

Steel 36

Chapter 36: A Difficult Negotiation

Days had passed, and all of the guests who were present for Berengar's Ceremony had departed. All except for Count Lothar, who was in the middle of a fierce debate with Sieghard about Lambert's supposed affair with Linde. Strictly speaking, they were not supposed to engage in such behavior before their wedding night, and Linde purposely made it seem like she was pressured into the occasion by a drunken and belligerent Lambert. Though nothing actually happened between the two, the only people aware of that fact were Berengar and Linde who used this opportunity to sow division between Lambert and his greatest backer. As far as both families were concerned, Lambert had done the deed with Linde during Berengar's engagement ceremony, and it would not be long before Linde revealed she was pregnant to the two families. However, there was still some time between now and then.

Berengar sat in the great hall and listened to the bickering of the two old men as he dined on schnitzel, which the cooks had prepared for him. He washed it down with a flagon of beer and enjoyed the scene of Lambert being scolded by the two feudal lords who were furious with his behavior. Linde had done more than Berengar had asked and made it seem like Lambert had practically forced himself on the poor girl; of course, Lambert had no memories of the time he spent with Linde and deeply regretted it. If he really did as she claimed, then the worst part of it was that he could not remember what her naked body looked like or how it felt. She had covered herself thoroughly with the sheets when he awoke to the scene and could not get a good glimpse of her bare figure.

Linde was standing next to her father with a downcast expression; she was an excellent actor and could play the victim's part quite well. Lothar was spouting his demands to Sieghard as he pointed his finger at him menacingly.

"Unacceptable! I will not stand for this; I demand some form of compensation for my daughter's chastity, which your errant son violated! Just because they are betrothed does not mean he can force himself on my daughter as he pleases!"

Sieghard was trying to manage the situation and felt deeply embarrassed by Lambert's actions; though he knew the boy's relationship with his fiancée was

tense, he had no idea that his prized son would act in such a way after having a few beers.

"I promise, I will do my best to make this right, but what is it exactly you are asking from me?"

Lothar was genuinely not too appalled by Lambert's behavior; in fact, it was doing him a great favor; this gave him cause to demand a portion of Kufstein's iron reserves. Which he immediately requested.

"I demand 25 percent of Kufstein's iron reserves in return for your son's actions."

Siegward was outraged by such a demand that was giving away a massive pile of wealth, especially now that Berengar had managed to find a way to turn all of that iron into steel in an efficient manner. As such, he pounded his fist on the armrest of his seat of power and refused Lothar's demands.

"Absolutely not! you are trying to rob me!"

Count Lothar frowned at the insinuation and retorted properly

"Rob you? A lowly Baron like you may not be aware of this, but Linde's chastity has an extreme degree of political significance attached to it as a Count's daughter. If your Barony were not so rich in minerals, I would have married her off to a Duke!"

At this point, Berengar had put down his fork and got off his chair while tidying his mouth with his napkin. Afterward, he walked over to the center of the Great Hall, where the two noblemen were bickering. As the man tasked by his father with leading the industrial sector, he had a great deal of say on how its resources were managed. There was not a single possibility that Berengar would allow Lothar to have his way.

"Pardon me, My Lord, but I don't believe that such a request is even remotely reasonable. At most, I would be willing to sell you a supply of steel at a discounted price. I will not under any circumstances hand over the resources of my industrial district because of the improper actions of my little brother."

Lothar was thoroughly outraged by this interruption and the offer. Who did this kid think he was to so boldly interrupt a conversation between two lords?

"Under whose authority do you gain the power to negotiate with a man of my standing? I'm busy talking to your father, little boy; you'd best go back to eating your meal."

Berengar chuckled at the vicious response he was given by Count Lothar, who was in all technicality his liege.

"I'm afraid to say that my father has delegated all responsibility of the mines and steel industry of the region into my hands. If you want to demand compensation in the form of minerals, I'm the one you need to be discussing this with."

Lothar glared menacingly at Berengar; if this were true, he would have a much more difficult time getting what he desired from the von Kufstein family. Sieghard was mostly compliant and was not nearly as cunning as Berengar. Over the past few days, Lothar had observed Berengar and his dealings with the other nobles and discovered that he was an incredibly shrewd young man. Berengar would not crumble under pressure Lothar held as Count and would fight tooth and nail to make sure every aspect of the deal was favorable to his position.

Lothar walked over to Berengar and stared the young man down, a challenge from which Berengar did not back down. Rather he returned Lothar's vicious gaze with a smug smile as if no matter what Count Lothar did or said, the negotiations would ultimately be in his favor. This haughty expression further enraged Lothar to the point where he wanted to backhand the arrogant youth.

"I demand 25 percent I will not leave here until I get it."

Berengar had struggled to contain his laughter; aggressive negotiations like this would never work on a man like himself. For it to do so, Berengar would have to fear the power in the hands of Count Lothar, and considering that fact that the young Lord could bring forth the power of nearly 1000 guns and unleash it upon the Count's feudal army, he did not fear, nor respect the meager power in which the proud Count held. As such, he calmly denied Lothar's demands.

"Then make yourself comfortable because it looks like you're going to be here for the rest of your life. Do you understand the value of a quarter of our iron reserves when converted into steel?"

Lothar wanted to throttle the boy for his arrogance. How dare he speak to his liege in such a condescending manner. He would have to teach this boy a valuable lesson.

"Bah, and I suppose you have the ability to convert such a large amount of iron ore into steel? Do not jest with me, boy. It would take a lifetime to make that much steel!"

Berengar did not say anything; he just stood there with a satisfied smile on his face. If the Count knew how much steel he was currently in possession of and how much he could produce in one batch, then the man would surely never have suggested such an absurdly high number. Eventually, Berengar broke the awkward silence between the two as he countered the Count's proposal.

"Here's what I can do, as an official apology from the von Kufstein family for my foolish little brother's unsightly behavior, I will cut the cost of steel sold to your family for the next ten years by 15%. That is the best I can offer you, any more than that, and I will be operating at a loss."

The brow on Lothar's forehead began to twitch uncontrollably as he struggled to contain his anger.

"Operating at a loss? Your brother has stolen my daughter's chastity, and you're concerned about operating at a loss?"

Berengar did not say anything; he just smiled and nodded his head. Truthfully he had not calculated the demands that Lothar would make into his scheme. He figured that his father would pay Lothar a small amount of gold and silver in compensation, which would be the end of it. However, Lothar had made a ridiculous demand that allowed Berengar to take control of the conversation. He now fully intended to make a profit off of framing his little brother.

Lothar approached Berengar very closely and whispered to him in a voice that only the two of them could hear.

"Do you think your pathetic little Barony could withstand the might of the County of Tyrol if I were to order my bannermen to march upon your house?"

Though Lothar had boldly threatened Berengar in an attempt to get the young lad to back down, he did not get the result he expected. Instead, Berengar smiled devilishly as he whispered back to the old Count.

"My Lord, do you think it is wise to send your men to die in Kufstein when your forces will be needed elsewhere soon enough?"

The Count stood stupefied upon hearing those words. Either this young man was referring to his plots to overthrow the Duke, or he was referring to the upcoming civil war that everyone with half a brain knew was on the horizon. Either way, he was absolutely right. He could not afford to send the armies beneath his control into Kufstein to punish them over such a small matter. His bluff had been called, and now the old Count had to admit defeat. With great reluctance, he whispered back towards Berengar.

"I accept your terms on the condition that the price of steel purchased from your lands is reduced by 20%."

Berengar's smile was so wide that it had practically taken up the entire lower half of his face at this point; just now, he had been victorious with the negotiation. All that remained was to see how much of a profit margin he could scrape together from this deal.

"17% and I will cover transportation, take it or leave it that is my final offer..."

Everyone else was looking at the two who were so close that their faces were practically touching, on the face of Count Lothar was a large scowl; he felt awful not getting what he wanted, but at least he was getting a better deal with Berengar than he was from Ulrich, and better yet it would be steel ingots, not iron ore that would be shipped to him. Though his daughter's chastity had been violated ahead of her wedding, at the very least, he could gain something from the occasion; after all, he still needed Lambert to succeed Berengar if he was eventually going to get the resources he needed. If anything, this harsh negotiation served as a reminder that Berengar needed to die if the Count's ambitions were to become a reality.

Little did The Count of Tyrol know that this whole scenario was a ploy from Berengar to pin Linde's pregnancy on Lambert. If Lothar were aware that not only was his daughter's chastity taken by Berengar long ago but that she was also pregnant with the scoundrel's bastard child, then he would have had the urge to draw his sword at that moment and drive it through Berengar's black heart. But, he did not know, and as such, he pretended to be nice to Berengar as he accepted the young lord's offer.

"Deal."

Afterward, Lothar turned away from Berengar and put on an act

"You drive a hard bargain Berengar von Kufstein; out of the respect that I have for your family, I will agree to your terms. Come Linde; it is about time you return home..."

Berengar nearly laughed at the old man's poor performance; however, he instantly became aggrieved when he heard the last part of his sentence. There was no way he was going to allow this old bastard to seize his lover from him. However, before he could protest, Linde stood up to her father.

"I'm not going!"

Lothar stopped in his tracks as he turned around and glared at his errant daughter.

"What did you just say?"

Linde was no longer afraid of her father's fury; now that she had Berengar protecting her, she knew there was nothing her father could do; however, she was also quick-witted and came up with a proper excuse to stay behind and spend her days with the father of her child.

"You need to have proper representation in whatever deal you just came to an agreement to with Berengar. I will stay behind and protect your interests."

Count Lothar was initially furious that his daughter wanted to stay behind after everything that had transpired, and also downright confused. However, it turned out that she was looking out for the family's interests like she always

had. Her explanation made perfect sense, and the more he thought about it, the more he did not trust Berengar; somehow, that blaggard would screw him over; he could feel it in his bones. With Linde keeping a close eye on the boy, he had nothing to worry about. After all, she was clever enough to keep up with Berengar.

"Under those circumstances, I will allow you to stay. I will see you at your wedding."

Linde smiled and bowed to her father like a proper young lady.

"Of course, father. I will see you then."

Afterward, the Count departed from Kufstein, and thus the last guest on Berengar's list of invitations had left his family's regions. From now on, Berengar no longer had to entertain the nobility and could get back to his normal schedule. He had many things to take care of in the coming days, and he was just happy to have a bit of reprieve.