

Steel 33

Chapter 33: Tea Time

Berengar was holding Adela's hand as he walked side-by-side with her into the dining room, where many of the guests visiting for their engagement ceremony were currently staying and enjoying a lavish meal. The noblemen and women of various stature could not help themselves from complimenting the chefs and the fine cuisine they had served to the guests. Of course, it was all of Berengar's favorites and the culinary knowledge he brought with him from his previous life. Though certain foods were missing from the dishes due to the inability to source them, the main staples of what would become german cooking were all spread out in a feast for the Lord and Ladies to enjoy at their leisure.

When Berengar entered the room, he was wearing a fine black velvet doublet with golden embroidery. Worn over the doublet was an exquisite sleeveless black fur coat. His trousers were matching black velvet and were well-tailored, and he currently wore knee-high leather riding boots. All of which were recently made. Atop his neck and over his shoulders was a golden chain embellished in black gemstones. His extravagant attire was recently manufactured in his fledgling textile industry and was in the style of the Tudor era, which had yet to exist in this timeline. To the medieval lords and ladies who gathered in the room, his renaissance style attire was new and luxurious. The moment the nobility laid their eyes upon the young Lord and his unique fashion sense, they could not help but feel astonished and envious at the same time. Was this really the sickly and petty young lord they all knew?

Though they had all heard the rumors of Berengar's recent transformation, none of them had truly believed it until the moment they laid eyes upon him. Adela, of course, was standing next to him, holding his hand and wearing a Tudor-style dress in the same black and gold color scheme. Despite her age, she appeared quite ravishing standing next to her betrothed; many of the eligible bachelors instantly became furious that a lowly Baron's son like Berengar had snatched up such a fine young woman. They could not understand what the Count of Steiermark was thinking, allowing his youngest daughter to be wed to the son of a family of such low nobility. Of course, Otto was not the only count marrying one of his daughters to Sieghard's sons.

With the arrival of the Count of Steiermark and the Count of Tyrol came many of their subjects paying respects to their lieges and their attendance at what would normally be a local affair. There were far more nobles at the occasion than what was initially projected, and there were many more to come in the following days. From Steiermark and Tyrol, nobles of all positions could be found in Kufstein at the moment. Many of which were not even aware of Berengar's existence before his engagement to Adela. Still, they did their best to appease him, as they could tell by the presence of two Counts at a celebration that he personally called for, that perhaps one day Berengar would become an important figure in the Duchy of Austria.

Linde was standing in the crowd next to Lambert as she watched Berengar and Adela arrive in the newly designed fashion with a great deal of envy in her heart. Why had Berengar not presented her with such a fine dress? Obviously, she knew it would not be appropriate for him to do so, and if she waltzed around wearing such a fine dress, her father and fiance would immediately become suspicious of where she had acquired it. Yet the young woman could not prevent such feelings as she gazed upon Berengar and his future bride standing in the middle of the dining hall basking in the glory.

Just as Berengar had planned, the nobles saw the luxurious new outfits Adela and himself were sporting and could not help but approach the two and inquire about where they purchased such fine clothing. Of course, Berengar revealed that it was designed and manufactured in his family's territory within the new textile factories he personally owned. If the nobility wanted to purchase the new fashion designs for themselves, they would have to negotiate with him personally. Thus a new, and lucrative trade was born on the spot.

Through much effort and expense, Berengar had begun to grow flax and had imported a great deal of the material alongside silk to produce these designs. Though at the moment, the flax was still growing and had yet to be harvested. The factory was fully constructed. However, it was currently operating at minimum capacity, as only a single unit of each of the new inventions was set in the large building. Those inventions include the spinning jenny, the spinning mule, the flying shuttle, and the water frame. Considering his industrial district was built near the river Inn he had ample water power to use in both the steel and textile industries.

As of now, he could only produce a small quantity of clothing, but it was more than enough to appease the nobles in front of him and their desires to buy the new style of fashion in which Berengar had personally introduced. Though now was not the time to talk business; instead, it was the time to build alliances and conspire against his enemies. Berengar and Adela spent much of the day socializing with the other nobles; in this feudal era, building alliances were important.

Berengar sat at the head of the table as he associated with the other young nobles, drinking fine chamomile tea as he snacked on apple strudel and lebkuchen cookies. The other nobles of his age were delighted by the delicacies in front of them, which Berengar boasted of being the invention of the local chefs. He would not take credit for too many things, else nobody would believe him.

A young lady who was quite attractive could not help but exclaim in joy as she tasted pfeffernusse for the first time.

"Adela, you are so lucky; I would be so happy if I could snack on such treats each day."

Adela could not help but smile at the compliment; the truth was she was quite used to snacking on these things. She had even begun to exercise more to maintain her petite physique; she would never want to become fat and unattractive in Berengar's eyes. Berengar, on the other hand, goaded the girl on and handed her a slice of cheesecake.

"Try this; I promise you will love it!"

The young lady who had a passion for pfeffernusse tasted the german cheesecake and immediately fell in love with it. Linde was observing Berengar's behavior while snacking on her favorite foods at the other side of the table. She was not as into sweets as Adela was and preferred the actual meals, like schnitzel. As long as she could get a good jaeger schnitzel with a side of spaetzle and a good lager to go with it, she was satisfied. That just so happened to be Berengar's favorite meal, too; of course, a crucial component of the meal was missing, but Linde had no way of knowing it.

The more Berengar ate his favorite food, the more he missed the potato pancakes and chocolate desserts that he grew up with as a staple in his previous life's household. He desperately wished he could speed up time to send out an expedition to South America and get his hands on cocoa and potatoes. However, patience was a virtue, and whether he liked it or not, he would have to wait until he had enough power, influence, and wealth to sponsor such a voyage. Thus he opted to enjoy the fine cuisine in front of him as he was thankful he could dine on such treasures regularly.

On the other hand, Lambert was surrounded by his allies, who all began to chat among themselves about the lack of a certain Lord who was a core part of the alliance. A young man in which Berengar recognized as Ser Ingbert Heltzer; was currently conversing with Lambert about Ulrich's absence.

"Is it true? Was Ulrich killed by a stray projectile fired by a hand cannon in the hands of a peasant?"

Lambert could not help but furrow his brows and facepalm at such a remark. He had no way of knowing if his brother's claims were true as nobody could find Ulrich's body. Officially, Berengar was so disgusted with Ulrich's behavior that he left his body for the wolves. Though the men beneath Berengar's command all confirmed the story was true, there was no way of knowing precisely how Ulrich had perished in battle without a body. However, as far as his father was concerned, Berengar spoke the truth, and as such, Ulrich was condemned as a fool who had marched upon an entrenched enemy position and had met his fate at the hands of lady luck.

The Lordship of Wildsch?nau was in a rough state at the moment, a large portion of their workforce had disappeared overnight, they had no professional army to call upon in the event of a war, the von Kufsteins seized their largest source of income, and a small child was at the head of the household. The child-lord was present for this ceremony, accompanied by his regent, who the von Kufsteins appointed; this said a lot about how the feudal overlords currently viewed the von Wildsch?nau family. Truthfully they got off easy compared to others who have attempted something similar in the past. The fact that Ulrich's family was still in possession of most of their lands and their lives was a testament to the benevolent nature of Sieghard.

Still, the result of Ulrich's attempt on Berengar's life made many of the other lords and knights in Lambert's corner hesitant to provide any more support than they already have. If it weren't for the Count of Tyrol backing Lambert, most of his support would have vanished after Ulrich's death. Despite supporting Lambert, the Count of Tyrol was absolutely livid at the boy's repeated failures to get the job done. Looking upon Berengar, how healthy he appeared, how graceful he was when talking with the other Lords and Ladies, and how prosperous his industries were becoming, the old Count could not help but feel like he had backed the wrong horse. Who was the idiot who told him that Berengar was a sickly, idle fool!?! If he had known the truth about Berengar sooner, he would have engaged his beloved daughter to him instead. Damn that Lambert for deceiving him!

However, the more Count Lothar watched Berengar, the more he came to realize that he desperately needed to install Lambert on the throne; even if it were possible for him to switch sides now, he would not do so. Every word Berengar spoke to the other nobles was carefully chosen to present himself in a better light. The young man was cunning, too cunning. It was obvious to Lothar that even if he could marry his beloved daughter to Berengar, the young lord would not be so easily fooled into giving up Kufstein's iron reserves in which Count Lothar desperately needed to achieve his greater ambitions. What Lothar needed was a pawn, and Lambert fit that role perfectly. The boy was exceptionally eager to give up his family's most valuable resources so that he could be with the Count's daughter. It was truly, and utterly pathetic, yet Lothar still agreed to the betrothal of his dearest daughter to the pitiful baron's son anyway, for he would never become Duke of Austria without Kufstein's iron reserves.

As Count Lothar was inspecting Berengar with his discerning eye, so too was Berengar examining Count Lothar. Currently, the Count of Tyrol was the greatest threat to Berengar's existence. Though the Count's daughter had fallen under his control, and Berengar could expect to be one step ahead of the Count, and his Brother, the young lord, did not feel safe knowing that such a powerful man was after his life. Nevertheless, he did not display a hint of his internal hostility towards the Count. As Lambert was discussing with his allies the loss of their partner in crime, one of the young ladies fawning over Berengar brought up the tale of his battle with Ulrich, by now the rumors had spread far and wide and had become greatly exaggerated, the rumor had now

become so inflated that even his actual accomplishment no longer seemed so impressive.

"Berengar, I heard that you personally commanded an army of 100 men while previously wounded from the attempt on your life against an army led by that dastardly Ulrich who had over 2000 of his own troops! Surely the mad man must have emptied his fields to take your life!"

Berengar struggled to maintain his composure as he heard the absurd lengths the rumors had reached; he was good, but not that good! He had to correct this mistake while still making it seem like his feat was grand. Thus he decided to tell the whole truth, of course, to the many observers who were aware of the official numbers what Berengar was about to say would seem like he was conceding ground, to appear humble while still greatly exaggerating the battle.

"I'm afraid I'll have to disappoint you; the reality of the situation was that I was facing 1600 men, with 600 of my own. Still, with our hand cannons, we gunned down hundreds of their men before they finally broke ranks and fled like the cowards they were..."

The girl did not seem disappointed in the slightest. Instead, she had sparkles in her eyes as she heard the exact details of the battle from the man himself. Granted, he did not deny the part of him being grievously injured, despite only having minor injuries and dehydration. On the other hand, Lambert nearly spat out his drink when he heard his brother's wild claim. The way Berengar espoused such a hyperbolic tale was without a hint of dishonesty on his face. Either Berengar was the greatest bullshitter Lambert had ever seen, or he was actually telling the truth. The youth struggled to wrap his head around what was real and what was dishonesty.

Ultimately the meeting between the various nobles and Berengar was split into two factions sitting across the table as if battle lines were drawn. Those who supported Berengar tended to be of the younger generation, few of which had already succeeded their fathers; most were heirs like Berengar or even second sons. The other faction supported Lambert, and most of them were of the older generation, those who were currently in a seat of power and had been for some time. If one were not aware of the deadly war of intrigue fought in the shadows of these two brothers, then they would not understand the full

context of the seating arrangement that had occurred. Either way, the friendships Berengar made at this table with the younger generation of nobles from across Austria would one day become the backbone of his power base.