

Steel 40

Chapter 40: Caught in the Act

Berengar gazed upon the musketeer who stood upon the testing field. In his hands was a small spherical steel device with a fuse sticking out from its top. In his other hand was a slow match in which the soldier used to ignite the fuse. After the successful ignition, the man lobbed the spherical device towards a safe distance and quickly sought refuge behind the provided cover. Within seconds a thunderous explosion occurred, and shrapnel was sent in every direction shredding apart the closely packed straw dummies in which it had landed near.

After such a shocking scene, the sound of slow clapping could be heard from afar as Berengar showed his sign of approval of the new weapon. What was just tested by this brave man was the prototype of a hand grenade. It would not be long before he could field these to his troops in large numbers and establish grenadiers into his ranks. However, this revolutionary weapon of war was not the most exciting innovation being tested to this day. Eckhard was filled with anticipation as the artillery crew loaded a strange-looking device into the bore of the 1417 Pattern 12 lb cannon. The old knight prayed to the father above in heaven that this device went off without a hitch.

After a relatively smooth loading of the cannon, the powder was vented, and the cannoneer used the linstock to light the fuse. After a few moments, the familiar roar of the 12 lb cannon echoed into the air. However, what truly astonished those who were fortunate enough to watch this secret testing, was that when the projectile landed it exploded upon impact into many fragments, sending shards of steel into all directions. The result of which was far more destructive than the hand grenade, which was tested previously.

This time a thunder of applause rose from the bystanders as they watched a new era of artillery being born before their very eyes. Berengar had a wicked smile on his face. He had finally done it; he had created the first explosive shell. Though the solid ball still had its uses; against infantry, nothing was more devastating than explosive shells. In his previous life's timeline, the explosive shell was not invented until the 16th century. However, the shell he was currently using was modeled after those utilized by the 12 lb Napoleon cannon by Union forces in the American Civil War; it was a far more efficient shell than the earlier designs.

Eckhard saluted Berengar and congratulated him on his newest innovation; with this, their militia was even more fearsome than they were a month ago at the Battle of Mining Town.

"Commander, let me be the first to congratulate you on the success of this truly revolutionary design! With these shells, our artillery will rule the battlefields."

Berengar smiled and returned the salute to his second in command. However, one thing was noticeably missing from his forces, the third branch that comprised all early modern armies for centuries. Cavalry, though he would not be able to raise cavalry for his militia until after he took over his father's position. Either as a regent or as the Baron himself. Nevertheless, this was truly a monumental occasion; with shell and canister being fired out of his 12-pound cannons, he could engage forces far larger than his own on the field of battle.

As his militia further completed their training and outfitted themselves with better equipment, Berengar believed it would not be long before he could begin his conquest of Germany. It might take a few years for him to succeed his father; in his eyes, the Baron of Kufstein was not likely to survive the upcoming war. By the time the war was over and the various feudal powers of the Kingdom exhausted themselves in bloody conflict, he would rise from the ashes and stake his claim with his superior army. By right of conquest, one day, he would be Emperor of the German people!

After testing the new weapons, Berengar wanted them mass-produced as quickly as possible; as such, he put in priority order, he would have his Artillery trained to use the new shells effectively and would establish the strongest and most elite of his infantry forces into Grenadiers. Of course, all weapons operations were strictly confidential; as such, they would have to use the new testing field Berengar had set up, out of the sight from unwanted eyes.

After testing the weapons successfully and giving his new orders, Berengar returned to the Castle, which took a while, seeing as he had to travel from his secret testing facility. When he returned, he saw Adela and Henrietta playing in the castle corridors. They were not too far apart in age and were getting along splendidly. On the other hand, Linde had a tense relationship with

Henrietta; the little girl had good intuition and had a feeling something was going on between Lambert's fiancée and Berengar. A sense of intuition that the men of the family desperately seemed to lack. As such, the little loli constantly ran away from Linde whenever she tried to get along with the family.

Of course, Linde's most strained relationship was with his Berengar's mother, Gisela. Gisela was a shrewd and proud Baroness who had long suspected an affair between Berengar and Linde, practically since the first night when Linde arrived at the Castle. However, she saw how Linde treated Lambert and saw this dirty secret as a way to break her second son's betrothal. If Berengar wanted a lover to hold him over until he married Adela, then she would allow his selfishness, so long as she could later use it as a means to get rid of the young vixen once and for all.

Though she was not aware of the fullest extent of Linde's abuse towards Lambert, she could tell it was at the very least a verbally abusive and unhealthy relationship. Especially since the night of Berengar and Adela's engagement ceremony and the alleged actions Lambert had engaged in. The growing closeness between Berengar and Linde under the guise of Count Lothar's transaction did not ease the Baroness's animosity toward the young woman. Berengar was aware of how his mother eyed the two of them and had long since known about her suspicions, however as long as his mother did not intervene, he would not say anything to her about his relationship with his lover. Of course, if Gisela were aware that Linde was currently pregnant with Berengar's child, she would do everything in her power to separate the two of them.

When Adela saw that Berengar had returned home, she ran over and hugged him; Berengar responded to this by petting her head gently. It was nice having two women with completely different personalities to care for him. He vowed that he would never give up this lifestyle and never complicate it further by adding more women to the mix. He cared for both of his women equally, as they both served their own unique roles in his life. After a while, Adela let go of Berengar and asked him the question on her mind.

"Are you done with work for the day?"

Berengar smiled and nodded at his little fiancée before noticing Henrietta come over to him with a sheepish expression.

"Big brother, will you play with us?"

Berengar chuckled lightly as the little loli grabbed ahold of his torso and hugged the other side of him. He thought to himself for a moment and then decided to entertain the two girls, who were currently in the middle of playing an imaginary game. One where Adela was the crown princess, who was captured by an evil witch. Berengar played the role of the valiant knight as he strode through the castle walls and rescued the princess from the wicked grasp of Henrietta, who acted the part of a wicked witch. Berengar felt quite embarrassed playing such childish games at his age and was thankful that video cameras did not exist at this time. He could not imagine what the internet would label him if this scene were posted on some video-sharing site from his previous life. However, after rescuing the princess and slaying the evil witch, Berengar picked up Adela in a princess carry and walked around the castle with her. To his surprise, he got a reward that he was not expecting. When Adela gently pecked him on the lips, her face began to become red with embarrassment and she looked away while in his arms and awkwardly muttered.

"My Hero..."

At this point, even Berengar felt embarrassed, as he was not mentally prepared for such a thing. He did not know what to say, so he chose some cheesy one-liner and smiled at Adela and said in a serious tone.

"I will always protect you, my little princess!"

The scene was sickening to Linde as she watched in the corner; it was only when Adela's eyes met her own with a furious stare did the young beauty realize that her little rival had been aware of her presence and that Adela had deliberately done this to mark her territory. Linde thought it was cute that the little girl considered that slight peck on the lips to be considered a kiss. Obviously, Linde would have to leave her own mark on Berengar later that night to make up for it.

After seeing Linde had watched the entirety of his performance, Berengar's heart immediately imploded. He sincerely hoped nobody was watching what would be considered a potentially illegal activity in his previous life. Yet he was caught in the act by his own lover, he was never going to live this moment down, and he could tell by the smirk on Linde's face that she was going to hold this moment over his head forever. Berengar attempted to defuse the situation and asked Linde an important question, which immediately received the two little girls' glares.

"Would you like to join us, Linde?"

The heavenly beauty immediately scoffed at the idea and glared at Adela

"No thanks Berengar, I've long since matured beyond the need to play such childish games. A word of advice, if you keep playing games like this with little girls, people might believe you to be a pervert."

And with that said, Linde turned around and walked away with a smug expression on her face. Before Adela or Berengar could even form a response, she had already turned the corner and was out of sight. The couple then stared at each other awkwardly as Adela was still in Berengar's arms. Henrietta, of course, was lying on the floor pretending to have been slain, but she still managed to overhear the conversation, and her disdain for Linde grew even greater as a result. After Linde's departure, there was an awkward silence for a while before Berengar finally let Adela down from his arms. Feeling embarrassed about the whole situation, the young man scratched the back of his head before calling it quits for the evening.

"I suppose we should end it here... We can play again some other time!"

Adela nodded; she was also quite embarrassed after Linde's harsh words. On the other hand, Henrietta was pouting; she wanted to play some more with her big brother and soon-to-be sister-in-law. It was rare where she was able to play games with Berengar these days. Nevertheless, she acquiesced to their conditions. Either way, she would hold her elder brother to his word that they would definitely play together later.

Afterward, Berengar dined with his family, it was a civil conversation, and there was less animosity between him and Lambert than usual. Berengar was

well aware that Lambert was in the middle of cooking up a conspiracy against him; after all, it had been a while since Berengar was given the title of regent, and Lambert had yet to act. What Lambert did not know is that Berengar was also in the process of conspiring against his brother. His plan would not only disrupt Lambert's plot but actively take out one of the boy's greatest allies.

After dinner, Berengar snuck out into the town where he entered his newly built chemical laboratory today. Tonight he would complete the production of white arsenic, which would allow him to begin his plot to assassinate his father's marshal, who was an ardent supporter of Lambert. Of course, he had to confirm such a thing before acting rashly. While some of his spies were acquiring the materials to create arsenic, others were gathering intel about any potential alliance with Lambert. In the process, Berengar uncovered Lambert's plot to act against Berengar, and frame him and his militia for multiple crimes, and use the marshal as a witness. Unfortunately for the teenage boy, the marshal would soon become very ill and pass away from this world.

Berengar began to laugh sadistically as he saw the powdered arsenic that was created overnight. He would give his many spies strict instructions to lace the Marshal's wine with the poison in small doses for the next week; once the man became dreadfully ill, Berengar would increase the dose, effectively ending the man's life. As far as anyone was concerned the marshal would have fallen ill and passed away from said illness shortly after. Even if someone expected an assassination, nobody would be able to prove it. Just like that, Berengar had taken this war of intrigue to the next level. Lambert would soon enough be left alone, cut off from any support, and when Berengar finally had his scoundrel of a little brother by his lonesome and the authority to pursue justice, then, and only then would he put an end to this war of intrigue once and for all.

After distributing the poison to his assassins, Berengar quietly returned to the Castle. He made sure that his absence went unnoticed. When he finally returned, he saw the familiar sight of Linde waiting for him. She immediately ran into his arms and kissed him passionately, as if she was trying to remove the mark upon him that Adela had left previously. Just like that, Berengar and Linde spent the remainder of the night enjoying each other's passionate embrace.

