everyone talked, everyone cursed, everyone swore. And the name Berlichingen now burned brighter than the town itself.

That evening, as they camped by the river, Götz raised his cup. "To Landshut!" he roared. "They thought they were burning the city—but they've set my name ablaze! From now on, everyone knows me. Friend, foe, emperor, peasant. I am the fire that never goes out."

The gang toasted, roared, and laughed. And the fire on the riverbank was reflected in his eyes.

As the sun rose again, Landshut looked like a corpse that even the ravens had gorged themselves on. Roofs continued to collapse, beams smoked, and the river washed away charred bodies, as if trying to wash away the shame. But shame doesn't wash away. It sticks.

Götz rode slowly through the ruins, his sword on his saddle, his burned hand clenched on the hilt. Children crouched in the rubble, women searched for men, men for bread. Everyone stared at him. Not a word, just those looks filled with fear and hatred and that sickening glint: respect.

"Look at me well," he roared, his voice as rough as iron on stone. "I am no emperor, no duke, no priest. I am your new god, and my altar is fire. You wanted power—now you have it. My name will remain when your walls are dust."

No one answered. They ducked their heads as if they were facing a storm.

His gang plundered the last remnants. Jörg lugged a barrel of wine, tore it open, and drank until his beard dripped. "Tastes like burnt grapes—but still better than water!" Veit found a ring on a charred hand, laughed, pulled it off, and slipped it on his own hand. "Gold doesn't rust. And neither do I." Grete wasn't looking for jewelry, but for knife steel. "This," she said, pulling a blade from the soot, "is more honest than coins."

A priest without God delivered a sermon over the rubble. "Here lies your heaven. Ashes. Here lies your faith. Iron. Here lies your soul. Burned." Sigi crouched next to a corpse so small that no one knew whether it was a child or a dwarf. He wept quietly, but no one listened.

Lenz stood aside, his bow over his shoulder, silently staring into the smoke as if he wanted to count every flame.

Then Götz grabbed the merchant who had hired them. The man was pale, his face sweating, his hands shaking, but his pockets were full of silver. "You wanted to get your goods through," Götz growled. "The city is ashes, but your chests are intact. Pay up."

"But... I have..." "Pay!"

The merchant counted, his hands bloody from the coins, and Götz took each one, letting it ring in the dust. "That's what freedom sounds like," he murmured. "Blood and iron. Nothing else remains."

In the evening, once they had left the outskirts of the city behind them, Götz sat by the fire. The sky was red, but not from the sunset—from the embers still rising from the city.

He raised his burned hand and held it up to the light. "I now have two burns," he said. "One in my fist, one in my name. And both will never fade."

The men nodded. They knew: Landshut was more than a victory. It was a mark. A mark that couldn't be washed away—neither by blood, nor by rain, nor by the emperor himself.

This is how Landshut ended: not with bells, not with prayers, not with salvation. It ended with ash and iron. And with a name that weighed more heavily than any castle: Götz von Berlichingen.

Landshut still burned in the nights that followed, and with every gust of wind, the smoke carried not only ash but also stories across the land. It was as if heaven itself had spread the word: Berlichingen had arrived—and it left only fire in its wake.

In the villages, people whispered: "Did you hear? He beat the bailiff to the wheel."

"No, he ate an entire city." "He burned it—with his bare hands!"

The lies grew like mushrooms on shit. But they made him bigger than he was. No priest, no duke, no emperor could dispel this legend. Everyone who survived Landshut carried the curse, whether they wanted to or not.

The princes cursed. Letters were written, seals were pressed, complaints were filed. "This Berlichingen is a plague! A dog who rebels against order!" But even in their curses lay fear. For they knew: Such dogs don't just bite—they tear down entire walls.

The emperor himself heard about it. "A knight who sets cities on fire as if they were farms?" He snorted, remained silent, and put the matter aside. For an emperor has many enemies—and sometimes a dog like Götz is more useful alive than dead.

For the peasants, he was no longer an imperial dog, but a kind of demon with his own code. Some called him a savior because he slew bailiffs. Others called him a devil because he showed no compassion. But everyone knew: When Berlichingen comes, something will happen. No village, no town, no man will be left unharmed.

Within the gang itself, Landshut lingered like an aftertaste that was too strong. Jörg swore he'd never smelled so much blood. Veit boasted he'd taken more loot than in an entire year of war. Grete said nothing, but her eyes gleamed when she thought of the flames. Priest Without a God murmured that Landshut was true proof that heaven and hell were one and the same place.

And Götz? He was mostly silent. But when he spoke, his words were iron. "Landshut wasn't a victory. It was a sign. They won't just fear me anymore—they'll expect me. And when I come, they'll know: The fire will ride with me."

One evening, around the campfire, he toasted his band. "We have sown," he said, "not grain, not wine, not peace. We have sown fire. And now comes the harvest. And the harvest is called blood."

The men roared, clinked glasses, and laughed. But somewhere, deep in the smoke, an echo lurked. It didn't sound like laughter. It sounded like thunder. As if the world itself had decided: What you sow will eventually devour you.

Landshut didn't simply remain a city in flames. A shadow remained, hanging over everything. Götz later appeared in. Whoever saw him saw smoke. Whoever heard his name smelled burnt wood. Landshut wasn't a thing of the past—it was a brand that followed him wherever he rode.

Weeks later, in a village far from the Isar River, an old farmer was standing by the well when Götz and his band rode in. The man trembled, dropped the bucket, and the water spilled. "Lord... Berlichingen," he stammered, "you bring us... fire?"

Götz grinned crookedly. "Only if you force me."

And that was it: He no longer needed to threaten. Landshut threatened for him. Every farmer, every merchant, every councilor saw the burning city in his eyes, heard the bells, smelled the ashes. He needed no banner, no sermon. Landshut was his coat of arms.

For the princes, he was a stigma. Some wanted him dead, others whispered that he should be kept on a long leash, like a dog tearing the right throats. But whether they hated him or wanted to use him, Landshut was proof: Götz was more than a simple knight. He was an event.

In the gang, the memory burned deeper than any fire. Years later, Jörg raved about the heat, the blood, the intoxication. Veit boasted that he had killed ten men and kissed twenty women that night – no one believed him, but everyone laughed. Grete sharpened her knife and simply said, "Cities scream louder than villages." The priest without God declared Landshut the only real sermon of his life. Sigi remained silent, trembling every time he saw smoke.

And Lenz? He looked Götz in the eyes, and they both knew: Landshut had changed them all, but him most of all.

One night, drunk, the embers still in his bones, Götz said: "I have two hands. One burned, one bloody. And both bear the name Landshut. When I die, they should write on my stone: He brought fire, and he took it with him."

So Landshut didn't end with bells, prayers, or punishments. It ended with a legend. A legend of fire, iron, and a name that from now on no longer meant just knight, but storm.

Götz von Berlichingen – the man with the hand that burned and with the heart that was finally hardened in Landshut.

Blood and iron

The city had long since crumbled to ash, but its cry echoed throughout the empire for weeks afterward. Landshut wasn't just burning within its walls; it was burning within its minds. Every farmer, every merchant, every damned councilman had heard something—and everyone told it differently.

"Berlichingen grilled the bailiff in the fire." "No, he set fire to houses himself with his burned hand." "He came with demons, with wolves, with devils." "He rode through the flames and laughed."

The stories grew like weeds, and the more they were lies, the harder they pinned his name.

In a tavern, a merchant swore: "I saw him! His hand glowed like iron, and people burned before him without him touching them." A farmer objected: "Nonsense. He only has one sword—but he swings it so that death itself recoils before him." A mercenary grinned: "No matter how. Anyone who hears Berlichingen had better shit their pants before drawing their sword."

And at the end they clinked glasses and laughed, but their eyes betrayed: they believed every word.

The princes raged. Sealed letters flew back and forth. "This robber baron must be stopped!" cried one. "He is disgracing the realm!" screamed another. But behind closed doors, they whispered: "Perhaps we need him. A dog, yes—but a dog that will bite if set on the enemy."

The emperor remained silent. And silence is worse than a command. Silence means he's observing. Silence means he's waiting until the dog grows too big—or too useful.

In the villages, where the earth still smelled of smoke, people made the sign of the cross at the sound of his name. Some prayed that he would come and kill their bailiff. Others prayed that he would stay away so their children wouldn't end up in the fire.

But everyone knew: Berlichingen was no longer a knight – he was a storm.

And Götz himself? He heard the rumors, the whispers, the lies that made him bigger than he was. And he grinned. "Let them talk," he growled. "Words are like smoke – they suffocate. But my name burns."

He raised his burned hand and clenched it into a fist. "Landshut wasn't my end. It was my beginning. And every bastard in the empire will know it."

The gang grew like a stinking clump of weeds. They came to Landshut from everywhere: drunken mercenaries, runaway servants, peasants with more anger than bread, even a few noble sons who preferred blood to Latin. Everyone wanted to become part of the legend that crept through the empire like smoke.

But the more they grew, the more chaos engulfed them. One stole another's cup, one took a wife intended for another, and soon the camp was more of a mess than an army.

Götz watched this for three days. On the fourth, he drew his sword.

A mercenary, as fat as a barrel, had stolen a boy's purse. Götz grabbed him by the collar and pulled him in front of the gang. "Did you steal?" The man grinned filthy and spat at his feet. "So what?"

The next thing he felt was Götz's sword in his stomach. No grand speech, no trial. A thrust, blood, dust. The man sank into the dirt, gasping.

Götz wiped the blade on his shirt. "That's my law," he growled. "No one steals from their own pack here. Anyone who tries will eat steel."

In the evening he set the rules, shouting them into the crowd, which was quieter than a cemetery:

- 1. Anyone who steals in a squad loses their life.**
- 2. Anyone who disobeys the order will be broken.**
- 3. Anyone who deserts is hunted like a dog.**
- 4. Anyone who drags the name Berlichingen through the mud wishes they had never been born.**

"And if you don't believe it," he added, "ask the bastard in the ditch."

Jörg grinned broadly. "Finally, order, the way I love it." Grete nodded, the knife on her knee. "Blood is the best writing." The priest without God muttered, "Amen—and fuck grace." Veit raised a toast: "Laws I even understand. Cheers!" Sigi trembled, but he raised his hand as if about to swear.

And Lenz? He remained silent, but his expression said: This is what keeps them together.

From then on, the gang ran more tightly. No more quarrels over loot, no more bickering over women. Everyone knew: Götz held them not with parchment, not with prayers, but with blood and iron.

And the legend continued to grow, not only in the cities, but also within his own camp: Berlichingen is not a master – he is the law.

It was inevitable. The greater the reputation, the faster the envious people crawled – and the enemies. One of them was Count von Hohenfels, a pompous rooster with too many coats of arms and too little sense. He had land and peasants, whom he squeezed dry like old sponges, and he was fed up with people talking more about Berlichingen than about him.

"A robber baron!" he spat in the hall as the candles flickered. "A bastard who thinks he can taunt the realm! On my streets, in my forests! I will break him, or I die trying!"

His knights nodded, cowardly dogs who always nodded when their lord barked. But their eyes betrayed: They feared Götz more than they respected their lord.

The first blow came cowardly. An ambush in the forest. Ten men, spears, shields, on the count's orders. They thought they could surprise Götz in his sleep.

Wrong thought.

As they stormed the camp, Jörg was already roaring, hacking two of them to pieces before they even knew what was happening. Veit laughed, jumped on their backs, and Grete cut throats like bread. Pfaffe shouted "Amen!" and plunged his cross into a neck like a dagger. Lenz's arrows found eyes in the darkness.

And Götz? He stood in the middle of it all, bareheaded, devoid of all mercy, a sword in one hand, a hand burned like iron in the other. "Hohenfels sends dogs!" he roared. "Then they'll die like dogs!"

In the end, eight lay dead, two fled – and Götz let them go. "Go," he growled, "and tell your master: I'm coming. And when I come, I'll bring fire with me."

The news arrived. Hohenfels foamed at the mouth and slammed his cup against the wall. "He mocks me! That bastard dares to challenge me!" But in the hall, the servants murmured: "Perhaps we should leave him alone... Berlichingen is burning cities." "Cowards!" roared the count. "We'll defeat him on the plain, openly, man to man!"

And Götz? He laughed when he heard it. "Open?" he growled. "He wants battle order? Let him have it—but I'll bring my own rules."

He rode off, the band at his back, the fire in his sight. No seals, no banners, no god, no emperor. Only blood and iron.

The sun was high when Götz and his band encountered the count's men. There was no large army, just a scraped-together band of farmhands, a few poorly paid mercenaries, and a few knights in shining iron, more concerned with their hair than their swords. Hohenfels himself rode in front, his coat of arms fluttering like a colorful rag in the wind.

"Berlichingen!" he roared across the plain. "You are a traitor to the empire, a thief, a robber baron! In the name of honor and order, I challenge you!"

Götz laughed hoarsely, so loudly that even the horses shied. "Honor? Order? Screw both! Your kingdom is a dung heap, your honor a piece of parchment. And I'm the one who'll show you what law truly means."

He rode forward, his burned hand open, his sword loosely grasped in his fist. "Judgment!" he roared. "Not in halls, not with parchment, not with bishops. My judgment is the sword. And my sentence is iron!"

The count's men hesitated, murmured, some even lowered their lances. For they had heard what was happening in Landshut, and they knew: whoever rode against Berlichingen often rode only once.

Then there was a crash. Jörg roared, the axe swung, splitting shields and skulls. Veit ran like a madman, stabbing, laughing, cursing. Grete leaped from horse to horse, cutting straps, slitting throats. Priest shouted psalms that sounded like curses, and Lenz's arrows flew, finding gaps in the iron. Sigi, pale as death, stabbed, stumbled, survived.

And Götz? He was looking for only one person: Hohenfels.

The count rode like a peacock, his sword raised, his voice loud. "Berlichingen! Your end!" "My beginning," growled Götz, ramming his sword into his shield. Iron screeched, horses screamed, men roared. Hohenfels struck back, hard, but Götz caught the blow with his burned hand. The steel cut into his flesh, but it held.

"Your judgment, bastard!" gasped the count. "My judgment," roared Götz – and slashed his sword across his face. Blood spurted, his helmet flew, and the count fell from his horse like a sack.

Silence, for only a heartbeat. Then the count's men screamed, fled, threw shields and spears, and ran like hares before a wolf.

Götz stepped beside the twitching Hohenfels, grabbed him by the hair, and jerked his head up. "Look!" he roared. "That's law! No seal, no emperor, no god—only blood and iron! Whoever stands against me stands against the only law that matters!"

He pushed his head into the dust and left it there like garbage.

The men of his gang laughed, roared, and clinked their mugs together. But the peasants who had watched told a different story. They said that Götz himself had executed the man—that he was judge, executioner, and devil all in one.

And so the judgment of the sword was born.

After Hohenfels, nothing was the same. His head lay in the dust, but his blood painted an image greater than himself: an image that became a symbol. The peasants who saw it later swore that they had recognized the red puddle as the image of a fist—a fist made of iron.

In the villages, people began to whisper: "Berlichingen needs no coat of arms—its emblem is the blood on the streets." "Its symbol is the fist, burned and strong." "Its seal is iron, its parchment the belly of its enemies."

It didn't matter whether someone had made it up or not. The stories spread across the country faster than any messenger.

One evening they sat by the fire. Jörg chopped wood, Grete sharpened the knife, Veit drank, the priest murmured "Amen" over the last dead man, Sigi trembled, and Lenz stared silently into the flames.

Then Götz said: "My father had a lion in his coat of arms. Others have eagles, deer, crosses. All bullshit. I don't need a lion. I don't need a crown. I don't need wings."

He raised his burned hand, clenched it into a fist, the flesh dark, the veins like iron. "This is my coat of arms. The fist. Blood and iron. Whoever sees it knows: There is no negotiation, only blow or death."

The men toasted, laughed, and roared. "The fist!" cried Jörg. "The fist!" shrieked Veit. Grete grinned. "Finally, a coat of arms that suits me." Priest raised the cross. "A fist strikes harder than any god." And Sigi whispered, "Yes... a fist..."

Lenz remained silent, but he drew lines in the ground with his blade: a fist, raw, crude, but clear. The new coat of arms.

From then on, it was everywhere. Carved into the doors they smashed. Carved into the trees from which enemies hung. Carved into the walls they stormed. No lion, no eagle—just a fist. Everyone knew: Wherever it appeared, there would be blood.

And Götz laughed. "Let the princes paint with ink. I paint with iron. My coat of arms doesn't rust."

After Hohenfels and Landshut, there was no longer any doubt: Götz was not a knight among knights. He was a force of nature. A name that traveled faster than any messenger, struck harder than any spear, and burned deeper in the flesh than any sword.

In the cities, his name was murmured like a curse. Children fell silent when their mothers said, "Berlichingen is coming!" Merchants paid their tolls double, just so no one would think they had the courage to say no. And even the priests who ranted from the pulpits sometimes stammered when they condemned him as the devil.

But worst of all, some priests also began to interpret him as an instrument of God—a black angel who judges the corrupt. The Church couldn't decide: demon or sword of God.

Götz heard this and laughed, harshly and contemptuously. "God? If I'm God's instrument, then God is a drunkard with a rusty axe. No—I'm my own instrument. Blood is my baptismal water, iron is my prayer."

His gang had long known: They were no longer riding just for coins. They were riding for a name. For the fist, for fire, for the legend. Jörg grinned bloodily: "We are more than men—we are a storm troop of destiny." Grete nodded coolly: "Whoever sees us sees the end." Priest cursed: "Amen to that." Veit toasted: "To blood and iron!" Sigi trembled, but he raised his knife. Even he wanted to be part of it.

And Lenz? He remained silent, as always, but when he carved arrows, he carved little fists into the shafts. That was his confession.

Thus, the name Berlichingen became not just a curse, not just a reputation. It became a legacy that grew even during his lifetime. Farmers said he was immortal. Merchants swore he could set cities on fire with a glance. Enemies whispered that he would always return, no matter how many times he was overthrown.

And Götz himself? He knew it: "I'm no longer a man. I'm blood and iron. And that doesn't rust."

The amputation

The sky was gray as a damned shroud, and the air stank of gunpowder and fear. Not a heroic battlefield, not a smooth tournament, but a stinking, muddy field, saturated with blood and horse shit. The very place where legends are either born or perish.

Götz rode in front, his burned fist on the reins, his sword loosely in his right hand. Behind him, the pack, yelling, cursing, ready to devour anything that moved. Jörg was already swinging his axe before he even saw an opponent. Veit drank in the saddle, spat out the wine, and laughed as if this were some fucking fair. Grete chewed on a piece of leather, her knife on her thigh. Priest Without a God muttered his mocking psalm: "This is my body, this is my blood—and soon yours too." Lenz tested the string, cold as ever. Sigi trembled, but he stayed in the saddle.

And then it happened.

The enemy wasn't many, but they had cannons. Not the big fortress things, but those damned arquebuses, peasant weapons that made more noise than honor. But noise is enough when the lead flies fast.

The first shot ripped a horse's throat out. The animal fell, the rider screamed, and was crushed by the hooves of those following behind. Blood sprayed like rain. A second shot pierced a man's breastplate, and he toppled over as if someone had pulled the soul out of his ass.

And then it happened to Götz.

A bang, dull and ugly. A blow like a blacksmith's hammer. The bullet tore his right hand to pieces. Not just a finger, not just a cut—the entire damned hand exploded in blood, bone, and shreds of flesh. Pieces of his fingers stuck to the reins, the rest fell into the mud.

Götz roared. Not a human scream, but an animal sound, raw, brutal, so loud that even the horses retreated. The sword fell, and with it, a piece of himself fell.

He toppled from the saddle, hitting the dirt hard. Blood spurted, splashed, and sprayed. His burned hand tried to hold the wound, but it was useless, weak.

"Götz!" Grete screamed, leaping from her horse, knife thrown away, her hands covered in blood. "Shit, that hand!" Jörg bellowed like an angry bull, hacking down anyone who came near. "No one can get to him! No one!" Veit laughed hysterically, lashing out. "He's still alive! He's still alive, damn it!" Priest Without a God knelt down, pressing his cross to the wound. "In the name of nothingness—hold on, bastard!" Sigi stood rigid, his face white, trembling like a leaf. "He's dying... he's dying..." Lenz drew his bow, shooting anyone who came too close in the face. Silently. Mercilessly.

Götz lay in blood, his face contorted, his eyes filled with rage. "My hand!" he yelled, "my damn hand!" Grete pressed cloth over the gaping wound, but the blood flowed through like water through a sieve. "We have to get out!" she screamed. "Out? Fuck out!" Götz gasped, blood in his mouth. "Kill them all! Every bastard who breathes here, dies!"

He tried to get up, stumbled, and fell again. His gaze flickered, but he was still there, still that dog, still wanting to bite even as he died.

The gang fought like madmen. Jörg hacked until he was covered in blood. Grete held Götz, shouting orders. Veit jumped like a madman. Pfaffe cursed, Lenz killed, Sigi wept—but they held their ground.

And in the midst of all the chaos, all the stench, all the blood lay Götz von Berlichingen – his right hand gone, his sword lost, but his eyes full of hatred.

He spat out blood, grinning like a demon. "Screw your hand. I'll bite it to death without it."

Götz had always been the bastard who didn't fall. No matter whether it was the bailiff, the emperor, or an entire village full of enemies – he stood. He struck. He laughed. But now he lay in the dirt, blood pouring from his arm like a slashed hose, and the men who usually saw him as a storm saw something else for the first time: a man who could perish.

"Shit, he's bleeding!" Grete screamed, her hands red up to her elbows. "Hold him, damn it, or he'll die!"

Jörg knelt beside him, as clumsy as a milking ox, pressing his huge arm against the wound. "Damn it, Götz, stop squirting! I've seen barrels that leak less!"

Veit staggered around, drinking, cursing, tearing his hair. "Not him! Not him! If he falls, we'll all be nothing but dirt!" The priest without God pressed the cross harder against the gaping wound, the flesh hissing. "So be it, Amen – heal through pain, or die in anger!" Sigi stood beside him, rigid, his eyes wide. "He's dying... he's dying... he's dying..." He sounded like a damned crow.

Only Lenz remained silent, drew his dagger, and cut Jörg's shirt into strips to bandage the wound. No words. Only hands, cold and firm.

Götz wheezed, blood in his mouth, his teeth red. "Let me go, you dogs!" he roared, "I can still fight!" He tried to get up, but his body slumped. He spat blood into the dirt. "Damn it! Where's my sword? Where's my hand?" "The hand's gone, sir," whispered Grete, her face pale but her eyes unblinking. "Gone."

Götz laughed, hoarsely, almost maniacally. "Then look for her! Maybe she's over there, and I'll beat you all again!"

The men still fought, but they fought differently. Not for loot. Not for glory. They fought to drag their damned leader out of hell. Jörg covered the retreat with axe blows, bursting heads like pumpkins. Veit threw himself at anyone

who came too close like a drunken wolf. Lenz shot, cold and precise, turning enemies into bloody shadows.

And Grete, with her arm full of blood, pulled Götz by the collar, dragging him piece by piece from the carnage, while he cursed and roared like a caged animal.

"The Invincible One!" whispered the enemies who remained behind when they saw the blood. "He's falling!" But they dared not pursue. For even as he fell, he bit. Even as he died, he grinned.

At the edge of the forest, the gang collapsed. Götz lay there, bleeding, semi-conscious. His breathing was labored, his face chalk white, only his eyes still burned like coals.

"You think I'll fall?" he whispered, barely audible, but everyone understood. "I never fall. I always get back up. Even if I only have one fist. I'm standing."

Then everything went black around him.

They had dragged him from the carnage like a dead pig from the slaughterhouse. The camp was just a dirty clearing, somewhere among the trees, with a fire that produced more smoke than flame. But for Götz, it became hell on earth.

Grete pressed down on the torn stump with both hands until blood poured over her fingers like a fountain. "Shit! I can't stop it!" "Press harder, woman!" Jörg yelled, kneeling on Götz's chest until his ribs cracked. "If he dies, at least he'll die with blood in his mouth!" "I'm pressing harder than you've ever squeezed a woman, you idiot!" Grete snarled back.

Veit ran in circles, pulling at his hair, screaming into the forest. "Not him! Not Götz! He won't die! Otherwise we're all screwed!" Priest without God held the cross over the wound as if it were a hammer. "In the name of pain, in the name of blood, in the name of the only law—hold on, you damned dog!"

Sigi crouched beside the fire, just staring. He whispered, over and over again: "He's dying... he's dying... he's dying..."

Lenz didn't say a word. He tied cloths, pressed, and knotted, so calmly it was almost eerie. His eyes were as dark as the forest itself.

Götz roared. Not a human scream, but an animal sound, raw, bestial. "You bastards! You're doing worse than the cannon!" He writhed, lashing out with his burned fist at everything within reach. Blood spurted into the fire, it hissed, and sparks flew.

"Hold still, sir!" Grete cried, "or you'll bleed in all our faces!" "Quiet?" roared Götz, "I'm not a damn donkey! Cut it off or let me die, but stop this messing around!"

The night was a concert of curses and screams. They took turns: Jörg squeezed, Grete held, Lenz tied, Pfaffe muttered, Veit raged, Sigi howled. Everyone did what they could—or couldn't.

And Götz? He screamed, he spat, he cursed. He told every god, every emperor, every whore in heaven that he would kick their asses if he survived this.

"Shit heaven!" he roared. "Shit earth! Shit everything! I'll get back up, you understand? I always get back up!"

But at some point, even he weakened. His voice broke, the roar turned to moans, the moans to rasping. His gaze flickered, fixed on the fire as if searching for his hand in it.

"The hand..." he murmured, "take it back... I need it..."

Grete placed the bloody cloth on his forehead. "That hand won't come back, Götz. Never."

He was silent for a moment. Then he spat in her face. "Then make me a new one."

The men stared. No one laughed. No one mocked. Because they knew: He meant it.

And the night continued, full of screams, full of blood, full of smoke. A camp that was not a place of rest, but an altar on which a man's body was sacrificed—only so that his legend would live on.

The morning crept gray and damp through the trees, but there was no relief in the camp. Only the stench: burnt flesh, clotted blood, sweat of fear. Götz lay on a pile of blankets, his face pale, his lips blue, but his eyes still glowing like two cursed coals.

"Cut it off," he gasped, his voice shaky but full of hate. "Damn it, cut it off, or I'll do it with my teeth myself."

Grete looked at the men, knife in hand. "If we don't do it, he'll rot away. He'll die of rot, of fever." Jörg snorted, sweating. "Then do it, woman, but keep your mouth shut." Veit ran back and forth. "Shit, shit, shit—he's alive, he's dying, he's alive, he's dying! Do it before he kills us!" Priest raised his cross, grinning madly. "Amen. Today we're the devil's surgeons." Sigi sobbed. "I... I can't watch."

"Then shut up," Grete growled. "We need space, not your whining."

Lenz put the iron in the fire until it glowed. He said nothing, not a word. But everyone knew what was coming.

"Tie him up," Grete ordered. "Hold him, or he'll jump in your face."

Jörg placed his giant arm on Götz's chest, pressing him down. Veit held his legs, Pfaffe his left wrist, Lenz his shoulder joint. Grete brought the knife to bear, sharp, rusty, who cares.

"Go," she gasped. "Now."

The first cut was a hellish scream. Götz roared so loudly that even the birds flew out of the forest. He bit at Jörg, at the priest, at the air itself. Blood spurted, warm, stinking, and Grete cut, quickly, roughly, as if she were gutting a pig.

"Faster!" Jörg yelled. "Hold still, you dog!" Grete hissed. "Still?" Götz gasped, blood in his mouth. "I'm not a shitty tree trunk! Cut harder, or I'll stab you when I get back up!"

Then came the iron. Lenz pulled it from the fire, red-hot, burning. Pfaffe laughed madly when he saw it. "This is God's blessing, you bastards!"

Grete pressed the iron onto the stump.

Götz screamed. Not a human, not an animal, not a demon—it was all of them. A scream that froze even the fire. The flesh sizzled, the smell of a burned body filled the camp, pungent, unbearable.

Sigi vomited into the leaves. Veit joined in the screaming as if it were his own arm. Jörg gritted his teeth and held Götz down. Priest shouted, "Amen! Amen!" Lenz pressed harder, silent, cold, like a faceless executioner.

And Götz? He screamed, he cursed, he laughed, all in one breath. "You bastards! You sons of bitches! Cut me, burn me—I'll get up again, do you hear? I'll get up, even if I have to tear you all apart with my teeth!"

Then everything went black before his eyes.

They held him until the hissing stopped, until the smell was nothing but smoke. Then they let go. Grete wiped her forehead, her face covered in blood and sweat. "It's over," she murmured. "The hand is gone."

Silence. Only Götz's breathing, shallow and rattling. But he was alive.

It wasn't the light that woke him. It was the pain. Not a clear cut, not a dull throbbing—a burning storm consuming his entire body. Götz opened his eyes, sweat running down his face, and his first glance went to his right.

Nothing.

Where the hand once was, there was only a thick, black bandage, stinking of blood, smoke, and burnt flesh. He stared at it, gasping, laughing hoarsely. "You bastards... you really did it."

The gang was silent. Jörg sat by the fire, his axe beside him, his face hard but his eyes red. Grete squatted next to Götz, her hands still bloody from cutting. Veit chewed on a piece of leather, his eyes wild. Priest mumbled something that sounded like a prayer, but no one knew whether it was addressed to God or the devil. Lenz sat in the shadows, watching him silently. Sigi just stared into space, trembling.

"You dogs," Götz gasped, "took my hand." "The cannon took it from you," Grete said coolly. "We only spared you your life." "Life?" Götz laughed harshly, bitterly. "A knight without a hand? I'm no longer a man, just a cripple, a lump of flesh lying in the dust."

He tried to stand up, stumbled, and fell back again. The pain nearly tore him apart. "Shit! Shit! I can't even hold the sword anymore!"

The men looked away. No one wanted to see the storm become a cripple in the saddle. Even Jörg, who usually laughed, just grumbled, "You're still Götz." "No," Götz growled, "I'm less than Götz. Half a bastard. A joke fate played on."

The priest laughed maniacally. "A joke? No. You're closer to God now than ever before—he takes what he wants from you and still lets you breathe. A sign!" "A sign?" Götz spat blood. "If it's a sign, it's that God is a damn sadist."

He stared at the stump again, the laughter stopped, and for a moment they saw something no one wanted to see: fear. Pure, naked fear in the eyes of Götz von Berlichingen.

Grete placed her hand on his shoulder. "You're not dead, Götz. That's enough. We'll find a way." "A way?" He shook his head. "There is no way without a sword."

But deep inside, behind the fear, behind the pain, behind the anger, something else was already growing. Not a thought, not a plan – an instinct. The instinct of a man who never lay down.

And so he suddenly laughed again, hoarse, full of blood. "Screw it. Maybe I'm not a man anymore. Maybe I'll become something else. Something harder than flesh."

The gang stared at him. Even Sigi raised his eyes. "Yes," Götz growled, "maybe I'm less of a man now. But more of a legend."

The night after waking was harder than any battle. Götz lay awake, his stump pressed firmly against his body, his face wet with sweat, his teeth bloody from biting. Every breath was an insult. Every heartbeat a mockery.

But amidst the pain, something grew. Not whining, not crying—rage. Pure, burning rage.

"You think I'm finished?" he wheezed into the darkness. "A man without a hand? A cripple? A dog that can be killed?"

Jörg growled, "No one here thinks that." "Don't lie to me, ox," Götz snarled. "You all thought it. You saw it in your eyes. Götz is down, Götz is down, Götz is finished."

He laughed, hoarsely, maliciously. "But I'll get back up. With or without flesh. If I don't have a hand, I'll make myself one out of iron. I'll eat metal, I'll shit steel if I have to—but I'll stand!"

Grete looked at him, hard and cool as ever. "Then we'll make you one. A iron that hits harder than any fist."

"An iron fist," muttered the priest without God, the cross crooked in his hand. "Amen. The devil himself wouldn't have a better idea." Veit laughed as if he'd drunk too much. "Shit, yeah! Imagine that—Götz with a fist of iron! Who would be able to stand up to that?" Sigi sobbed, nodding vigorously, as if he needed to convince himself. And Lenz? He remained silent, but he dug a fist into the ground with his dagger. Crude, rough, but clear.

Götz stood up, swaying, his bandage black with blood. He raised his burned left hand and clenched it. "From today on, I am no longer flesh. From today on, I am iron. And iron doesn't rust as long as blood drips on it."

His voice wasn't loud, but it cut through the night like a sword. Everyone heard it, everyone felt it.

And so, from the greatest defeat came the birth of something greater. The man with the hand of flesh had fallen. But that night, the man who would soon be known as:

Götz von Berlichingen – the knight with the iron hand.

The Birth of the Iron Hand

The air in the forge was thicker than in any damned tavern. Smoke, sweat, coal dust—it smelled of iron and hell. The blacksmith, a broad fellow with arms like anvils, stood by the fire, hammer in fist, brow shining. He stared at Götz, who stood like a ghost in the doorway: pale, half-healed, the bandage on his stump bleeding through, but his eyes bright as two torches.

"Make me a hand," growled Götz. The blacksmith laughed uncertainly. "A hand? Made of iron? That's madness." "Madness?" Götz stepped closer, his burned left hand on the hilt of his sword. "I am madness. Make me a hand—or I'll feed your entrails to the fire."

The gang was there, as always. Jörg grinned broadly. "Come on, dude. Make him a fist that breaks bones like chicken bones." Veit raised a toast from a stolen mug. "A hand that can drink more than I can." Grete sharpened her knife and nodded. "Make it sharp. Sharper than any sword." Priest Without a God laughed, raised his cross. "A miracle made of iron. Amen." Sigi stood in the back, trembling as if he saw a devil. And Lenz? He just stood still, his eyes in the fire, as if he already knew that a legend was being forged here.

The blacksmith looked at Götz, saw the bonds, saw the fire. He knew there was no choice. So he threw the iron into the embers, the fire consumed it, turning it red, then white. He grabbed the hammer and struck, each blow a thunderclap, each blow an oath.

Clink. Clink. Clink.

Sparks flew, burning holes in the men's clothing, flying into their faces, but no one flinched. Every blow echoed through the room like a drumbeat during childbirth.

Götz stood there, motionless, his eyes fixed on the iron. He was sweating, but not from fever, not from pain. From hunger. Hunger for that damned hand that would turn him into a storm again.

"Make it strong," he growled. "Stronger than flesh. I want to hold a sword with it, I want to crush throats with it, I want to slap gods with it."

"That's not a hand," murmured the blacksmith. "It's a nightmare." "No," hissed Götz, "that's my second birth."

The hammer continued to thunder. The sparks danced. And the gang remained silent. Because they all knew: They weren't just seeing a blacksmith at work. They were seeing a ritual. A damned devil's baptism.

And when the iron lay glowing on the anvil, everyone knew: This wasn't a tool being forged. This was a legend being born.

The blacksmith hammered like a madman, and the iron bent beneath his blows as if it were flesh. Every blow sent sparks flying, every blow a heartbeat of the new beast Götz demanded. The anvil sounded like a damned death knell, and the gang stared as if this weren't craftsmanship, but black magic.

"It's supposed to be a hand?" growled the blacksmith, his teeth bared with effort. "This is a lump of steel. Rigid, hard, heavy."

"Good," hissed Götz, "rigid as my will, hard as my hatred, heavy as my name."

Jörg laughed so hard the floor vibrated. "Make it so he can smash a man's face in without a sword!" "Yes!" Veit shrieked. "A fist that cracks skulls like walnuts!" Grete watched with narrowed eyes, her voice quiet but razor-sharp: "A weapon, not a piece of jewelry." Priest grinned crookedly, his cross raised. "A new gospel made of iron." Sigi just swallowed, but you could see in his eyes that he felt both fear and hope. Lenz was silent. He watched as the metal

slowly took shape, and in his gaze was a strange respect that never found expression.

The blacksmith forged joints, rough and angular, not fingers of flesh, but iron claws. A fist that could be closed. Heavy, unwieldy, but terrible.

"That's not a hand," he groaned as the hammer came crashing down again. "It's a hammer disguised as a fist." "Perfect," said Götz, his teeth bared. "The flesh is soft, the iron unbreakable. I don't want a hand anymore, I want a tool that every bastard fears when I lift it."

The first mold finally lay steaming on the anvil. A gray block, raw, brutal, like a piece of broken rock from hell. No decoration, no ornamentation. Just edges, rivets, hinges, thick bolts.

"That's it," whispered Götz. "Not pretty. But deadly."

The gang approached. Jörg let out a throaty laugh. "I could kill an ox with this, without a sword." Veit raised his empty mug. "I'll drink to that!" Grete nodded curtly. "That's fine." Priest murmured, "The iron fist. The new commandment." Sigi stared, murmuring, "He's getting even worse than before..." And Lenz silently carved a fist into the wood of the table with the tip of his knife.

The blacksmith wiped the sweat from his brow. "This is the first draft," he said roughly. "But it will do. It will kill more than any hand of flesh."

Götz grinned, despite the pain, despite the fever. "Then tie that damn thing on me. I want to feel it beat."

The blacksmith held his fist with tongs, the iron still hot from the forge, but already hard as stone. Sparks danced as he struck the final blows. The gang approached, the room stuffy, the fire roaring.

Götz sat on a stool, the bandage long since torn off, the stump fresh, red, open like a mouth. He grinned, even as sweat and blood streamed down his face. "Come on. Screw that damn thing on me."

Grete grabbed him by the shoulders. "You'll scream." "I'll scream in your face if you try anything," he snarled. "Get it on."

Jörg held him from behind, his arms like iron chains around his chest. "If you bite, you bite me, not the others." "Then shut up," Götz growled.

The blacksmith struck. Iron struck flesh. A crunch, a dull clank as the bolts were pressed into the stump. Blood spurted, as if the flesh were trying to vomit out the metal.

Götz roared. Not like a man. Like a damned animal born in fire. He lashed out with his left fist at everything within reach, hitting Jörg in the jaw, making him laugh and hold on tighter.

"Harder! Screw it deeper!" yelled Götz, sweat and blood in his mouth. "I want to feel it!"

Veit staggered back, shrieking: "This is madness! He's dying sitting down!" "No," hissed Grete, "he's being reborn." The priest held the cross aloft, laughing like a madman. "The flesh weeps, the iron laughs! Amen!" Sigi was really crying, hands over his face, as if he felt the pain himself. And Lenz? He stood there, cold, unmoving, his eyes fixed on the stump, as if he wanted to burn every twitch into memory.

The blacksmith screwed, hammered, and pulled. Metal against bone, iron against skin. Every blow, every twist made Götz's body twitch as if struck by lightning. He screamed, he laughed, he spat blood, and over and over again:

"Harder! Deeper! More! More!"

Finally, after an eternity of blows, sparks, and screams, the thing was in place. Crude, brutal, lashed tight. Blood dripped beneath it, but it held. Iron was bound to flesh, inextricably, mercilessly.

Götz leaned forward, his breath rattling, his body wet with sweat. Then he slowly raised his head, his face red, his teeth bared. He raised his new fist.

"It... fits."

The gang was silent. Even Veit fell silent, Sigi stopped whimpering. Only the fire crackled, as if it were showing respect.

And Götz? He laughed, hoarsely and evilly. "Now I am more than flesh. Now I am iron."

The forge was silent. Only the crackling of coal and the faint dripping of blood onto the floor broke the silence. Götz hung forward as if the thing had finally broken him. But then he slowly raised his head, his eyes red, his face filled with rage—and raised his new fist.

The iron clanged as he first moved the joints. No supple fingerwork, no soft flesh—a hard crack as metal struck metal. Every bolt screamed, every rivet groaned, but the thing moved. Heavy, awkward, crude—but it moved.

Götz grinned like a devil. "It's alive."

Jörg stepped forward, his face full of childlike joy. "By God, this thing rattles, but it holds!" "Not God," growled Götz, "just iron."

Veit jumped up and down like a madman. "Hit something, Götz! Hit something, damn it!" Grete pushed a piece of wood toward him. "Then hit."

Götz looked at the piece of wood, grinned, and swung. The iron fist crashed down, a dull, hard thud that reverberated through the forge. The wood broke in two, splinters flew, one of which cut Sigi's cheek.

"Shit!" Veit shrieked with delight. "It hits like a damn blacksmith's hammer!" The priest laughed maniacally, his cross raised. "That's no longer a hand, that's a judgment!" Grete nodded, curtly, satisfied. "You can kill with that." Sigi staggered back, tears in his eyes. "He's... worse than before." And Lenz? He smiled very slightly, barely visible, as if he'd just witnessed a storm being born.

Götz raised his fist again, clenched it, and the metal creaked. "Heavy. Hard. Ugly. But stronger than flesh." He raised it higher, into the firelight, the iron glowing red in the glow. "This is my new truth."

He reached for the sword that lay beside him. His iron fist closed around it, clanging, clumsily, but firmly. He raised it, the sword trembled briefly, then rested securely in his hand.

A cough, blood on the lips—and a grin. "I'm holding it again. I'm hitting again."

The gang stared at him, torn between fear and awe. And Götz, with his sword in one hand and his iron fist in the other, laughed, hoarse and wild.

"You thought I had fallen. But now I stand stronger. Flesh rots, iron does not."

The echo of the broken wood still hung in the air. Dust and splinters danced in the firelight. Everyone stared at the iron fist as if they had just witnessed a dead man rise from the grave.

Jörg was the first to break the silence. He laughed so loudly that the walls of the forge vibrated. "Holy shit, Götz! You can crush oxen with this without them

mooring! I want to be the first to see you crush a bastard's skull with that thing!"

Veit jumped around like a child who'd had too much schnapps. "Screw the sword! Hit everything with your fist! Destroy castles! Punch the emperor himself in the balls!"

Grete stood still, her eyes narrowed. Her voice was cold, but there was respect in it. "That's no longer a hand. It's a threat. Anyone who sees it knows immediately what to expect. Death."

The priest without God laughed, a croaking, demented laugh. "Amen! That's the hand of God, damn it. But not the hand that blesses—the hand that punishes! A new gospel: In the beginning was iron."

Sigi cried. Not a loud howl, just tears streaming down his face. "He... he's not human anymore," he stammered. "He's... something else. Something that can't die." "Shut up, Sigi," Jörg growled, "or I'll shove my fist down your throat so you'll finally be quiet." But secretly, they all felt the same fear.

Only Lenz said nothing. He took his dagger, cut off a branch, and sharpened it slowly, deliberately, as if the world outside were still the same. But then he carved a crude drawing into the ground in front of the smithy: a fist, rigid, solid, without flesh. He looked at Götz and nodded almost imperceptibly.

That was his word.

Götz grinned, sword in one hand, iron fist raised. "You dogs! You thought I'd fallen. But now? Now I stand firmer. Flesh rots. Iron rusts. But as long as blood flows over it, it remains strong."

He pounded the air with his fist, rattling the iron. "This is my new law. Whoever sees it knows: I don't negotiate. I don't forgive. I crush."

The gang toasted, roared, and laughed, but there was something else in their noise: awe. Fear. They knew they were no longer following just one man. They were following a myth made of flesh, blood—and iron.

The forge was more than just a place with fire and anvil. That night, it became an altar, and Götz was both the priest and the sacrifice. He had given blood, he had eaten pain, he had taken iron. Now he stood there, half man, half machine, and everyone in the room knew: This was not the end—it was the beginning of something damned, something greater.

Götz raised his iron fist into the firelight. The metal glowed reddish, sparks reflected off the rivets, and for a moment it seemed as if he had Hell itself bound to his arm.

"Look," he roared, his voice harsh but powerful. "This is not just iron. This is my will. You can take my flesh, you can take my blood—but you will never take my blow!"

He clenched his fist, and the crack echoed like thunder.

Jörg roared: "The iron fist!" Veit laughed like a madman: "The coat of arms is born!" Grete nodded slowly. "Now they fear you twice as much – because you've already fallen and yet you still stand." Priest without God cried: "Amen, amen, amen! A new testament made of steel!" Sigi stammered, his voice shaky: "He is no longer... he is no longer just a human being..." And Lenz? He stepped forward, placed a hand on the wall of the smithy, and carved a fist into the stone with his dagger. Deep. Permanent. The symbol.

Götz stepped out into the night, his fist raised. The wind tore at him, the sky was black, but he stood there like a tower. "From today on," he growled, "you know my name not only as a man. You know my symbol. The fist of iron. It is my emblem, my law, my curse for all enemies."

He looked at his band, who stood like shadows in the firelight. "And when I die—then every bastard shall know: I was no longer a knight. I was more. I was iron."

And so, from blood and pain, a new chapter emerged. The peasants soon whispered that the knight was half man, half hell. The princes trembled, knowing: You can break flesh, but not iron.

The iron hand was born.

The man with the iron fist

Weeks had passed since the amputation, and everyone in the Reich thought: That's it. The bastard has fallen. Finished. The end. But the Reich was wrong.

On a gray morning, he rode out of the forest again. No banners, no trumpets, just Götz von Berlichingen on a black horse, his iron fist gleaming in the first

light, raw, angular, threatening. The bandage was gone, the flesh beneath scarred, the metal bolted tight like a curse.

The peasants who saw him fell silent. Some crossed themselves, others fled, a few stared as if paralyzed. One whispered: "He's alive... with a hand of iron..." And an old man muttered: "No. He's no longer human."

The gang followed him like a pack of hyenas. Jörg grinned with bloody teeth, an axe on his shoulder. Veit sang filthy songs no priest would ever forgive. Grete rode silently, her knife always at the ready. The priest without God held his cross high, but everyone knew he was only aiming for throats. Lenz, as always, silent, his bow slung over his back, his eyes alert. And Sigi – pale, trembling, but still there, because he'd long since known: There was no escape.

They rode through a village, and the people cowered as if Death himself had walked through the streets. Children screamed, dogs howled, and the elderly spat in the dust—not out of contempt, but out of fear.

One of the peasants, braver or more foolish than the rest, shouted:
"Berlichingen! You should be dead!"

Götz reined in his horse, looked at him, and slowly raised his iron fist. The metal creaked, sparks flew, as if the iron itself were hungry for blood. "Dead?" he growled. "Only he who remains lying down is dead. I stand. Harder than before."

The farmer fell into the dust and crawled away. No one said another word.

The news spread faster than fire in summer grass:
Götz lives. Götz rides. And Götz has a fist of iron.

The courts whispered, the cities murmured, the princes gritted their teeth. The emperor fell silent again—and the silence was heavier than any threat.

And Götz himself? He rode, his iron fist on the reins, his sword loosely in his left hand. He grinned like a man who had survived hell and tied it to his arm as a trophy.

"Fuck death," he muttered, "I saw him. And now he's wearing my gloves."

It took less than a week for the first blood to appear on the new fist. A band of mercenaries—hired by some prince who believed Götz was now a cripple—

faced him in a narrow valley. Ten men with spears, shields, and rusty swords. They grinned when they saw him.

"There he is," one sneered, "the half-knight! We'll knock him down like a lame horse!"

Götz laughed, hoarse, dirty, full of scorn. "Come on, dogs. Look what half a hand does to you."

The gang attacked like a pack of starving wolves. Jörg rushed forward, roaring, his axe a screeching crescent. Veit stabbed blindly, drinking blood like wine. Grete sliced tendons, cold and nimble. Pfaffe cried "Amen" and drove the cross through a belly. Lenz sent arrows into flesh, silent and deadly. Sigi staggered, stabbed, survived—again.

And Götz? He rode right into the middle, leaped from his horse, sword in his left hand, iron fist raised.

A mercenary slashed, blade from above. Götz raised his iron hand—CLONG!—the steel ricocheted, the blade shattered as if it had struck stone. The mercenary stared, and in the next breath, the fist slammed into his face. Cartilage shattered, teeth flew, and his skull cracked like an egg.

"Fucking cripple!" shrieked another, stabbing. Götz grabbed the lance with his iron hand, yanked it to the side, and the man was swept away. A quick tug—and the spear was his. "Thanks for the weapon," he grinned, and drove it right through the bastard's chest.

It wasn't a fight. It was a massacre. The iron fist wasn't just a shield—it was a hammer. It blocked swords, shattered faces, and tore weapons from hands. Everyone who touched it knew immediately: flesh loses to iron.

Veit shrieked with joy. "He's worse than before! He's damned hell!" Jörg yelled, "Look, you pigs! That's our master!" Grete cut even deeper, her lips curled into a sinister smile. Priest yelled, "The iron has blessed him! Amen, you dogs!" Sigi stood there, staring, blood streaming from his face, and simply muttered, "He'll never die. Never."

When the last mercenary fled, the ground was red, and the air stank of iron, sweat, and death. Götz stood in the middle, his iron fist bloody, the sword dripping from his left hand. He grinned, his eyes wild.

"So much for half a man," he growled. "Now I'm more than twice as big."

News of the battle in the valley swept through the land like wildfire. Not only was Götz riding again—he now rode with a fist of iron that cracked bones like dry branches. Those who had seen it no longer spoke of a knight. They spoke of a monster.

In the taverns, people whispered: "He crushed a helmet with his fist like wet bread." "No, he caught a spear with his iron hand – and hurled it back!" "One swears he grabbed a man by the throat and broke his neck with one grip."

Regardless of whether it was true or not, the stories grew, and with them the fear.

The next people to confront him weren't paid mercenaries, but men of a bailiff, miserable servants with rusty spears. They had barely seen him when one whispered: "There... there it shines. His fist!"

Before he even drew his sword, two staggered back, three threw down their weapons, and one fell to his knees and prayed.

Götz grinned evilly, slowly raised his iron fist, and let it gleam in the light. "You know what that means, dogs. You have two options: Run, or I'll mush you to pieces."

Half fled immediately. The other half hesitated—and were slaughtered by his gang.

Jörg laughed like an ox. "We don't need to hit them anymore! They'll shit themselves if you so much as raise your fist!" "That's how I like it," growled Götz. "Let them flee. Fear is better than blood – it stinks longer."

And so it began: The mere sight of it was enough. No blow necessary, no sword. The iron fist had become a symbol, a walking threat.

A priest without God preached with his cross raised high: "See, iron is stronger than flesh! Whoever sees this recognizes the devil—and obeys him!" Veit shrieked: "Screw it, I love it! Another cup on the fist!" Grete simply said: "It's better this way. Fighting is easier when your opponents already look dead before you hit them."

And Götz? He stood, fist raised, sword loosely in his left hand, and roared into the wind:

"Let them fear me! I want them to tremble when they hear my name. I want their children to scream when they learn the word 'Faust'!"

The battle was over, the enemies lay in the dust, but the gang remained silent. They had fought alongside Götz hundreds of times, had seen him split skulls, burn cities, and even survive bullets and swords. But what they saw now was different.

It was no longer just Götz the Knight. It was Götz the Indestructible. The man with the iron fist.

Jörg spoke first at the fire, his axe at his knees, his face covered in scratches and blood. "Lord," he grumbled, "I've always seen you as strong. But now... now you're like a storm that no one can stop. Not even God. Not even the Emperor."

Veit laughed, drunkenly, his voice cracking. "Screw it, Jörg! He's worse than God. God preaches, Götz hits. And I'd rather drink to a man who hits than to one who babbles!"

Grete sharpened her knife and looked Götz straight in the eyes. "You're no longer a man. And that's precisely why you're more than any man. I'm following you because now you're not just alive—you're burning."

The priest without God stood up, cross in hand, his face delirious in the firelight. "Amen! Amen! This is the revelation, you swine! The arm of flesh has fallen, the arm of iron has risen! If there is a God, then he will bear your fist!"

Sigi crouched on the edge, trembling, his hands in his lap. "You should die," he stammered. "I saw how you fell, how you bled... no one would have survived that. No one. But you're alive. That means... you're no longer like us." His voice broke, but he looked at him with eyes filled with fear and believing horror.

And Lenz? He remained silent, as always, but he took a piece of wood and drew lines on it with his dagger: a fist. Then he placed the wood in the fire, and it crackled, as if the symbol itself were being born into the flames.

Götz looked at them all. The gang that had previously feared him as their leader now knelt in their hearts before something else. Not before a person. Before a symbol.

He grinned, raising his iron fist. "You thought you were following a man. You're wrong. You're following a legend. And a legend never dies."

It was another dirty fight, an attack on a bailiff's servants, somewhere between the woods and the mud. A minor skirmish, really, nothing the world would have remembered—if it hadn't been for that one moment.

His enemies pounced on him like flies, three at a time. One slashed with an axe, one stabbed with a spear, one with a rusty sword. Götz blocked the blow with his iron fist—CLONG!—the blow rebounded as if the man had hit a rock. With his left hand, he parried the spear, yanking it aside. Then his fist shot forward, right into the face of the third.

CRACK!—the skull burst, teeth flew, the guy fell to the ground gasping for breath.

The others staggered back. One stared, his eyes wide, his mouth open. And he screamed, panicked, full of sheer fear: "God help us – that's the man with the iron fist!"

It was just a sentence. A scream in the mud. But it echoed like thunder.

The opponents retreated, muttering, cursing. "The iron fist!" – "He has a fist of iron!" – "The man with the iron fist!"

Jörg laughed like a madman. "Do you hear that, sir? They gave you your name!" Veit shouted, "Cheers, you dogs! That's his title, and you'll eat it whether you like it or not!" Grete nodded coldly. "That's not a nickname. It's a curse. And it will stick." The priest howled, holding the cross high: "Amen, Amen! The new gospel has been spoken: The man with the iron fist!" Sigi just whimpered, his eyes filled with tears, but he whispered it like a prayer. And Lenz? He pulled out a piece of chalk and wrote a word in the dirt: FAUST.

Götz himself stood there, his fist bloody, his sword dripping, grinning. "The man with the iron fist..." he murmured, tasting the words as if they were wine. Then he laughed harshly, full of defiance. "Screw it—the name fits."

From then on, it was no longer just a rumor. It was a title. A spell. A symbol that ran faster than any horse and rang louder than any bell.

The man with the iron fist.

After the battle, Götz sat by the fire. Blood clung to his armor and his beard, and his iron fist was still smeared with red. He held it up to the light, slowly turning it so that the sparks of the fire reflected in the metal edges.

"The man with the iron fist," he muttered. The words sounded foreign, yet they fit like a sword in a sheath. "Shit, maybe I really am not one of you anymore. Maybe I'm just that."

The gang was silent, each in his own way. Jörg grinned as if proud to have the world's biggest bastard as a friend. Veit raised a glass and roared: "I'll drink to that, sir! The fist drinks with us!" Grete looked at him for a long time, coldly and seriously. "You are more than a man. You are fear. And fear doesn't rust." Priest Without God knelt laughing in the dirt: "A saint of iron! The New Testament! Amen, amen!" Sigi crouched at the edge, his eyes as wide as plates. He trembled, whispering: "You're no longer a man, Götz... you are fate." And Lenz – he was silent, but he drew another fist in the ground with his dagger. This time deeper, more clearly, as if to say: This is what stays.

Götz rose, heavy but unbroken. He raised his iron fist to the sky, clenched it, and the crack of the metal echoed like thunder.

"Listen, you bastards," he roared into the night. "The man of flesh has fallen. But the man of iron stands! I am no longer just Götz von Berlichingen. I am the man with the iron fist—and whoever hears my name shall tremble until his soul falls out of his ass!"

The call went out into the darkness, carried by the wind, by the fire, by the fear of those who had heard it.

And from that day on, it was no longer just a nickname. It was his new identity.

No longer just a knight. No longer just a rebel. But the man with the iron fist.

[The fear of the opponents](#)

It was as if the realm had been struck by a new plague—only without the boils, without the fever. Instead, a name crept through every tavern, every barn, every princely court:

The man with the iron fist.

In the taverns, every drunkard told his own story. "He broke a sword with his fist, just like that, with one blow!" "Nonsense, he crushed a tower, stone by stone!" "I swear, my cousin saw him grab a man by the throat with his fist and choke him like a chicken—until his head was off!"

Every mouth made the story bigger, every night a little wilder. In the end, people believed Götz's hand wasn't made of iron, but straight from hell.

In the villages, the old men whispered around the fire: "That's no longer a knight, that's the devil in an iron shirt." "Whoever meets him sees his life flash in his fist." "Better to set fire to the farm than to get in his way."

And the children, who used to play with sticks, called out to each other: "I am Götz!" – "No, I have the iron fist!" – until their mothers pulled their ears and growled: "Never mention that name, or you'll call the devil."

The princely courts weren't quiet either. Rumors flowed, accompanied by wine and fear. "He's unstoppable," said one knight, "the bullets ricochet off him as if he himself were made of iron." "The Emperor will judge him," murmured another—but his voice trembled.

And one, already drunk, dared to say: "Perhaps we shouldn't judge him, but use him. If you have him on your side, you don't need armies."

The silence that followed these words was heavy as lead. No one objected – but everyone thought it.

The fear was greater than the actions. Many had never seen him, but everyone had an image of him in their minds: a monster with an iron arm, a man laughing while breaking bones.

And somewhere in the darkness sat Götz himself, his fist in the firelight, grinning. "Let them talk. Every rumor is like another lance in my hand. And if the lies are bigger than me—all the better. Then they'll fear not only what I'm doing, but what I might do."

It was a pitiful troop that the bailiff had sent there. Twenty servants, poorly armed, with rusty spears and shields made of rotten wood. Men who would have preferred to stay in the field, but who were now tasked with confronting the "robber baron" on their lord's orders.

They lined up at dawn, the grass still wet with dew. Their hands trembled on the ends of their stalks, their mouths dry even before the first cry was heard.

And then Götz came.

Not with a hundred men, not with banners, not with drums. He rode alone, the band in the background, calm, serene, like shadows. But he himself sat there

on his horse, his iron fist raised in the morning light, his sword loose in his left hand, his grin as wide as a slash across his face.

The servants stared. One whispered, "The fist... do you see the fist?" Another, "It's him... the Man of Iron." And a third dropped the spear as if he had been burned by a ghost.

"Come on, you dogs!" roared Götz. "Your master sent you! Then come here and get me! Or should I show you what iron tastes like?"

He gritted his fist, the metal screeched at the joint, and it sounded like the crack of a broken neck.

That was enough.

Two ran immediately. Three followed them. Then six threw down their spears, screamed like children, and fled down the slope. The rest trembled, stared, and stepped back, step by step. Until they too collapsed. In the end, not a single one remained standing.

The gang laughed, roared, and clinked cups, even though no blood had been shed yet. "Lord, you don't have to hit anymore," Jörg yelled. "You just have to raise your fist, and the world will be wet!" "Screw fighting!" Veit shrieked. "That's even better than blood—when the bastards take care of themselves!" Grete grinned thinly. "Fear is the sharpest blade." Priest Without God raised his cross and laughed. "Amen! They're running because the devil already lives in their heads!" Sigi whimpered, "They had no chance. No chance." Lenz was silent, but you could see in his eyes: He knew this was more dangerous than any blade—an opponent who breaks himself.

Götz spat in the dust and grinned evilly. "So be it. If they're already running before I strike, then I'll save myself the trouble. Iron isn't just a weapon. Iron is fear."

News of the fleeing band of servants spread faster than horses could run. Soon every bailiff, every petty prince, every count knew: When Berlichingen stands at your gate with an iron fist, you'll think twice about whether to fight or pay.

One example: Altfeld Castle. The lord of the castle, a puffed-up sack of fat, had been ranting for weeks: "That Berlichingen! A cripple, a robber, a mockery of the nobility! I'll hang him!"

But when Götz appeared before the walls—not with an army, but only with his gang—the man suddenly became very small. Götz stood there, his iron fist raised, not a word, only the metallic creaking of his wrist. The peasants on the battlements whispered, one made the sign of the cross, two others stepped back.

The lord of the castle stepped out, pale as a shroud, sweating like a pig in summer. "Lord von Berlichingen... we don't have to fight, do we? We can talk..." "Talk?" Götz grinned crookedly. "I talk with iron."

The lord of the castle trembled, clutching his throat as if he could already feel the fist. "You'll get silver. More than usual. And supplies. And wine."

Götz spat in the dust. "Keep your wine. But I'll take the silver. And remember: if you ever desecrate my name again, I'll write it on your forehead with my fist."

The guy just nodded, silent, servile, broken.

And it didn't stop with him. Other lords who once acted grandly cowered like beggars. One had his city gate opened without drawing a sword. Another immediately sent a messenger with money and asked only that Götz never come in person. A third had sermons delivered in which Götz was praised as an "instrument of divine wrath"—out of fear, not faith.

Jörg almost laughed himself to death. "Did you see, sir? The princes pee themselves before you even raise your fist!" "So be it," growled Götz. "I don't need to tear down walls if they open their own gates." Grete smiled thinly. "Blood is cheap. Fear is valuable." Veit poured the wine they had taken down. "Screw it! I like it when they give us their best booze just because they see the fist!" Priest Without God raised his cross. "They kneel, not before God—but before you. Amen." Sigi murmured, "That's worse than murder. They die inside before they fall outside." And Lenz? He remained silent, but carved a fist into the castle gatepost—a mark that would remain long after they had moved on.

The masters gave in, not because they were defeated, but because they thought they had long since been defeated. And Götz knew: That was true power.

The evening after Altfeld, they sat around the fire, their pockets full of silver, their bellies full of meat and wine, which the cowardly lords had voluntarily given them. Normally, they would have been loud, laughing, cursing, mocking. But this time it was different—they spoke as if, for the first time, they truly understood what Götz was holding in his hands.

Jörg broke the silence, axe on his knees. "Sir, I've seen many heads split. But for castle lords to open their gates before you touch them... that's even sweeter than blood." He grinned broadly, but there was respect in his eyes.

Veit threw the cup into the fire, causing it to sizzle. "Screw fighting! If they're already running before we strike, I'd rather drink! Let fear guide our swords, then we'll save ourselves the trouble!"

Grete sharpened her knife and looked into the flames. "I don't know... Blood is honest. When someone dies, you know they're defeated. But this fear? It's like poison. It makes them weak, yes. But it also makes them lie. Today they pay. Tomorrow they might betray us twice as much."

The priest without God raised his cross, his face demonic in the firelight. "Amen! What do we care about betrayal? If they tremble, we have already triumphed. Fear is our gospel. Every breath they take is a prayer to you, Lord!"

Sigi sat off to the side, his knees drawn to his chest, his voice barely audible. "It's worse than blood. If they're already broken before you hit them... then you live in their heads. You don't die outside anymore, you die inside." His words sounded as if he himself were breaking.

And Lenz? He remained silent, as always, but he picked up a stick and drew another fist in the ground. This time large, wide, almost filling the entire camp. Then he dropped the stick.

Götz heard them all and grinned darkly. "You talk as if this were new. But fear has always been the sharpest blade. I don't just cut through flesh now—I cut through souls. They're no longer fighting against me. They're fighting against the image of me they have in their own heads. And that's an enemy no one can defeat."

He raised his iron fist into the firelight, the metal glowing red. "Blood rusts. Fear not."

It wasn't enough that the masters paid, that the servants fled. Götz began to milk the fear himself, like a cow full of poison milk. He knew: just one word, just one look, was enough to make her tremble. And he enjoyed it.

He rode alone to the gate of a minor landgrave. The guards stood stiffly, shields in hand, their knees wobbling. Götz slowly raised his iron fist, letting it creak as if bones were already breaking.

"Well, you bastards," he cried, "do you have the balls to let me in—or should I use them to twist your cocks off?"

The men immediately retreated, the gates opened as if by magic.

Once he entered a council chamber where cowardly noblemen sat trembling at the table. One dared to ask: "What do you want, Lord von Berlichingen?"

Götz grinned crookedly, raised his fist over the table, and slammed it against the wood. Boom! The table shook, the cups shattered, and wine ran across the board like blood.

"I want," he growled, "that you don't get my fist in your face. Anything else is a bonus."

The men nodded, pale, and one simply collapsed.

On the streets, it became a ritual. If someone looked at him askance, he raised his fist, showed it, and cracked it. "Don't look like that, or I'll smash my crest in your face."

If someone hesitated to give him the way, he would mock him: "Make way, or you'll learn what iron tastes like."

And when princes babbled about honor and imperial order, he laughed in their faces. "Honor? Your honor is made of paper. My fist is made of iron. Guess which lasts longer."

His gang celebrated every saying. Jörg laughed like a madman: "Lord, you beat them with words!" Veit snorted, raising his cup: "Another sip to your sayings—they're harder than swords!" Grete nodded coldly. "Words are knives. But yours are iron." Priest raised his cross: "Amen! Whoever hears your word has already made his confession!" Sigi murmured: "It's enough if he speaks. He doesn't even have to hit." And Lenz... he smiled barely noticeably, a thin, dangerous smile that rarely appeared on his face.

Götz himself laughed, rough and hoarse, spitting into the fire. "They fear my fist—but my sayings cut deeper. For a broken skull may heal. A broken heart never will."

The nights had become different. Götz had once slept in the smell of blood, the noise of drunkards, the stench of burnt flesh. Now he sometimes woke up and

it was quiet—too quiet. No dogs barked, no farmers snored in the huts. Only this feeling that someone was whispering somewhere.

And they always whispered the same thing: “The iron fist...”

He realized he was no longer just a man who caused fear. He had become a nightmare people told themselves. A shadow they saw, even when he was hundreds of miles away.

In the villages, children trembled when their mothers threatened them: "Sleep, or Berlichingen will come and punch you in the face." In the cities, merchants ducked when a stranger came wearing gloves. And in the castles, princes tossed and turned in their beds, drenched in sweat, dreaming of an iron fist breaking through doors and grabbing them by the throat.

The gang felt it too. Jörg grinned, but he spoke more quietly than usual, almost reverently: "Lord, they're already fighting in their heads—and losing before they see you." Veit snorted, drunkenly, but even he couldn't ignore the peasants running away at the mere sound of Götz's name. "Screw it, that's wonderful!" Grete nodded coldly: "You are more than a man. You're a ghost. And ghosts can't be killed." Priest raised his cross, his eyes wild. "Amen, Lord! You are the new demon who replaces God. Whoever sees you believes in nothing else." Sigi murmured, his gaze blank: "You live in them. In their heads. That's worse than any sword." And Lenz—he drew a circle in the earth, inside a fist, and said nothing. But everyone understood: The symbol had become bigger than the man.

Götz sat by the fire, his iron fist raised in the light. He grinned, evil and defiant. "They tell each other stories. Let them. Every lie makes me stronger. Every fear makes me immortal. I need no banners, no emperors, no damned laws. I am the Fist. I am the Nightmare. And nightmares... don't die."

And so terror was born. No longer just blood, no longer just iron.

Götz von Berlichingen had become a legend – a nightmare in human form.

Chivalric freedom

The emperor had finally had enough of the stories. Of peasants who said they'd seen the devil with the iron fist. Of princes who peed on their pillows and cried whenever Götz merely murmured their name. So he sent envoys. No army, no

cannons—just a few gentlemen in fine coats, flinging parchment and seals around as if words could break iron.

They found Götz in a tavern, stinking of smoke, beer, and blood. He was sitting in the middle of the room, his iron fist slammed on the table, his sword against the wall, his cup full. The gang around him, already half drunk, half eager for a fight.

The oldest envoy cleared his throat as if standing before God. "Götz von Berlichingen," he began in a shaky voice, "in the name of the Holy Roman Emperor, we command you to lay down your weapons and submit to the imperial order. Your actions contradict every chivalrous virtue."

Götz laughed so loudly that the beer mugs clinked on the table. "Chivalric virtue? You mean the virtue of letting the emperor lead you on a leash like a court dog? Screw virtue. My virtue is the fist."

He lifted it slowly, letting the iron creak in the joint. Clang. The sound was harsher than any words. "Do you see this? This is my seal. This is my signature. If the Emperor wants something from me, he can come and take it himself—right in the face."

The second envoy, younger, pale, tried to maintain his composure. "You're opposing the Empire! This is high treason!" "High treason?" Götz spat beer on the ground. "I won't betray anything because I never signed anything. I'm free. Freer than your emperor ever was. And if this is treason, then he'll eat me. But first, I'll eat him."

The gang laughed, roared, and toasted. Jörg yelled, "Thus speaks our lord!" Veit shrieked, "Screw seals! The only seal is when he presses his fist into your face!" Grete cut off a piece of meat and chewed, ice-cold: "Parchment burns. Iron remains." Priest raised his cross: "Amen! The emperor is paper. Our lord is iron." Sigi stared at the envoys, murmuring, "They're afraid. They already know." And Lenz—he stood still, bow loosely in his hand, his eyes on the fine gentleman, ready at the sound of Götz's words.

The envoys withdrew, pale, distraught, unable to find an answer. They had their parchments, their seals—but they knew: before this fist, they were mere paper.

Götz tipped the cup and grinned. "Tell your emperor he can shove his empire up his ass. I have my own."

The envoys were gone, and the inn belonged to them again. Smoke hung thickly from the ceiling, the jugs clinked, and the meat dripped fat into the fire. But Götz stood up, his iron fist planted on the table, and looked at each of his men.

"Listen up, you dogs," he began, his voice deep, heavy with beer and hate. "You saw those clowns come here with parchment and seals. They think we'll let ourselves be tied up because some old man somewhere is wearing a crown on his head. Damn crown, damn seal, damn emperor."

He slammed his fist on the table, splintering the wood and spilling beer. "We're not dogs on leashes. We're wolves. Free. Wild. And if anyone tries to tie us down, we'll rip their necks out."

Jörg laughed and slashed into the wood with his axe. "That's right, sir! We follow no emperor. We only follow the fist!" "Amen!" bellowed Pfaffe, holding the cross high. "The fist is our gospel!" Grete nodded coldly. "We follow you because you are free. And because you make us free." Veit jumped onto the table, spilled wine, and slurred: "Screw it, we're no longer knights, we're kings without crowns!" Sigi muttered, his eyes wide: "Free... free... but freedom will consume us too..." And Lenz? He remained silent, but he carved a fist into the table with his knife: a fist. The symbol. Their law.

Götz laughed, hoarsely, mockingly. "Knightly freedom? That doesn't exist anymore. The princes sold it, the Church betrayed it, and the Emperor trampled it into the dirt. But we—we'll take it back. With sword, with fire, with fist."

He raised his iron fist aloft, the embers in the iron glinting in the firelight. "No paper, no seal, no master shall bind us. We live by a single law: the law of the jungle. He who submits lives. He who doesn't – dies."

The gang roared, laughed, banged on the table, and toasted as if he had lifted them all to heaven.

And Götz grinned, with beer in his beard, blood in his soul, iron in his hand. "So be it. Our law is stricter than theirs. Because ours doesn't rust."

Night consumed the fire, but the tavern continued to smolder. Götz still stood, his iron fist on the table, and the gang hung on his words as if they were sitting in a damned church—except their church stank of sweat, wine, and blood.

"Listen to me," he growled, "I now give you the only law we need. No parchment, no emperor, no church—just our fist. This is our oath."

He raised his iron hand, the joint creaking like a broken neck. "First: We live free. No leash, no master. We follow only ourselves and our fists."

He slammed it on the table, making cups crack. "Secondly: Whoever gives us silver lives. Whoever doesn't, dies. Simple, clear, fair. Better than any imperial law."

Another bang. Shrapnel flew. "Third: We take what's ours. Land, wine, women, loot. Those who resist will feel the iron. Those who submit can keep drinking."

Another blow. Beer sloshed across the floor. "And fourthly—and remember this well: betrayal is not forgiven. Whoever betrays the fist ends up beneath it."

Jörg roared, his face contorted with enthusiasm. "Lord, that's more right than any emperor ever had!" Veit tipped a jug over his head. "Screw laws! This is our gospel!" Grete nodded curtly. "Simple. Tough. Honest." Priest laughed, holding the cross high. "The New Testament has been spoken! In the beginning was iron – and iron was law!" Sigi wept silently, but he nodded. "It is... clearer than anything else." And Lenz? He drew his knife and carved the word "FAUST" into the tabletop. Deep, raw, final.

Götz grinned, his face lit red by the fire. "This is our realm. Not an empire. Not a kingdom of God. A realm of the fist. And I swear to you: as long as I breathe, this law will not rust."

It took less than a week for Götz to ram his new "law" into the world like a stake in a rotten heart. A nearby prince had proudly proclaimed that he would not tolerate robbers, and certainly not "a cripple with a shovel on his arm." A feast for the eyes.

That same night, Götz and his gang rode through the fields, like shadows on black horses. They torched the prince's tithe barn, full of grain for the tax collectors. The flames licked the sky, the smoke devoured the stars. Peasants saw it and whispered: "Berlichingen... he spat in the prince's mouth."

But Götz didn't stop at the fire. The next day, he stood in the middle of the market square of a small town belonging to the prince. No disguise, no hiding. He stood there, his iron fist raised, his sword in his left hand, and roared:

"Listen, you bastards! Your master thinks he is your law. I tell you: your law is iron! Whoever wants to live, pay me silver. Whoever doesn't—his blood stains the cobblestones!"

The merchants tossed coins as if they were hot. Women pulled children into their houses, men cowered. No one dared to look at him. Götz stepped to a well and slammed his iron fist against it, shattering the stone. "This is my seal!" he shouted. "This is what your contracts will look like now!"

Jörg roared, "Thus says the Lord!" Veit collected the silver, dancing in circles like a madman. "Look, the market is our purse!" Grete slashed the wallet right from the belt of someone who hesitated. "He who hesitates pays twice." Priest raised the cross: "Amen! Iron is harder than any edict!" Sigi stood pale beside him, muttering: "They didn't fight at all... they didn't even try..." And Lenz? He drew a fist on the city gate with chalk, large and raw, so everyone would know: Götz was here.

The prince heard of this and raged, vowing revenge, but his men grumbled, hesitated, and many refused to serve. For each of them had the fist in their head before they had even seen it.

Götz later sat by the fire, the silver in sacks, a broad grin on his face. "This is what provocation looks like. I want them to know: I am not their subject, I am their nightmare. Whoever calls me emperor at least knows that I rule. Whoever calls me enemy dies."

The provocation had the effect of a stone thrown into a foul pond—its ripples spread far and wide throughout the empire. Every prince, every farmer, every merchant spoke of it.

The little gentlemen raged like children whose toys had been taken away. "This is high treason!" they cried. "He's spitting in the Emperor's face!" they wailed. But behind closed doors, fear was evident. No one wanted to be the first to feel the blow. One even whispered: "Perhaps... we should buy him. Get him on our side. If you have him against your neighbors, you don't need an army anymore."

Others were fuming. A count beat his own messenger because he refused to deliver the order to arrest Götz. "I won't oppose this," the man stammered. "Better death than the fist."

The peasants were divided. Some trembled because he plundered their villages. They cursed him, called him a demon, and said he was worse than the plague.

But others... others raised their heads. "He does what we would never dare," they murmured. "He beats the princes. He takes what he wants, and there's nothing they can do about it." And soon, in taverns, peasants were heard proudly calling their children "Götz"—as if the name itself were a protection.

Even the Church couldn't remain silent. A bishop preached that Götz was the arm of the devil, and whoever uttered his name dishonored God. But in the same breath, he whispered to his servants: "If he comes, give him silver and let him go."

Priest Without God laughed himself silly when he heard that. "You see, sir? Even the saints tremble at the mere thought of your fist. You are their new god, whether they like it or not."

The discussion continued around the fire. Jörg hammered the wood with his axe: "Lord, they hate you, they fear you – and they'll pay! That's exactly how it should be!" Veit was drunk and slurred: "Fucking princes! Cheers to their fear! May they tremble a hundred times more!" Grete said coolly: "The peasants are beginning to see you. Not just as a bogeyman, but as hope. That makes you more dangerous." Sigi whispered: "Hope? For them, perhaps. For us, it's just a tightening rope." Lenz silently drew another fist in the ground. This time, a cross next to it. A balance that no one quite understood.

And Götz? He grinned, his fist raised in the light. "Good. They shall hate me. They shall fear me. They shall whisper to me, worship me, curse me. It doesn't matter – as long as they have me in their mouths. Because whoever talks about me lives in my world. Not in the emperor's."

The night was silent, only the crackling of the fire and the gentle snorting of the horses in the background. The gang had long since drunk or fallen asleep, scattered like rats after a feast. Only Götz sat awake, his sword beside him, his iron fist raised in the firelight.

He turned it slowly, watching the sparks reflected in the metal. "Iron," he murmured, "cold, hard, honest. No emperor, no church, no parchment can be as strong. They all lie, cheat, play games—but iron never lies. It either strikes or it doesn't strike."

He remembered the faces of the peasants trembling—and the eyes of those who suddenly found courage because he stood up to the princes. It was more than fear. It was a kind of freedom he carried within him. Not the freedom the lords preached in their speeches, but the one born of dust, blood, and defiance.

"Knightly freedom," he muttered, spitting into the fire. "They say it's honor. They say it's loyalty to the empire. All bullshit. Freedom means: No one binds me. No one writes me laws. I take what I want, and when they scream, they learn what iron is."

The gang was asleep, but he continued speaking, as if preaching into the night itself. "I am not just a man. I am a law. My law. He who submits lives. He who resists dies. Simple, clear, harder than any seal. That is freedom."

He clenched his iron fist, the crack echoing like thunder. "As long as I have this fist, I am free. And everyone who hears my name knows: freedom doesn't come from above. It comes from below. From blood. From iron."

And so he realized that he was no longer just a bogeyman. He was the symbol of a freedom that no crown, no cross, no parchment could tame.

The iron fist wasn't just fear. It was freedom.

Bloody business

Freedom was a beautiful word, a thunderous voice that made any prince weak at the knees. But freedom didn't satisfy anyone. No horse ran with proverbs in its belly. No sword sharpened itself on ideals. No cup filled itself.

And that's exactly what the gang felt.

Jörg pushed the empty plate aside, his face full of greed. "Sir, fine words. But words don't eat meat. We need silver. We need wine. We need weapons." Veit slammed the jug down on the table, breaking the handle. "And women, damn it! A fist is beautiful, but a warm bed is better." Grete sharpened her knife. "Without silver, no steel. Without steel, no fist. Freedom consumes more than you think." Priest raised the cross, grinning madly. "Even God wants his tithes. So why shouldn't we?" Sigi stared at the boards, murmuring, "We are free... free and hungry."

Lenz remained silent, as always, but he looked at Götz as if to remind him: men don't follow a dream forever if their stomachs remain empty.

Götz sat in the dirt, his iron fist slammed on the table, his eyes glowing. He knew they were right. The fist was powerful, yes, but it alone fed no one. Freedom needed silver. And silver didn't flow on its own.

He grinned, evil and determined. "Good. Then we'll do as the gentlemen do—only more honestly. We'll take what's ours. Not with parchment, not with a seal. With our fists."

He slammed his iron hand down on the table so hard that the wood splintered. "Every village, every city, every merchant who lives under my thumb pays. Whoever pays, lives. Whoever doesn't, dies. Simple, clear, fair."

Jörg yelled, "That's how it should be!" Veit laughed, "Then we'll soon be drinking like princes again!" Grete nodded curtly. "That's how you keep the gang happy." Priest grinned, "That's God's will, sir. Tithes – only harder." Sigi trembled. "We buy our lives with blood..." Lenz drew a fist on the edge of the table with his dagger, a mint mark next to it. The message was clear: fist = silver.

Götz tipped the mug, pouring beer over his fist so that it looked like blood. "Then it's decided. Our freedom has a price. And the Reich will pay it."

It began in a small village on the edge of the forest. A village so small that even the chickens looked bored. The farmers hoed the dirt, the children ran barefoot through the leaves, and no one expected visitors. Until Götz and his gang appeared – like shadows on horses, their iron fists leading the way, gleaming in the sunlight.

The peasants froze. One dropped his hoe, a woman pulled her child into the house. Only the mayor, a scrawny man with an oversized hat, stepped forward, his hands sweating, his voice shaky. "Sir... Knight... we have done nothing to you."

Götz grinned, coldly and dryly. "Not yet. But listen carefully, or you'll do it. I'll offer you a deal. You give me silver, grain, wine—and I guarantee your miserable nest won't burn."

He ground his fist, making the metal screech like a dying dog. "Pay – and you live. Don't pay – and you'll learn what iron tastes like."

The farmers muttered, whispered, and stepped back. One cried defiantly: "We are poor! We have nothing!" Grete stepped forward, her knife flashing. "Then you have meat. We can take that too."

Jörg laughed roaringly: "Better give me some silver before I chop your stable in half!" Veit jumped off his horse and grabbed the mayor by the collar. "Give me that shit! Or I'll rip out your entrails and wrap them around my neck!" Priest raised his cross: "Pay your tithes! Amen!" Sigi stood pale next to him, muttering: "They're scared... so scared..." And Lenz? He drew his bow, aimed at the chicken coop, released the arrow—and three chickens fluttered dead to the ground. A warning.

The mayor broke down. He fell to his knees, trembling, crying. "Please... please, take what we have!"

And they took: silver from the chests, bread and wine from the stores, even the best rooster from the stable. The farmers were silent, daring not make a sound; only the children cried.

As they left, Lenz carved a fist into the wooden village cross. Götz saw it and laughed hoarsely. "Good. That way they know who they belong to. Whoever sees the fist pays—or dies."

And so it began: village by village, town by town. Protection money. A "trade" without a contract, with only the iron fist as a seal.

It wasn't just farmers who paid. Soon, the traders came of their own accord. Merchants who had previously made their money through honest trade and crooked scales suddenly flocked to Götz because they understood: The iron fist could do more than rob—it could conduct "business."

It began with a wine merchant from Würzburg. A fat man with a sweaty face and too many rings on his fingers. He arrived with a cart full of barrels and almost fell to his knees when he saw Götz. "Herr von Berlichingen," he stammered, "my competitor from Bamberg... he's undercutting me. He's stealing my customers. But... if you perhaps... your law...?"

Götz grinned, his fist in the sunlight. "You want me to be your business partner? Then pay the price."

The merchant placed silver on the table. A lot of silver. More than could be found in three villages. Götz took it, weighed it in his fist, and nodded. "Good."

Your competitor no longer belongs to you. He belongs to me—and I'll break his throat if he keeps selling."

And so it happened. A few days later, the competitor lay in the ditch, his throat cut open, his goods looted. "An honest deal," laughed Jörg, his axe bloody. "Fucking honest!" roared Veit. "This is the best deal we've ever made!" Grete rinsed the blood off the knife. "Money for death. It couldn't be clearer." Priest raised the cross: "Amen! This is the true tithe. Blood for silver." Sigi whimpered: "We are traders... only we trade in life..." Lenz chalked a fist on the merchant's wagon wheel. A sign: This man was now under the protection—or curse—of Götz.

And the Würzburg merchant? He grinned, drank, and toasted Götz. "To our partnership!" Götz laughed harshly. "Here's to you. Your blood pact is signed."

From then on, more traders came. Merchants, wagon drivers, even wealthy townspeople. Some wanted protection, others wanted rivals to disappear. And Götz fulfilled his wish. Sometimes with a sword, sometimes with fire, sometimes just with a glare from his fist.

The iron hand became not just a symbol of fear—it became the seal of "contracts." A deal made of blood.

It was inevitable: someone had to believe he could betray Götz. A shopkeeper from a small town, both greedy and stupid. He paid the first time, buckled before the fist, and promised loyalty. But the second time, he held back the chest, hoping Götz would forget or be too busy plundering other masters.

Wrong thought.

When Götz learned of this, he didn't ride at night, nor in secret. He arrived in broad daylight, right in the middle of the market square. The gang behind him, grinning broadly, the people whispering, fled into the houses. Only the shopkeeper remained, pale but defiant, as if he had found courage.

"Herr von Berlichingen," he stammered, "I... I have nothing left. I can't pay."

Götz dismounted and walked slowly toward him, his iron fist clanging with every step. He grabbed the man by the collar and pulled him up so that his feet barely touched the ground. "Don't pay?" he growled. "Then you pay with the only thing you have left."

The gang surrounded them. Jörg laughed loudly: "Crush him, sir!" Veit danced, slurring: "Set an example so everyone learns!" Grete nodded coldly. "He who doesn't pay dies. It's that simple." Priest shouted: "Amen! The iron takes the tithe!" Sigi whispered, his hands over his face: "Not like that... not like that..." And Lenz stood still, his dagger loose, but his eyes alert: he knew it would end in bloodshed.

Götz raised his iron fist, clenched it—thunk!—and struck. A blow, right in the face. Bones cracked, blood spurted, teeth flew to the cobblestone. The man gasped, but Götz struck again, and again, until the skull no longer looked like a head, but like a crushed sack of flesh.

He dropped the body, blood running into the cracks in the stones. Then he turned to the onlookers in the doorways and windows. "This happens to anyone who thinks they can cheat the fist. Silver or blood. There's no third way."

Silence. No one breathed. No one moved. Then Götz spat in the dust, wiped the blood from his fist, and left.

Lenz stepped in front of the body and carved the fist symbol into the dead man's forehead with his dagger, so everyone would know who had pronounced the sentence.

From that day on, no one dared to delay the payment of the protection money. The law was the law. And the law had shown that it struck without mercy.

The fire burned, the sacks full of silver lay between them, and the shopkeeper's blood still clung to Götz's fist. The stench was heavy, but the gang drank anyway. But this time the mood was different—not just cheering, but also yelling voices.

Jörg laughed loudly, his axe over his shoulder. "That's how I like it! Anyone who doesn't pay gets a punch in the face. Lord, I swear to you, the world will be ours if we keep charging like this!"

Veit jumped onto the table, wine dripping from his beard. "Fucking princes, fucking merchants! We'll take everything! Today silver, tomorrow castles, the day after tomorrow the whole world!"

Grete sharpened her knife, her face hard. "Silver satisfies us, yes. But silver also attracts rats. The more we take, the more the masters will hunt us. Blood doesn't rust iron—but silver poisons hearts."

A priest without God raised his cross and grinned madly. "Amen! Whoever pays us worships us. We are the new god, and God demands sacrifice. The silver is nothing but incense, the blood the host!"

Sigi sat off to the side, his knees drawn up, his voice shaky. "This is no longer a right... this is trade. We buy our lives, piece by piece, with blood. Today they pay, tomorrow they hang us. We are not free—we are traders, only we pay with death."

The gang laughed at him, but Lenz remained silent. He took a piece of charcoal and drew in the dust: a fist, next to it a mint mark, next to it a skull. No one commented, but everyone understood.

Götz looked at her, grinning crookedly. "You talk as if this were something new. The princes do it the same way—only more cowardly, with seals and parchment. We are more honest. Our contract is iron. Our seal is blood. Whoever pays lives. Whoever doesn't, dies. That's clearer than any damned imperial order."

He raised his fist, the metal red from the fire. "We are not merchants. We are judges. And our judgment does not rust."

Night fell over the camp. The gang was drunk, scattered in the dirt, snoring, gasping, a pack of wild dogs after the feast. Only Götz sat awake, his sword beside him, his iron fist raised in the firelight.

He looked at the iron fingers, felt the weight, still smelled the blood that hadn't been completely washed away. Silver gleamed in the sacks behind him, clinking softly, as if it were laughing itself.

"So this is freedom," he murmured. "Not just sword and fire. Not just fear. Freedom eats silver. Without silver, there's no steel, no horses, no wine, no meat. And silver doesn't come by itself—it comes with blood."

He laughed softly, bitterly. "Bloody business. That's the price. Those who want freedom must pay. Either the others—or me. And I won't pay. I'll collect."

The gang's voices still echoed in his mind. Jörg: cheering, because he smelled power. Veit: greed, because he only wanted to drink and fuck. Grete: cool, warning—silver attracts rats. Priest: crazy, who turned everything into a religious service. Sigi: broken, because he realized that blood was the new currency. And Lenz: silent, the symbol drawn: fist, coin, skull—the naked truth.

Götz clenched his iron fist. The grinding sound echoed through the night like a judgment. "Yes," he whispered, "that's it. Blood is our seal, silver our reward. The fist is law. And this law never dies."

He spat into the fire and grinned. "Fuck morals. Fuck the emperor. Fuck the church. All that matters is business—and my fist is the notary."

And so it was clear: Götz was no longer a simple knight, no mere robber, no nameless bandit. He was a businessman of death, a merchant of fear. His freedom was built on blood—and on silver that smelled of blood.

Bloody deals were no coincidence. They were his foundation.

The new identity

It was deep into the night. The camp lay silent, except for Jörg's snoring, Veit's insane babbling in his sleep, and the crackling of the embers. Götz sat alone by the fire, his sword beside him, his iron fist on his knees. Before him was a jug, half full, half empty—like his damned life.

He removed his helmet, reached into the embers, and pulled out a piece of polished metal he'd chipped from a shield during the day. No mirror like those used by princes, just a crooked, sooty piece of steel. But the image within was enough.

He looked inside – and laughed bitterly. This was no longer the knight he once was. No shining hero, no fine gentleman in shining armor. His face was furrowed, his skin scarred, one eye deep in shadow, as if it had long since seen everything. And beneath it, the iron fist – heavy, brutal, cold.

"Shit," he muttered, "that's me? That's not human anymore. It's a machine that drinks, fucks, and kills."

He remembered the past—the vow, the honor, the knighthood, the dream of fame and service. And he laughed. A rough, hoarse, evil laugh. "Honor. Chivalry. All filth. Words that princes vomit into the world to keep their servants quiet. Honor doesn't eat bread. Honor doesn't buy swords. Honor doesn't keep a bastard away."

He raised his iron fist and held it next to the scarred face in the mirror. "This is my honor. Iron. Cold. Honest. When I strike, it doesn't lie."

For a moment, it was silent. Only his breathing, the crackling of the embers, the distant neigh of a horse. Then he spat into the mirror, wiping the image away. "The old Götz is dead. The new Götz lives—and he wears irons."

And there, in the shadow of the fire, he realized: He was no longer just a man. No longer just a knight. He was something else, something new, something that doesn't scar, doesn't break, doesn't age like flesh.

He was the fist.

The steel mirror lay in the dust, and Götz stared into the fire as if he could burn the ghosts of his past in it. And indeed—they came, those memories. Images of Jagsthausen Castle, of magnificent halls, of sword exercises in the courtyard. His father speaking of honor. His mother whispering of virtue. All that stuff that seemed like a crown to him at the time.

He laughed harshly, shaking his head. "What a damn joke." He remembered the first time he'd seen a tournament as a boy—shining armor, trumpets, ladies with flowers in their hair. He'd dreamed of shining like that himself. "Shit," he growled, "it was all just an act. Chivalry? A masked ball hiding greed and cowardice."

He thought of the oaths he had taken: loyalty to the Emperor, obedience to the Church, protection of the weak. He spat into the fire. "Loyalty? The Emperor doesn't give a shit about anyone who isn't of use to him. Church? A bunch of drunks with crosses, drinking silver like blood. Protection of the weak? I've seen enough – the weak don't want to be protected, they want to survive. And they'd rather pay silver than hear stupid praise."

The gang was asleep, but he spoke louder, as if he wanted to awaken the past itself: "Once, I wanted to be a hero. A name in the chronicles. Today I know: heroes are dead. Legends live. And legends don't need virtue. Legends need iron."

He reached for the sword, drew it halfway from its scabbard, and saw the blade in the firelight. "This thing used to be mine. Now it belongs to Faust. Without her, I would be ash. But with her? With her, I am more than any knight I've ever seen."

He tipped the mug, beer running down his chin. "Knight? Fuck knights. I was one of them—and I saw them die, with all their honor in the dirt. I forged my own law. And if someone doesn't eat it, I'll stuff them with it."

The old Götz was dead. The distance was not grief, not pain. It was mockery, bitter, harsh, cold. And in the fire, the iron fist grinned back, as if it had the last word.

In the morning, as the sun shredded the mists, the gang crawled out of their holes. Hungover, smelly, with half-torn shirts and full bellies from the previous night's party. But when they saw Götz sitting there—upright, his iron fist in the light, his eyes deeper, harder than ever—they realized something had changed.

Jörg scratched his beard and grinned broadly. "Sir, you look like you ate hell and spat it back out. Shit, I was already proud to follow you, but now... now I'm following someone even the emperor wouldn't shit on when he heard your name."

Veit staggered, the cup still in his hand, his face puffy. "Yes, damn it! You're not just our lord anymore, Götz. You're Faust himself! I'll drink to you whether you like it or not!" He spilled the rest down his shirt and laughed like a madman.

Grete looked at him for a long time, coldly and seriously, her fingers playing with the knife. "You're no longer like us. You're not even like you anymore. You're something else. Harder. Sharper. I don't know if that's a good thing—but I know no one can break you."

The priest jumped to his feet, waving his cross, his eyes glowing. "Amen! Amen! I said it: You are more than a man! You are a sign, a god of iron! Your word is law, your fist is the gospel!"

Sigi stood pale, his hands shaking, his voice a whisper. "You... you're no longer human, sir. I see it in your eyes. You are... fate. And fate cannot be killed."

Lenz remained silent, as always. But he took a piece of charcoal, knelt down, and drew a fist in the dirt. He didn't write a word underneath—but everyone understood.

Götz looked at them, grinning hoarsely and crookedly. "You're starting to get it. I'm not just your leader. I'm the law. I'm the Fist. Whoever rides with me doesn't ride behind a man—he rides behind a legend."

The crowd toasted, roared, and cheered. But amidst the cheering lay a trace of silence—the silence of those who knew: Something untouchable had been born, and they were now part of it.

It was Grete who had the idea. She sat there, knife in hand, her eyes cold, and said quietly: "If we truly stand behind the Fist, then we should show it. No parchment, no seal, no oath in the monastery. Blood and silver. That is our oath."

Götz grinned, raggedly, and nodded. "Good. Then you swear tonight—and whoever doesn't swear won't ride with me anymore."

He took a bag of silver and threw it into the center of the circle. Then he drew his sword, cut his left hand—the one that was still flesh—and let the blood drip down his iron fist. It ran dark red over the metal, like a second skin. "This is my oath," he growled. "I am the Fist. Silver nourishes it, blood sanctifies it. He who walks with me walks with iron."

Jörg stepped forward, cut his hand, and let the blood drip onto the silver. "So be it, Lord. My blood for the fist, my silver for your law."

Veit yelled, stabbing himself deeper than necessary, letting the blood spurt. "Screw knights and the church! That's my gospel! Cheers to the fist!"

Grete cut only a small tear, coldly, precisely. "My blood isn't much—but it's enough. More than any words."

The priest grinned maniacally, struck his forehead with the cross until it bled, and let the drops fall onto the silver. "Amen! This is the host, this is the sacrament!"

Sigi trembled, tears in his eyes, but he also cut. "I... I can't help it. Without you, I'm dead. So I swear... even if it tears me apart."

And Lenz? He said nothing. He cut himself, let the blood flow, and drew a fist on the stone with his finger. An image that remained when the drops dried.

Götz raised his fist, glinting in the fire, red with blood, heavy with silver. "Now it's sealed. We are no longer a bunch. We are the Fist. Each of you now has it in the flesh. Betrayal means death, loyalty means plunder. Simple as that."

The gang roared, laughed, and drank until the stars blurred.

And somewhere in the darkness, iron itself laughed, cold, sharp, indestructible.

The morning after. The sky hung gray over the hills, the fog still clung to the trees. The gang lay scattered like pigs after slaughter—hungover, bloody, stinking. But Götz stood tall, his iron fist raised high, his face full of defiance.

"Listen to me, you dogs!" he roared, and slowly the heads rose. "Yesterday you gave your blood, yesterday you gave your silver. Now I'll tell you what that means."

He slammed his fist against his sword. Clang, the sound echoed through the forest like thunder. "I am no longer just Götz von Berlichingen. No longer a knight, no longer a vassal, no longer a peasant among peasants. I am the Fist. Your law, your judge, your damned realm."

Jörg grinned broadly, his teeth bloody from sleep. "So be it, sir! Screw the emperor!" Veit roared, stumbling, half-drunk. "The emperor has his crown, God has his cross—and we have you!" Grete nodded curtly, coolly: "You are harder than crown and cross. And more honest." Priest jumped to his feet, cross in the air, eyes like fire. "Amen! Amen! This is the revelation: The emperor has his empire, God has his church—but Götz, the master of the fist, has us!" Sigi just murmured, pale: "You are... more than human. You are something that cannot die." And Lenz? He took a stone, struck it against another, until a rough image emerged: a fist. Raw, angular, but unmistakable.

Götz grinned and spat on the ground. "Princes swear on parchment, the church on books, the emperor on a crown. All bullshit. My oath is iron. My law is blood. Whoever hears my name knows: I am the Fist—and the Fist knows no mercy."

There was no speech. It was thunder that shook the band. And everyone knew: From that day forward, they no longer rode behind a knight. They rode behind an identity harder than steel.

It wasn't long before the news spread again. But this time it was different. Before, they had spoken of Götz, the knight. Then of the man with the iron fist. But now—now they were no longer speaking of a man. They were speaking only of the sign.

In villages, peasants whispered: "The Fist was here." No name, no face. Only the symbol, carved into beams, burned into gates, struck into stone. And each time, it was like a judgment written in the earth.

Children drew small fists on the walls with charcoal. Women whispered them like a curse when they couldn't sleep at night. Men sweated when they saw the symbol, as if it were the eye of a demon watching them as they slept.

The legend also grew in the cities. Merchants boasted that they were "under the Faust"—as if it were a letter of protection. Others told of rivals who had disappeared after a visit from Götz's gang. Everyone knew: A person could die, but a legend traveled on.

And in the castles? The princes murmured at the table, pale and trembling, as they counted silver. "It wasn't Berlichingen... it was the Faust." They didn't even dare to speak his name anymore, as if he could hear them through the walls.

The gang felt it too. Jörg grinned: "We're no longer just men. We're shadows with a name." Veit roared: "Screw it, I'll drink to our coat of arms! Cheers to the fist!" Grete sharpened her knife, murmuring: "A man dies. A symbol remains." Priest shouted, half preaching, half madly: "The fist is the new gospel! It is God and the devil at the same time!" Sigi whispered, pale: "He is no longer master... he is only iron." And Lenz? He no longer just drew the fist on wood or stone. He carved it into flesh—into the arm of an enemy they had ambushed. So that the symbol would be carried through the streets.

And Götz himself? He laughed, hoarsely and evilly. "Good. Man dies, legends don't rust. I am more than Götz von Berlichingen. I am Faust. And Faust is immortal."

The Peasants' Revolt

It began with rumors, as it always does. First, it was said that a few farmers had refused to pay tithes. Then, that they had smashed a bailiff's skull. One day later, a monastery burned, monks ran howling through the fields. And before the smoke had even cleared, there were rumors that a castle had fallen, the lord slain, and the woman driven naked through the village.

Götz was sitting with the gang in an inn, his fist heavy on the table, when a merchant rushed in, sweat on his brow, his voice shaky. "Uprisings everywhere! In Franconia, in Thuringia, in the Allgäu – the peasants are banding together! They have scythes, pitchforks, clubs... and they're crying out for freedom!"

The gang burst out laughing. Jörg slapped his thighs. "Peasants with pitchforks against castles? That'll be a bloodbath!" Veit tipped his mug and snorted. "Screw it, I want to be there when a farmer thinks he's a knight!" Grete just shook her head. "Many rats make a wolf. Don't laugh too soon." Priest jumped up, his eyes glowing, his cross raised. "Amen! This is the army of God finally crushing the lords!" Sigi stared into space. "This is a storm... a storm that devours everything." And Lenz? He was silent, but he took a block of wood and, slowly, patiently, carved a fist—this time with flames around it.

But the news became harsher, more brutal. Entire cities were set ablaze. Monasteries were looted, priests nailed to their doors. Lords were slain, their bodies dragged through the villages. And everywhere the same word: freedom.

Götz laughed at first. "Ha! Let them eat the princes! I don't mind if a few castles burn." But the more reports came, the more serious his expression became.

Because he knew: One angry farmer was a problem. A hundred were a threat. Tens of thousands? This wasn't fun anymore. This was a war. And he, whether he wanted it or not, was in the middle of it.

He raised his iron fist, seeing the fire reflected in it. "The empire is burning," he murmured. "And when everything is burning, everyone wants me to decide whether to pour oil on the fire—or extinguish it with blood."

It didn't take long for them to find him. Not princes, not envoys of the emperor—peasants. But no crooked backs, bending over in the dirt. These were men with scythes in their fists, with clubs, axes, muscles like ropes, burning with rage. Their eyes flickered like fire, and they no longer carried fear, only rage.

They came in droves, marching into the courtyard where Götz and his gang were camped. One man, a man as broad as a plow, his hands calloused, his voice harsh, shouted: "Götz von Berlichingen! We know your name! We know your fist!"

He held up a tattered flag, on which a fist was scribbled in charcoal. Not beautiful, not precise – but everyone recognized who it was modeled after. "You are our man! You defied the masters, you plundered their castles, you lived the freedom we now demand!"

Götz grinned crookedly, bit into the bread, and chewed slowly. "And what do you want from me?"

A second, thinner, with sparkling eyes, stepped forward. "We want you to lead us. To ride at our head! Your name is a sword, your fist our banner. With you, we can break the masters, tear the church apart, and rebuild the world!"

The crowd roared, fists in the air, a chorus of ragged voices: "The fist! The fist! The fist!"

The gang reacted immediately. Jörg grinned, axe over his shoulder. "Lord, imagine this—a thousand peasants under your command! We could set the whole damned empire on fire!" Veit shrieked with joy: "Screw princes, screw the church—we're kings when we lead the peasant army!" Grete narrowed her eyes, cold. "Peasants aren't warriors. They shout loudly, yes. But they die faster than they fight." Priest brandished his cross, howling: "Amen! This is God's army, Lord! The fist is their prophet!" Sigi shook his head, his hands trembling. "This is madness. A bunch of wild dogs who think they're wolves. They're running to their doom—and dragging us with them." And Lenz? He stood up, went to the banner with his fist, touched it. He said nothing. But his gaze betrayed: He knew it was stronger than any sword.

Götz stood up, his iron fist raised, and the crowd immediately fell silent. "You want me to lead you? You think you can overturn the world with clubs and roars? Maybe. Maybe not. But I'll tell you one thing: When I ride in front, I don't ride for your dreams. I ride with iron. And iron knows no mercy."

The farmers cheered, shouted, and threw up their scythes. For them, it was enough.

The peasants had raised their banner with their fists, they cried his name like a prayer, but Götz's chest was gnawing. He looked into their faces: bruised hands, scars, hungry eyes, enslaved for years. He knew their rage—he shared it. But he also knew their misery. And misery doesn't make warriors; misery makes cattle for slaughter.

He sat with the gang by the fire, the peasants outside in a circle, as if he were already their king. Götz laughed hoarsely, took a sip, and growled: "The dogs want to make me their banner. But a banner can tear if the wind is too strong."

Jörg grinned, chewing meat. "Screw it, Lord! Let them tear it apart—as long as they die for us first!" Veit raised a toast. "There are many peasants! Anyone with so many dogs doesn't need knights!" Grete looked coldly into the fire. "Many rats make noise, yes. But they die when the cats come. And the cats wear armor." Priest knelt, cross up, shouting: "Amen! They are the army of

God, Lord! Lead them, and the world will be ours!" Sigi shook his head, muttering: "They're running into their own grave. They believe in freedom—but all they get is the rope." Lenz silently continued carving the piece of wood he had started: a fist surrounded by flames. His eyes said: The symbol will drive them—whether they live or die.

Götz saw the farmers outside, heard their chants. "Freedom! Freedom! Freedom!" A word he himself had uttered so often. But from their throats, it sounded different: raw, desperate, like the howls of animals finally breaking free from their cages.

He spat into the fire. "Shit princes, shit church—the peasants are right to burn them down. But they don't understand one thing: freedom eats iron. And iron doesn't rust with scythes and pitchforks."

For a moment he stared at the iron fist glowing in the firelight. "Am I their hero? Am I their executioner? Perhaps both."

The peasants continued singing outside, shouting about freedom and justice as if words could tear down walls. But in the gang's camp, the discussion simmered, everyone spewing their own truth into the fire.

Jörg squatted there with his legs wide apart, axe in his lap, grinning like a butcher before a slaughter. "Lord, I tell you: This is a gift. A thousand peasants who think they're warriors—we'll drive them before us like dogs and make them bleed for us. Shitty princes should see what a sea of bastards can do."

Veit, half drunk, banged his cup on the floor. "Yes! Imagine, sir: castles in flames, monasteries plundered, wine in abundance, women kneeling before us because we lead the Fist! I'll drink to see us become kings without crowns!"

Grete, on the other hand, was as cold as a knife. She put the wood on the fire, not even looking up. "You're fools. Peasants are cannon fodder. They can set fires, yes. But when the knights approach, when steel meets their scythes, they fall like grass. Anyone who messes with them will ride into the abyss."

The priest jumped to his feet, his cross raised, his eyes glowing like embers. "Abyss? No! This is God's will! The peasants are his sword! They will purge the empire, burn the Church, and our Lord is their prophet! Amen, Amen!"

Sigi sat off to the side, his knees drawn to his chest, trembling. "You don't understand... this isn't a war. This is a massacre rolling toward us. They have

hunger, anger, courage—but no iron. They're dead before they even fight. And if we stand with them, we'll die with them."

And Lenz? He said nothing. He just squatted there, dagger in hand, continuing to cut into the wood with his fist. Only this time, he let the flames burn higher until they consumed almost everything. As if he were the only one who understood: This fire would not be controlled—it would consume everything.

The gang fell silent for a moment. Even Jörg and Veit stopped their roaring for a moment. Because they sensed: Grete was right, Sigi was right too, and Lenz was carving the truth into the wood.

But Götz? He laughed harshly, took a sip, and growled: "Screw it if they die. With me or without me—they'll burn anyway. The only question is: Do I burn with them—or do I feed the fire until it devours princes and emperors?"

It happened faster than he thought. He had barely stopped contradicting the peasants when he became their banner, their general, their damned prophet. Everywhere he appeared, they raised clubs, scythes, and axes in the air and shouted: "The fist! The fist!"

They marched in groups, barefoot, dirty, stinking of sweat and dung, but with sparks in their eyes. Götz rode in front, his iron hand in the morning light, and this image alone made them believe they were invincible.

Jörg grinned broadly. "Do you see that, sir? Thousands following you! If you lead them, the empire will burn!" Veit roared, "Shitty knights! With these dogs, we'll ride castles into the dust!" But Grete looked coolly at the ranks. "They don't see you. They see a symbol. And symbols don't die in battle. But men do." Priest cheered, waving his cross, shouting, "Amen! The Lord has his army! The fist is our banner, God our witness!" Sigi just murmured, pale, "This is a march to death. They think they're alive—but they're marching to the grave." And Lenz? He rode silently beside Götz, his gaze fixed straight ahead, his fist carved as a symbol on his belt. His eyes said: He knew how it would end.

But Götz felt it: the weight of thousands of eyes staring at him as if he were the key to freedom. And he hated it. He wasn't a messiah, he was a bastard with an iron hand.

That evening, he delivered a harsh speech, full of mockery and anger. "You want to see me lead? Then listen: I promise you no crown, no paradise, no

victory. I promise you only iron, blood, and fire. Anyone who doesn't want that should leave now. Those who stay will either die as dogs or live as wolves."

No one left. Instead, they screamed louder, screamed his name, screamed "Freedom."

And so he stood there – reluctant, cursed, but undisputed: Götz von Berlichingen, the man with the iron fist, leader of a peasant army that clung more to hope than to iron.

The peasants cried for freedom, sang songs, and drank cheap wine to gain courage, as if they were already victors. But Götz saw further. He had seen enough wars to know: hope is not a shield, and anger is not a sword.

From the hills, he looked down at the army he now led. Hundreds, thousands—men with scythes, women with clubs, children with stones. A chaotic mob that believed it could tear apart castles and armies of knights.

Götz growled and spat into the grass. "They think they're wolves. But I only see sheep who've learned to scream."

Jörg grinned nonetheless, full of bloodlust. "Let them go, sir! We'll chase them into the cities, and then we'll get what we want." Veit swung his cup, shouting: "Fucking knights, fucking princes—we'll drown them in this sea of peasants!" Grete, however, remained ice-cold. "This sea will tear as soon as the first steel lands in it. They have courage, yes. But courage breaks when iron meets flesh." Priest brandished the cross, ecstatic: "They are the army of the Lord! God himself leads them! Amen!" Sigi trembled, his voice thin as smoke. "No... they're dead. Every one of them. They just don't realize it yet." And Lenz? He sat still, the piece of wood in his hand on which he had carved a fist—but now he let flames run over it, carved with a knife. A burning fist. And without a word, he placed it in the fire, where it slowly charred.

Götz felt the weight of the future like iron on his shoulders. He was a symbol, yes. But symbols couldn't fight. Men could. And those screaming behind him weren't an army—they were a victim just waiting to be slaughtered.

He clenched his iron fist, the crack echoing like a judgment. "This isn't a path to freedom," he muttered. "This is a path to a mass grave. And damn it, they're going to drag me in with them."

And so the day ended not in jubilation, but in foreboding. The fire burned, the farmers sang, but a shadow hung over everything: the disaster could no longer be stopped.

“Tell him yourself!”

It happened as it had to. The peasants cried "Freedom!" but freedom is no shield against steel. When the knightly armies met them, it was like a butcher's feast.

Götz stood on a hill, his iron fist in the morning light, and watched his "army" collapse. A mob of barefoot, screaming men, women with clubs, children with stones—and below, the princes' banners rolled in, iron gleamed, hooves thundered, and lances pierced the crowd like devil's spears.

At first, the peasants stormed, furious, like a wave. But the wave shattered against the iron. Knights in armor tore them down, horses trampled bodies to pulp, swords split heads, and scythes shattered like straw.

Jörg cursed, his axe firmly in his grip. "Lord, we could ride into it! We could..." "We could die," Grete growled coldly. "This isn't a fight. This is a slaughter." Veit foamed at the mouth, half drunk, half mad. "Screw it, let me go! I want to see blood!" Priest brandished his cross, shouting: "Amen! God's wrath falls on the unbelievers!" Sigi whimpered, trembling. "No... no... they die like cattle... they scream, and no one hears them..." And Lenz? Lenz sat still, staring into the flames of the burning fields, and in his eyes there was only certainty: It was always planned this way.

Götz clenched his iron fist, the crack sounding like thunder. "I knew it," he murmured. "They were sheep who thought they were wolves. And now they're being torn apart like lambs."

He spat into the grass and reached for his sword. "This isn't a war. This is a massacre. And I won't waste my iron escorting peasants to their graves."

And so he saw it: how thousands died, slain, trampled, burned. The screams echoed across the fields, and the smoke from the villages mingled with the stench of blood. Freedom? No. Only a grave, as large as the empire itself.

The battlefield still stank of blood and smoke when the princes sent their messengers. No knights this time, no steel sergeants—only fine gentlemen in velvet, with parchment scrolls and puffed-up faces, as if words could break the iron.

They found Götz in a deserted courtyard, sitting with the gang, cup in hand, fist on the table. The peasants lay in heaps outside, crows already pecking at the corpses.

The first envoy cleared his throat, his nose wrinkled as if he were standing in dung. "Lord von Berlichingen," he began, "in the name of the Emperor and the princes, we command you: Lay down your weapons, lay down your fists, submit to the Empire. Your actions are a disgrace to the knightly order."

Götz laughed dryly and shook his head. "Stain? A stain is when knights with steel ride on peasants with scythes and then call it a victory. A stain is your entire empire, which stinks of blood and perfumes itself with parchment."

The second, younger but no less pompous, stepped forward. "You have made yourself the leader of the rebels. You have fueled the rebellion. You are now an enemy of the Empire. Submit—or we will force you."

The gang erupted in derision. Jörg laughed raucously: "Force them? Try it, you clowns!" Veit snorted, spitting wine. "The only ones who were forced were the peasants—forced into the grave!" Grete narrowed her eyes, cold. "They talk a lot. But behind their words lies fear." Priest raised the cross and grinned: "Amen! They want to banish the devil by asking him politely." Sigi trembled, whispering: "They're afraid. But they'll still hit..." And Lenz? He stood in the shadows, his gaze fixed on the parchments, as if he could already see them bursting into flames.

The oldest envoy raised his hand, trembling but determined. "You have one last chance, Lord von Berlichingen. Submit. Recant. Otherwise, the imperial ban will fall upon you, and you'll end up like the peasants: trampled and forgotten."

Silence. Only the crackling of the embers. All eyes on Götz. His fist gleamed, cold, heavy, ready for the word that would soon weigh more than any sword.

Götz stared at the envoys, his face hard, his iron fist in the firelight like a demonic seal. He listened to their babble about empire, order, and honor—words that tasted of paper, while outside the earth was still warm with the blood of the peasants.

He slowly stood up. The chair crashed back, the boards creaked. With every step, the iron against his fist grated as if it were cutting through the air itself. The messengers stepped back, but he remained standing, directly in front of them, and raised his fist between their faces.

"You want me to submit?" he growled. "You want me to crawl like a dog while you knights slaughter peasants and then call it victory? You want me to lay down my iron so you can rebuild your damned order?"

He laughed hoarsely and spat on the ground. Then he roared, his voice like thunder:

"Tell your emperor yourself: He can kiss my ass!"

The gang went wild. Jörg laughed so loudly he almost choked. "Lord, that's it! That was a blow harder than any axe!" Veit jumped onto the table, shouting, "Kiss my ass! Cheers! The Reich shall hear that!" Grete grinned coldly, thinly. "A sentence harder than iron. It won't rust." Priest almost fell into ecstasy, holding the cross high, shrieking, "Amen! A Gospel! The new prayer: Kiss my ass!" Sigi covered his ears, whispering, "There's no turning back now..." And Lenz? He took a piece of coal and wrote on the wall: "Kiss my ass," with a fist next to it. Raw, large, unmistakable.

The envoys stared, stunned, pale, like men who had seen the devil. Words they had brought—words they had received. But words that slashed through every parchment like an axe.

Götz laughed hoarsely and reached for his mug. "That's my answer. You'll get nothing more."

It was as if Götz had slapped not only the ambassadors, but the entire empire. As soon as the word was spoken, the gang broke loose like a pack of rabid dogs.

Jörg slammed his axe into the table, sending splinters flying. "Lord, that was harder than any blow I've ever seen! No sword, no lance—one spell, and you ripped their asses open!"

Veit danced on the bench, his eyes red with wine, his voice a roaring chorus. "Kiss my ass! That's what should be carved into every damned coat of arms! Cheers, you dogs, cheers to the Lord!" He poured the cup over his own head as if it were a baptism.

Grete grinned, a thin, cold smile that rarely crossed her lips. "One sentence, as clear as a cut through flesh. With that, you broke her, Lord. Words don't rust. They will fear you longer than any sword."

The priest staggered, his cross raised high, and shouted with foaming mouth: "Amen! This is the new liturgy! No more Our Father—just: He can go fuck himself! Hallelujah, Lord, you are the prophet of wrath!"

Sigi sat in the corner, pale, his hands over his ears, muttering, "They'll repeat it everywhere... they'll never forget it... you've cursed them all, Lord. Yourself too."

And Lenz? Lenz stood still and walked over to the wall where he had written the word. With the tip of his knife, he carved the letters deeper into the wood, his fist next to them, so that it seemed burned in. He said nothing—but his eyes shone, as if he knew: This was more than a curse. It was a legacy.

The envoys fled, pale, heads bowed, the parchment uselessly in their hands. They knew they had no answer to this weapon, which was neither iron nor blood—but pure contempt.

The gang celebrated all night. Cups clinked, wine flowed, meat was torn, and again and again the saying echoed through the hall, coarser, louder, like a war song:

"Kiss my ass! Kiss my ass! Kiss my ass!"

And Götz? He sat, grinning, his iron fist heavy on the table, drinking quietly. He knew: Today he had done more than with a thousand sword blows. Today he had made himself immortal.

The envoys returned, pale as shrouds, their parchments crumpled, their words choked in their throats. And as they reported to the circle of princes and bishops, for a moment there was only silence.

An old count stared at them as if they'd lost their minds. "How... how did he answer?" The younger envoy, still trembling, forced it out as if spitting venom: "He said... he said your emperor could kiss his ass."

The hall exploded. "Shame!" roared a bishop, his cheeks red with rage. "High treason!" snarled a prince, barely able to hold his wine cup. "Monstrous!" wheezed a knight, already halfway in his coffin.

But beneath the shouting lay something else—fear. For no one dared to repeat the sentence without the words sounding like a slap in the face. Everyone who heard them knew: They were harder than any sword, cutting through crown, cross, and empire.

A prince slammed his hand on the table. "We must hang him!" Another shook his head. "You don't hang legends. You only hang flesh. But flesh rusts, and words remain."

The emperor himself remained silent. He drank slowly, his brow dark, as if he knew that he, with all his might, had been mocked by a man who possessed only iron and defiance.

The spell spread through the castles like a plague. Knights repeated it cursingly, as if they could eradicate it. Bishops growled at it in confessions, as if it were a sin itself. But the more often they cursed it, the stronger it became.

The gentlemen had hoped to break Götz with parchment. Instead, he had thrown a sentence into their mouths that they could never get out of their heads.

And in the shadow of their palaces, the curse laughed, harsh, defiant, indestructible: "Kiss my ass."

It took less than a week for the saying to be everywhere. From tavern to tavern, from stable to stable, from market to market. It was no longer just Götz's name that echoed through the villages – now it was his sentence.

In the taverns, farmers and servants roared over the third mug: "Do you know what Berlichinger said? To the emperor himself?"

'Kiss my ass!' "And the laughter was louder than any prayer.

Children murmured it secretly behind the stables, as if it were a magic spell that protected them from blows. Women laughed it into their aprons when they wanted to slander their masters but weren't allowed to. And men whispered it to each other as they toiled in the fields: a spark of defiance against a world that crushed them.

Even the merchants used it. One refused to pay the toll and growled in the customs officer's face: "Berlichinger says: The emperor can kiss my ass. Then your count can do it all the more." The customs officer beat him bloody, yes – but the joke was out, and the crowd grinned.

The church was in a frenzy. Bishops ranted from the pulpits that the sentence was a mortal sin, a blasphemy against God and the kingdom. But the more they raged, the louder it was repeated. Priests preached about hellfire – and the people in the pews whispered, "Fuck you."

The gang heard it in every village, in every town. Jörg grinned: "Lord, you are now more than iron. You are a saying that exposes all masters." Veit roared: "Screw it, I'll drink to your mouth! Your word is harder than any axe!" Grete murmured coolly: "A sentence cannot die. It will outlive you." Priest cried ecstatically: "Amen! Your curse is the new Bible!" Sigi shook his head, whispering: "A curse can be a man—but a man can't get rid of a curse." And Lenz? He carved it into a piece of wood, raw and large: Kiss my ass. No fist this time. Just words. Words that burned.

And so it became a slogan. Not just a mockery, not just a curse—a battle cry. The echo of the people against the empire, the church, and the masters.

The night was silent, only the crackling of the fire and the wheezing of drunken throats in the camp. Götz sat alone, his cup half empty, his iron fist on the table, heavy as the whole damned world.

He thought about the sentence. It hadn't been planned, no calculation, no chivalrous saying. It had simply blurted out, as raw as he was: "Kiss my ass." And now the entire empire was wearing it on its tongue.

He had ridden down castles, slain lords, plundered monasteries, shed blood up to his neck – and yet it was this one sentence that had cut more than a thousand swords.

Jörg mumbled in his sleep, slurring the words as if they were a prayer. Veit snored and laughed at the same time, muttering, "...kiss my ass..." Grete slept silently, knife in hand, but even she had grinned with her last drink. The priest murmured "Amen" in his dream, as if the curse were a mass. Sigi whimpered, whispering the spell like a nightmare. And Lenz—he had burned it into wood, as a symbol that would remain even after the night.

Götz laughed hoarsely, tipping the rest of the cup. "Damn sword, damn glory. One sentence made me immortal. A curse, nothing more."

He raised his iron fist into the glow of the embers. "You lords, you princes, you emperors—you can break my bones, burn my skin, condemn my name. But you

will never be rid of this sentence. It eats away at you from the inside, like rust. I am not just the iron fist—I am the mouth that laughs at you."

For a moment, there was silence. Then he grinned, broad, dirty, defiant. "If that's my legacy—a saying as raw as beer, as dirty as the filth in the stable—then so be it. Words don't rust."

And then he knew: no matter how many more wars he fought, no matter how many men he killed or lost, the empire had already lost. Not by iron, but by a single sentence.

"Tell him yourself!" – that was the seal of his legend.

Burn the country!

It began, as always, with a spark. A village burned in the Neckar Valley because farmers refused to pay tithes. The next day, a monastery in Thuringia burned, with the monks nailed to the doors in their own robes. A week later, half of Franconia was in smoke.

Götz rode through the fields and saw it for himself. Barns blazing like torches into the night. Fields no longer green, but black, torn, steaming. The screams of children mingled with the neighing of horses, the clanging of armor, the shrieks of women who, between fear and rage, no longer knew where to go.

It was as if the sky itself had vomited and set the earth on fire.

The peasants roamed the countryside in hordes, poorly armed, drunk with rage. They stormed manors, threw furniture out of windows, slaughtered dogs, drove the lords into the courtyard, and beat them to a pulp. The princes responded even more harshly: armies of knights who didn't fight battles, but flattened villages, slaughtering their inhabitants like weeds.

Jörg grinned, axe over his shoulder, eyes sparkling. "Lord, this is a celebration! Everything is burning, everything is screaming—and we're riding through it like kings!" Veit danced, laughed, and tore the mug from his belt. "Screw order! Screw peace! The land is our tavern, and the flames are our beer!" Grete looked coldly over the chaos. "Peace, order, war—all words. What remains is hunger. And hunger consumes more people than swords." Priest brandished the cross, howling ecstatically: "Amen! Behold, this is the Last Judgment! The

Lord himself has set the kingdom on fire!" Sigi sat pale, his eyes wide. "This is not judgment... this is madness. Everything is burning. Everything is dying. There is no tomorrow." And Lenz? He rode in silence, carving a fist into a charred piece of beam he picked up along the way with his blade. A fist surrounded by flames.

Götz laughed hoarsely, though his eyes remained dark. "Fucking emperors, fucking princes, fucking peasants. They're all doing what I've long known: Everything here is rotten. And what's rotten must burn."

He raised his iron fist, the iron glowing in the firelight. "The empire is nothing but a barn full of hay. And now it's burning."

If the peasants thought they had kicked the lords in the ass, then they didn't know how cruel a prince could be when he wanted to get his toy back.

The knightly armies came like iron waves, banners in the wind, lances like forests of steel. They rode not against soldiers, they rode against farms. They did not fight battles, they held hunts.

In one village near Heilbronn, they nailed men to the gates, their tongues cut out so they could never shout "Freedom" again. In another, they stormed the barns and set them on fire while women and children still screamed inside. In Franconia, they tied peasants to plows and drove horses until their bodies were torn to shreds—a spectacle for the gentlemen, who sat in a circle and laughed as if it were a tournament.

Jörg growled, the axe tightened in his hand. "Lord, I swear, if I get even one of those bastards, I'll split his head right through his chest." Veit foamed, his eyes red with rage and wine. "Fucking knights! You call this law? I piss on their law!" Grete stared at the charred bodies. "They don't just want punishment. They want fear. So that no one ever stands up again." Priest laughed maniacally, the cross held high. "Amen! This is their trial by ordeal! Blood, fire, screams – this is what the Lord preaches!" Sigi choked, his hands shaking. "This isn't a trial by ordeal... this is madness. We... we're in the middle of it." And Lenz? He took a charred board, carved a fist into it, and held it in the fire until it shattered. Then he threw it away, wordlessly.

Götz stood amidst the ruins, his iron fist raised, his face as hard as iron. "This isn't revenge. This is a show of power. They want to show that farmers are trash. But they're forgetting one thing: When dirt burns, it stinks to high heaven. And the stench never goes away."

He spat into the blood soaking the ground. "Let them burn. Let them slaughter. For every corpse they make, my name grows. I am the smoke above their castles."

With each day that the land burned, Götz's shadow grew. And this without him having set fire to a single village himself. The peasants saw in him the man who embodied their rage. The princes saw in him the arsonist. And now he stood between these two fires.

In a half-charred village, peasants threw themselves at his horses. Their faces covered in soot, their hands blisters from their picks. "Lord Berlichingen!" they cried. "Help us! The knights are coming back, they're slaughtering everything! Only you can save us!"

An old man grabbed the bridle, tears in his eyes. "You have shown that one can defend oneself. Be our shield, Lord! Guide us!"

And less than three days later, in another village that had burned down, a surviving peasant called out to him, full of hatred: "This is your work, Berlichingen! Your iron has driven us into the fire! If you hadn't rebelled, the princes would have left us alone! You are our downfall!"

The princes printed leaflets with images of a fist gripping flames. "Berlichingen, the arsonist! The devil of the empire!" they wrote beneath them. In the cities, priests preached from the pulpit: "It was he who unleashed the fire! He is the reason why the earth is black and the heavens are full of smoke!"

The gang heard it and reacted as always. Jörg roared with laughter: "Arsonist? Screw it, sir – better an arsonist than a dog!" Veit raised a glass: "If they're going to condemn you, then at least they should drink too! Cheers to the flames!" Grete shook her head. "They need a face for their fear. And you are that face. Whether you like it or not." Priest staggered, grinning. "Amen! You are fire and smoke. God's torch against the world!" Sigi almost wept, whispering: "They're making you a symbol, sir... but symbols burn longer than people. And people... people burn quickly." And Lenz? He carved a fist made of smoke on a house wall. No more fire, just smoke – as if he knew that symbols don't perish in the fire, but in the aftermath.

Götz stood amidst the ashes, his iron fist raised. "I am no savior, I am no devil. I am only me. But if the land sets me on fire, then it shall burn until no prince can breathe anymore."

The land burned, and the band burned with it—each soul in its own way, as if the fire had awakened a different demon within each of them.

Jörg trudged through the ruins of a burned-down village, axe shouldered, teeth glinting. He kicked charred beams, laughing as the smoke rose. "Screw everything, sir! This is the world as it should be—no princes, no priests, just ashes and loot! Give me more of it!"

Veit staggered beside him, a cup of wine in one hand, a bloody shirt in the other. He danced over charred corpses as if it were a celebration. "Fire in the sky, fire in the mouth, fire in the ass—cheers, you dogs! The land is our tavern, and the wine is blood!"

Grete squatted still, knife in hand, cutting a piece of bread that tasted of smoke. Her eyes were cold, her voice soft. "Fire consumes everything. Houses, fields, people. But it also leaves hunger behind. And hunger, Lord, is worse than any sword. That is what we are sowing here."

The priest stood amidst the flames of a half-burned courtyard, his cross raised high, shouting like a madman: "Amen! Amen! This is the Last Judgment! The kingdom will be purified in fire! The Lord speaks through smoke and ashes!" His voice echoed like a bell tolling over the dying.

Sigi knelt next to a dead woman, her arms burned, her face barely recognizable. He trembled, wept, and slapped himself in the face. "This isn't freedom... this is madness... we've set everything on fire, and no one is putting it out. Lord, we're not men—we're vultures."

And Lenz? He stood at the edge of the village, silent, a piece of coal in his hand. He was drawing on a half-burned door: a fist. This time surrounded by a circle of flames, raw, black, threatening. He said nothing, but his gaze burned deeper than any fire.

Götz saw them all—Jörg's bloodlust, Veit's drinking, Grete's coldness, Pfaffe's madness, Sigi's brokenness, Lenz's silence—and he knew: each of them reflected a piece of him. And if the fire consumed them, it consumed him too.

He clenched his iron fist, the iron glowing red in the flames. "Then we shall all burn. The empire, the peasants, the princes, the gang—and me. Burn until nothing remains but iron."

The world around them was a single conflagration. No path, no village, no road without smoke and ash. No matter where they rode – behind them was the

curse of the princes, before them the chaos of the peasants. The land itself seemed to want to hunt them down.

At night, they rode through forests whose treetops burned like torches. Sparks rained down on them, horses shied, the air filled with smoke. They coughed up blood, tore cloths over their faces, but the stench of burnt flesh crept into every pore.

Once they came to a river flooded with corpses, their faces swollen, their hands still clenched. Veit jumped into the water, laughing like a madman, splashing around until Jörg grabbed him and dragged him out. "Do you want to swim with the carcasses, you drunk?" Veit just yelled, "Screw it, they don't stink any worse than the wine!"

In a village, knights blocked their path. Heavily armored, lances low, banners fluttering. But when Götz rode forward with his iron fist, roaring like a demon from the fire, they retreated. No one wanted to be the first to run into the symbol itself. They fled—but they left flames in their wake, and the village was reduced to embers as the band rode through.

Grete coughed, her voice hoarse. "We're no longer riding through the kingdom, sir. We're riding through hell." The priest shrieked ecstatically: "Yes! This is the Last Judgment! Fire to our right, smoke to our left—we are the riders of Revelation!" Sigi screamed, his eyes filled with madness: "This is not judgment! This is the end! Everything dies, everything burns, everything rots!" And Lenz? He rode in silence, but he drew a fist with chalk on the charred back of a horse lying dead by the path. A fist, white on black, like a final mockery.

Götz felt the heat on his skin, the iron of his fist glowing as if it were itself part of the flames. "We are not fugitives," he growled. "We are the fire. Whoever hunts us hunts the embers that never die."

The fire reduced everything to rubble and ashes, but amidst the smoke it reappeared – again and again, in places where no one knew who had left it: the fist.

In a burned-down village, someone carved it into the charred gate, large, raw, black. The peasants who survived knelt before it as if it were a protective symbol. "He's still there," they whispered. "The Fist watches over us."

In a city sacked by knights, the fist appeared on banners that children secretly sewed from rags. They carried them like flags while their parents wept.

And leaflets circulated in the princes' castles: a fist drawn in the smoke, with the word "curse" underneath. For the lords, it was a brand, a sign that the devil himself was riding through the kingdom.

The gang saw it with their own eyes. Jörg grinned and struck the wall with his axe where the fist was carved. "Look, Lord, your face is burning itself into stone!" Veit raised a toast, staggering. "Fucking emperors, fucking princes—the people now have their coat of arms, and that's us!" Grete looked coolly at the drawings. "Symbols are stronger than men. Men die. Symbols remain. And yours grows with every fire." Priest knelt, rolling his eyes. "Amen! The fist is the gospel in the smoke! The sign of the Last Judgment!" Sigi screamed, almost madly. "That's not a gospel, that's a curse! Lord, you'll sweep them all away!" And Lenz? He stood silently next to a charred house, picked up coal from the ground, and drew a fist on the wall, large, threatening, until his fingers were black.

Götz laughed harshly, his iron fist raised. "I don't care if it's hope or a curse. It's my sign. And if they don't know my name anymore – the fist doesn't rust. It stays in the smoke."

The night was black with smoke, the stars vanished behind the ash. Götz sat alone on a hill, his iron fist on his knees, while the fields below still glowed like open wounds.

He looked down and knew: This was no longer war. This was no longer rebellion. This was a fire consuming itself. Peasants, princes, monasteries, castles—everything burned because it had long since decayed.

He laughed hoarsely, bitterly. "The empire was never strong. It was a haystack full of lies, and now someone has thrown the torch into it. Maybe it was me, maybe not. Screw it—now it's burning."

He clenched his iron fist, the iron glowing red from the firelight. "Iron rusts, they say. But not this one. Fire eats flesh, eats wood, eats stone—but iron remains. And when it rusts, it rusts with my name on it."

Behind him, he heard the gang sleeping. Jörg murmured in his dream and grinned as if he were dancing in the fire. Veit snored with the wine bottle in his arm, the smoke still in his throat. Grete slept soundly, the knife beside her, ready to stab even in hell. The priest babbled "Amen" as if he were holding mass with the devil himself. Sigi wept softly as if he had broken the whole

world in his heart. And Lenz—Lenz slept with coal in his hand, his fist carved into the wood, even in his dreams.

Götz looked at her, then back at the burning valley. "Perhaps I'll burn too. Perhaps the fire will take everything. But when the empire goes up in smoke, then they'll know: I was the iron in it. And iron doesn't rust."

He laughed, spat into the embers, and whispered, "I am not just the fist. I am the fire."

Imprisonment and intrigue

It wasn't a fight, no thunder of lances, no honest blow that brought Götz down. No – it was dirty, cowardly, underhanded. Just as princes always did when they wanted to break a man they could never have defeated in the open field.

Götz was traveling with the gang, through a valley that seemed so peaceful, as if the fires of the rebellion had never touched it. The fields were green, the birds were chirping—and he immediately smelled something rotten. "Too peaceful," he growled, his iron fist on the reins.

There was a crash from all sides. Crossbows flew, arrows whizzed. No open battle line—just a rain of ambushes. Two horses fell, Jörg bellowed, Veit shrieked like a madman, Grete drew her sword and screamed, "Treason!"

They had dug ditches, blocked the roads. An ambush of dozens of men, with nets, spears, and bolts. No jousting tournament, no noble duel—just a hunt. And Götz was the prey.

The priest howled, holding the cross high. "Amen, Lord, they come in the name of the devil!" Sigi trembled, lashing out in panic, but missing. Lenz fought silently, his knife flashing, but he knew it was hopeless.

Götz roared, his fist raised, and pulled one of the men from his horse, crushing his skull. A second fell as the fist drove its teeth through his neck. He laughed, wild, full of defiance. "Come here, you dogs! I'll take you all!"

But there were too many. They threw nets over him, chains clanged, hooks tore at his armor. A bolt struck him in the shoulder, a blow from the butt of the rifle against his helmet briefly robbed him of his vision.

He fell, his fist in the dust, his iron heavy as lead. Men threw themselves at him, beating, pulling, and tying him up. Even on the ground, he bit one of them in the ear, spitting out blood and teeth. "Fucking princes! You don't have the balls for an honest fight!"

But in the end, the chains were around him. Iron on his feet, iron on his hands—iron against iron.

The gang screamed, fought, and fled. Jörg was knocked to the ground by three spears, Veit ran into the bushes like an animal, Grete hacked her way free. Priest sang psalms as he lay in the dirt. Sigi collapsed, whimpering. And Lenz disappeared into the smoke, wordless, his eyes dark.

Götz knelt in the dust, blood dripping from his forehead, and he grinned, spitting in the faces of the princes who stepped forward. "You think you have me? You only have my flesh. My fist doesn't rust."

The first thing Götz heard was the clanging. Not his own iron, not the fist that had served him as a weapon and seal for years – but the chains they had placed around him. Leg irons, handcuffs, an iron ring around his neck. Like a dog.

He lay in a wagon, the wood hard beneath his back, the stench of sweat, blood, and hay in his nostrils. Every jerk made the chains rattle. They had bound him so tightly that he could barely breathe. "Fucking iron," he growled, "when it's not hanging from my fist, but from my neck."

He tried to stand up, pulling on the rings, but the chains were deeply embedded in the wood. He felt the weight, heavier than any armor. Not because it held him down—but because it suffocated his damned freedom.

Jörg wasn't there. Neither was Veit. Grete, Pfaffe, Sigi, Lenz—no one at his side. The gang was scattered, dead, fled, or disappeared somewhere in the smoke. For the first time in a long time, Götz was alone. Just him, the chains, and the clanging that hammered into his brain like mockery.

A guard rode beside the wagon, spat in the grass, and grinned. "Well, Berlichingen, feels different, doesn't it? No more fists, just a dog in a cage."

Götz laughed hoarsely, spitting blood at him. "Fucking dog? More like a wolf. And wolves eat guards when the chain breaks."

But inside, it was eating away at him. He, who had always built on iron, was now imprisoned by iron himself. No sword, no fist could help him when the

enemy put him in chains. For the first time, he had to realize: iron wasn't just freedom. Iron could also be a prison.

Night came, and the rattling of the chains was the only song that kept him awake. He smiled anyway, cynically, defiantly. "Let them tie me up. I've eaten worse. The chains hold my flesh – but no one can shut my mouth."

They led him not like a knight, not like a prisoner of standing—but like a showpiece, like a damned animal. They dragged him into the prince's courtyard, chains on his hands, feet, even his fists. Guards pulled him on hooks, so that he stumbled, fell, and was pulled up again. Every step was a mockery.

The hall was full of gentlemen. Furs, velvet, gold chains around their fat necks. Bishops with rings that gleamed like coffins. Faces red with wine and greed. And in the middle of it all was Götz, the dusty bastard with the iron hand and chains.

A prince, his mouth as fat as a pig, stepped forward. "There he is, the arsonist! The disgrace of the empire! Götz von Berlichingen – now nothing more than a dog in a cage!" The laughter echoed, long and piercing.

A bishop raised his finger, trembling with rage and wine. "He is the devil in the flesh! He seduces peasants and servants! He spits on the emperor and the church! We should hang him in the marketplace so everyone can see the devil die!"

Another prince laughed sarcastically. "Hang? No. A man like him is more valuable alive. We could set him against our enemies. Like a dog on a leash—only he'll bite if we want him to."

Götz grinned and spat a red lump into the reeds in front of the bishop's boots. "Dog, huh? If I am one, I'll eat your bones if the leash breaks."

The murmuring in the hall grew louder. Some laughed, others hissed in anger.

The Imperial Envoy, bringing parchments, read in a stiff voice: "In the name of the Empire, Götz von Berlichingen is accused of being a rebel, heretic, robber, and disgrace. His fate will be discussed."

Jörg, Veit, Grete, Pfaffe, Sigi, Lenz—no one was there. Only he, alone in the courtyard full of hyenas. And he knew: No judgment was being passed here. This was a game being played. Everyone wanted him as a pawn in their chess game, not as a man.

He laughed, loudly, dirty, mockingly. "You want advice? Shitty advice. One wants to hang me, another wants to buy me, the next wants to tame me. But you know what? No rope can keep my mouth shut. And my mouth has already fucked all of you before you tie the rope."

The hall erupted. Rage, laughter, screams. The prince was red as a pig. The bishop shrieked, "Heretic!" The envoy was pale, helpless. But amidst all the noise, Götz sat there—chains on his body, but free in his mouth.

While Götz sat in chains before the princes, what had once been his bonds broke outside. Without the core, without the fist, everything fell apart like a barrel losing its frost.

JörgHe was last seen in an inn, his axe still bloody, his mouth full of scorn. He boasted that he would continue fighting alone, that he could slay twenty knights. But when the prince's riders arrived, he disappeared into the night. Some said he had been slain, others that he had joined another band.

VeitHe drank his way across the country, grinning as if it were all just a joke. But without Götz's fist, he was just a drunk with a loud mouth. He got into tavern fights, got beaten up, and ended up in the dirt. In the end, it was said he died in a ditch, his mouth still full of wine.

GreteShe remained cool, pure in her blood. She moved on, stole, murdered, but without Götz's shadow, she was nothing more than a knife without a sheath. Some said she was hunted down and burned by the prince's servants. Others said she had found a new life—but no one knew for sure.

PriestThe madman with the cross continued preaching, shouting about his fist as if it were God's new Bible. Peasants followed him briefly, praying with him, but when the knights arrived, they dispersed. The priest disappeared—perhaps in the dungeon, perhaps on the gallows, perhaps still on the streets, screaming like a madman.

SigiHe was falling apart. Everyone said so. Without Götz, without the gang, he was nothing but a wreck. He slunk through villages like a shadow, begging, crying, muttering of fire and blood. A ghost more than a man.

LenzThe Silent One. He appeared like a phantom, carving his fists into walls, trees, and doors. No one knew where he was. Some swore he wanted to free Götz, others said he was just quietly building the legend.

So it was: the bonds that had shaken an empire lay in pieces. Everyone went their own way, scattered, lost.

And Götz, in chains, heard it from the guards, who mockingly fed him rumors. He laughed, even though his stomach burned. "Screw it," he growled, "the Fist was never a bunch. The Fist was me. And I'm sitting here—not them."

The princes had him in their hands – but no one knew what to do with him. And so Götz was no longer treated like a knight, not even like an enemy. He was a coin they tossed back and forth; everyone wanted him, no one wanted to spend him.

They squatted in the hall, fat and sated, and argued about him. "Hang him!" roared a bishop, the veins in his neck thick as ropes. "He is the devil who has seduced peasants and servants. His mouth is poison, and poison must be burned!"

A prince struck back, his face red with wine. "No! Dead, he's worthless. Alive, he's a tool. We let him ride against our enemies, like a dog we chain. He bites, and we guide him."

Another nodded coldly. "Yes. We use his legend. The farmers tremble at his name, the traders at his fist. If we tame him, their fear will be ours."

But there were also voices of fear. An old councilor whispered with a trembling voice: "A man like him cannot be tamed. Chains hold his flesh, not his legend. If we keep him, he'll eat us from the inside. Better we throw him at the Emperor's feet so he can decide."

Meanwhile, Götz sat in the dungeon, hearing the voices echoing above him as if they were thunder. He laughed, spitting blood and mucus onto the floor. "Dogs fighting over a piece of bone. No one notices that the bone is still biting."

The gang was scattered, the kingdom was in smoke, and the princes above haggled over him as if he were a horse at the market. But none of them had the guts to look him in the eye.

And so he remained, in chains but unbroken, amidst a web of intrigue. A peasant hater wanted him dead, a prince wanted him as a tool, a bishop wanted him as a sin, a councilman wanted to be rid of him. Everyone pulled at him – and no one dared to strike.

The dungeon was damp, stank of mold, urine, and cold ash. Rats scurried across the floor as if they were the true masters of the place. The chains scraped against his wrists, iron upon iron, a mockery of everything he had stood for.

But Götz grinned. Even here, in the darkness, his mouth was sharper than any sword.

A guard approached the cell, a fat man with piggish eyes, a cup of wine in his hand. "Well, Iron Fist," he sneered, "now you're just a lame dog. No banner, no bonds. Just chains."

Götz laughed hoarsely and spat a glob of blood against the bars. "Dog, okay? Then come in, and I'll bite your balls off."

The guard hissed and struck the bars with his spear. Sparks flew, the clanging echoed. But he didn't go in.

The next day, a bishop arrived, gold rings on his fingers, his hands softer than a nun's skin. He stepped close to the cell and stared down at Götz. "You are the devil. A disgrace. A godless man who exalts himself above the emperor and the church. You will end up in the fire."

Götz grinned, his iron fist raised as far as the chains allowed. "Fire? Fucking fire. I am the fire. And you're just an old fart who thinks his god pisses on wine. Fuck off before I ram your cross up your ass."

The bishop blushed and crucified him with his eyes – but he left, and his footsteps echoed like defeat.

Even the princes themselves sometimes came, in the dark, to see him like a circus animal. They whispered, plotted, and boasted. But Götz spat at them all—with words harder than steel.

"You have my flesh," he laughed, "but you don't have my mouth. And as long as I can spit, you'll rust faster than my fist."

The guards grumbled, the lords hissed, the priests cursed. But no one could take away his defiance. In the dungeon, in the filth, in chains – he was still Götz von Berlichingen.

The nights in the dungeon were longer than a lifetime. Drops fell from the ceiling, always in the same rhythm, like the ticking of a clock that pointed only

to death. The rats smacked their lips, somewhere a guard snored. Everything was dull, heavy, dead.

And yet, Götz sensed that the chains weren't the worst of it. No, they were just pieces of iron. The real poison lurked above, in the halls of the princes, where intrigues were plotted in soft beds. There they pulled the strings, there they dismantled men like chess pieces.

"Chains hold my flesh," he murmured into the darkness, "but you play with my name. And that's worse. A rope breaks the neck, but a lie breaks the man."

He thought of Jörg, Veit, Grete, Pfaffe, Sigi, Lenz—the gang scattered, each one in their own chaos. Perhaps dead, perhaps alive, perhaps long-since traitors. And he knew: It wasn't the iron on his arm that made him weak, but the net they all wrapped around him.

But he grinned, his teeth bleeding. "Fucking intrigue. As long as I can laugh, as long as I can spit, as long as I can talk a bishop into his ass—I'm free."

He raised his fist as far as the chains allowed. Iron against iron. "You think you have me. But I am still the rust in your realm. I'm slowly eating you from the inside. And if I rot here—my name won't rot."

The darkness was silent. Only the dripping, the rattling of chains. And Götz laughed, deep, ragged, defiant. A laugh that was thicker than any parchment, harder than any oath, louder than any judgment.

The Imperial Ban

They made a spectacle of it. No silent judgment in a back room, no secret memo. No – the princes wanted the whole damned world to see how they finally brought the "arsonist of the empire" to his knees.

In Nuremberg, Augsburg, Worms—everywhere the messengers shouted it out. In marketplaces, in front of churches, in villages. Parchment rolls were unfurled, the voice boomed over the mob:

"In the name of the Emperor and the Holy Reich of the German Nation, Götz von Berlichingen is declared outlawed. He is an outlaw, without rights, without

honor. Anyone may persecute him, no one may give him shelter. Whoever protects him will lose his property, his life, his salvation."

The reactions were divided.

The peasants heard it and whispered, some with tears in their eyes: "Our Götz... an outlaw..." Others grinned defiantly: "Screw it, now he's one of us. A man without a master."

The princes toasted each other, fat and smug. "The bastard has finally fallen. The emperor has crushed him."

The church sang hymns of joy as if they themselves had driven the devil from the kingdom. Bishops sweated in golden robes and preached: "The heretic is outlawed, God has triumphed!"

And the people? The old saying "Kiss my ass!" echoed on the streets again—this time not as a curse against Götz, but as a response to the verdict itself.

And Götz? He stood in the princes' courtyard, chains on his hands and feet, as the verdict was read. His iron fist gleamed in the sunlight, rusty and heavy. He grinned, spat on the ground, and growled:

"Outlaw? Shitty word. A bird is free, and I've always been free. Your eight is nothing but parchment. My iron is worth more than your entire empire."

The men raged, screamed, and clenched their fists. But the crowd laughed, roared, and murmured. The ban had been cast, yes—but it had already removed the sting: it had turned shame into a badge of honor.

They wanted a spectacle, not a judgment. A triumphant procession over the man who had spit in their mouths for years. So they dragged him into the courtyard, chains rattling, as if he were a bear for a fair.

The gentlemen squatted on their chairs, furs over their fat bodies, goblets in hand. The sun was shining, and they grinned as if this were a tournament they had all won.

The herald stepped forward, the roll of parchment in his hands, his voice swollen with importance:

"Götz von Berlichingen, called the one with the iron hand, is hereby declared an outlaw. All his property, all his rights, all his honor – are forfeited. He is

without protection, without rights, without a future. Whoever kills him commits no sin. Whoever helps him shares his fate."

The crowd of onlookers went wild. Some laughed, others booed, some spat in his face. Women screamed "Devil!" Men roared "Death to the traitor!" Children threw stones, which rattled off the chains.

And the princes laughed, drank, and toasted each other. "Look, the bastard has fallen! The empire has broken him!"

But Götz? He stood, his iron fist raised as high as his chains allowed. He grinned, bloody, his lips torn, and roared across the courtyard:

"Broken? You bastards think I'm broken? Your eight is parchment. Your honor is filth. Your titles are nothing but paper crowns. I stand here, in irons, and I still spit in your mouths!"

The crowd murmured, fell silent, some laughed. Even in mockery, he was still a king. The princes raged, screamed, gasped for breath—but no one could drown out the iron in his voice.

So they brought a herald bearing an old coat of arms: the colors of the Berlichingen family, the symbol that had stood for his family for generations. In full view of everyone, it was torn down and thrown into the dirt. A young knight stepped forward, drew his dagger, and cut the banner to pieces.

"This is no longer the mark of a knight," he cried pathetically. "This is the rag of a traitor."

The crowd cheered, some laughed, others spat. For the gentlemen, it was a celebration: a man stripped of everything that had once made him one of them.

A bishop approached, dressed in gold and fur, his voice thick with malice: "In the name of the Church, we withdraw God's protection from you. No mass, no prayer will save you. Your flesh is dust, your soul is given to the devil."

And Götz? He laughed hoarsely, spat on the ground, his iron fist raised. "God's protection? Screw it. Your god is a cowardly dog who drinks at your table. I have my fist—and it doesn't rust."

They took his signet ring, sword, banner, and title. A herald stepped forward and read the formula: "Götz von Berlichingen is hereby no longer a knight. He is without rights, without honor, and outlawed."

The princes grinned, the crowd roared, the church nodded in satisfaction.

But the fist—the iron fist—they couldn't take that away from him. It glowed in the sunlight, defiant, unbreakable, as if it were a thorn in the flesh of the entire empire.

And Götz grinned, bloody and ragged. "You can take everything from me—title, land, seal, your damned protection. But you won't get my fist. And it will crush your balls in your dreams."

The Imperial ban had struck the entire empire like a thunderclap—and even the scattered band, torn apart, heard the rumbling. Everyone reacted in their own damned way.

Jörgsat in a tavern, his axe against the wall, his fingers greasy from the roast. When the herald read the verdict, he laughed so loudly that his wine cup tipped over. "Outlawed? Ha! Then he's freer than all of us! Damn the eight, damn the princes—Götz will still eat them if he escapes." But there was also fear in his eyes: He knew that if they could banish the lord, none of them would be safe.

Veit staggered through a marketplace, half-drunk, when he heard the words. He roared along, shouting, "Kiss my ass!"—and slapped the parchment out of a messenger's hand. But later, lying in a ditch, he muttered, "Without the Lord, we are just dogs that no one feeds anymore."

Grete heard it in a strange village, a dagger at her belt, a cool gaze. She simply murmured, "So they've finally made him a wolf. Good. A wolf lives longer than a dog." Then she disappeared back into the shadows, as if she herself were an outlaw.

Priest He went completely berserk. He preached in the streets, his cross raised high: "Look! The fist is cursed, and yet it is the sign of God! The emperor has banished it, but God himself has sanctified it!" Peasants and beggars listened, laughed, cried, screamed—he became both prophet and madman.

Sigis at in a stable, his hands shaking, his eyes red. He wept, muttering, "Outlawed... outlawed... that means dead, sir... that means they'll turn you to dust." He drank until he fell over, and no one knew if he'd ever get up again.

Lenz was silent as always. But at night, people found new symbols: the fist, carved into walls, bridges, and doors. Beneath it, the word: Outlaw. He turned the sentence into a banner that spread like fire.

And so, while the gang fell to pieces, the defiance lived on—each in his own way. And Götz, in chains, grinned when he heard the rumors. "They think I'm alone. But my shadow sits in each of them. And you can't hang shadows."

People were now talking about him even more everywhere. In taverns, peasants roared: "The emperor has banished him! Outlawed! Do you know what that means? He's one of us now!" Merchants told stories of how he had spat in the prince's mouth and made him a cursed spirit of the country roads. Children played knights and robbers—but everyone wanted to be Götz, no one the prince.

The princes wrung their hands. "We have outlawed him! Why does his name continue to grow?" A bishop raged: "He's an outlaw, damn it! Why do the peasants recite his curse as if it were gospel?" A councilor muttered: "Because words are more important than judgments. Because parchment burns, but the rust remains."

Even in the emperor's court, people trembled at the irony: they had taken away his rights and rank – but that was precisely what made him the most vibrant of all rebels.

And Götz? He sat in the dungeon, the iron chains cutting raw into his skin, and laughed. "They wanted to turn me to dust – now I'm smoke. Smoke drifts everywhere, eats into every crack, and no one can get it out. Damn it! With every curse they hurl at me, my teeth grow."

The greatest irony was: For the lords, outlawing meant "without rights." For the peasants, it meant "freer than any prince." And so the legend lived on not despite, but because of the ban.

They led him before the crowd once more, the parchment scroll in hand, the herald's voice hollow and important. Again the same words: "Outlawed, without rights, without honor..."

But this time Götz grinned, bloody, defiant, his iron fist raised as high as the chains allowed.

"Dishonorable?" he roared across the courtyard. "You never gave me honor, so you can't take it away! Without rights? Your rights are nothing but a noose

around the peasants' necks! If that's what the law looks like, then I don't give a damn! Outlawed? You think that's a curse? This is my victory! I am free as the dirt in the wind, free as the smoke in the sky, free as the fire you cannot extinguish!"

The crowd murmured. Some booed, others grinned, still others shouted "Fuck you!" – loudly, defiantly, as if it were an anthem.

A prince jumped up, red-faced, and spat with rage: "He mocks us, even in chains! Hang him!" But another, pale, just shook his head. "Hang him, and he'll be a martyr. Let him live, and he'll be a ghost."

Götz laughed hoarsely and spat on the ground. "Exactly. You have a choice: hang me so my name grows, or let me live so I can continue to devour you. Whichever way you look at it—you're the losers."

And so he stood there: chains on his body, but unbroken. A man who turned shame into a badge of honor. The imperial ban was meant to destroy him – instead, he wore it like a crown.

The night after the announcement was silent. No more jeering, no more mocking, no more shouting—only the dripping in the dungeon, the rattling of the chains, the crackling of the fire outside in the guard rooms.

Götz sat in the darkness, his iron fist on his knees, the iron cutting raw into his skin. He sensed: Something had come to an end.

He was no longer a knight. No seal, no banner, no parchment crown. The empire had taken away his title, the church his salvation, the princes his rights. Everything that had once bound him to their society – gone.

And yet he laughed. Quietly, harshly, like someone with blood in their throat who still spits it out.

"Fucking knights. Fucking honor. Fucking titles. All crap. I don't need an emperor to tell me who I am. I'm the one with the fist. And the fist doesn't rust."

He saw the rat scurrying through the dungeon, fast, free, outlawed. "That's what they call me now," he muttered. "Outlawed. A man without rights, without protection. But what does that mean? It means I'm free from their fucking game. Free from their lies. Free from their God."

He grinned, clenched his iron fist, the chains clanging. "I am no longer a knight. I am no longer a prisoner. I am Wolf. I am Faust. I am what they fear when they lock their castles at night. And none of them will ever sleep peacefully again as long as I breathe."

And in that moment, deep in the dungeon, in chains, without rank or rights, he became more than ever before. Not a knight, not a lord, not a vassal—but a symbol. The man who, even in exile, was still invincible.

On your own

The chains clanged, the iron bit deep into the skin—but no iron lasts forever. Especially not a bastard like Götz von Berlichingen.

It began on a night so dark that even the rats were wary. The dungeon stank of piss and mold, the guards were drunk, keys dangled loosely from their belts. One of the servants—perhaps bribed, perhaps just fed up with all the scorn—didn't let the door close properly.

Götz noticed it immediately. He grinned, pulled on the chains, flexed his muscles. One jerk, another – the wood of the bench to which he was tied broke. Iron clanged, sparks flew, and then he lay half-exposed, his iron fist gleaming in the moonlight that filtered through the bars.

A guard staggered forward, his eyes glazed over. "Back off, dog..." But Götz grabbed him with his fist, yanking him against the bars until bones cracked. The ring of keys clattered to the floor. Götz bent down and picked it up—the iron chain rubbed flesh from his skin, but he laughed hoarsely: "Shitty eight. Shitty chains. Now it's my turn."

He untied the rings, one by one. Each fell to the ground like a judgment that no longer counted. When the last shackle clanged, he stood up, heavy, sore, but free. His iron fist clenched as if it had been waiting for this very moment.

He crept through the corridor, blood dripping from his arms, his footsteps echoing. Two guards sat by the fireplace, laughing, rolling dice. They saw him, the dice rolled from their hands—and before they could scream, a fist was in their faces. One fell with a broken neck, the other with his teeth stuck in his throat.

Götz wiped away the blood and grabbed a sword. "Now," he murmured, "now I'm really on my own."

He stepped out into the night. The sky was filled with smoke, the wind smelled of burnt wood. Free—but outlawed. Hunted, banished, cursed. But he didn't give a damn.

He raised his iron fist to the sky, grinning into the darkness: "Come on, you dogs. I bite harder than ever."

Freedom stank of smoke and mold. No more farm, no roof over his head, no hall full of food and wine. Instead, forests rotting in the fog, castle ruins full of rats, fields where he only rested at night because any farmer could betray him.

Götz was truly a wolf now. He slept under trees, his cloak over him, his fist buried in the leaves. He ate whatever he found—dry bread, stolen chickens, sometimes half a deer if he caught it with a bolt. No more feasting, just cold meat that tasted of blood and earth.

And he was hunted everywhere. Notices on church doors everywhere: "Whoever helps Berlichingen will lose his property. Whoever kills him will be rewarded." Sometimes he heard the villagers whispering as he crept into the darkness to fetch water. "He's out there... the one with the fist... a wolf in the woods..."

Some cursed him, out of fear. Some remained silent, out of defiance. Some smiled secretly, as if to say, "Keep burning, Götz. Burn for us."

The nights were the worst. When he lay alone, he heard the princes' dogs barking in the distance. He knew he was being hunted like an animal. He was no longer a knight, no longer a lord—just a shadow with iron.

But he grinned anyway, rubbing his iron fist against the stone until sparks flew. "Shitty hunting," he muttered. "You don't chase a wolf—it chases back."

The forests became his home, the ruins his castles, the fire in the darkness his only counsel. He was an outlaw—but for the first time, he was also free from everything that had bound him. No titles, no masters, no laws. Just him and his fist.

One man alone doesn't survive long, especially when half of Europe is after his skin. So Götz did what he always did: He attracted people like moths to a flame.

No more knights, no more honorable servants—but those who were just as outlawed as he was.

The first was a runaway servant whose fingers had been chopped off by his master for stealing bread. He joined Götz, grinning with his mutilated hand and saying, "I'd rather die with you in the forest than starve to death in the stable again."

Then came a whore, fleeing a burning city. She brought knives hidden in stockings and a tongue sharper than Götz's curses. "Men want to use me," she laughed, "then I'll use them. But you, Faustmann, I'll follow, because you don't belong to a dog."

A few mercenaries appeared, deserters from princely armies. Tired, hungry, half-mad from slaughter. They no longer wanted pay, only loot and a master who wouldn't stab them in the back. "Better a wolf in the forest than a dog in the army," they said.

A miller, whose mill had been burned down, joined in. A quiet, broad man who could hurl stones like thunder. He hardly spoke, but when he laughed, you could hear the anger whistling through his teeth.

And so a new band grew. Not a band fighting like knights—but robbers, outlaws, and outcasts. Each with scars, each with rage.

They slept in the forest, drank whenever they found wine, emptied chicken coops, and attacked merchant trains. And every time they struck, they called out one name: Berlichingen.

Götz stood among them, his iron fist raised. "You're outlawed? Good. Then you're free. No princes, no priests, no damned laws. Only the iron we hold and the courage no one can buy. From today on, you won't fight for the emperor, not for the church, not even for the peasants. You'll fight on your own—and my fist won't rust."

The gang roared, clashed cups, and drew blades. They weren't knights—they were a pack of wolves. And Götz was their alpha.

No sooner had the new bond been forged than the empire began to tremble again. No battle banners, no trumpets, no courtly chatter—only smoke, blood, and the sound of iron striking in the darkness.

Their first blow struck a trading convoy. Barrels full of wine, carts of cloth and salt, guarded by mercenaries who cared more about their pay than their jobs. Götz and his outlaws rushed out of the forest like wolves. Two mercenaries fell immediately, a third ran, the rest knelt. "Berlichingen!" the merchants cried when they saw him. "The outlaw!" – and they surrendered everything without him having to strike another blow.

The second act was more brutal. A small castle, the seat of a vassal who boasted of hanging peasants who whispered Götz's name. At night, the gang crept over the walls, slit the throats of guards, and opened the gates. Götz charged forward, smashing doors and dragging the lord of the castle from his bed.

"You wanted to hang peasants?" he growled. "Then hang yourself." And so it happened—at your own gate, with your own ropes.

The news spread like wildfire: The outlaw was alive, and he struck harder than ever. Princes began placing double guards at their castles. Merchants prayed as they departed. Priests muttered curses over his fist. But the people laughed, roared, and told legends that were wilder than the truth.

And the gang grew with every blow. More deserters, more outlaws, more lost souls joined. They lived on loot, wine, and revenge. They celebrated in the woods, danced around fires, and shouted the same thing over and over again: "On your own!"

Götz stood, his iron fist raised, blood and wine dripping onto the ground. "Let them hunt me down. Let them banish me. With every blow I strike, my name laughs louder. I am no longer a knight. I am their nightmare."

The revengeful attacks fell like thunder upon a country that believed Götz had been broken. Instead of peace following the imperial ban, unrest came – like a plague that could not be banished.

The princes raged in their halls. "The bastard has been banished! Outlawed!" they cried, tearing parchments in half as if that would silence him. They doubled their guards, sent mercenary troops into the forests—but every sortie only brought back more dead. A councilor groaned, "He's like rust. The more we scratch, the faster he eats through."

The merchants trembled. At the markets, the message was: "If you take the road to Heilbronn, pray three times that you don't get a fist in your back."

Some hesitated to even drive, so great was their fear of running into Götz in the forest.

The church was in a frenzy. Sermons echoed through the cathedrals: "Götz von Berlichingen, the one with the iron fist, is Satan himself! Whoever feeds him feeds hell!" But even in the pews, people whispered: "He lives with his fist... and he laughs at everyone."

And the peasants? They rejoiced secretly. By the fire, in the taverns, behind closed doors. "He hanged a castle lord at his own gate!" they said. "He drinks the merchants' wine, he takes the rich men's gold, and restores the princes' shame." For them, he was not just an outlaw—he was a hero, a mirror of their rage.

The empire trembled. Not because he led armies—but because he showed that one man alone, with one fist, could mock all their laws and parchments.

And Götz? He heard the rumors in the forest and grinned, his fist raised in the firelight. "Good. Let them curse, let them tremble, let them pray. As long as my name burns their throats, I've won."

The fires of vengeance burned brightly, but cold crept between the flames. For bird freedom was not a celebration—it was also misery, hunger, restlessness.

After a raid, they sat in the forest, their blood still fresh, their wine half-empty. The gang laughed and roared, but Götz remained silent. He chewed dry bread, felt the rain seeping through his coat, his wounds oozing. No roof, no home, no rest.

The night crept into his bones, and he knew: This was not the way a knight lived. This was the way a dog, on the run, lived.

Sometimes, as he crept through villages, he saw people's looks on. Not everyone cheered. Some whispered, "He brings only destruction. Wherever he appears, houses burn, and punishment follows." He heard children cry when his name was mentioned.

And he knew they weren't entirely wrong. Wherever he struck, the princes struck back—and the peasants paid the price.

One night he sat alone by the fire, his fist glowing in the light. He murmured: "Am I free—or am I damned? I have no home left, no rights, no honor. Only iron. Iron and rust."

The gang noticed. Jörg grinned, but his eyes were tired. "Lord, we live well – as long as we live." Veit downed the rest of his wine. "Fucking doubts. Cheers until the sun can't find us anymore." Grete said coldly: "Freedom devours. It devours you, Lord. But better devoured than enslaved." Priest howled ecstatically: "Amen! That is true freedom – no god, no emperor, only blood!" Sigi trembled, whispering: "That's not life... that's just dying in installments." And Lenz? He remained silent, carved his fist into a piece of wood – this time with cracks, broken, as if he already saw the end.

Götz stared into the fire, laughing hoarsely. "Screw it. Doubt is for those who still have something to lose. I only have my fist left – and it doesn't rust."

The morning smelled of wet wood; the fire had long since turned to ash. The gang slept scattered among the leaves, like a bunch of outcasts who had no home even in their dreams. Only Götz was awake.

He sat there, his iron fist on his knees, his face etched with smoke. He thought back: to castles, to feasts, to battles fought in the name of the emperor. All that was gone—burned, betrayed, banished. No coat of arms, no seal, no "Lord of Berlichingen."

What remained was him. He alone, with iron in his hand and fire in his mouth.

"Knights?" he muttered into the gray of the morning. "Fucking knights. They sit in castles, drink wine, and sell their honor for parchment." "Emperor?" He laughed hoarsely. "A shadow on a throne with more piss than blood in its veins."

"God?" He spat into the embers. "If he exists, he's laughing his ass off that I'm still alive."

He raised his fist, holding it to the first light of day. The iron glowed dully, rusty, but indestructible. "This is me. No knight, no vassal, no servant. Just the fist. Outlawed—but free. A wolf in the shadows, and wolves need no master."

Behind him, the gang stirred. Jörg rubbed his eyes, Veit reached for the wine, Grete sharpened her knife, Priest murmured prayers into the void, Sigi trembled, Lenz scratched symbols into the wood again. Each one broken, each one burned—and yet all of them their own pack.

Götz grinned, stood up, and spat into the morning. "So be it. I am no longer the Knight of Berlichingen. I am the Fist. And anyone who gets in my way will learn it."

The Hunt for the Rebel

The emperor was fed up. Fed up of rumors about the "outlaw," fed up of peasants bellowing "On your own!" in the tavern, fed up of princes complaining that their roads were unsafe, their castles mocked, their pockets empty.

So he summoned the scribes. With a heavy hand, greasy with wine, he signed his name on a parchment worth more blood than any battle:

"In the name of the Empire, Götz von Berlichingen, known as the one with the iron hand, shall be brought before the Emperor, dead or alive. Whoever protects him is an enemy of the Empire. Whoever hunts him down and brings him back shall be rewarded with gold, land, and mercy."

The messengers carried it to every city. They nailed wanted posters to marketplaces. Crudely drawn pictures: a man with a beard, with an iron fist. Below: Outlaw. Reward for the capture.

Children stared at the drawings and whispered. Merchants crossed themselves. Farmers grinned furtively. Princes fumed, finally sensing their chance to hunt him down like a rabid animal.

And soon they swarmed out. Troops of mercenaries, drunken dogs with iron hats and greed in their eyes. Knights, proud and stupid, who believed it was an honor to hunt down an outlaw. Servants who betrayed their neighbors for a piece of bread.

The hunt was on.

And Götz? He heard it in the shadow of a ruin, as a beggar pulled the wanted poster out from under his coat. He grinned and spat into the fire.

"Dead or alive," he muttered, his iron fist raised. "Fuck it. I'm alive—and as long as I'm alive, I'll chase them back."

The empire vibrated like a disturbed anthill. As soon as the order was announced, the hunters rushed in. Knights, mercenaries, spies, peasant farmhands—all smelled blood, all scented gold.

In the cities, wanted posters hung on every corner. "Götz von Berlichingen – outlawed, dead or alive." Crude drawings with an iron fist, including a bounty large enough to feed an entire village for a winter.

Children pointed at the pictures, giggling. Old men murmured, "The wolf is being hunted." Women whispered, "If he falls, so will our hope."

The mercenaries moved through the villages in packs, sniffing around like dogs. They stormed houses, searched stables, and tore down doors. A farmer who hesitated too long got the butt of a rifle in his face. One, who claimed he had never seen Götz, was nailed to the barn door as a warning sign.

The princes sent their servants into the forests: hundreds of men with spears, crossbows, and dogs. They cut paths through the undergrowth and set fire to bushes to drive the wolf out of cover.

The church preached from the pulpits: "Whoever hides the outlaw shares his damnation! God himself has cast him out!" And yet, after the mass, peasants whispered: "God lives. The fist doesn't rust."

Grete, crouching next to Götz at the edge of the forest, growled: "They search every nest. One moment of carelessness, and we're hanging." Jörg grinned, drawing his axe. "Let them come. The more, the more skulls." Veit slurred wine and slurred: "Hunting? Ha! Cheers, sir, we are the deer that bite back." Priest roared ecstatically: "Amen! They're hunting us—but it's God's hunt for sinners, and we are the Lord's dogs!" Sigi trembled, his eyes wide. "We... we can't run forever. There are too many of them. Too many." And Lenz? He silently carved into the bark of a tree: a fist pierced by arrows—and yet still standing.

Götz spat into the embers and laughed hoarsely. "Let them search. I'm not a deer. I'm the wolf. And wolves kill the dogs they hunt."

They lived like shadows. No fire to be seen. No path to be walked twice. No word louder than the rustling of leaves.

At one point, they huddled in an abandoned chapel, its roof half-collapsed and its altar shattered. Rain dripped through the cracks, they lay in the mud, smelling the mold—but no one dared to curse out loud.

Then they fled into a cave, deep in the forest, full of bats and a stench. The smoke from the torch crept down their throats, the walls cold as iron. Jörg grumbled, "Shitty hole. Even the rats have it better." But he stayed—for the princes' hounds lurked outside.

Sometimes they found ruins, old castles long since eaten away by moss. There they lay down in the cold stones, like ghosts no one saw.

The band grew thin. Bread was rare, meat even rarer. They lived on stolen chicken, rainwater, and whatever they could snatch from the fields at night.

Grete chewed hard bread and said coolly, "That's not how a knight lives. That's how a wolf lives." Veit laughed hoarsely, wine dripping from his mouth. "A thirsty wolf, sir. Do you have more?" Priest cried softly to himself, the cross in his arms: "Amen, we are the angels of darkness!" Sigi whimpered, shivering, as if he heard the dogs in every rustle. And Lenz? He carved a fist into the stone of the ruin, deep, as if he wanted to bury the legend there.

Götz looked at them all, his fist heavy on his knee. "No court, no home, no god, no emperor. Just us. They hunt us – and we still live. Shitty shadow life? Maybe. But a shadow can bite."

They thought they had the wolf in the bag. But every time a troop came too close, every time dogs barked and armor clanged, Götz struck back. Not like a knight in open battle, but like a shadow with teeth.

Once, a troop of mercenaries came through the forest, six men, armed with iron, full of greed. They crept, cursed, and held torches high. Then Götz burst out of the darkness, his iron fist first. One fell, his skull bursting like a melon. Jörg hacked down the second, Grete slit the throat of the third, Veit shouted "Cheers!" and stabbed blindly. The rest fled—leaving their torches in the dirt.

Another time, it was a knight, young, stupid, proud, out hunting for his lords. "Berlichingen!" he cried when he saw him, "stand up!" But Götz didn't stand up. He yanked him off his horse, kicked the sword out of his hand, and pressed his iron fist against his face. "Stand up? Screw it. I'll stand you in the ground." And he did.

And again, at a crossroads, a dozen servants attacked, armed with spears and nets. They thought they could catch him like an animal. But Götz's band burst out of the forest. Blood spurted, screams echoed, and the priest roared "Amen!" as he smashed one of them in the head. In the end, the dozen men lay in the dust, their fists red up to the elbow.

The news spread. "Beware," whispered traders, "he lurks in the woods." "Even the knights are falling," whispered servants, "one by one." "Don't chase him too close," warned mercenaries, "or the wolf will bite."

And Götz laughed, blood still dripping from his fist. "You call it hunting? Shitty hunting. I'm the hunter. I'm the wolf, and they're the dogs who howl when I crack their bones."

Weeks of hunting ate into the gang's bones. It was no longer a heroic adventure, no longer a frenzy of blood and wine – it was misery.

The princes' dogs barked every night. They could be heard from afar, like thunder, like the hammering of a judgment. Every sound in the forest sounded like pursuers. Every cracking branch made Sigi flinch, as if the rope were already around his neck.

Stomachs growled. The bread was moldy, the meat stank, the water was brackish. Jörg grumbled, Veit drank, Grete gritted her teeth, the priest babbled psalms, Lenz remained silent. But the faces grew thinner, the eyes deeper.

The nights crept by. Cold gnawed at their bones, rain turned the ground into a swamp. They wrapped themselves in rags, fists in their hands, and stared into nothingness.

And above all, the pressure: the wanted posters, the reward, the whispering peasants. Everyone knew that one wrong word, one wrong look could betray them.

One evening, in the shadow of a ruin, Sigi collapsed. "Lord... we can't go on... the hunt is eating us... we're just bones." He wept, his hands shaking. Veit laughed bitterly, downing the last drop of wine. "Screw it. I'd rather drink until the rope catches me." Grete said coolly, "Drink or cry, I don't care. Just don't die quietly, otherwise it will all be for nothing." Priest roared, "Amen! The Reich wants to hunt us—but we are God's hunters!" Jörg growled, pounding his fist into the ground. "We aren't dead until we're dead." And Lenz? He dragged a lump of coal against a stone wall with his fist—this time torn, as if it were about to break apart.

Götz saw them all, heard their misery, felt it in his own bones. But he laughed, harshly, bloodily. "Fucking pressure. Let it crush us. I've taken worse. As long as the fist goes up, I'm not down."

The hunt became fiercer, colder, more systematic. It was no longer a case of wild wandering—now the princes pulled the net like fishermen who know full well that a wolf is wriggling in the water.

Profiles hung in every village, larger, more threatening. The bounty grew. Worth half a peasant's life for whoever brought Götz's head. Some saw the fist on the parchment and crossed themselves; others licked their lips for gold.

Patrols They combed the forests in rhythm. No longer ten men with dogs, but hundreds of men cutting paths, setting fires, and closing circles. Every forest in which Götz hid became smaller, narrower, hotter.

villages were tortured. Peasants were whipped, their children dragged to the doors. "Tell me where he was! Tell me if he was here!" Some spoke, others died.

The gang felt it. Jörg growled, the axe heavier than ever. "They're no longer hunting us like game. They're driving us like pigs." Veit slurred, blood and wine in his beard. "Shitty net. Let them pull it. I'll piss through their mesh." Grete looked coolly into the flames. "They'll catch us. The only question is: alive or dead." Priest cried ecstatically: "Amen! We're the fish in the net—but fish with teeth!" Sigi broke, trembled, muttered: "It's too tight... too tight... no way out..." And Lenz? He carved a fist into the earth, surrounded by circles. A wolf, encircled.

Götz heard the dogs, heard the hunters' drums. He stood, his iron fist raised, his face hard as steel. "Shitty net. I'm not a fish. I'm the hook that will tear you apart if you pull."

The night was black, no moon, no stars, only the barking of dogs in the distance. Götz sat alone, his iron fist in his lap, his face full of shadows. The gang slept restlessly, one whimpering, one cursing, one praying.

He thought, "The Empire thinks I'm prey. A hunted animal that they'll eventually tire out until it falls. But they're wrong."

He laughed hoarsely, the echo echoing through the trees. "I am not a stag, not a deer that runs until the dogs tear it apart. I am the wolf. And a wolf may be hunted—but it bites back. Anyone who chases it risks having its throat in its mouth."

He remembered the castles he had torn down, the princes he had mocked, the peasants who had whispered to him as a hero. All this, despite the ban, despite the chains. "They hunt me because they fear me. And they fear me because they know that as long as I bite, I live."

The gang woke up. Jörg grumbled, "Sir, what now? They're everywhere." Veit grinned, half drunk. "Let them come. Cheers to the dogs." Grete looked hard into the fire. "We die when we run. We live when we fight." Priest shouted, "Amen! Hunt or judgment, we are the Lord's fist!" Sigi trembled but nodded weakly. And Lenz? He drew a fist in the dust—this time with teeth.

Götz stood up, clenched his iron fist, and spat into the darkness. "You call me the hunted? Screw it. I'll chase you back. I am the shadow in the forest, the iron in the night. Hunter and hunted – one and the same. And I swear: I won't fall still. I'll fall while I bite you."

Lost Friends

It didn't happen in a battle, not with trumpets and heroic songs - but in the dirt of a forest, so casually that it seemed almost banal.

They were on the run, pursued by mercenaries leading dogs on leashes. Rain pelted, the ground was muddy. The gang ran, stumbled, and cursed. Behind them came the barking and the clanging of iron.

A bolt whirred through the night. A single sound—a strangled gasp—and Sigi fell. Just like that. No scream, no struggle. Just a bolt in his throat, his eyes wide, his mouth open, blood gushing into the rain.

Grete tugged on his arm, trying to pull him up, but his body was already limp. "Lord, he... he's gone." Veit staggered, clutching the wine bag as if he didn't want to see. "Screw it, one less... one less to eat..." His voice broke. Priest shouted, yanking up the cross: "Amen! The Lord takes him home!" – but even he sounded hollow. Jörg cursed, grabbed the axe, and tried to rush back. "I'll cut off those bastards' heads!" But Götz grabbed him, yanking him on. "Leave him there. He's dead. We're alive – and if we stand still, we'll be dead, too."

They continued running, while behind them the dogs pounced on the corpse. Their barking turned into howls, as if they had found prey.

Later, in the hiding place of a dilapidated barn, they sat in a circle. No one spoke. Only the dripping of rain through the hole in the roof.

Lenz pulled a piece of charred wood from his pocket and carved a fist into the ground. He made a cross next to the fist. Silently.

Götz stared into the darkness, his iron fist heavy in his hand. "That's how easy it is to die. So cheap. No song, no fame, no shit. Just a bolt and the dirt."

He spat into the fire. "Screw honor. That's the price. One by one. And in the end, I stand alone."

It wasn't the bolt in his neck that cut deepest—it was the knife in his back. Not an iron, not a sword, but the quiet whisper of a man who could no longer bear the fear.

They had holed up in an old farmhouse, half-collapsed, the roof eaten away by moss. The rain pounded on the tiles, the wind howled through the cracks. Inside, the gang huddled in the dark, their bread hard, their wine empty. Everyone heard the dogs in the distance, getting closer and closer.

Veit crept out into the night. "Where to?" asked Grete, knife in hand. "Pee," he slurred, "screw it, what else?"

But he didn't return. Only in the morning did they hear the clatter of boots, the clang of iron. A troop of mercenaries marched directly toward the farmyard, too purposefully, too quickly.

"Treason!" Jörg roared, jumping up, axe in his fist. Grete snarled, "The dog has sold us out." Priest cried ecstatically, "Judas! Judas among us!" Sigi was dead, unable to tremble anymore—but Lenz stared fixedly at the door, his face pale.

They ran, fought, hacked their way through. Two mercenaries fell, one with an axe in his skull, one with a fist in his chest. Blood splattered on the walls, dogs howled, screams echoed.

But when they made their way into the forest, everyone knew: It had been Veit. He had talked. He had sold the hiding place, perhaps for a piece of bread, perhaps for a drop of wine, perhaps just because he couldn't bear it anymore.

Later, in the shadow of a cave, Götz growled: "That drunkard betrayed us. Screw him. If I find him, I'll rip out the tongue he used to sell my name."

The iron fist crashed against the rock, sparks flying. "Thus, one dies twice: first as a friend, then as a dog. Betrayal is worse than death."

The forest was silent, but the storm raged within the band. No enemy had to strike—they devoured themselves.

Since Sigi's death and Veit's betrayal, poison lay in every look. Jörg growled like an animal, his axe constantly within reach, as if he would rather split his own companions than tolerate another traitor. Grete sharpened her knife incessantly, her eyes cold, her tongue sharper than steel. Every sentence she uttered sounded like a threat. Priest shrieked psalms and curses so loudly that even the rats fled. "Treason! Hell! Blood sacrifice!" – his madness was no longer a sermon, but poison. Lenz remained silent, as always, but his silence was heavier than words. He carved his fists into wood, stone, and earth – this time not strong and defiant, but brittle, splintered, as if they were falling apart like the gang itself.

Food became scarcer, trust even scarcer. Jörg growled, "Maybe Grete is involved. Maybe she was the one who sent that drunk." Grete snarled back, "If it had been me, you'd be hanging from a rope right now, you ox." Priest screamed, "Everyone is a sinner! Everyone is Judas!" Even Götz felt the poison. Once, he clenched his fist, slammed it into the ground so that the stone broke, and yelled, "Shut up! You're eating each other while the dogs outside are already licking their mouths!"

But the words hardly helped. Everyone knew: the bond was thinner, weaker, more fragile. Trust was dead, and all that remained was fear and defiance.

In the evening, they sat around a small fire that gave off barely any light. The smoke crept between them like a ghost. No one spoke. Only the crackling of the flames.

Götz stared into the fire, his iron fist on his knees. "This is how friendships fall apart. Not by sword and blood—but by hunger, doubt, mistrust. Shitty gang. Shitty world."

The net didn't just tighten—it struck. Again and again. Harder and harder. Every day brought a new blow to the face.

In a village where they hoped to find peace for a night, they were betrayed. They had barely entered the barn when lances crashed through the walls. They fled, fighting their way through the rain of iron, but two dead remained behind—not from the hunters, but from the gang: a mute miller's apprentice and a mercenary who had joined them. Gone, just like that.

The princes set fire to a cave where they were hiding. Smoke crept in, thick and suffocating. They burst out coughing, their eyes burning, and found themselves in the middle of the spear ring. Only a wild outburst saved them – Jörg hacked,

Grete stabbed, Götz shattered bones with his fist. But three horses remained behind, and with them the last of their swiftness.

Every night got worse. No sleep, just coughing, trembling, fear. They ran more than they fought, and each time it was closer, each time they lost more.

The gang was no longer proud, no longer defiant. They were bruised, harassed, full of cracks. Priest screamed as if he wanted to bring down the sky itself. Sigi was dead. Veit was a traitor. Others lay in the dirt, forgotten.

And Götz? He stood in the rain, blood in his beard, his iron fist heavy with bone meal, and growled: "They want to break us? Screw it. Every blow they strike only knocks the rust off my fist. I'm still standing. As long as I'm standing, none of them has won."

But deep down, he knew: every setback was wearing on him. Not on the iron, but on the people around him. And they were breaking faster than he was.

The gang was like a burned-out house—nothing but beams and smoke. But even in the rubble, there were a few who remained. Those who were too proud or too stubborn to flee.

Jörg was one of them. The ox with the axe, blunt, hard, unyielding. He sat by the fire, axe across his knees, and growled: "Lord, screw those dogs. I'm staying. If they come, I'll beat you until my arm falls off." His gaze was dull but honest. A man who would rather die with the Lord than live on alone.

Grete was the other. Cold, slender, with eyes like blades. She said little, but when she spoke, it burned. "I didn't choose you, Götz. But I follow you because you fear no god or lord. Whoever wants you must first pass my knife."

Priest He raged on, the madness in his eyes blazing like fire. "Amen, Lord! I'll follow you into the fires of hell! For you are God's fist on earth!" No one knew whether he wanted to serve Götz or sacrifice himself—but he didn't give in.

And Lenz – the mute one who only scratched. He sat down next to Götz, picked up a stone, and drew another fist. This time not broken, not pierced by arrows. A fist, simple, hard, defiant. He raised his eyes and nodded. Silently, but unmistakably: I stay.

So they were left. Few. Battered, torn, but still there. Jörg, the ox. Grete, the knife. Priest, madness. Lenz, the silence.

And Götz? He looked at her, his iron fist raised. "Good. Then we'll die together, if that's what it takes. But I swear: Not quietly. Not on our knees. If we fall, it'll be right in her fucking mouth."

At night, when the dogs barked in the distance and the rain doused the fire, the mask fell away. Then there was no roaring wolf, no defiant iron—only a man who realized that everything was being torn from him, piece by piece.

He stared into the darkness, his iron fist heavy as lead on his knees. "Sigi dead. Veit a dog. The others are gone. Soon you'll be dust too." His voice was rough, brittle, almost a whisper.

Jörg slept with the axe in his arm, snoring like an animal. Grete woke, her eyes hard, but even she seemed tired, hollow. The priest muttered in his sleep, psalms mixed with curses, drooling. And Lenz—he no longer carved. Only a piece of wood in his hand, which he chewed silently, as if trying to silence himself.

Götz sensed it: the pack wasn't immortal. Every day was consuming, every loss hurt. He clenched his fist and rammed it into the ground, sending sparks flying. "Shitty kingdom. Shitty eight. Shitty life. I was a knight, I was a lord – now I'm just a shadow who watches his friends die in the dirt."

His breath trembled, almost like a sob, but he bit it back, clenched his teeth. Tears weren't iron. Tears were weakness. And he couldn't afford weakness.

But it gnawed deep, incessantly in his chest. It wasn't the chains that had broken him, not the princes, not the church. No – it was the faces of his people, who, one by one, fell, disappeared, and rotted away.

And he knew: The fist could strike, could kill, could defy. But it couldn't keep friends.

He laughed bitterly and spat into the fire. "Screw it. Then I'll just be alone. I always knew that. In the end, everyone rusts, only the fist remains."

The morning came gray and cold. No birds sang, only the dripping of wet leaves and the soft clink of Götz's fist as he pressed it against the stone.

He looked at those who were still there: Jörg, snoring, the axe clutched like a child in his arms. Grete, awake, cold, but with eyes that had already seen too much. Priest, muttering, drooling, half prophet, half mad. Lenz, silent, the piece of wood in his hands, his fist already cracked.

And he knew: even these last loyal ones were only shadows. Anyone could be gone tomorrow—pierced by a bolt, taken by a rope, consumed by hunger.

"Friends?" muttered Götz. "Shitty words. First they fall, then they betray you, and if they stay, they're just ghosts."

He laughed hoarsely, the echo creeping through the trees. "But one thing remains. Always. The fist. No friend, no brother, no master – only iron. Iron rusts, yes. But iron doesn't fall over when it counts."

He rose, raising his fist into the morning. The iron was blunt, bloody, and full of notches. But it still gleamed in the pale light—like a single promise he had made to himself.

"I am alone," he said, harshly, loudly, defiantly. "Alone against the empire, against the dogs, against the gods. And so be it. Because in the end, one thing is enough for me: my fist. My fist doesn't rust."

The others saw him, one after the other. No one said a word. They knew: He was right. Friendship was dust. Loyalty was fragile. Only the fist was eternal.

The last great battle

It began with the blaring of horns. No more isolated barking of dogs, no more mercenary troops in the forest—no, this time the Empire itself came, with flags, drums, and horses, like a storm of steel.

Götz and the last of his faithful followers had barricaded themselves in an old castle ruin, half-collapsed, its walls full of cracks, more like a grave than a fortress. The wind howled through the gaps, the fire was cold. Jörg crouched by the wall, an axe in his lap. "Lord," he grumbled, "they're coming. An entire army." Grete looked through a crack in the wall. Her eyes were narrow, hard. "Hundreds. Cavalry, spears, crossbows. No escape." Priest laughed, cross in hand, drooling. "Amen! The Last Judgment is coming! And we are the angels with bloody wings!" Lenz remained silent, carved a fist into the crumbling stone—large this time, as if he wanted to stretch it over the entire ruin.

Then they saw them. Riders with banners, red, black, and gold. Footmen with long spears. Crossbowmen lurking on the walls. And above all, the roar of drums, the blaring of horns. The empire had come to crush the rebel.

A messenger rode forward, his voice sharp: "Götz von Berlichingen! Surrender in the name of the Emperor! We will not grant you life, but perhaps a quick end. If you fight, you will be torn to pieces."

Götz stepped into the breach in the wall, his iron fist raised, his face covered in blood and dirt. He grinned and spat into the dust. "Surrender? Screw you. I'll only surrender to death—and even death can kiss my ass."

The answer came as thunder. Drums, horns, the rattling of hundreds of spears. The circle tightened, the ruins trembled beneath their boots.

The encirclement was complete. The final battle was imminent.

Night fell over the ruins, but the enemy tightened its perimeter. Torches burned outside like a crown of fire, voices echoed, horses snorted, iron clanged. Götz and his men crouched in the shadow of the shattered walls, and everyone knew: tomorrow was the end.

Jörg broke the silence. "Lord... we can't get out of here. Too many. We'll die." Grete nodded curtly, her voice steady. "Then we die. But not on our knees." Priest shouted as if he'd been waiting for this sentence: "Amen! We are the torches of God! Burn, my brothers, burn!" Lenz said nothing, only carved his fist into the stone one last time—deeply, cruelly, as if he wanted to give the wall itself a heart.

Götz saw them all, the last remnants of his gang. Jörg, the axe. Grete, the knife. Priest, the madness. Lenz, the silence. That was all that remained—and yet enough to make the world tremble once more.

He laughed hoarsely, blood in his beard, and spat in the dust. "We won't get out. We won't survive. But we won't go quietly. We'll make noise, so much noise that even the Kaiser will clench his arse in his bed. Tomorrow Berlichingen may die—but tomorrow the Reich will vomit with fear."

He raised his iron fist and held it up to the firelight. The iron was scratched, bloody, rusty—but it gleamed nonetheless. "This is not a retreat. This is not the end. This is our last dance. And I swear: we'll dance in their faces."

The gang nodded, one after the other. No heroic song, no glory—just defiance. But defiance was enough.

The night was cold, the fire small, and the ruins' walls trembled in the wind. But in the darkness, the sharpening of iron, the cracking of bones, the last breath before the storm sounded.

Jörgs sat on a stone, the axe on his knees. He sharpened the blade with slow strokes, each stroke a promise. "If they come," he muttered, "I'll chop until my arms fall off. Screw fame. I just want to hear the sound of skulls shattering."

Grete She checked her knives. One in her boot, one on her belt, one in her sleeve. She gave a small grin. "Those gentlemen out there think they're fighting knights. I'll cut out their balls before they realize we've long since been living in the belly of their fear."

Priest He stood in the middle of the courtyard, cross in hand, drooling, eyes wild. "Amen! Amen! They will come like locusts, and we are the fire that will devour them! Brothers, sisters, laugh, for the heavens will open tomorrow!" He beat his forehead bloody and laughed like a madman.

Lenz sat silently against the wall. With a piece of charred wood, he again drew a fist, large and dark, on the stone. He looked at Götz and nodded. Not a word, not a sound—but the message was clear: Until the end.

And Götz? He stood in the breach, his iron fist raised, his eyes red from the fire. "Good. You have the numbers, we have the will. You have banners, we have iron. Tomorrow, death may devour us—but it will devour us with its mouth full. We will not go quietly. We will go like thunder."

The gang laughed hoarsely, roared, and screamed curses into the night. Everyone knew it was their last laugh. But better to laugh before the end than to whine before it.

The morning came bloody red. Not a beautiful sunrise, but a sky as if someone had ripped open the belly of God. Drums thundered, horns screamed, the enemy's iron glittered like a sea of knives.

Götz stood in the breach of the ruins, his iron fist raised, and roared: "Now, you dogs! We're dancing!"

And they charged. No plan, no battle line, just a pack of wolves leaping against an army.

Jörgran like an ox, swinging his axe. He knocked one rider off his horse, split the next in half up to the neck. Blood splattered like rain, his roar echoed across the courtyard.

Gretewas a shadow. Knives flashed, throats opened, blood gushed. She screamed curses, laughed coldly, and stabbed even when her arm was already soaked red.

Priesttraged like a madman, cross in one hand, club in the other. "Amen! Amen! Amen!" Every blow a prayer, every broken bone a hallelujah.

LenzHe crept like a ghost, striking softly, hard, without a sound. Arrows whizzed, but he dodged until he rammed his fist into a soldier's face, silent, icy, without triumph.

And Götz—he was the center. His iron fist smashed into shields, broke teeth, and ripped men from their lives. He spat, laughed, and roared: "Come on! I am the wolf, and you are my food!"

The army didn't waver—too many, too strong. But for every one who fell, they took three with them. The ruins shook, the courtyard transformed into a sea of blood, sweat, and screams.

The outbreak wasn't a victory. But it was thunder. It was chaos. It was a final song louder than any drum in the empire.

The courtyard of the ruins transformed into a mass grave. Dust, smoke, blood—and one by one they fell. No heroic song, no golden banner. Only dirt and death.

Jörgwent first. The ox swung his axe until the wood splintered, until his hands slipped and bloody. He laughed, roared, and knocked three more riders off their horses. Then a lance pierced him, right through the chest, so deeply that he staggered. But he grabbed the shaft, ripped the damned fellow off his horse, bit his throat out like an animal—and then fell himself, gasping, the axe still in his arm.

Gretefought like a demon. Knives flashed, men screamed, her lips grinned coldly. "Come on, you bastards! I want your balls!" She rammed the blade into a soldier's throat, pulled it out, screamed triumphantly—then a bolt struck her in the side. She growled, laughed, ripped out the bolt, stabbed again—and then fell, knife in her fist, her eyes defiant, even in death.

PriestIt was pure madness. He screamed psalms, laughed like a madman, and struck the cross like a hammer. Bones cracked, teeth flew. "Amen! Hallelujah! Blood is wine!" But then came the blow: a sword across the cross, deep into his chest. He staggered, spat blood, cried out "AMEN!" – and fell, the cross broken in his hand.

LenzHe died quietly. No scream, no curse. He carved one more fist into the dust with his dagger as the battle raged. Then a rider came, his sword driven deep into his back. Lenz fell on the fist he had just carved into the earth and remained there, silent, the blood his final mark.

And Götz? He saw them all fall. One by one, in the dirt, in the blood, in the madness. He growled, roared, his iron fist raised. "You'll take her from me! But you won't get me! NEVER!"

The ruins were a slaughterhouse. Blood flowed between the stones, bodies lay on top of each other, the air stank of iron and burnt flesh. Only one remained standing.

Götz. Blood up to his knees, his iron fist dripping, his face like a devil of mud and anger.

Before him was a ring of enemies—knights with drawn swords, mercenaries with shields, crossbowmen with nervous hands. They had him, finally, the wolf, the outlaw. But no one dared to take the first step.

"Come on!" roared Götz, his voice hoarse, like thunder across the battlefield. "Why are you trembling, you dogs? There are a hundred of you, and I'm one—come on!" He laughed, spitting blood. "Or do you want to wait until I come for you one by one?"

A knight charged forward, young and proud. Götz grabbed him with his fist and slammed him against the wall until his skull burst. A mercenary followed – his fist smashed through his shield, breaking bones, and hurling him into the dust.

Two crossbow bolts whirled, one ripping open Götz's shoulder, the other hitting him in the leg. He staggered, growled, yanked the bolt out, and threw it at the enemy. "Damn arrows! You need more!"

He was alone. All dead, all gone. Just him and his fist, one man against the empire. Yet he stood. Bleeding, yes. Wavering, yes. But his fist was still up.

The enemy murmured, the ranks retreated. One whispered, "That's not a human. That's a damn demon."

And Götz laughed, harshly, mockingly. "Demon? No. I'm just a man. But one who shows you that one man is enough to make you all tremble."

The courtyard was silent for a moment, only the dripping of blood and the gasping of the men surrounding him. One army against one man—and yet no one dared to make the first move.

Götz stood, swaying, his legs full of arrows, his shoulder open, his fist red up to the elbow. He grinned, bloody, almost toothless, and spat into the dust.

"Come on, you cowardly dogs. You have the empire, the emperor, God himself behind you. I only have my fist. And yet you still shit your pants."

A captain shouted: "Down with him! For the Emperor!" The soldiers stormed.

Götz roared, a sound like thunder, like an animal tearing the sky apart. He ran, his iron fist raised, and crashed into the middle of the mass. Bones cracked, shields splintered, men flew. One screamed because his face was gone. A second died before he could find his own scream.

They stabbed him, they beat him, they tore him down—but still the fist struck. Every blow a judgment, every blow an insult against the empire. He bled like an open barrel, but he laughed, roared, and spat.

"This is your victory? Ten against one? One hundred against one? Fucking victory! I'll give you something to remember, you jerks!"

And then came the final blow. A fist so hard that the enemy's helmet burst like a can, spraying skull, blood, and brains. A blow so loud that even the drums outside fell silent.

They pulled him to the ground, finally. Kicks, punches, iron on flesh. He fell, yes. But his fist was still raised, until his last breath.

The army stood panting, bloodied, distraught. They had won, yes. But no one uttered the word "victory." For everyone knew: One man, alone, had shown them that even the empire is small when the fist still strikes.

The tired sword

The battle was over, but the battlefield still stank. Blood, smoke, cold iron—a mixture that ate into the lungs. Bodies lay everywhere, some still twitching, others long since stiff. Crows were already perched on the dead, pecking greedily into their open mouths.

And in the middle of it all: Götz. Not dead. Not alive. Something in between. He lay between bodies, his iron fist red, his sword blunt, his body covered in wounds. Every breath was a cough, every attempt to stand, a blow to the ribs.

He laughed hoarsely, blood in his mouth. "So this is what immortality feels like—like shit."

He rolled up, leaning on his fist. The iron was heavy, heavier than ever. It was as if the metal itself had drunk the blood of the dead and now weighed twice as much. His arm trembled, but he didn't let go. "Screw it," he growled, "I'd rather die with rust on my fist than with empty hands."

The silence was worse than the battle. No Jörg grumbled. No Grete laughed. No priest shouted. No Lenz remained silent. Only Götz, standing among the carcasses and realizing: The pack was gone. Only the wolf remained—alone, limping, half-dead.

He dragged himself to a still-standing wall. He sat down, his sword across his knees, his fist gripped tightly around the hilt. He looked up at the gray sky and laughed again. "Come on, Emperor, God, devil—where are you now? You haven't beaten me. But damn... I'm tired."

And so he sat there, his iron fist heavy, his sword rusty, his heart still burning, but weaker than before. He lived—but victory tasted of ashes.

The sword lay across his knees, blunt, dented, its edge full of notches. It looked as tired as he was. Götz lifted it, just a little, and felt how heavy it had become. It used to fly through the air like lightning—now it felt like a millstone.

"Damned iron," he muttered, his voice rough, "you're getting old like me. You used to be sharp, now you're blunt. But we two, we fit together—tired dogs who bite one more time before they die."

He dropped the sword, the sound echoing through the ruins, dull, like a grave nail.

The iron fist was no better off. The metal was covered in blood, rust had eaten into the cracks. He tried to clench it—it did, yes, but it trembled. For the first time in years, he felt weakness in this piece of iron, which had always been stronger than flesh.

"Shitty fist," he laughed hoarsely. "Still harder than me, but even you're starting to wobble. In the end, we'll both rust."

He looked at his hands, still alive, their skin torn, their nails blackened. Flesh against iron. Both were the same in the end: tired, bruised, rotting.

"Sword, fist, flesh—all the same. Everything breaks. Only the legend lasts longer. Maybe."

He spat blood, slid the sword back onto his knees, and ran his fist over the blade. "You're old, I'm old. But if they come for us again, at least we'll take a few more with us."

The silence after the blood was worse than the battle itself. No more roars, no more clangs, no more thunder—only the wind rushing through the crumbling walls and the cawing of crows descending upon the dead.

Götz looked at the bodies around him. There lay Jörg, the axe still in his grip, his face half-shattered. There lay Grete, the blade in her stomach, her eyes open, still defiant, as if she herself were giving death the finger. There lay Pfaffe, his cross broken, his mouth open like a never-ending scream. And Lenz—the Silent One—stretched on the ground, the fist he had carved into the dust buried under his blood.

All gone. All dust.

He laughed hoarsely, a sound that sounded more like a cough. "Shitty bunch. One by one, they're dying, and I'm still sitting here like an old dog." He spat in the dirt, watched the crows take flight. "What a hero. The last one standing is the one who stinks the most."

Loneliness crept into their bones. No Jörg to growl. No Grete to laugh. No priest to shout. No Lenz to remain silent. Only Götz—and his fist.

He leaned on the sword, which was barely a blade anymore. "This is what freedom looks like, right? Outlaw, they say. Free from everything. Free from friends, free from voices, free from everything that keeps you alive."

The crows circled, the howling of the wind grew louder. Götz closed his eyes and muttered, "Fucking freedom. It's just another word for a dungeon without walls."

"Outlaw." The word tasted like cold ash in his mouth. The Empire had spoken it like a curse, the peasants had whispered it like a song, and he himself had carried it like a flag for years. But now, in this accursed ruin full of corpses, it sounded like nothing more than mockery.

He shuffled a few steps, his leg dragging, his iron fist heavy, his sword lugging. Blood everywhere, crows everywhere. No one left to give orders to, no one left to growl "Yes, sir" at him. Only him. The last dog.

"Freedom, my ass," he muttered, his voice scratchy. "It just means no roof, no bread, no wife, no friends. Just rain, hunger, rusty iron, and a name everyone curses."

He sat down against the wall, feeling the cold stone against his back. Above him, the sky, gray, empty, endless. No cage, no chains – and yet he felt trapped. Trapped within himself.

"Free from all laws, free from all obligations... free from everything that keeps you alive. Yes, that's it. Outlaw means alone. And alone means dead, except that the body hasn't yet figured out that it's rotting."

He reached for his wineskin, which was long empty, and laughed bitterly. "Freedom is when you can't even pay for your own intoxication anymore. Freedom is when you have no one to hear your curse. Fucking freedom."

The iron fist clanged dully against the stone. "But better this bitter freedom than kneeling before a prince again. Better alone in the dirt than chained in the courtyard. Damn empire. Damn God. I'll stay free, even if it consumes me."

The wind blew coldly through the cracks in the ruins, carrying the smell of blood and mold. Götz leaned against the stone, his fist heavy on his knees, and for a moment he no longer saw the corpses, no longer the crows—but the shadows of his own past.

He saw himself as a young lad, barefoot in the courtyard, his first wooden sword in his hand, laughing, wild, unbroken. He heard his father speaking of honor, and Ulrich laughing at blood. Two voices that had shaped him, both of whom he had cursed and loved.

He saw the first battles where the sword was light, where he thought he was immortal, a hero who could hack down the world, as long as the wine flowed and the iron was sharp.

He saw the women who had loved him, or at least claimed to. Tongues like fire, hands like comfort. Some he had left, some had left him—and none had remained.

He saw the friends who had fought, cursed, and drunk alongside him. Jörg, Grete, Pfaffe, Lenz—all in the dirt, all dust. Before him, Sigi, before him, Veit, before him, many others whose names he barely remembered.

The images stung harder than any wound. "Shitty memory," he muttered, his voice shaky. "It's like wine that turns sour. First sweet, then bitter, and in the end, it makes you sick."

He laughed hoarsely, coughing up blood. "Everything's gone. Everything's rotten. Only I remain, the old dog, still baring my teeth even though no one's watching anymore."

He closed his eyes and saw the boy with the wooden sword one last time. Free, strong, full of defiance. And he murmured: "The boy is long dead. Only the shadow lives on."

His body felt like a pile of rubble. Every movement creaked, every breath was a tear in his chest. He had been wounded many times before, had bled many times before, but this time was different. This time he wasn't just injured—he was tired.

Götz tried to push himself up. The iron fist supported him, but it trembled. For the first time in years, it trembled. "Fucking iron," he growled, "lasts longer than flesh, but even you're starting to falter."

The sword lay heavy beside him, blunt, like a dead dog. He reached for it, lifted it halfway, and dropped it again. Too heavy. Too tired.

"Before," he muttered, "I could fight, drink, and fuck for ten hours, and then get up again for twenty. Now, one breath is enough to make me want to puke."

He laughed, bitterly and raspily. "That's what old age feels like, huh? No enemy, no rope, no emperor—just your own bones telling you: That's it, old dog."

He looked at his fist, still solid, still iron, still unbroken. But he knew: Iron alone couldn't fight. It needed flesh, blood, and heart. And they were growing tired, weaker, and empty.

"The fist doesn't rust," he whispered. "But the man behind it does."

He slumped back, his back against the cold wall. Eyes half-closed, breathing heavy. "Tiredness is worse than wounds. Wounds scream. Tiredness silently eats you away."

Night descended over the ruins like a coffin lid. The crows had fallen silent, only the wind still blew through the broken walls. Götz sat alone, his iron fist on his knee, his sword beside him like a dying dog.

He knew he was old. He knew he was tired. But he also knew he would never let go voluntarily. Not the iron, not the fist, not the defiance.

He grabbed the sword, raised it with his last bit of strength, and placed it across his knees. "Listen, old iron," he muttered harshly, "you and I – we'll fall together. No prince will take you from my hand. No emperor will lay you down. Only when I'm lying in the dirt will you go down with me."

He clenched his iron fist so tightly that blood oozed from the cracks. "They can tire me. They can break my bones, tear my flesh, steal my friends. But they won't take my fist. It won't rust. It will stay until death itself tears it from my bones."

His breathing was heavy, his eyes half-closed, but his fist remained raised, defiant, like a silent oath. No scream, no curse, no bloodlust—just a promise, quieter, louder than any roar.

"I will not lay down my sword. Not willingly. Not until death itself forces me. And even then, I will put my fist in its mouth."

He laughed hoarsely, a sound that drifted away in the wind. "So be it. Until the end. On your own."

The voice of old age

The sword lay in the corner like a rusted bone. Once it had flashed like thunder, now it was blunt, crooked, riddled with notches. Götz stared at it and felt the truth he had repressed for years: His arm was too heavy, his back too tired, his bones too brittle.

He tried to clench his iron fist. It did, yes, but it trembled. Not like before, when it shattered steel and cracked skulls. Now the trembling was there, no matter how hard he squeezed it. "Fucking iron," he growled, "you don't rust, but I rot around it."

He stood, limping through the courtyard where horses once stamped, farmhands shouted, and weapons flashed. Now there was only emptiness, dust, and cobwebs. He reached for an old shield, tried to lift it—and cursed when his shoulder cracked. "Well, wonderful," he laughed hoarsely, "my fist is as strong as the devil, but the rest of me is a sack full of bone meal."

But while he cursed, he also grinned. "Screw it. When the bones can't strike anymore, I'll strike with my mouth. And believe me, my mouth bites harder than any sword."

He sat heavily on the bench, his fist on the table. "Iron doesn't break. Neither do words. And when I can't fight anymore, I'll finish off the bastards with my curses. Let them tremble when old Berlichingen opens his mouth."

When the sword was blunt, the tongue became a blade. And Götz's mouth was never soft.

One day, a messenger from the emperor arrived, young, stiff, his mouth full of parchment. He read aloud as he had been taught: "Götz von Berlichingen, you shall serve the empire, be faithful to your master—"

"Shut up," growled Götz, his fist on the table. "I serve the empire as a dog serves a butcher: by biting its leg if it comes too close." The messenger stared, pale. "You dare—" "I dare much more, lad," Götz interrupted. "Tell your emperor he can suck my balls. And if he can't find them, he can look for them in his damned crown."

Even the priests weren't spared. A fat monk came, carrying a cross and a Bible, muttering sins and preaching humility. Götz grinned and spat into the fire. "Sin? I've committed more sins than you have hair on your ass. And you know what? I still sleep better than you in your damned monastery bed." The monk

stammered and made the sign of the cross. "Go to Rome," Götz called after him, "and tell the Pope I have a gift—my iron fist, right in the face!"

His words ran like fire through the land. Peasants grinned secretly when they heard them. Princes raged when his curses reached their halls. And the people said: "Old Berlichingen no longer fights with a sword—he fights with his tongue. And it cuts deeper than steel."

Götz laughed hoarsely, raising his fist. "Shitty sword, shitty bone. But the mouth doesn't rust."

They came secretly. First a few, then dozens. Gaunt, dirty, hands full of calluses, faces ravaged by hunger. Farmers and farmhands who would otherwise have had to duck their heads when a lord rode by now stood before Götz—the old wolf, the outlaw.

They sat down in his yard, on broken benches, on the bare ground. One brought a piece of bread, another a mug of thin beer. They wanted nothing from him except what he had always had: a mouth that spoke the truth.

"Sir," muttered an old servant, "the princes are taking our last straw. What are we supposed to do?" Götz laughed and spat in the dust. "What are you supposed to do? Damned princes. If they take your last straw, cut off their fingers. And if they take any more, cut off their whole hand."

A young farmer asked, "But the emperor...?" "The emperor?" Götz raised his fist and grinned. "The emperor is a shadow in gold. And shadows can't be fed, so why fear him? Let him sit on his throne and gild his eggs. Out here, hunger, filth, and your own wrath reign supreme. So take what's yours."

The people laughed, some fearfully, some liberated. They knew: Götz couldn't give them peace, land, or gold. But he gave them something they couldn't get anywhere else—a voice that said what they were thinking but never dared to say out loud.

And so his court became a place where the oppressed whispered, laughed, and cried. Not because he helped them, but because he showed them that one could curse the empire without immediately losing one's head.

Götz drank the rest of the jug, shook his head, and grinned. "You want advice from old Berlichingen? Here you go: Screw lords, screw the emperor, screw the priests. Your fist is your law. Period."

His words spread across the land faster than any army. No drum, no horn, no imperial decree could keep up with what the peasants whispered around the fire:

"Old Berlichingen spat in the Emperor's face—with words!" "He told the priest that heaven was as empty as his wine barrel." "He called the princes pigs who wallow in their own filth."

The stories were passed on, exaggerated, distorted, and embellished. One servant recounted: "I saw him myself! He crushed a stone with his fist like bread!" Another swore: "He spoke, and three knights fell dead of shame!" Thus the legend grew—no longer in blood, but in words, laughter, and defiance.

The princes hated it. Their scribes drafted edicts, their preachers ranted: "Götz von Berlichingen is an old fool, a sinner, a cursed man!" But everyone knew: even if they talked so much, they still feared him.

The peasants loved it. They worked, cursed, suffered—but at night they told each other how Götz had shown his teeth to the Reich. And that alone gave them the strength to survive the next day.

And Götz? He grinned when he heard about it. "They make stories out of my curses. That's fine with me. Better they remember my shit than forget me."

Thus the legend lived on. Not by the sword, not by the fist—but by the mouth. The old wolf had found new teeth, and they bit deeper than iron.

It wasn't long before his tongue brought him back into the halls of the mighty. Not with sword and iron, but with words sharper than any blade.

Once he stood in a council chamber, invited or perhaps merely tolerated. The princes sat snugly in their chairs, boasting their titles and parchments. One dared to say: "Götz von Berlichingen, you should show humility. You are an old man. The time for rebellion is over."

Götz grinned and scratched his beard. "Humility? I'll gladly show you humility—as soon as you show me how a sack of shit ducks its head when you step on it." The hall fell silent. One person swallowed, another remained silent. But no one dared to laugh, because everyone knew: He was right, right in the face.

Another time, in a church. A priest thundered from the pulpit, shouting about hell and damnation, threatening the peasants with flames and torment. Götz stood at the back, leaning against the wall, his fist clenched. "Amen!" he cried

loudly. The priest paused. "How dare you—?" "I dare you," cried Götz, "that your hell is empty, and so is your heaven. The only flames burning here are the candles you pull from these poor bastards. If God saw this, he'd personally kick you in the ass."

The peasants giggled, the priest turned pale. But no one dared to throw him out.

And so it came to pass that Götz became a fist, not only in the forest, no longer in battle, but in the midst of courtyards and halls. No sword necessary, no blood—only words that struck harder than iron.

"Tell him yourself," he growled every time someone hesitated. "If the emperor scares you, then tell him yourself that he's a bastard. If the priest threatens, then tell him yourself that he stinks. The fist isn't just iron—it's the mouth that knows no fear."

It was one of those nights when the wind blew through the cracks in the castle like a ghost, and Götz sat alone with a jug of thin wine, his iron fist on the table, dull with rust.

He thought of all the battles he had fought. All the swords he had broken, all the helmets he had split, all the friends he had lost. And then he laughed hoarsely, a sound like a croak.

"Damn it," he muttered, "all that iron has long since turned to dust. Every blow, every ride, every carnage—all forgotten. But my curses, my words... they still live. The dogs no longer tremble at my sword, but at my mouth."

He took a deep drink and wiped his beard. "That's it. Swords break. Bones break. But words? Words remain. Once spat out, they can never get them back down their throats. My fist may be iron, but my mouth—that's damned fire."

He grinned and spat into the ashes. "Perhaps this is the last revenge I can bestow upon the empire: Not with a sword into the history books—but with my curses in their faces. Every peasant will repeat it, every prince will hate it. And that will last longer than any battle."

The iron fist rested heavily on the table. But his voice? It still sounded sharp, defiant, unbroken. "The fist rusts. But the words don't."

The morning dawned, gray like his beard. Götz stood in the courtyard, leaning heavily on his iron fist. His back bent, his legs lame, but his eyes still sharp as knives.

He knew: He was no longer a warrior. No knight charging into battle, no wolf tearing armies apart. His sword lay dull in the corner, and his fist, once strong, was slowly rusting away. But his mouth – it still bit.

"It may be," he growled, "that I can no longer lift a sword. But I don't need one either. My words are enough. Every curse I spit is a blow. Every sentence I spit is a slash. And they cut deeper because they don't scar."

Peasants gathered around him laughed. A few princes nearby gritted their teeth, but dared not. They knew: The old man could no longer be bound, no longer broken. One could only fear him—and that was enough.

Götz laughed harshly and spat on the ground. "I am old, yes. A tired dog who still has teeth. But better an old wolf that bites than a young dog that cowers. Remember that."

He raised his iron fist to the sky one last time, his fingers stiff, rusty, but still defiant. "The Empire may tire me. But it will never quiet me. I'll bark until I die."

The family and the future

It had been a long time since the courtyard had been full of life. Once, all one could hear here was the clanging of iron, the neighing of horses, the bellowing of men who wanted to drink, curse, and die. Now it was different. No more war cries, no more mercenary bellows—just the laughter of children.

Götz sat on the old bench by the fountain, his iron fist on his knee, his back bent, his eyes narrowed. A few rascals ran across the yard in front of him, screaming, laughing, chasing each other like little dogs. One stumbled, fell, tore his knees—got up again, laughing even louder.

"Ha," growled Götz, "the little one's got it. Falling down doesn't matter as long as you get back up."

Pots clattered from the kitchen, somewhere a woman yelled for her children, and a dog barked because he didn't understand that he had no chance against the wild gang of grandchildren.

The courtyard was no longer quiet. It was loud, lively, chaotic. It wasn't a military camp—but it had the same noise, the same pulse. Only different.

Götz sipped at his jug; the wine tasted thin, but better than silence. He grinned when two grandchildren saw him and rushed toward him, giggling. They weren't afraid of the fist, of the old iron. They grabbed it, tapped it, laughed.

"Grandpa, you have a knight's hand!" cried one. "An iron fist!" squealed the other.

Götz laughed harshly, almost spitting out his wine. "Iron Fist, yes! And if you don't obey, you'll get her in the ass!"

The children screamed and ran away, only to come back again.

For a moment, the courtyard wasn't a dungeon, a grave, or a ruin of the past. It was a home. And Götz, the old wolf, grinned and thought, "Damn war. This is louder."

The children were no longer children—men and women, with wrinkles from life, with hands that smelled of work. But when Götz looked at them, he recognized a piece of himself in each one.

His eldest son stood at the edge of the yard, arms crossed, face as serious as stone. A man who bore the responsibility, not out of desire, but because he had to. Götz saw the hardness in his gaze and growled with satisfaction. "He inherited my defiance—and my face, too. Only less handsome."

His second son was different—slimmer, faster-talking, with a tongue that never gave a wink. He sharpened his words like a blade. Götz grinned: "He doesn't need a sword. He curses his enemies to death. Just the same old guy—only with more hair."

And then there were the daughters. No fine ladies, no quiet dolls. One commanded the servants like a captain, the other shouted at her children as if they were a troop of mercenaries. Götz laughed hoarsely, his fist on the table. "The princes would shit their pants if they knew what kind of women run around here. Tougher than any knight, and smarter to boot."

He knew he hadn't given them much except a name, defiance, and a story every farmer knew. No wealth, no land that hadn't been questioned a hundred times. But he saw them now, how they lived, worked, cried—and he felt something he rarely felt otherwise: pride.

"Fuck princes and emperors," he muttered. "This is my kingdom. Blood of my blood, mouth of my mouth. I need nothing more."

The elders bore his features, the defiance in their eyes, the harshness in their voices. But the grandchildren – they were like a breath of fresh air in a smoky tavern. Loud, bold, fearless.

They climbed onto his knees as if he weren't an old knight, a wolf, or an outlaw, but merely a tired tree to be climbed. One hung onto the iron fist, shook it, and laughed like a fool. "Grandpa, that's cold!" Another tapped the steel as if to hear if it was hollow. "Sounds like a pot!"

Götz growled, raised his fist, and pretended to swing it through the air. "Just wait, you brats, I'll boil you in the pot, and then the dog will eat you!" The children shrieked, fell from his knees, giggling, and ran away, only to return the next moment.

For them, the fist wasn't a symbol of fear, a legend made of wanted posters or blood. For them, it was a toy, a miracle, a piece of their grandfather. And Götz, the old dog, grinned and let it happen.

He told them stories, not the bloody ones, not the ones where skulls cracked—but the ones where he, as a young rascal, ran through the yard with a wooden sword. "Just like you now," he growled, "only with fewer teeth in his mouth." The grandchildren shrieked with laughter; one actually lost a tooth and held it up proudly like a trophy.

"Screw it," muttered Götz, placing the boy's small fist in his iron fist. "You are the future. And if anyone tries to bend you, punch them in the face. With iron or with words, it doesn't matter – the main thing is that you don't give in."

Götz had built his life on blood and iron. For him, glory meant heads rolling. Freedom meant serving no one but his own fist. But when he heard the voices of his children and grandchildren, the laughter and the cries, he sensed something he had never found on any battlefield.

He saw his eldest son, shouting at the farmhands as if he were a captain himself. He saw his daughter, who held the farmstead steady, stronger than

any castle wall. He saw his grandchildren skipping over the dung as if it were a tournament ground.

And he realized: This was the true victory. No prince, no emperor, no damned priest had managed to take it away from him. Despite the ban, despite betrayal, despite blood and death – his family stood there, alive, loud, unbroken.

He laughed hoarsely, rapping his iron fist on the table. "Screw medals, screw titles, screw gold. This is my treasure: a horde of brats who fear no prince and chase away every dog."

A grandson ran up to him, holding out a flower, crushed, half-dead. "For you, Grandpa!" Götz took it in his iron fist, looked at the little thing, and grinned. "Flowers, huh? I used to collect heads. Now I collect things like this. Better. Less blood."

For a moment he was silent. No curse, no roar. Just a glance over the farm, children, grandchildren. And he thought: "Perhaps this is my greatest victory. Not that I survived. But that they did."

In the evening they sat together, like a loose army around the fire – only this time there were no swords hanging at their hips, but aprons, working hands and children in their laps.

His eldest son asked, "Father, what shall we do if the princes come again? If they want to take our land, our bread, our honor?" Götz grinned, his iron fist on the table. "Then do as I do: Spit in their faces. If they reach for bread, cut off their fingers. If they reach for your honor, show them that you have more balls than they have crowns."

The daughters looked at him, sternly but also proudly. One said, "And if we fail?" "Fail?" Götz laughed hoarsely, coughing up blood. "Failure only means that you died while standing. And that's better than living while crawling on your knees."

The grandchildren sat in a circle, their eyes wide. One asked, "Grandpa, have you really killed men with your fist?" Götz growled, grinning. "More than you have teeth in your mouth. And when you're old enough, you'll be able to do it too—with your fist or your mouth. The important thing is: hit back."

Another child asked, "And if the emperor comes?" Götz roared with laughter. "Then you say, 'Tell him yourself!' – and give him the finger. Screw the emperor. In the end, they'll just shit in the straw like the rest of us."

The family laughed, even if some gulped. But everyone knew: These weren't fairy tales. This was Götz's legacy – raw, honest, unbroken.

"Remember one thing," he concluded, raising his fist. "You are Berlichingen. That means: You belong to no master. And if anyone tries to do so, show them your fist. Iron or flesh, it doesn't matter. The main thing is that it doesn't buckle."

Later, when the fire was only smoldering and the voices had faded, Götz sat alone on the bench. The grandchildren had fallen asleep, the children had retreated. Only the wind still played with the floorboards, and somewhere a dog barked.

He rested his iron fist on the table, looked at the embers, and thought, "Damn... I'm done for. My bones are cracking, my flesh is rotting, my sword is blunt. I'm no longer a wolf, just an old dog slowly rotting away."

But then he heard a child's laughter in the distance. High, shrill, free. And he grinned. "Screw it. I'm dying, yes. But they're still laughing. They're still running. And when they fall, they get back up. Just like I did. Just like I taught them."

He thought of Jörg, of Grete, of all the companions who had rotted in blood. "You are dead. But my blood continues to flow. Not in your swords, but in these children who roar across the courtyard as if the whole world belonged to them."

For the first time in years, he didn't place his fist raised on the table, but let it fall. Not out of weakness—but because he knew he no longer had to hold it alone.

"The fist rusts," he murmured, "but the defiance doesn't. It lives on in them. And that's enough."

The next morning, he called them all together. Children, grandchildren, servants—whoever was there would hear what the old dog had to say. He stood in the courtyard, the sun shining slanting across his wrinkled face, his iron fist propped up, his sword blunt at his side.

"Listen," he began, his voice raspy but loud enough to make even the crows fly from the rooftops. "I'm old. Too old for battles, too old for wine, almost too old to curse. But there's one thing you must know before I die."

He raised his fist, slowly, rusty, but unbroken. "This—is your inheritance. Not gold, not land, not some title the princes will take away from you tomorrow. No. Your fist. The only thing that matters. With it you can strike, with it you can show that you won't bend. Whether made of iron or flesh, it doesn't matter—the main thing is that it stays up."

His children nodded seriously. The grandchildren grinned, one of them raised his little fist in the air. Götz laughed hoarsely, coughed, and wiped blood from his beard. "That's right. Even that brat has figured it out: Never bend over. And if they try to break you, then break back."

He took a step forward, his body unsteady, his voice firmer than bone. "You are my legacy. Not the stories of princes or emperors. You are proof that one can live without ever being on one's knees. If you forget that, then you are less than dogs. If you live it, then you are more than kings."

He lowered his fist, his eyes full of fire. "And now get out of here, you bastards. Go to work, go to live, go to fight, but never forget: Keep your fist up. Until death comes. And even then, spit in its mouth."

The pen replaces the sword

The nights grew longer, his bones heavier, breathing a struggle. Götz knew: the battles were over, the wine almost gone, the end not far off. And he also knew: if he kept his mouth shut now, others would speak. The princes, the priests, the cowardly clerks with their clean hands and their dirty pens.

He spat into the fire and growled: "Fuck it. They'll call me a robber, a rebel, a dog who bit the emperor. They'll write I fell like a scoundrel. But damn it—I'll live longer in my words than in their filth."

He saw the sword, lying blunt in the corner. A piece of iron, nothing more. Swinging a thousand times, now just a rusty bone. And next to it, on the table: a quill, an inkwell, parchment. A new tool, a new battlefield.

"All right," he muttered, reaching for the quill with his still functioning hand. His iron fist lay beside it, a sentinel, heavy and rusty. "If I can't cut with iron anymore, then I can cut with ink. If my fist can't crush skulls anymore, then at least their goddamn lies can."

He grinned, almost toothless, but with fire in his eyes. "My story. My words. No prince, no emperor, no pope will rewrite them for me. If I die, then it will be on paper—and everyone who reads it should know: I lived like a wolf and barked until the very end."

The feather felt strange. It had no weight like a sword, no creaking like iron, but a thin thing, delicate, almost ridiculous. Götz stared at it as if he wanted to break it.

"You're making history with this shit?" he muttered, his mouth twisting. "I've torn apart entire armies, and you want to tell me a few lines on paper count more? Damned world."

He dipped the nib into the ink. His fingers trembled, his hand heavy, his joints cracked. He tried to draw the first letter—a crooked line, shaky, like a broken bone.

"Ha!" he laughed hoarsely, followed by a cough. "Look, you bastards—that's my first blow with the pen. It looks like shit, but it hits home."

The fist lay beside him on the table, heavy, rusty, like a memory. Götz stared at the blackish mark that ran across the parchment. No blood, no splinters, just ink. And yet—it felt like a blow.

He wrote slowly, each letter a struggle. Hands clenched, eyes burning. "I, Götz von Berlichingen..." – and he grinned, spitting into the ashes. "...the knight with the iron fist, who has never feared a prince, a priest, or an emperor. Eat this, paper."

He saw the sentence, crooked, ugly, full of stains. But it was his sentence. No scribbler, no lackey, no priest had dictated it to him. His words, his life.

"Fucking sword," he muttered, "you've split enough heads. Now it's the feather's turn. And believe me—it stings deeper."

The quill scratched across the parchment like a rusty knife across bone. It wasn't a beautiful sound, it wasn't a refined scribble—crude, uneven, full of blotches. But it was real.

Götz wrote about his youth. Standing barefoot in the courtyard, his first wooden sword in his hand, thinking he could hack the world to pieces. "I was a brat with more stubbornness in my ass than sense in my head," he scribbled, laughing hoarsely.

He wrote of the first battles—of the stench, the blood, the screaming. No heroic songs, no glory. Just dirt, iron, and the truth: "You stink, you vomit, you eat dust, and if you're lucky, you're still alive by the evening."

He wrote of betrayal, of friends who became enemies, and of companions who rotted in the dirt. "Never rely on a man who smells of gold. Only rely on the one who still fights when he's bleeding."

He wrote about love and women—short, smutty, and without sugarcoating. "They wanted the knight, not the man. And I wanted the intoxication, not eternity. So it never went well, and I don't curse any of it."

He wrote of the fist. Of the amputation, of the iron that made him a legend. "They took my hand. I gave myself iron. And I swear: It's easier to fight with iron."

Lines piled up, crooked, clumsy. No scholar would praise them, no priest would quote them. But he continued writing, page after page, as if he wanted to capture every scar, every curse, every blow in ink.

He put down his pen and growled, "Shitty memory. But now it belongs to me. Not to the princes, not to the scribblers. To me."

The pages piled up, covered with scratches, stains, and crooked letters. Götz bent over them, his back aching, his hand shaking—but his mouth was even sharper than ever.

"Ha," he muttered, "the fine scribblers would puke if they saw this. No decoration, no glitter, no Latin flourishes. Just dirt on parchment. But I'd rather have my own shit on paper than their lies encased in gold."

He remembered how they'd called him in court records: robber, outlaw, troublemaker. He growled, his iron fist on the table. "Robber? I took what wasn't given to me. Outlaw? Damn right—because I didn't crawl up any master's ass. And troublemaker? Screw it—better trouble than the cowardly tranquility of slaves."

He wrote it down, harshly, crookedly, in thick strokes: "I am no saint. But I was free. Free as a wolf. And if you write it any other way, you lackeys of the emperor—then fuck you. Here stands the truth. My truth."

He laughed hoarsely, coughed blood, and spat on the floor. "History writers... cowardly dogs. They only write what the Lord dictates. And then they call it the truth. Shitty truth, which they charge for. My ink is more honest—it stinks of blood and sweat, not wine from the prince's table."

He dipped the pen again and scratched into the page: "If anyone wants to know who I was, then read this. Not what some soft-handed scribe babbles about me. For the words of cowardly men are like swords without blades."

The pen continued to scratch, and the longer he wrote, the less his hand trembled. Every sentence became a blow, every line a slash. He realized he wasn't simply scribbling down memories—he was fighting. Not with iron, but with words.

"Damn it," he muttered, "this is better than a sword. The sword kills a man—the pen strikes entire generations in the mouth."

He wrote about princes, calling them "fat sacks in velvet and silk that stink when you cut them open, like any other dog." He wrote about the Church, "which blesses crosses with one hand and empties the pockets of the poor with the other." He wrote about the emperor, "who wears more gold in his crown than he has sense in his head."

Every sentence burned. No poetry, no sweet talk—just mockery, curses, blood. His language was as raw as his life. "I was no hero," he scribbled. "I was a man who never stooped. And if someone can't stand that, let them burn the page. But as long as someone reads it, my defiance lives on."

The pages filled. Ink splashed, blotted, and smeared. But there was fire in every word. No scholar would have called this 'art'—but every farmhand, every peasant, every bastard who read it would nod and say, "This is real."

Götz grinned, his iron fist next to the parchment, heavy, rusty, loyal. "The fist has fought, the sword has fought – now the words fight. And believe me: They bite deeper. For you can kill me, but you cannot erase what I have written."

For the first time in years, there was no noise in his head. No drumming, no clanging, no cursing of enemies, no howls of betrayal. Only the soft scratching of the quill on parchment, the dripping of ink, and the crackling of the candle.

Götz leaned back and rubbed his eyes. His fist lay heavy on the table, but his heart beat more calmly. He felt how writing didn't weaken him, but rather stilled him—not like the fatigue after a battle, but like a strange form of peace.

"Well, what a load of crap," he muttered, grinning crookedly. "I've found more peace in a stain of ink than in a thousand barrels of wine."

He continued writing, this time not of blood or betrayal, but of what remained to him: of the farm, of his children, of the laughter of his grandchildren.

"Perhaps," he scribbled, "freedom isn't just about obeying no master. Perhaps it's also about still being alive when everything else has long since turned to dust—and about telling yourself stories before others do."

The words flowed, no longer like blows, but like breath. He realized: Not every line had to be powerful. Some could simply be.

He paused, looked at the pages covered with writing. Crooked, blotchy, raw—but true. "Damn beauty," he muttered. "Honesty is enough."

For the first time in his memory, he felt he didn't have to fight. Not against princes, not against emperors, not against death. Only against the emptiness of paper—and that was easier to conquer.

The candle flickered, the ink was almost gone, and his eyes burned. Götz put down his pen, rubbed his face, his iron fist dull against the wood of the table. His body was a heap of scrap, tired, scarred, almost at its end. But before him lay pages. Scribbled on, smeared, raw—his pages.

He stared at it and knew: This was it. Not the end, but the legacy. No prince could take it from him, no priest could confess it to him, no emperor could burn it without it being told again.

"Shitty life," he muttered, "but now it's mine. Every scar, every curse, every blow—it's all here. And when I die, that mouth will stay open. Forever."

He laughed hoarsely, coughed blood, and spat into the ashes. "Let them leave my bones in the dirt. But my words? No one can break them. They're harder than iron, sharper than steel. I may soon be dust, but the words... they'll remain, damn it."

The iron fist lay heavy next to the quill. He placed his left hand on it, almost tenderly. "You served me, old iron. But the quill has replaced you. Not because

it's stronger—but because it lasts longer. You rust, but ink eats into minds, year after year."

He grinned, his eyes glowing once more. "So be it. I'll die soon. But my story... it marches on. Without me. Without my flesh. But with my voice."

And in that moment he knew: Death could come whenever it wanted. He had forged his final sword. Not of iron—of words.

The Rebel's Legacy

There was no need for drums, no heralds, no damned parchments with imperial seals. What Götz had scribbled on its pages, what he had spat into the peasants' mouths, what he had yelled in the faces of the princes – it spread like fire through the land.

In the taverns, mercenaries sat with thin beer, laughing filthy, and one said, "Did you hear? Old Berlichingen told the priest that heaven was as empty as his wine barrel!" Laughter thundered, mugs flew together, and one roared, "That's a man talking! Damn heaven, cheers!"

In the villages, farmers squatted around the fire, their hands covered in calluses, and one whispered: "Berlichingen himself wrote that he never lived on his knees. Imagine—he, the outlaw, is writing his own history!" The others nodded, and one spat into the straw. "If he could do it, then we can too. No master will bend us forever."

Even in the princes' castles, the servants trembled, because even there, Götz's words seeped into the halls. Curses, mockery, defiance—nothing anyone wanted to hear in churches or council chambers, yet no one could stop them.

His words ran faster than any blade, sharper than any judgment. From mouth to mouth, from ear to ear. No edict could burn them, no priest could condemn them.

Götz grinned when he heard about it. "Ha! I spit in the dirt once – and years later, another one slips."

It wasn't long before they were no longer just words. They became stories. And stories became legends.

In an inn, a mercenary swore he had seen with his own eyes how Götz crushed ten men with his iron fist in one blow. "Ten, I tell you! One after the other, like logs in a fire!" The others toasted him, laughed, and by the next village there were already twenty.

A farmer said at the harvest fire: "Berlichingen isn't human, he's a demon made of iron! He doesn't need bread, he doesn't need sleep, he only eats blood and princely shit!" The children screamed, the old people nodded, and soon everyone believed he was half human, half hell.

Some imagined him as an avenger who roamed the forests at night, slaying princes and protecting the poor. Others saw him as a devil who mocked even death.

And so the myth grew, greater than the man himself. Everyone embellished him, everyone made him what they needed:— To the peasants, he was the freedom fighter.— To the mercenaries, he was the invincible wolf.— To the princes, he was the bogeyman who, even dead, still showed his teeth.

Götz heard about the nonsense and laughed hoarsely. "Ten men in one fell swoop? Screw it—I would have loved to see that. But let them believe it. The bigger the lie, the longer the truth lasts."

The princes hated him even during his lifetime. But now, as his words devoured villages and cities like fire, they feared him more than ever.

In the council chambers, they whispered: "His writings must be burned."
"Burn? Damn it, his words have long been in the mouths of the peasants. Do you want to burn every farmhand who repeats them?" Silence. Fear.

The priests ranted from the pulpits: "Götz von Berlichingen was a heretic, a sinner, a dog! Whoever repeats his words is sinning!" But even as they shouted, a faint laugh could be heard from behind. The peasants grinned and whispered to each other: "If he was a heretic, then we want to be heretics too."

The emperor, in his golden chamber, gritted his teeth whenever the name was mentioned. No one dared to speak it aloud, and that was precisely what made it stronger. For what could not be forbidden grew.

Götz, the old dog, grinned when he was told this. "Ha! They're still trembling. I'm old, I'm tired, I'm rotting—and yet they're still trembling. This is my victory. No blood, no iron. Only fear remains."

While the princes trembled, something else grew in the land—affection, respect, even love. Not the sweet love for saints or kings, but the raw, dirty, genuine love of the people for someone who spoke like them, cursed like them, suffered like them.

In the villages, children played "Berlichingen." One would pull an old pot onto his arm and shout, "I'm Götz! Tell him yourself, you dog!" And then they would laugh and fight in the dust until one of them bled—and no one cried, because even the blood was part of the game.

The peasants drank thin beer on long evenings and recited his sayings like prayers. "Do you remember," said one, "when he yelled in the priest's face that heaven was empty?" Another nodded and grinned. "He said the emperor should shove his crown up his ass. I swear!" The laughter was loud, defiant, like a small piece of freedom in the midst of misery.

The farmhands and maids moved through the fields with his words. One sang while plowing: "Tell him yourself! Tell him yourself!" – and this became a rhythm, a hymn for all those who otherwise only screamed when the whip came.

And even those who had never seen him knew him. Not as a knight, not as an enemy of the emperor—but as a symbol. He was the one who never crawled on his knees. The one who said "screw it" where others prayed. The one who had a fist that stayed up even in old age.

Götz heard this and growled, half-touched, half-mockery. "Love, yes? Ha! If they love me, then at least they should curse while they do it. Otherwise, it'll all be in vain."

The further his words traveled, the more they were twisted. Everyone took what they needed—and made Götz into something other than what he was.

The peasants made him a saint. They said he was the only knight who truly fought for them. One swore he saw Götz throw the tithes back into the fields as a gift from heaven. "He was a man of God," whispered an old farmer, "only with an iron fist instead of a cross."

The mercenaries turned him into a demon. They boasted around the fire: "Berlichingen drank blood like wine. He laughed when he died and spat in death's face. No man, I tell you—half iron, half hell."

And the princes painted him as a robber. Their writings described him as "a restless spirit, an outlaw who stood against the emperor and the church." They wanted to belittle him, make him a scoundrel who left no trace but shame.

The truth became blurred. No one knew what was real and what was made up. Was he a freedom fighter? A bandit? A devil? A saint? All at once—and none of it entirely.

Götz himself heard about it and laughed hoarsely. "Let them lie. Let them sanctify me or demonize me. In the end, they talk—and that's enough. A man isn't dead as long as his name still howls in the ears of the powerful."

People brought him stories. Servants, travelers, even grandchildren recited them to him, everyone wanting him to hear how great his name had become.

"Grandpa," cried a boy, "they say you killed a hundred men with one blow!" Götz coughed, laughed hoarsely, and spat into the straw. "A hundred? Screw it, I was already tired at ten. But if you enjoy it, go ahead and tell them. Maybe tomorrow I'll kill a thousand without getting up."

A servant grinned crookedly: "They say you're a saint, sir. A martyr of the people." Götz slammed his fist on the table, shattering the mug. "Holy shit, my ass! I've drunk, cursed, and fucked more than ten sinners combined. If that's holy, then hallelujah!"

And then a messenger arrived, speaking on behalf of a prince: "They call you a robber, an outlaw who stood against all order." Götz grinned, his iron fist raised. "Robber? Right. I stole what they never wanted to give me: my freedom. And if that's a crime, then I'm guilty until the grave."

He heard all the voices, all the exaggerations, all the lies. And he laughed, coughed, spat, but he knew: It didn't matter. Because they were talking. They were arguing, they were swearing, they were writing poetry – and his name was on everyone's lips.

"Let them do it," he growled, half-satisfied. "A saint, a devil, a bandit—I don't care. The main thing is that they don't forget me. Because forgetting is worse than forgetting." The nights grew colder, the candles shorter, his breathing heavier. Götz knew he didn't have many more sips of wine ahead of him. But he saw the children, the grandchildren, the farmhands—and he heard his own mouth in their words, his own laughter in their defiance.

"Damn it," he muttered, "I'm dying. Yes. My flesh rots, my bones crack, my fist rusts. But my name—it doesn't die."

He thought of the princes whispering in fear. Of the priests ranting as if the devil were on their tail. Of the peasants singing his curses as if they were psalms.

And he grinned, hoarsely, full of mockery. "That is my victory. Not the battles, not the heads I've split. But that I remain—in the mouths of the people, in the curse of the peasants, in the wrath of the princes. I have long been more than flesh. I am a damned thorn."

The iron fist lay on the table, heavy, silent. He placed his left hand on it, almost tenderly. "We've both bitten long enough, old iron. I'll lie down soon. But you, you'll remain in the stories. And in the fists of those yet to come."

He coughed, laughed, and spat blood. "Immortal? Screw gods and emperors. I don't need heaven. I already have my place—in the curse, in defiance, in everyone who doesn't bend."

Death. And death can go to hell."

The death camp

It was no throne room, no courtyard full of banners, no damned hero's bed. Just a plain room, wooden beams, a fire crackling faintly in the corner. The smell of smoke, sweat, and death hung in the air like a damp rag.

Götz lay there, his body a wreck. His legs were like lead, his chest heaving, every breath a battle against his own ribs. His iron fist lay heavy on the blanket, blunt, rusty, more memory than weapon. But his eyes—dull, yes, but that damned fire still burned within them, one no one could extinguish.

The family stood around the bed. Children with serious faces, daughters with tears, grandchildren who didn't understand why the old dog was suddenly lying still. To them, he was not a rebel, not an outlaw, not a bogeyman of the princes—to them, he was just father. Grandfather. Blood.

One of the grandchildren ventured closer and placed a small hand on the iron. "Grandpa, does that hurt?" Götz coughed, laughed, and wheezed: "Son, the iron never hurt. Only the flesh around it. And now it's just rotting. Screw it."

A murmur went through the room, quiet sobs, swallowed prayers. But Götz growled, his voice still scratchy like a rusty knife: "Stop crying. I'm not lying here because I'm broken. I'm lying here because damned death has finally found the courage to take me on."

His body was no longer a body—it was a crumpled heap of bones, tendons, and pain. Every breath scratched, as if he were swallowing shards of glass. His legs lay there like useless wood, cold, heavy, long since without strength. His left hand was thin and shaky, the veins bulging blue.

And the iron fist? It was heavier than ever. Once a tool of defiance, now a damned anvil pressing him into the mattress. He could barely lift it anymore, but he left it there, visible, as a sign. "It'll stay with me until the last damn pull," he gasped, "whether it pulls me down or not."

He coughed and spat blood into a cloth. A grandson tried to take the cloth away, but Götz, weak as he was, slammed his fist against it. "Stop it. Let everyone see how death fucks me piece by piece. I'm not hiding anything."

The daughter at his side whispered, "Father, you need to rest." "Rest?" Götz laughed hoarsely, rasping, a sound like tearing leather. "I'll rest in the grave, girl. Until then, I'll stay awake. I want to feel every fucking blow from that bastard who calls himself death. Then I can laugh right in his face as he takes his last breath."

He turned his head, sweat running down his forehead, his eyes half-closed. But there was still that spark, that damned defiance that wouldn't die. "My body is a dilapidated stable," he murmured. "But inside me, the dog still barks. And it bites until it suffocates."

The room was full of breath, but no one dared to breathe loudly. Children and grandchildren crowded around the bed, their eyes red, their hands nervous, as if merely holding on could prevent the old dog from slipping away.

The eldest son stood stiffly, arms crossed, jaw clenched. A man who had learned not to cry—and whose eyes now gleamed, whether he wanted to or not. "Stop pulling yourself together," Götz growled in a raspy voice. "If you

want to cry, then cry. I've spit out more blood than you have tears. And screw it—both show you're still alive."

A daughter surreptitiously wiped her eyes and murmured, "Father, why do you always have to talk like that? Why not just go quietly, in peace?" Götz laughed hoarsely, wheezing. "Peace? Girl, that's for saints and ass-kissers. I'll go the way I came: with curses in my mouth and my fists raised. Let the others seek peace—I'll seek conflict until I die."

A grandson climbed closer, tugged at his blanket, and whispered, "Grandpa, are you scared?" The old man turned his head, stared at the child with glassy eyes—and grinned. "Scared? I've farted in front of princes, spat in front of priests, and I'm supposed to tremble before death? Boy, when death comes, I'll ask him if he has any balls. And if not, I'll send him back."

The room was silent, only the crackling of the fire and his ragged breath filled the space. But amidst all the misery, amidst the tears and trembling, something like pride burned. For everyone knew: This old wolf would not whine. He would howl until the very end.

His breath sounded like rusty chains dragging across stone. Every breath hurt, every cough ripped open his chest. But his mouth—that remained sharp.

The priest, who had been summoned, approached, the cross in his hand. "My son, it's time to entrust your soul to God." Götz grimaced and spat a bloody laugh. "God? Let him come and get it for me himself. I sent him nothing but curses. If he has any balls, let him stand here and give me his hand—but let him know that he'll only get it made of iron."

The daughter hissed in alarm, the grandchildren clung on tighter. But Götz grinned. "See? The priest is already stammering. He wants to talk me into heaven, but I've already been sitting in hell for a long time – and I'm making myself comfortable until you come along."

A son, his voice broken: "Father... don't you want to leave us anything? A final word?" Götz coughed, coughed up blood, wheezed, and forced out: "Yes. Tell every damned prince, every priest, every emperor: Tell him yourself. If they want to take something from you, then show them your fist—whether it's made of iron or flesh. You don't need any more inheritance."

Then he closed his eyes briefly, his breath ragged. For a moment, he seemed weak, small, almost broken. But then he opened his eyes again, grinning, his

voice barely above a whisper: "Damn it, even death can get me with a curse in my ear. Then at least he'll know who he's dealing with."

The night stretched like a wet rope. Every breath Götz took sounded like he was sucking on broken glass. Death was there—not visible, not tangible, but palpable like a cold wind blowing through the cracks in the room.

Götz coughed, spat blood into the cloth again, and growled: "Come on, bastard. I know you're sitting here. Stop hiding like a cowardly dog. Show yourself!"

The grandchildren recoiled, the daughter whispered, "Father, who are you talking to?" "Death, damn it!" he rasped, grinning crookedly. "He's sitting here in the corner, staring at me like a scribbler who doesn't know what to write. And I tell him: Write it yourself, you cowardly bastard!"

His breath was ragged, but he continued, his fist pounding on the blanket: "You want me? Then come closer. But don't think I'll follow you quietly. I'll kick you, bite you, spit on you—until you finally grab me."

He laughed, a scratchy, bloody laugh that echoed in the rafters. "I've spat in the faces of princes, I've given the emperor the finger, I've cursed priests—and you think you scare me? Screw you. If you've got balls, come and get me. But woe betide you if you come empty-handed—then I'll smash your face in, even if you're out of breath."

To the family, it sounded like madness, but for Götz, it was the final battle—not with a sword, not with a fist, but with words. He wanted death itself to tremble before taking him.

The air was heavy, the fire almost extinguished. Götz lay there, his skin pale, his eyes half-closed. Every breath a cramp, every cough a tear in his chest. But the fist—the fist was still there.

Slowly, with the last of his strength, he raised his arm. The iron hand, rusty and heavy as a millstone, rose trembling into the air. Centimeter by centimeter, as if he were trying to lift the whole world onto his shoulders once more.

The family watched, breathless. One of the grandchildren whispered, "He'll lift it again..." The eldest son stepped forward, trying to stop him, but Götz hissed, "Don't touch me. I'll do this... myself."

The fist hung in the air, trembling, weak—but it hung. A final banner, a rusty symbol. Not beautiful, not shining, but defiant.

He growled, his voice barely more than a scratch: "That's how you should remember me. Not lying down, not whining. But with my fist up, even if it falls."

And then his arm sank back, heavy and dull, onto the blanket. He grinned, bloody, tired, but content. "Ha... even death can't get me without that stupid greeting."

The night had become silent. No more coughing, no more crackling fire, only the deep gasping of a man who already had one foot in the grave. The family held their breath, as if they could hold him with silence.

Götz felt the darkness tugging at him. Every breath was a theft, made more difficult by death. His bones were empty, his chest burned, his eyes grew duller. But the mouth – it was still there.

"Listen, you bastard," he whispered into the shadows, his iron fist heavy at his side, "you'll get me now, yes. But you won't get me clean. I'll come to you with blood in my beard, curses on my tongue, and my fist in the dirt. So prepare yourself for your hell to stink of me."

The daughter wept quietly. The grandson pressed his small hand against the cold iron. But Götz grinned, his lips bloody, his eyes half-closed.

"Ha," he wheezed, "you all thought I'd go quietly. But I don't give a damn about silence. I'll go laughing because death can't defeat me—it can only carry me. And even then, I'll fart in its ear."

One last breath, one last cough, one last laugh—rough, brittle, full of defiance. Then the head slumped to the side, the fist resting heavily on the blanket.

Thus died Götz von Berlichingen—not with prayer, not with peace, but with a curse and a laugh. Death had claimed him, but it had not broken him.

The man, the legend

They carried him out, the old dog, without drums, without banners, without any damned pomp and circumstance. No emperor would have seen him off, no church would have granted him the bells. Just family, a few servants, a few neighbors—that was all.

The corpse lay heavy on the bier, wrapped in a coarse cloth, the iron fist clamped across his chest. No gold, no jewelry, only the iron that remained. And even that looked like a rusty pile of scrap.

The sun shone dimly as they lowered the coffin into the ground. One grandson wept, one grinned bravely, and the eldest son threw a shovelful of earth on top, as if closing the chapter.

No priest spoke grand words. Only the cracking of shovels, the coughing of men, the sobbing of women. And above all, the silence of those who knew: They were laying not just a man in the grave, but an entire era.

But even before the last of the earth fell, the first words began to fly. A servant muttered, "He told the emperor to stick the crown up his ass." Another nodded, "He spat in the priest's face and laughed." And they were already laughing quietly, despite their tears.

The body lay in the dirt. But the story was already standing up again.

It took less than a week before his sayings echoed through the villages like thunder. No priest, no prince could stifle them. They were too simple, too raw, too real—they fit every mouth that had ever been oppressed.

In a tavern in Franconia, a mercenary raised his mug and roared: "Screw the emperor—tell him yourself!" The benches shook, laughter roared, and suddenly it was a toast, a shout, a hymn.

In a field in Swabia, as the plough drove heavily through the earth, a farmer shouted: "Keep your fist up!" The farmhands laughed and repeated it until it sounded like a song rolling through the fields.

And the children—they were playing "Götz" in the yard. One tied a rusty bucket to his arm, held it up in the air, and screamed: "I am the knight with the iron fist!" The others screamed, threw themselves at him, and in the end, one of them lay bleeding in the dust—grinning.

His name was everywhere. Not in the thick books of scholars, but in the mouths of those who needed him. He was the curse in the tavern, the laughter in the stable, the defiance at the plow.

And so he lived on – not as a hero with a halo, but as the rebel in everyone who said "screw it" when his chains were tightened.

The news of his death brought no peace to the halls of the princes. On the contrary, it made them more nervous. For a dead Götz could no longer be hanged, no longer outlawed, no longer bound. And yet he continued to bark, from a thousand mouths simultaneously.

In the council chambers they whispered: "Forbid his name." "Forbid his sayings." "Hunt down anyone who repeats them."

But they knew it was futile. How can you stop a flood with your hands? The more they forbade it, the louder the cry echoed across the fields: "Tell him yourself!"

The priests preached against him, ranting from the pulpits: "Berlichingen was a sinner! A cursed man! Whoever repeats his words risks his soul!"

But in the back rows, the peasants grinned, murmuring his words quietly as if they were psalms from a new, dirty Bible.

And even the emperor could no longer reach him. He was dead, yet he made the throne more shaky than many living enemies. For he could no longer be condemned, nor could he be judged. He had long since been beyond all power.

They had feared him while he was alive. Now that he was dead, they feared him even more. Because you can't behead a dead person. But their stories—they'll rip your guts out while you sleep.

The years passed, but the name Götz von Berlichingen didn't fade. On the contrary – it grew, swelled like a stream after rain. Each generation added something, making the old dog bigger, stronger, fiercer than he had ever been.

A farmer swore that Götz single-handedly chased an entire company of imperial soldiers into the forest—with only his iron fist and a filthy curse on his lips. A mercenary told the tale in the tavern that Götz hadn't died, but marched through hell, spat in the devil's face, and returned. And children screamed in the courtyards: "I am the knight who never kneels! I am Götz!"—and beat each other laughing into the dust.

The truth transformed into myth. He was no longer a man; he was a symbol. For the peasants: the freedom fighter. For the mercenaries: the immortal wolf. For the princes: a specter that robbed them of their nights even after death.

The fist, once just a piece of iron, became a symbol. It was carved into doors, painted on walls, and raised in taverns when one rebelled. It was no longer a weapon—it was an image, an oath, a cry.

And so Götz became not a knight, not a rebel, not an outlaw – but a legend. One greater than his flesh, greater than his sword, greater even than his death.

The iron fist had long since lain underground, rusting with him in the grave. But out in the country, people raised their fists—flesh and bone—and named them after him.

A farmer who refused to pay tithes clenched his hand and shouted, "Keep your fist up!" A farmhand beaten by the lord of the manor grinned bloodily and roared, "Tell him yourself!" And in the taverns, over beer and arguments, his name was the cue that made the men stand up when one claimed too much power for himself.

His words had become a legacy. Not parchment, not a title, not gold. But a sentence, a sign. "Tell him yourself." Simple, raw, imperishable.

The children first learned it as a game, as mockery. Later, they said it with anger, with defiance. And eventually, with pride. No other saying was so honest, so dangerous, so free.

Princes hissed at him, priests cursed him – and that made him even stronger. For everything that is forbidden grows. And Götz's legacy was now greater than ever: a fist against every crown, a curse against every whip, a laugh in the face of death.

What had he become in the end? A knight without a hand. An outlaw who dwelt more in the forests than in castles. A man full of curses, with wine in his stomach, blood on his hands, and dirt under his nails. No saint, no emperor, no scribe would ever have thought of calling him a role model.

And yet – that's exactly what he was.

The emperors with their crowns rotted to dust, forgotten by their own grandchildren. The princes with their seals, their palaces stood empty, their names mere footnotes in the filth of chronicles. The priests with their crosses, they prayed themselves to death, while no one remembered their names anymore.

But Götz? The old dog, the outlaw, with a curse in his mouth? His name remained. His defiance echoed on, his spell was stronger than any seal, his iron harder than any crown.

There was the contrast that drove the powerful mad: They had everything – gold, power, armies.

He had nothing—just a rusty fist, a loose mouth, and the will never to kneel. And that's exactly what made him immortal.

"The man who became a legend," whispered the peasants. "The bastard who still haunts us," growled the princes. "The heretic who lives among the people," cursed the priests.

Whether hate or love – he was there. And she was no longer there.

His body had long since turned to dust, his bones long since gnawed by worms. But his name echoed. In taverns, in villages, in fields, in filthy camps, even in the corridors of castles.

The story was told again and again. One swore he had returned from Hell to make a fool of the Devil himself. Another claimed he was in Heaven and had spat in God's face because he had too many crowns and too few eggs. And the peasants simply said: "He was one of us. And he never backed down."

His iron fist rusted deep in the earth, but it became an image in people's minds—raised against every whip, against every seal, against every throne. His saying, "Tell him yourself," lingered like a curse, indelible, born again and again in the mouths of the enraged.

So the man ended—but the legend began. A knight, a rebel, an old dog full of curses. No emperor could break him, no priest could cleanse him, no death could truly kill him.

For as long as someone stands up, clenches his fist and laughs in the face of the powerful, Götz von Berlichingen lives on.

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Year of publication: 2025