

LIBERATION

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I

Safe Haven

“**W**e’re almost there. After we round the next curve, you’ll be able to see the castle.”

At Gunner’s words, Hans looks up wearily. He’s tired, his body heavy and sore from the many hours of riding as well as the several days of non-stop travelling, and it takes a moment for his eyes to come into focus. But when they do he’s able to spot their destination, painted blood-red by the light of the setting sun: Castle Salgen. Sitting atop a rocky outcrop in the middle of the Dukedom’s capital city, its walls are squat and menacing but still somewhat familiar, and Hans smiles wryly as he’s reminded of his own home, now far behind their backs.



He pulls slightly on the reins and lets his horse slow so that the carriage trundling behind him can catch up and knocks lightly on the wood; the window blind draws back, and Katrin meets his eyes. “We’re almost there,” he says.

Katrin nods. “I’ll wake the Queen. How much time do you think we have?”

Hans turns his head and looks at Wilhelm, riding beside him, in an unspoken question; Wilhelm narrows his eyes at the road ahead. “About an hour until we reach the city, I’d say,” he replies in Hans’ stead. “Then a bit more for the climb up to the castle.

“We’ll be ready,” Katrin says, and pulls the blind closed again. Hans sighs.

“Is everything all right?” Wilhelm asks. “Do you need to stop to rest?”

Hans shakes his head. “No, I’m fine, Will. We’re almost there anyway, it would make no sense to stop now.”

“What about...?” Bertold asks, riding up to them, his eyes flitting down to Hans’ saddle.

“*Bertold!*” Wilhelm hisses.

“We’re sworn to protect him, Will,” Bertold says, matter-of-factly. “To take care of him, and that includes making sure he’s comfortable.”

“Still, you can’t just ask about...” Wilhelm says; he looks over at Hans, who meets his eyes with a steady gaze of his own: he refuses to let his resolve waver. Not after they’ve come this far.

“I’m all right,” Hans says. “Really. A bit uncomfortable, yes, but that’s to be expected, after all the riding we’ve done.”

“You could have ridden in the carriage. You should have.”

“What, like a woman?” Hans laughs. “Come on, Will. Despite everything that’s happened, I’m still a man.”

Wilhelm quirks his mouth. “You shouldn’t make light of it, my lord,” he says.

“What should I do, then? Cry about it?”

“That wasn’t what I meant,” Wilhelm says. “I just meant that... uh...”

Hans pierces him with a glare. “What *did* you mean, Will? Come on, out with it.”

Will visibly hesitates. “I...”

“And what’s with the ‘my lord’ anyway? Have you forgotten my name?”

“It’s...” Wilhelm says; then he looks away. “It’s not appropriate for a bodyguard to address their charge by their first name.”

“You used to do it all the time,” Hans says; as much as he tries to keep the bitterness out of his voice, it still comes through, making Will flinch.

“And that was a mistake.”

“A *mistake*? You’re my friend, Will.”

“I let you get hurt.”

“We’ve been over this how many times again? It was my fault in the first place, and I’m over it. You should get over it too.”

“It’s not something I can just forget.”

“Don’t forget it, then, but stop feeling bad about it! Tears won’t bring back—”

“My lord,” Bertold says, placing a hand on Hans’ arm. Hans looks at it, then at Bertold, then all around him, and he realises everyone in the caravan has stopped and is looking at them in dead silence.

After a moment, he shrugs off Bertold’s hand. “My name is *Hans*,” he says in a low, cutting voice, and he spurs his horse forward, away from them; he glances back for a moment, but he’s glad to see Will and Bert aren’t following — they know better than that at least. He shakes his head; after everything they’ve been through together, all it took for his bodyguards — for his *friends* — to start keeping him at arm’s length was...

He grimaces in remembered pain.

...was him getting injured.

Thinking about it objectively, they're completely right to do so. He is Crown Prince Hans von Granin, son of King Anselm von Granin, and Wilhelm and Bertold, while not commoners, are the sons of minor nobles, and stand many steps below him in the social hierarchy. The only reason they've been together, the only reason Hans has spoken to them at all, probably, is that they're his bodyguards. They're not supposed to be his friends. But having grown up with them by his side, he can't help but think of them as such.

"Is everything alright, my lord?"

Hans jumps — he'd been so lost in his thoughts that he hadn't heard anyone approach — and turns towards the source of the voice, a snapping remark dying in his throat as he realises he's looking at Gunner; he shakes his head. "Yes, everything is fine. I'm just... on edge."

"Understandable," Gunner nods. "After everything that's happened, it's normal for you to be nervous, sire. You'll be able to relax soon enough, though."

Hans wordlessly nods, and focuses on the road ahead. They ride in silence for a while, until they come into sight of the city walls, and Gunner excuses himself and charges on ahead.

Hans looks at him go for a moment, then tugs on the reins and turns his horse back towards the small group he'd been travelling with: besides Bert and Will and the carriage the women are travelling in, they'd been accompanied by a dozen soldiers, which Gunner had assured him had been all hand-picked among the best trained and most loyal Salgen had to offer.

Bringing his mount to a halt, Hans waits for Will and Bert to ride up to him. They look at each other for a brief moment, then exchange a nod, and keep riding together, his bodyguards falling in position on either side of him. Upon reaching the gate leading inside the city, the entire group stops on Gunner's command.

"My apologies, but we need to leave the carriage here," Gunner says.

"Why?" Bertold asks. "It's been years since I visited, but I remember the streets being more than wide enough for a carriages."

"That they are, but there are several narrow turns on the road up to the castle: it's impossible for it to get up to full speed as quickly as a horse would."

"And that would be a problem because...?"

"Let's say this is a precaution."

“Do you think someone could attack us?” Wilhelm says, raising an eyebrow in Gunner’s direction. “I thought you said Prince Hans would be safe at Castle Salgen.”

“At Castle Salgen, yes. But the city streets are dark at night, and these are dangerous times; we may need to move quickly. I don’t think it will come to that, but like I said: it’s a precaution. We will provide horses for the women, of course.”

Wilhelm and Bertold don’t look convinced, but accept the explanation without further question. Hans watches as they turn their horses back and ride up to the carriage, knock on the door, and exchange a few words with the people inside. After a minute, three women step out: Katrin, Gabriela, and, lastly, Queen Heloisa, and Hans can’t help but smile — despite having been travelling for weeks, his mother looks as regal as ever, moving with grace and poise as she walks towards him.



“Hello, Mother,” he says, smiling down at her. “How are you feeling?”

“Rested enough,” she replies with a warm smile. “But my back aches terribly from

being stuck inside that infernal contraption; I'm afraid I am no longer a young girl, and I'm definitely looking forward to sleeping in a proper bed tonight. What about you?"

"I'm tired as well, but I'm managing."

Heloisa nods; she glances down at the horse's saddle, then back up at Hans, her eyes asking an unspoken question.

"I'm *fine*, Mother," he snaps, and then flinches: even though he tried to pretend it didn't, the previous conversation with Will and Bert got to him, and the reply came out much harsher than intended. So he corrects course: "I'm sorry," he says, more softly. "I'm all right. Thank you for worrying, Mother."

There's a look of doubt in Heloisa's eyes, but she doesn't have time to say anything before Gunner rides up to the two of them, pulling three horses behind him by the reins. "Your horse, milady," he says. "I made sure it has a side-saddle, and the same for your companions. You should have no problem staying on."

"It is quite alright, Count Hoch," Heloisa replies. "Though my ladies-in-waiting and I can ride normal saddles just fine."

Gunner hesitates, seemingly surprised, but he still nods. "I'll have someone come assist you."

"The assistance will not be necessary. I'm quite able to get on and off a horse by myself. Thank you all the same."

Gunner nods again. "As you say, milady." He hands Hans a pair of reins and rides off towards the others, dragging the other two horses behind him.

"I dislike that man," Heloisa says, looking at Gunner go.

"We owe him our lives, Mother."

"I don't think they'd have killed us. I know you think differently, Hans," she adds, when she sees Hans is about to object, "but I don't want to argue about it right now."

"Our freedom, then. It's thanks to Gunner and his men that we're here now."

It takes a moment for Heloisa to reply, and when she does she nods her head slightly. "Yes. But he's always too polite, too guarded. Almost as if he's hiding something."

"What *would* he be hiding?"

"I don't know." A sigh. "Maybe I'm imagining things."

"You've been under a lot of stress these past months."

"That I have," Heloisa says, and she turns a smile on Hans again. "And so have you, but you've behaved admirably. I'm so proud of you, Hans. I know your father would be proud of you, too."

"Thank you, Mother," Hans says, feeling his cheeks redden a bit.

“Hold the horse still, please?”

Hans nods, and holds fast on the reins as Heloisa climbs onto the horse and sits down aside it; then he looks around and, seeing that Katrin and Gabriela are ready, too, nods at Gunner, who nods back and takes point in leading the group through the gates and into the town.

Like Gunner had said, the city streets are dark: Hans is only able to see where they’re going thanks to the torches carried by the soldiers. The long, flickering shadows cast by the flames, however, make him nervous, and he can’t help himself looking this way and the other, watching for unseen enemies, wondering if someone is about to jump out and attack them.

And the flames themselves... He stares into them, into their blinding, searing heat, thinking back, remembering—



He jumps a bit as his mother places a hand on his arm, and when he turns to her she's looking at him with worried eyes. She mouths, *are you alright?*

He nods. She keeps looking at him, and he nods again, more firmly; it takes a moment, but she nods back, and turns to look at the road ahead again.

Hans is grateful to her: her intervention, her simple touch, manages to keep his fears from becoming outright panic. She's done so many times before, and she'll probably do it again many times still; she was present the first and only time the monsters in his mind found their way to the surface, and she'd vowed never to let it happen again.

Despite Hans' worries and anxiety, however, the climb up to the castle is uneventful: their group meets no one in the streets, and only a few curious faces glance out of windows, only to retreat right away at Gunner's barked order. Within the hour they've reached the castle walls, where the guards are clearly waiting for them, since they're let through right away; from there, it's only a few minutes more before they're dismounting their horses and walking into the bright entrance hall, lit by huge chandeliers hanging from the ceiling, and relief washes over Hans: no flickering shadows here, no visible flames.

He's safe.

"The Archduke has been informed of your arrival," Gunner says. "He's waiting for you in the throne room."

Hans doesn't let his annoyance show, nor does he ask why the Archduke hasn't come to greet them personally and is instead waiting for them to come to him: he has to remember that he's not the master here, he's simply a guest. So he says, "Lead the way, Count Hoch," and grasps his mother's hand, the rest of their retinue falling in behind the two of them.

Gunner hesitates. "There is... one thing. Your bodyguards and ladies-in-waiting will have to wait here."

There's a sharp intake of breath behind Hans, but he doesn't turn to look. "Why?" he asks instead, giving Gunner a wary look.

"No one can enter the throne room without invitation. It is protocol," Gunner replies. "And only you, Prince Hans, and you, Queen Heloisa, have been invited in. Everyone else will have to wait outside."

Hans frowns: it *is* protocol, that much is true, but that protocol has rarely, if ever, been enforced; and by doing so, the Archduke is showing them discourtesy. Still, they don't have any real choice, do they? "Alright." He turns back to Bert and Will and adds, "Take care of Katrin and Gabriela. We'll be right back."

“No way,” Wilhelm says. “We’re not letting the prince go in there without us.”

“Will—”

“No. We’re sworn to be by your side. To protect you.”

Hans looks at him, then to Bertold, who nods his agreement.

“Count Hoch, can’t an exception be made?” Hans asks, turning back to look at Gunner.

“No exceptions. You go in alone, or not at all,” Gunner says, matter-of-factly. “This is how things are done here.”

“No way,” Wilhelm repeats in a growl. “No *goddamn* way. I’m not letting him out of my sight, you hear me?” He places a hand on the hilt of his sword, and takes a step towards Gunner.

“Wilhelm. Will. Please,” Hans says, taking a step forward too, interposing himself between the two of them.

Will looks at him in surprise: Hans can see the doubting look in his eyes. “Hans— I mean, my lord...”

Hans shakes his head. “Please,” he repeats. “I need to do this. I’ll be safe. I promise.”

“But...”

“Please,” Hans says again; then, after a few long moments, in a whisper, he adds, “Don’t make me make this an order, my friend.”

At Hans’ words, Wilhelm visibly deflates; his hand drops from the hilt, and he takes a step back. “As you say, my lord.”

Hans wants to object, to tell him to call him *Hans*, but that is neither the place nor the time to do it; he just nods back at Wilhelm instead. “Thank you, Will.”

“If you need us, call,” Wilhelm says. “We’ll come running, and cut through anyone and everyone who gets in our way.” He tightens his hand into a fist and slams it against his chest for effect.

“Thank you,” Hans repeats; then he turns around and follows Gunner across the hall.

“He still blames himself,” Heloisa says in a low voice as they cross through the doors into a wide, tall corridor, lit by lanterns in sconces along the walls. “He still thinks it was his fault.”

“It wasn’t his fault,” Hans replies. “I told him so. He *knows* it so.”

“Knowing and believing are two different matters entirely.”

They keep walking in silence, crossing through another pair of doors into a small antechamber, then through a small arch into the throne room. It’s a large room, larger

than the entrance hall, probably, and richly decorated, with carpets covering the floor, and again illuminated by chandeliers, which look like they're plated in gold, with cut rock crystals decorations cascading down from them. At the far end of the room is an ornate throne, oak wood finely inlaid with silver and gold, upon which sits...

"Father?!" Hans exclaims in a shocked breath.



The man on the throne smiles and shakes his head. "No, Prince Hans. Though I have been told I do much resemble him; we were cousins, after all." He stands up and steps forward to meet them in the middle of the throne room. "It is good to see you again; the last time we met, you were but a child, only a few months old." He turns to Heloisa and nods. "Your highness."

"Archduke," Heloisa nods back. "Thank you for rescuing us, and for having us brought here."

“Yes, thank you, Archduke von Salgen,” Hans murmurs, nodding, coming out of his daze. “We are in your debt, a debt which I doubt we’ll ever be able to repay.”

“It was nothing,” the Archduke says, waving a hand dismissively. “I’m just glad you’re not in the hands of those *peasants* any longer; and you two, as well as your companions, are safe here, under my protection and hospitality, for as long as you desire.”

“Thank you,” Hans repeats.

“Come now. I have had the cooks prepare food for us; and while we eat, you will tell me exactly what happened to your father and to the Kingdom of Granin.”

II

Memories of Home

“Yah!” Wilhelm screams, swinging his sword hard; Hans just barely manages to parry it with his own blade, but he’s off balance, his hand barely gripping the hilt. He loses hold entirely and his sword goes flying as he trips backwards, landing heavily on his arse in the dirt and dust of the practice ground.

“Ow,” Hans complains. He looks up, only to see Wilhelm’s sword scything towards him; but he doesn’t flinch, since he knows and trusts his friend. And, indeed, Will’s training blade — unsharpened, but steel, heavy enough to do real damage if swung recklessly — stops a hair’s breadth from Hans’ neck.



Will smirks and taps Hans on the shoulder with the flat of the blade. “Another point for me, Hans,” he says. “That makes it five-nil.”

He lowers his blade and steps forward, offering his hand to Hans, who takes it and lets his friend pull him to his feet. “Since the start of the day. Altogether, it’s more like a couple thousand-nil, Will,” Hans says, shaking his head. “I’ve never been able to defeat you, and I’m not about to start now.” He smiles, and punches Wilhelm in the shoulder. “Besides, I don’t need to be a good fighter. Not with you and Bertold by my side.”

“That’s not the point,” Bertold says, stepping up to them. “The point is that you *should* be able to protect yourself, in case we’re not there, or we’re somehow kept from helping you. You should be prepared for every eventuality.”

“Bert is right,” Wilhelm says; he walks over to where Hans’ training sword has ended up, picks it up, and holds it out to his friend. “And besides, someday you will be king, and kings are supposed to fight. It’s even part of the regnal oath.”

“I solemnly swear I will do my utmost to safeguard the kingdom and protect it, resist-

ing and repulsing all enemies and adversaries from without and from within,” Hans recites, and grabs the sword. “I know it well.”

“Don’t worry!” Richter says, clapping his hand down on Hans’ shoulder and knocking him slightly off-balance: the master-at-arms is a big man, and he has strength to spare. Unlike Hans. “You just need to practise your forms some more, my prince.”

“I’ve practised them hundreds of times,” Hans complains. “I never seem able to commit them to memory.”

“It’s because you’re not paying enough attention, you’re just repeating them mechanically,” Richter rebuts. “Like I told you multiple times, you need to remember how your muscles move. To develop muscle memory.”

Hans frowns. “Memory is stored in the head, not in the muscles.”

“In the muscles too,” Bertold interjects. “With enough practice, the moves come to you automatically, without you having to think about them.”

“Young Bertold is correct,” Richter says, grabbing a training blade off a nearby rack. “I could do them in my sleep. And let’s review them one more time.” He strikes a pose. “The first form starts like this, and then—”

He glances at Hans, who is trying to copy his movement, and as does he catches sight of something behind the prince, and his eyes go wide. As if following a conditioned reflex, he drops down on one knee, lies his sword down in the dirt, and lowers his head. Wilhelm and Bertold follow suit, and Hans immediately knows what’s happening: he turns around to see his father, King Anselm von Granin, marching across the courtyard, surrounded by a half-dozen heavily armoured and armed soldiers and followed closely by a coterie of generals and advisors, who are still pouring through the door while whispering among themselves and to the king.

Hans doesn’t kneel, because he doesn’t need to: by ancient tradition no one can stand in the presence of the king unless they’ve been granted permission, with the only exception being the members of the royal family. But they, too, must show deference, and Hans does so by standing at attention and bowing his head.

He is puzzled, though: what is his father doing here? He was supposed to be on a tour of the outer provinces of the kingdom, and he’d left the castle early that morning, after returning late the previous evening from an inspection of a cavalry regiment. And before that, he’d been away for several days to visit the new fortresses along the southern border, and before *that*...

Hans keeps looking at the ground, but frowns. He loves his lord father the King, and he’s sure his father loves him in turn; but he wishes they could see more of each other,

spend more time together: as it is, they only talk a handful of times a month, if that. And his father isn't paying even a shred of attention to him right now, he's striding across the courtyard, heading for the door on the opposite side, his followers still talking with him... until he stops, and raises his hand. "Hold," he says.

Everyone else immediately stops walking and talking: the king has given a command. And now he's turning and walking over to his son: closer and closer he comes, until he stops right in front of Prince Hans.

"Look at me, son," he says; then, almost as an afterthought, he adds, "Everyone, you may stand."

As Wilhelm, Bertold, and Richter stand up, Hans looks up, and gazes deep into his father's eyes, which seem almost to be looking deep inside his soul. After a few moments, the king nods. "Master-at-arms," he says.

Richter stands at attention. "Sire!"

"How goes the prince's instruction in the art of the blade?"

Richter visibly hesitates. It takes him a few seconds to begin answering, and when he does his voice is wavering: "Well, sire—"

"The truth, if you please, master-at-arms," the king cuts him off, smiling mildly. "I promise no punishment will be exacted for any failures on your part, true or imagined."

"Yes, my liege," Richter gulps. "To tell the truth, Prince Hans is a diligent student, but he is not talented. His companions and bodyguards are much more skilled, and regularly defeat him during sparring matches."

The king purses his lips, and his face takes on a disappointed look. "...I see," he says.

Hans bites his lip and frowns. "Father..." he begins.

"His talents lie elsewhere."

Everyone turns to look at Wilhelm, and there is a collective sharp intake of breath because he has spoken out of turn: just like you're not supposed to stand in front of the king, you are absolutely *not* supposed to talk in the king's presence unless you are given leave to do so. And Wilhelm clearly realises what he's done, since he blanches and seems to shrink under the king's stare.

"Um... my apologies, sire. I ask for your forgiveness."

King Anselm's lips crinkle into a smile. "What's your name, lad?"

Wilhelm gulps. "Wilhelm von Breyer, sire. Knight of the Realm, and Prince Hans' bodyguard."

A nod. "What did you mean, Sir Breyer?"

“I mean, well...” Wilhelm begins, then stops; he glances over at Hans, and their eyes meet.

“Like I told the master-at-arms before: the truth, if you please,” the king says placidly.

“Yes, sire,” Wilhelm says, and looks at Hans again, an apology in his gaze. “I mean that your son is not talented in the martial arts, that much is true; but he’s very skilled as a scholar. His tutors speak highly of him: he has an excellent memory, and an extensive knowledge of just about every subject detailed in the castle’s library — I’m pretty sure he’s read every book in there twice over, at the very least. And he’s an excellent debater and negotiator, with a sharp wit and a skilful tongue. I’m sure that, when his time eventually comes to ascend to the throne, he will be a great king. Not a warrior king like yourself, your highness, but rather a king who solves the country’s problems through the power of his words and convictions rather than through strength of arms.”

“Will...” Hans whispers, looking at his friend in amazement: this is the first time he’s heard himself being described in such terms, and he’s not sure how to react to Wilhelm’s words.

The king looks long and hard at Wilhelm, and then his eyes turn soft, his countenance breaking slightly. “Yes, perhaps that is what will be best for the kingdom,” he murmurs. “What the kingdom needs. What the kingdom *needed*.”

One of his advisors steps forward: he had been hovering nearby in a group with the others, but it seems he has finally gathered his courage. He closes the distance to the king and says, urgently, “My liege, I apologise, but we *really* must go.”

King Anselm raises his hand, and the advisor freezes; but the king doesn’t turn to look at him — instead, he looks at Hans. “Prince Hans. Son,” he says.

“Father?” Hans replies.

“Your eighteenth name day has passed, has it not? You are of age, if I’m not mistaken.”

“I am.”

A nod. “Sir Breyer? Your sword, if you please.”

“Sire?” Wilhelm replies.

“Give me your sword, lad,” the king says and, after a moment’s stupor, Will complies; the king runs his thumb along the edge of the blade. “Dull.”

“It is a training sword, sire,” Master-at-arms Richter says. “Shall I fetch you a normal one?”

The king shakes his head. “No, this is perfect. It is the sword of my son’s friend, after all.” He pauses for a moment, and then continues, “Normally this moment would require

more pomp, and more grandiose circumstances, but we probably won't have time for that any time soon. Kneel, son."

Hans stares at his father for a moment, then kneels down in the dirt; everyone else follows suit, not following an order but rather an instinct, because it feels like something you should just do in this kind of situation: only the king remains standing. He raises the sword, and lays the blade flat on Hans' shoulder.



"In the name of the Kingdom of Granin, with God and our ancestors as witnesses, I hereby recognise you as my legitimate successor," the king says, in a grave voice. "Rise, Prince Hans von Granin, heir to the throne."

Still stunned, Hans stands up and looks into his father's eyes as the king removes his signet ring and presses it into Hans' hand.

"Should anything happen to me, I trust that you will keep the country safe," King Anselm says. "I know you'll make me proud."

“I will, Father,” Hans replies, and he’s stunned when his father steps forward and embraces him: it’s the first physical display of affection he can recall receiving from the king.

The king steps back. “All hail Prince Hans!” he exclaims, raising the sword to the sky.

“All hail!” everyone replies in a shout.

King Anselm hands the sword back to Will. “You have my thanks, Sir Breyer. We can go now,” he adds, turning back towards his advisors, who quickly resume whispering among themselves as they accompany the king out of the courtyard.

No one else speaks until the group has departed, the heavy wooden door closing behind them. “Well,” Bertold exhales, “that was surprising, to say the least.”

“It was,” Hans nods. “Did my father seem strange to you, too?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, the way he behaved... I don’t know.” Hans shakes his head. “It’s just, he’s never been like this. Do you know if something’s happened?” he asks, turning to Wilhelm and Bertold.

The two exchange a glance, but it’s Richter who answers the question. “There is discontent in the streets, my prince,” he says. “There has been for a while, but the recent drought has only exacerbated some of the issues. But worry not, I am sure your lord father has everything well in hand.”

“Yes, of course,” Hans says; then, after a moment, his face brightens, and he smiles at his companions. “Well then! Shall we resume training?”

“You want to train more?” Richter says. “It’s already quite late, I was planning on just showing you some forms again.”

“Of course I want to train. After all, now that I’m officially my father’s successor, I have to do my best in the martial arts, too, if I want to be sure I’m a *great king*.” Hans turns to Wilhelm and smiles. “Where did *that* come from, Will?” he says, punching his friend in the shoulder.

“I was only speaking the truth, Hans,” Wilhelm replies. “I’m proud to call myself your friend.”

Hans feels his cheeks redden. “You are much too kind. Well then. Master Richter? Once more from the top.”

—

There is a knock at the door; everyone in the room stiffens and starts to stir, but at Prince Hans’ look and gesture they quiet down again. He, Wilhelm, and Bertold are the only ones who stand up, and he steps forward, closer to the door, his bodyguards flanking in, just one step behind him.

The door opens, and a man walks in. He's wearing his usual armour, but Hans can see where the insignia of a Baron of the Realm has been knocked off the metal, the ornaments defaced, and he knows it's because the man standing before him has forsaken his title and rank when he declared open rebellion against the monarchy. He is unarmed, but behind him several other men — a rag-tag mix of commoners and soldiers, all carrying weapons and accompanied by Master Richter — step into the room, too, taking up position along the far wall, looking nervously at Hans and his bodyguards.

But Hans is not stupid enough to try anything, and he trusts Will and Bert to do the same.

“Citizens,” the leader of the group nods, keeping his face carefully neutral. “I apologise for leaving you here on your own for so long; we have been quite busy, as you’ll understand. I trust the accommodations are to your liking?”

“Of course they are, Conrad,” Hans says, trying and failing to keep a bitter edge out of his voice. “They’re the royal family’s private apartments, after all.”

Conrad’s face still doesn’t betray any emotion as his eyes briefly flit over to Queen Heloisa, who is sitting on a chaise, her back straight, hands folded carefully in her lap. “Quite,” he says, looking back at Hans. “But they no longer are. Just as the castle is no longer yours.”

“On whose authority?” Hans demands.

“The Council of the Republic has decreed it so,” Conrad replies. “All of the royal family’s possessions have been stripped from them. From you.”

“Stolen, you mean.”

“Repossessed. Given back to the people, to whom they rightfully belong.”

“So, stolen. And on what authority are you detaining us?”

“The Council of the Republic has decreed that anyone who might be involved in the tyrant’s crimes has to be held captive, pending trial to determine their guilt or innocence.”

“Unless they *prove* their innocence. Or, rather, their usefulness,” Hans spits out, and stares directly at Richter, who averts his eyes guiltily to avoid meeting the prince’s.

Conrad turns to follow Hans’ gaze and looks briefly at Richter, then turns back to Hans. “Citizen Vogler is a trusted friend of the Republic.”

“I’m sure he is,” Hans says. “A *trusted friend*.”

He puts as much venom as he can into those words, still glaring daggers at Richter, who at least has the decency flinch: when it came to decide where he stood the master-at-arms, instead of giving his life to defend the walls as King Anselm had ordered him to, had

slunk away and opened a side gate to let the rebellion spill into the castle, and that had been it — by the time anyone had noticed the betrayal, the battle had already been lost.

“And what about you, Baron von Dietz?” Hans continues, turning his eyes on the man standing before him. “You swore an oath of fealty to my father, and you’ve betrayed that oath.”

“I’m no longer Baron von Dietz. I’m Chief Councillor Dietz. And the tyrant brought it upon himself.”

Conrad is still keeping his voice flat, carefully measured, and Hans bristles. “My lord father was not a tyrant.”

“This is not a matter open for discussion, Citizen Granin,” Conrad says. “And I hope you realise how lucky you were: some on the Council wanted to put all of the tyrant’s family and their associates to the sword right away, without trial, but I managed to convince them otherwise. I managed to convince them to be merciful.”

Hans feels the blood go to his head. “Merciful?” he shouts. “*Merciful?*” He turns sharply on his heel and marches over to the side of the room, where he throws open a window and stabs an accusing finger through it towards the castle gates — and his father’s head on display above the gates, impaled on a spear for everyone to see. “You call *that* mercy?!”



For the first time, Conrad's face displays some emotion: he bites his lip, and looks away from the horrifying display. "The king..." he begins; then he stops, and takes a deep breath. "The *tyrant* got what he deserved."

"Of course he did. *Vae victis*," Hans hisses out between gritted teeth. "You decreed he was guilty and killed him without as much as a trial."

"His guilt was self-evident. His crimes so evil no punishment could be appropriate but death."

"You *killed him*," Hans repeats. "And now you and your cronies are occupying my family's castle and giving weapons to peasants."

He waves at the group of people behind Conrad, who says, again in his careful, measured voice, "Bearing arms is the right of all citizens."

"And what about us?" Wilhelm demands. "We were forced to surrender our blades, but are we not, by your own laws, also citizens? You called Prince Hans *Citizen Granin* earlier."

“You *are* citizens indeed,” Conrad concedes. “But you, all of you in this room, also stand accused of being complicit in the tyrant’s crimes. Until your guilt or innocence is ascertained, some of your liberties must be restricted.”

“Restricted how?” Bertold asks.

“No weapons, of course. And you will need to be kept under guard. But you are not restricted to your rooms: you have the run of the castle if you so wish. But you cannot leave. And you will obey any orders given by those the Council assigns to keep you under guard.”

“Understood.”

“Good,” Conrad says. “This is all for the moment. I only wished to inform you of your current situation. We shall now take our leave.”

His guards turn around and file out of the room; Conrad moves to follow them, but hesitates for a moment, and turns back.

“For what it matters, I’m really, truly sorry,” he says, looking at Queen Heloisa. “I had hoped it wouldn’t come to this. But the king forced our hand. I hope you can understand this, my lady.”

“I understand *perfectly*,” the queen says, her voice icy. “But thank you for your concern, Baron von Dietz.”

Conrad frowns, and for a moment it seems as if he wants to say something else, but then just shakes his head and walks out of the room, closing the door behind him.

There is a moment of silence; then, with a choked sob, Hans walks away from the window and to his mother, who embraces him; he puts his head on her shoulder and weeps.

