

LIBERATION

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III

Memories of Pain



Leaning on the parapet, Hans watches as the sun dips below the horizon far in the distance, painting the countryside a deep orange-red colour. It's one of the most beautiful spectacles he's witnessed in his life, and from up here, on the bastion above the castle gate, he has a privileged viewpoint: few people are allowed here, and even fewer now that his ancestral home has been taken over by rogues and villains. Luckily, as Baron von Dietz had said, Hans and his friend and family have the run of the castle, which means they can go wherever they want.

Under guard, of course; and Hans frowns as he glances over to where Wilhelm and Bertold are standing, flanked by six armed soldiers: the guards have been their constant companions ever since the death of his father, two months earlier. The royal family and their retainers are always watched very carefully, and are never allowed to be alone by themselves; and, to further quash any thought of escape, they can't all leave their living quarters at once — when Hans and his bodyguards are out, roaming the castle, Queen Heloisa has to remain in their rooms with her ladies-in-waiting, and vice-versa. Hans understands the reason: he would never attempt an escape if it meant leaving his mother in the hands of their captors, likely to face retribution.

Hans shakes his head as he turns his attention back to the landscape before him. The sun is lower now, and its light's colour a deeper red: it's as if the world is bleeding out and staining the landscape; an apt comparison, he thinks, because the realm is currently suffering under the heel of the Republic and its damnable Council.

Still, it *is* a beautiful view.

“Wish you could see it too, Father,” he whispers, and his eyes unconsciously drift to the side, to the spot on the ramparts where the king's head had been put on display. It's no longer there: it was removed a month earlier on Baron von Dietz's orders, and interred along with the rest of the king's body in a corner of the castle courtyard, in a small ceremony Hans and Queen Heloisa had been allowed to attend.

Hans had appreciated the chance to say a final goodbye to his father: allowing that, at least, had been a noble act on the baron's part — much more noble than allowing the king's head to be displayed in the first place. When Hans had confronted him after the funeral von Dietz had tried to apologise, to say that it had been done against his orders, and once it had been done he'd had to wait for some time, “Until the situation had calmed down and emotions were no longer as high,” before taking down the horrific display; but Hans knows those are just excuses.

He finds himself wondering how much power the baron actually holds. Inside the castle walls, it seems as if his word is law; what about outside, in the capital city? What about the rest of the kingdom? Surely not everyone believes the baron's lies about King Anselm. He can't have managed to fool everyone into thinking Hans' father was a tyrant. Deep in his heart, Hans knows, with an absolute certainty, that the Baron and his cronies are just a small splinter faction who've gotten lucky and managed to take over Castle Granin by surprise. But soon enough, when the rest of the realm's nobles manage to get organised and raise an army, someone will march to the castle, overturn the Republic, and free Hans and the rest of his family. Then Hans will take his place as the rightful King of

Granin, and will rain retribution down on everyone who dared betray his family.

When that will happen, however, Hans does not know. He has no way to know.

As the last sliver of the dying sun falls beneath the horizon, he hears Wilhelm clear his throat — he knows him and Bertold enough to be able to tell the difference between them.

“Yes?” Hans says, turning to look at him.



“We should be going, Hans,” Will says. “It’s past time we returned. Your lady mother is probably getting worried.”

“What do you mean? We’ve stayed out longer before.”

“Never past sunset,” Will rebuts, and he glances around, at the deepening shadows of evening creeping slowly across the bastion. “It’s... It makes me nervous.”

“Oh, come on, Will,” Hans says, trying to defuse his friend’s nervousness by smiling at him. “You don’t really think anything’s going to happen, do you?”

Will shakes his head. “I don’t think anything’s going to happen. But something *could*.”

“And I agree with him,” Bertold interjects. “It’s safe enough to be out during the day, when there are many people around; but after sunset, most of the castle starts to settle down for the evening. There are fewer... witnesses.”

“Witnesses?” Hans queries, his eyebrows rising in surprise. “Witnesses for what? No one is going to try to hurt me. The people love me.”

His two friends visibly hesitate; they exchange a glance. “Um...” Will says.

“The people *love me*,” Hans insists. “Or, at least, they don’t blame me for my father’s alleged crimes. They don’t think I should be punished for whatever they say he did. Didn’t you hear what Baron von Dietz said when he came to see us yesterday? That our trial was delayed yet again. Because...”

He lets the sentence hang in the air, and Bert is the one who completes it. “Because they’re having trouble finding enough impartial citizens to be part of the jury, yes,” he says. “But, Hans, that—”

“And besides, I have you two with me,” Hans says, stepping forward and clapping a hand down on Will’s shoulder. “So I know I’m safe.”

Bert and Will exchange another glance. “We’re not armed, though,” Will says.

“*They* are armed,” Hans says, nodding towards the guards, who are standing a short distance away. “They’re supposed to guard us, yes, but I have no doubt they will intervene if someone becomes a threat to us.”

“Still,” Will insists, “I would feel better if we went back right now. Please, Hans?”

Hans sighs. “Yeah, okay, alright,” he says. “I get it, you worrywart. Let’s go, then.”

Will and Bert nod, and they follow Hans as he opens the door leading down from the battlements and starts descending into the bowels of the castle; in turn, they are followed by the armed guards, who keep them in sight but still walk some distance behind the trio.

“By the way, what do you think we’ll get for supper?” Hans asks casually, glancing over his shoulder as he walks along a corridor.

“Same thing we get every day, probably,” Bertold replies. “Stale bread, cheese, some boiled vegetables. A bit of meat or eggs if we’re lucky. There hasn’t been much variety over the past months.”

Hans nods. “What do you think happened to the royal cooks anyway? Do you think they’re still working, only the ones who get to taste the delicacy they make are—” he stops talking abruptly and frowns: the door he’s just tried to push open hasn’t moved.

“What’s wrong?” Bert asks.

“It’s locked?” Hans says; then he shakes his head. “No, I’m certain this door doesn’t have a lock.” He places his shoulder against the wood and pushes, putting all of his

strength into it, but the door doesn't budge.

"Let me try it," Will says, and when Hans steps aside imitates him, trying to force the door open. "Barricaded from the other side. There's something heavy blocking it, I think."

"I don't like it," Bert says.

"Me neither," Will says, and he turns around. "Guards..."

He blinks.

The guards are gone.

"What's happening? Where are the guards?" Hans asks.

"Shit," Will hisses out. "Okay, come on, we gotta move."

"What's happening?" Hans asks again.

"We have to *move*," Bert repeats, and he grabs Hans' arm and starts along the corridor, back the way they came... only to stop after a few steps: a group of a half-dozen people are blocking their way. Not the soldiers they had been with a few moments earlier, they're not as heavily armed and definitely not as disciplined; but that doesn't stop them from looking menacing and, in the flickering light coming from the sconces lined along the hallway, quite sinister. Especially since they're all grinning widely.

"Well well well," one of them says, stepping forward ahead of the group. "What do we have here? A little princeling, I think!"



Hans stiffens up, staring right at the man who's swaggering towards him; but it's only a moment before Will and Bert step in front of him and stand tall. He can see their hands instinctively go for their belt, their fingers closing as if to grasp the hilt of a sword that just isn't there, before Will exhales a breath and falls into a pugilist's stance. "Not another step," he says, his voice calm and measured. "Turn around and leave if you know what's good for you."

"Ha!" the man exclaims. "Look at this, boy, the two knights want to protect their little friend."

Hans bristles. "I'm not *their little friend*, I'm Hans von Granin. Heir to Anselm von Granin and now..." He hesitates, because it feels bad to say it, it feels bad to admit out loud that his father is dead and buried, but still, he continues, "...and now the rightful King of Granin."

The man narrows his eyes at him. "Granin has no king," he spits out. "Granin *needs* no king. The parasites who call themselves thus have been nothing but a blight on the

country, from the first one all the way to the tyrant.”

“My lord father was not a tyrant,” Hans says, his teeth gritted tight.

“You don’t really believe that, do you?” another member of the group says. “Do you even know what he’s done to the country? To us? Well, let me tell you. Two years ago, the lord who held the fief which included my home village came knocking and asking for the grain in our stores.”

“Paying taxes is the duty of all royal subjects,” Hans says automatically, without thinking; he sees Bert briefly glance over his shoulder and pierce him with a glare.

“We’d *already* paid taxes that year!” the man shouts. “This was an extra tithe, the lord said. To feed the soldiers stationed at the border. We had enough grain to pay it, yes, but it would mean our entire village would go hungry. So my father, the village chief, refused, and the lord...” He shakes his head. “The lord had him cut down where he stood, and took the grain anyway.”

Hans hesitates; he’s never heard of anything like this happening. Of course he’s always spent most of his days — most of his life — secluded in Castle Granin, only very rarely venturing out, but he’s sure someone would’ve told him about this. He shakes his head in turn. “That was clearly an injustice,” he says. “Surely if you’d petitioned my lord father...”

“We’ve *petitioned* him over and over again,” the leader of the group says. “He just wouldn’t listen, so we finally had to take matters into our own hands. He got what was coming to him. As will you,” he concludes, and he draws a long-bladed knife from his belt and uses it to point at Hans; behind him, all other men draw their own weapons — a random mix of blades and blunt instruments of all shapes and forms: none of them are wielding arms made for combat, but everything still deadly enough.

“Stay back,” Bertold says. “We won’t let you harm Prince Hans.”

“Step aside, mate,” the man says. “We have no quarrel with you. We just want the princeling.”

“No,” Will grinds out. “You will have to go through us first before you can lay a hand on Hans.”

“Are you sure about what you’re doing? Do you really think he cares about you?”

“That doesn’t matter. It is our duty to protect him.”

“Then you’ll die first,” the man says. He raises his blade, the edge glinting in the flickering light, and takes a step forward.

“Stop. There’s no need for any of this,” Hans says.

“If you think you can solve this with words, *King Hans*,” the man spits out, “you better think again.”

“I don’t want to solve this. I want to surrender.”

The man blinks, clearly taken aback. “Say what?”

“I surrender. I will not fight you. So leave my friends alone.”

In front of him, Hans can see Will stiffen. “Hans...” the bodyguard says, glancing back, not letting his fighting stance drop.

“There’s no way we can win against them, Will. They’re over twice our numbers and they’re armed. So yes, I surrender,” he continues, looking at the enemy leader. “Do what you want to me, but don’t hurt Will and Bert.”

The man, eyes narrowing, studies the prince carefully. “You would seriously sacrifice your life for your bodyguards’?” he says, voice disbelieving.

“They’re not just my bodyguards,” Hans says. “They’re my *friends*. You said you have no quarrel with them, that you only want me. So let them go.”

There is a newfound respect for Hans in the man’s eyes. “Kristian...” one of his group says, but he raises a hand to shush him as he keeps staring straight at the prince. Then he nods.

“We won’t kill them,” he says. “We won’t kill *you* either, for that matter.”

Hans exhales a breath. “Thank you.”

“But still, you must be punished for what you and your bloody family did to this country. Lads, grab them.”

The group steps forward and Will and Bert move to react, but Hans shouts, “Don’t fight back!”

His two friends glance briefly at him, then at each other; their shoulders slump in defeat, and they let the rogues grab them and hold them as the leader — Kristian — steps forward.

“What do you intend to do to me?” Hans demands.

“I’m going to make sure your family’s blood never again taints this country,” Kristian replies. “Off with his trousers, lads.”

Hans doesn’t even struggle as he’s grabbed and someone roughly holds his arms in place behind him. He doesn’t move as one of the men cuts the cord that holds his trousers up and pulls them down. He stares into Kristian’s grinning face as the man steps forward.

“Wait!” Wilhelm shouts.

“What?” Kristian says, turning towards him.

“You can’t do this,” Wilhelm says. “You said you wouldn’t kill him. If you do this, he’s going to bleed out before we can get him to a healer.”

Kristian considers Will's words, then grins. "Well, we're going to have to find some way to prevent that, won't we?" he says. "Lukas. Grab a torch, mate."

One of the other men pulls a torch out of one of the sconces and steps forward, the flickering flames painting creepy, sinister shadows on Kristian's face as he raises his knife. Hans screws his eyes shut, doesn't look at Kristian's wide grin, and bites his lip, readies himself for the pain, which comes sudden and sharp.

Hans screams.



Hans stirs when he hears the knock at the door. He grasps the covers, moves to swing his legs over the side of the bed, but stops when his mother puts a hand on his shoulder. "I'll handle it, son," she says, smiling at him. "Gabriela, Katrin, could you please take care of him for a moment?"

“Of course, your highness,” Gabriela replies; Katrin nods. Queen Heloisa stands up from her chair and walks to the door, Wilhelm and Bertold stepping up behind her.

There is another knock, and the queen says, “Enter.” The door opens and Conrad von Dietz steps into the room, stopping just past the threshold. Unusually, he seems to be unaccompanied: his usual retinue is nowhere to be seen.

“Milady,” von Dietz says, nodding at Heloisa; then his eyes flit briefly to Hans, who responds to the glance with a glare. “How is he?” the baron asks.

“The healers say his life is not in danger,” Queen Heloisa replies. “He should recover from his injuries in a few weeks.”

The baron nods. “And what about...?”

The queen looks at him sternly. “That is none of your concern, Baron von Dietz.”

“First Councillor Dietz,” he replies. “And you’re right. But I came here to apologise, if I may.”

“...Apologise?” Heloisa says, raising an eyebrow.

“Yes,” von Dietz says, nodding again. “Your son, Citizen Granin, is accused of aiding and abetting the tyrant’s crimes, *but*,” he continues quickly before anyone can interrupt him, “he has not been tried. His sentence, if any, has not been decided; and in any case, that sentence would most certainly not be what has been done to him. And until his guilt or innocence has been determined, he has all the same rights as other citizens, though a bit restricted. He is a victim of a crime; and the Republic failed to protect him. For that, I apologise.”

Hans wants to reply bitterly, to shout out that he rejects the apology, but his mother has said she would handle the situation, so he lets her. For her part, Queen Heloisa side-steps von Dietz’s words, and simply asks, “What about the men who attacked him? Will they be punished? What about the soldiers who left my son alone?”

“They will all be tried for the... *wounding* of your son,” von Dietz says. “And they will be judged impartially. That is the extent of what I can promise.”

“I understand,” Queen Heloisa nods. “Thank you, Baron von Dietz.”

Von Dietz looks at her for a moment, then nods back; he turns on his heel and walks out of the room, closing the door behind him.

Heloisa exhales a breath, then turns around, too, and walks over to her son.

“They will not be punished,” Hans says bitterly. “Their courts are rigged in their favour. I don’t know why they don’t just kill us and be done with it.”

“I don’t think they intend to kill us, Hans,” Heloisa replies, sitting down beside him. “I know Baron von Dietz. He was one of your father’s best friends. He’s an honourable

man; he never says things he does not mean.”

“And yet he let them do *this* to me.”

Heloisa shakes her head. “He hasn’t *let* them. I’m sure he would’ve stopped them if he knew what they were planning.”

“But—”



“Shush,” the queen says, reaching out and placing a finger on Hans’ lips. “Let’s not argue, please. Save your strength. You will need it for healing.”

Hans looks at her for a moment, then grudgingly nods his head.

“You should sleep,” Heloisa says. “Would you like some more milk of the poppy?”

“No,” Hans replies. “Thank you, Mother.”

The queen smiles at him, and then lies back in her chair; it’s only a few moments before she falls asleep, the emotions of the day catching up with her. Hans turns his head to look at the ceiling, then closes his eyes. Despite the dull, throbbing pain in his loins —

which he refuses to soothe with drugs, lest he forget what has been done to him — he soon falls asleep, too, and dreams restless dreams filled with shadow and flame.