

LIBERATION

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IV

The Promise



There is a noise outside the door, just barely audible; so quiet anyone would dismiss it as just nothing, as a figment of their imagination, and yet Hans' eyes fly open: he stares at the ceiling above him, almost invisible in the darkness, as he pricks up his ears. It's only a second, and the noise comes again, still muffled but a bit louder,

and Hans throws the covers off of himself and springs up out of bed. It's been a couple months since the attack: his wounds have healed, and yet he will never be the same, neither physically nor because of the hyper-vigilance his brain seems intent in constantly maintaining, every day and especially every night — he can't remember the last time he's had a full night's sleep.

Across the room, Wilhelm and Bertold rise from the couches they use as beds. "What is it, my lord?" Will asks, and Hans frowns: ever since his injury, his two friends have been keeping him at arm's length, with none of the friendship and familiarity they had shown before. He misses it; he's been meaning to broach the subject with them, but he always hesitates and then decides against it when it comes to actually start forming his feelings into words.

Now it's not the time, though: there are more important things to think about. "There is someone outside the door," he says in a whisper. "Someone besides the usual guards, I mean."

Hans can't clearly see his friends in the gloom — the room is lit only by a single candle — but he knows they're nodding and grabbing their makeshift weapons: candlesticks and table legs. After what had happened a few months before, none of them had left the royal apartments, and they'd all agreed that they needed to find some way to defend themselves.

As Will and Bert take up position in front of the door, and a step ahead of Hans, he hears his mother and her ladies-in-waiting stirring behind him, but he pays them no mind, staying focused on what's coming; he grits teeth and tenses his muscles to be ready to spring into action if needs be as the door swings open, letting in the light from the torches outside and a man, wearing leather armour and armed with a sword — a *bloodied* sword, Hans realises, noting how the light reflects off the blade — steps into the room.



“Prince Hans?” the man says, stopping just past the threshold and lowering his weapon as Will and Bert raise theirs; behind him, Hans can see two other similarly-equipped men taking up position in the hallway beside the door — and the two guards sprawled on the floor, dead.

“Yes?” Hans replies, locking eyes with the man.

“You’re Prince Hans von Granin, are you not? Come on, we have to go.”

He nods with his head towards the open door, and Hans frowns. “Go where? Who are you?”

“There’s no time for explanations,” the man says. “I will tell you everything, but right now we have precious little time before they notice what we’re up to, so we have to go right now.”

Hans’ frown deepens. “I’m not going anywhere until—”

“Listen to me!” the man hisses; he takes a step towards Hans, but stops when Will and Bert close ranks, blocking his advance, and raise their weapons further.

“Not another step,” Will says in a low growl. “If Prince Hans says he doesn’t want to follow you, he’s not following you. And you’ll have to go through us if you want to take him by force.”

The man shakes his head. “You don’t understand. I’m...”

“Count Hoch?” Queen Heloisa’s voice says from behind Hans. “Count... *Gunner* von Hoch, right?”

“Right,” the man nods. “It is good to see you again, my lady. But please, talk some sense into your son; we have to go.”

“Mother, who is this man?” Hans asks, turning to her.

“Count Hoch is a retainer of your father’s cousin, Archduke Ulrich von Salgen,” she replies.

Hans recognises the name, of course: the Dukedom of Salgen neighbours Granin to the north, and the Archduke’s seat, Castle Salgen, is a little over two hundred miles away from Granin’s capital. “What are you doing here, Count Hoch?” he says.

“I thought it would be obvious, my lord,” the count replies. “This is a rescue. I’ve been tasked by the Archduke to save you from captivity and bring you to safety. But, like I said, we have to go. *Right now.*”

It takes only a moment for Hans to come to a decision; he nods. “Of course.”

“Take only the essentials, anything that can’t be spared; leave everything else behind. We’ll have to travel light and move quickly. And don’t worry about clothes.”

At Hans’ gesture, Bertold and Wilhelm lower their weapons; as they step forward and start talking with the count, likely discussing his plan for escape, Hans turns away, and rushes to the other side of the room, where the only thing he wants — no, the only thing he *needs* — to bring along on the escape is hidden. He opens a disguised cubbyhole in the far wall, reaches in, and draws out the only symbol of his family the Council of the Republic hasn’t stolen from him: his father’s signet ring.



He slips the ring on his finger and is about to rush back to the count to tell him he's ready to go when his mother steps up to him and puts a hand on his arm. "Are you sure about this, Hans?" she asks.

"What do you mean?" he replies, giving her a curious look. "This is our best chance to escape. Our *only* chance to escape, probably. We have to go."

"Yes, but..." she says; then, after a moment, she sighs. "I'm not so sure I trust the archduke. Or anyone who is closely associated with him, for that matter."

"...Why?"

"They disguise it well, but they're not good people. None of your father's family is. I have not forgotten how they treated me the first time I arrived at court, a young girl from a minor kingdom far away, to be wed to the king's son in a political marriage to cement an alliance." She shakes her head. "I'm sorry I have to say this, son, but I've

always distrusted the lot of them, and from what I've seen over the years, my lack of faith was well-founded."

Hans looks at his mother long and hard before speaking; then he asks, "Are you saying you don't want to escape? That you want to stay here?"

"No," she replies. "I will follow your lead: wherever you go, I will follow. And this is your decision to make. I'm only saying to think carefully before putting your life in their hands."

"My lord? My lady? We have to go," Count Hoch calls; Hans raises a hand to signal he's heard him, but keeps looking at Queen Heloisa.

"The choice is between going with them or staying here. And you know what they've done to me here," he says. "If we stay, they're going to kill me before long. They're going to kill all of us."

"I don't think they will."

Hans shakes his head. "I'm not willing to take that chance. We're going."

The queen nods, and then follows Hans as he turns around and walks across the room to the count and his friends. "Ready," Hans says.

The count acknowledges his words, then turns around on his heel and leads the group out of the room and into the maze of hallways that is the inside of Castle Granin. They move as a tight group, with the count and one of his men taking point, followed by Wilhelm, Hans, Heloisa and her ladies-in-waiting Katrin and Gabriela, and then Bertold bringing up the rear with the other soldier. This late at night the corridors are deserted, but Hans still finds himself jumping at every shadow the flickering light of the torches paints on the wall; he grits his teeth and bears it, telling himself that this is only temporary, that soon he and his family and friends will be safe, and he'll be able to stop being so afraid.

He's so caught up in his thought that he doesn't really pay attention to where they're going, and he only realises what their destination is once they reach it: it's one of Castle Granin's side door — the same side door, in fact, which had been opened by traitors to let the rebellion spill into the castle. There are a handful of dead guards sprawled on the floor near the door, and a man standing beside it.

"Took you long enough," the man says. "Did you have any trouble?"

"No, we—" Count Hoch begins to say, but he's interrupted by Hans' shocked gasp.

"Master Richter?!" he exclaims, staring at the former master-at-arm; the man who is, ultimately, directly responsible for his father's death.



“My lord,” Richter says, and he bows deeply. “I am deeply, truly sorry. I had thought...” He shakes his head. “What I’d thought doesn’t matter. I’ve been a fool.”

Hans stares at him for a moment, then looks at Count Hoch. “What is the meaning of this?” he demands. “Do you know what this *traitor* has done?”

“We wouldn’t have been able to enact our rescue plan if it hadn’t been for Master Richter,” the count replies, matter-of-factly. “It was him, in fact, who approached us in a tavern in town to offer his assistance when he recognised us.”

Hans blinks. “He did?”

“I did. This doesn’t even begin to repay the things I’ve done, though,” Richter says. “I know it’s impossible for you to forgive me right now, but maybe one day. Meanwhile, my lord, you have to go.”

“That we do. Come on,” Count Hoch says, and he herds the group through the door.

Still, Hans hesitates: he looks at Richter, at his teacher, at the man who betrayed his father, and who now has, apparently, realised his misdeeds. “Master Richter...” he murmurs.

“Go, my lord,” Richter says.

“You’re not coming?”

“No,” he replies with a shake of his head. “I’m going to bar this door again from the inside, and clean things up as much as I can, so they don’t realise you’ve fled the castle until it’s too late.”

“And then he’s going to act as our man on the inside,” Count Hoch adds. “To prepare things for your return.”

Hans bites his lip. “They’re going to kill you if they find out what you’ve done.”

“Undoubtedly,” Richter agrees. “But I will die knowing I’ve helped you, my lord. Now *go*.”

He pushes Hans out of the castle, then retreats back over the threshold and closes the door; after a moment, a dull thudding noise signals that the bar has been put back in its place.

“Alright,” Count Hoch says, “let’s keep moving.”

“And the rest you know,” Hans says; he takes a deep drink from his goblet, and continues, “Count Hoch led us away from the castle. We changed clothes and disguised ourselves as a group of travelling merchants, and we made our way to the border and over it. There were horses and soldiers and a carriage waiting for us there, and finally, we arrived here.”

“I cannot begin to tell you how pleased I am that you’re finally safe, Prince Hans,” Archduke Ulrich says. “When I heard about the revolution, I feared the worst.”

“And I can’t begin to tell you how thankful I am for the rescue,” Hans replies. “Both to you, and to Count Hoch especially.”

“And now that you’re here, you can finally sleep easy,” the Archduke continues. “I will take care of the rest.”

Hans gives him a puzzled look. “What do you mean, the rest?”

“I mean that I will take care of restoring you to your rightful place on the throne of Granin, of course. I’ve already begun to make plans.”

“Plans?”

“Yes. Sooner or later, but hopefully sooner, we will march at the head of an army and cross the border to retake your kingdom from the usurpers.”

“Of course,” Hans agrees. “Then, first thing tomorrow, I will sit with you and your generals, and—”

“I’m sorry, Prince Hans, but that just won’t do,” the archduke says, raising a hand. “I think that, for the time being, it’s better if no one knows you’re here at Castle Salgen.”

Hans’ forehead creases as he frowns. “Why?”

“Because there is also diplomacy to contend with. We’ve established relations, a dialogue, with the government of the Republic of Granin.”

“You have?” Hans says, his frown deepening.

“Yes. It’s a sham, of course, a deception. We are merely appeasing them, waiting for the moment to strike.”

“...I’m not sure I approve of these methods,” Hans says. “A ruler should be honest and upfront, not resort to deception and subterfuge.”

The archduke scoffs. “Your father was honest and upfront, and where did that get him? With his head on top of a pike.”

Hans flinches, and Queen Heloisa narrows his eyes at the archduke. “That is neither here nor there, Archduke von Salgen,” she says.

The archduke looks at the queen, then nods curtly. “My apologies. May as it be, the deception is already ongoing; and the government of the Republic will probably not take kindly to the news that the Dukedom of Salgen, the first country to recognise their rule, is harbouring the former royal family as fugitives.”

Hans looks at the archduke long and hard, then finally nods: he may not agree with how the archduke did things, but they’re already done; best not to upset the balance until he’s certain the time is right. “What do you suggest, then?”

“You should remain in the castle for the time being. Hidden. No one in here knows your face, I am sure of that, but there are many travellers out in the city, including from Granin, and someone may recognise you. And you should assume a new identity: you will be my nephew Florian, the legitimised bastard son of my brother, who came to stay with me after the untimely death of your father.” The archduke smiles. “A grain of truth makes the lie more believable. And then, when the time is ripe, you will once more become Prince Hans von Granin, and take back your rightful place as king and as your father’s successor.”

“Yes,” Hans nods. “I agree. But I will need to train.”

The archduke gives him a curious look. “Train?”

“In the art of the sword. I will need to be able to protect myself and my friends and family, and my kingdom, once I ascend to the throne.” Hans sighs. “I’ve slacked in my martial studies before; I shan’t do it again.”

“...Of course,” Archduke Ulrich nods. “My master-at-arm is at your disposal to train you. We will make arrangements first thing tomorrow.”

“And, if I may,” Queen Heloisa adds, “my son needs to be seen by a healer.”

“Why? Isn’t his... wound already healed?”

“That it is,” Hans says. “But when I was at Castle Granin, the healers there had given me a concoction to drink every day, to ‘rebalance my humours’, as they put it. I haven’t taken it since our escape, and I’m beginning to feel ill. Sometimes I feel faint, sometimes my entire body aches; sometimes I feel like I’m burning up. I’m ashamed to admit it, but I need a healer’s help.”

“Of course. And, on that note: we should all be retiring for the night. It is very late, only a few hours before dawn in fact. I have had rooms prepared for you and your retinue, Prince Hans.”

“Of course,” Hans echoes. “But before that, there is something I must do.” He stands up from the table. “Will you be my witness... Uncle?”

The archduke stands in turn, giving Hans a puzzled, wary look, but he and Queen Heloisa, along with Count Hoch, follow the prince as he walks out of the room and through the corridor, back towards the entrance hall where they left Wilhelm, Bertold, Katrina, and Gabriela. The two ladies-in-waiting are sitting when they arrive, but the two bodyguards are standing, leaning against two pillars; they look up with bloodshot eyes — they must be very tired, Hans realises — when they enter, and stand straight at attention.

“My lord,” Will says. “You were gone for quite a long time. Is everything alright?”

“It is,” Hans says. “Give me a blade, Sir Breyer.”

“...Sire?”

“Must I repeat myself? Give me a blade, sir. Your sword.”

Wilhelm hesitates for a moment longer, then draws his sword from his sheath and offers it to Hans, hilt first. Hans takes it, and nods.

“All of you know why we have come to this place today. We are here because my country, *our* country, has been taken over by rogues and thieves and brigands,” he says,

raising his voice and addressing everyone in the room. “Many people are undoubtedly suffering because of this situation, which must be remedied. So I call all of you here as my witnesses.”

Holding out his hand, he slips off his father’s — his *family’s* — signet ring. “I, Prince Hans von Granin, take this oath. I will do everything in my power to free my country from tyranny, from its enemies, from those who would see it subjugated to their will.”

He raises the sword and runs the edge briefly against his palm, drawing blood; then he closes his fist around the signet ring.

“This I swear on my family’s ring and my ancestors’ blood.”

He looks around the room, meeting the eyes of everyone present.

“Sir Wilhelm von Breyer. Sir Bertold von Kozak,” he says, turning towards his bodyguards. “Kneel.”

Bertold and Wilhelm, caught by surprise, take a moment to react; but then they lower themselves down to their knees, and look up at Hans.

“Sir Bertold. Sir Wilhelm,” Hans says. “Years ago, you took an oath. You swore to defend and protect me, giving your life for my safety if necessary. You have performed admirably; you have faithfully followed your oath.” He takes a deep breath. “I now release you from it.”

Will blinks, then begins to rise. “What? No! My lord—”

“Quiet,” Hans says, cutting through Wilhelm’s objection. “Let me finish. Please,” he adds softly, looking Will in the eye.

Wilhelm gulps, nods, and settles back down on his knees.

“You have heard the promise I made. The oath I swore. I will be completely honest with you, I have a long and difficult road ahead of me. I’m not sure if I will ever be able to fulfil my oath; but I will dedicate my life to it. But... I cannot force you to follow me along this path; it would not be right. I will not bind anyone to the fate I choose freely. Instead, I am *asking* you to walk the path with me: not as my bodyguards and retainers, but as my friends. As my brothers-in-arms. What say you?”

He extends his bloodied hand towards Wilhelm, who looks at him for a moment, eyes wide. “Yes,” he says breathlessly. “Yes, of course.” He grasps the offered hand and lets Hans — who grimaces slightly in pain — pull him to his feet. “I will come with you on this quest. I will gladly follow you to the ends of the world, my lord.”



“Not *my lord*,” Hans chides him, pulling Bertold up too with his other hand. “I’m not your lord. I’m your friend. And my name is Hans.”

Wilhelm nods again. “Of course... Hans.”

“Thank you, Will,” Hans says, and steps forward to embrace his friend, who returns the hug.

“The same goes for you,” Queen Heloisa says, addressing Katrin and Gabriela. “I will follow my son wherever his destiny will take him, but I will not order you to come with us; I will, however, be glad to have you along if you so wish.”

Katrin nods. “Of course, milady,” Gabriela says; then, seeing the look in the queen’s eyes, she smiles. “Of course, Heloisa.”

“Lise, if you will. But I recognise that may be a bit too early.”

“We will try,” Gabriela says, and Katrin nods again in agreement.

Heloisa nods; Hans turns to Archduke Ulrich. “Thank you for being my witness, Uncle, and thank you again for your hospitality. We would avail ourselves of the rooms you mentioned earlier, if you don’t mind.”

“...Of course,” Ulrich says, after a long moment of hesitation. “Count Hoch will have the servants show you to your quarters.”

“Come with me,” Gunner says, and he leads the group away; as they leave, Hans turns back for a moment, and sees the archduke is still looking at him, his brow creased by a frown.

There is a knock at the door. “Come,” Ulrich calls out loud, looking up from his papers.

“My lord,” Gunner says. “They are awake; Prince Hans is being seen by a healer right now.”

Ulrich nods. “What about everything else?”

“I’ve received words from my agents. Master-at-arms Richter has been... dealt with. And the peasants we dressed with Prince Hans’ and the other’s clothes and left in the woods have been found; savaged by wild beasts, of course. Utterly unrecognisable.” He pauses. “As far as everyone knows, Prince Hans, Queen Heloisa, and their retinue are dead.”

Ulrich nods again. He turns around and gazes pensively out of the window; the silence in the room stretches.

“I don’t like it,” Ulrich says.

“My lord?”

“Have you seen the look in his eyes, Gunner? When he swore his oath? I’ve seen that look before; it’s a look of determination. It’s the same look his father had in his eyes when he told me I would die by his blade if I ever showed my face in front of him again.”

Gunner raises an eyebrow at him. “My lord?” he asks again.

“Long story,” Ulrich says, waving his hand. “But in any case, I don’t like that look. The boy is stubborn, like his father. Like his whore of a mother. When those two set their minds to something...” He shakes his head. “And have you seen how his underlings look at him? He’s charismatic. He’s *inspiring*.” A pause. “I think he could really do it.”

“Do what, my lord?”

“What he swore he would do. Take back his throne. Ruin our plans.”

Gunner quirks his mouth in thought. “We could kill them all. There is still time.”

“Murder a member of my own family, you mean?” Ulrich retorts. “Do you think me some kind of barbarian? No. But still, there must be some way to—”

He’s interrupted by someone knocking on the door, and he looks at Gunner, puzzled. “I’ve asked Healer Baecker to come report to us when he’d finished examining the prince,” Gunner explains.

Ulrich nods. “Come,” he says.

The healer opens the door, steps inside, and bows deeply. “My lord,” he says.

“How is my nephew?”

“Most grievously injured, I’m afraid,” Baecker replies. “His life is not in peril, of course: the wound has healed, and whoever tended to it must’ve been very skilled. But he, ah... he will never be able to father children. He is, sadly, a eunuch.”

“And what about the symptoms he described?”

“The symptoms are commonplace among those who have suffered such injuries, and easily solved. I can make a draught which will rebalance his humours and restore his virility. Many eunuchs take it, and live their lives as normal men do. Except for being sterile, of course.”

“I see. Thank you, Healer Baecker. And tell me, is this draught difficult to make?”

“Not at all. I do not have all the ingredients on hand, but they’re easy to procure.”

“Any side effects?”

“None. The draught is quite similar to the draught I usually make for women of advanced age, in fact, with a few differences.”

“...Women of advanced age?” the archduke inquires.

“Yes, of course. You see, once a woman is past childbearing age, her humours become imbalanced, much like a eunuch’s, and she experiences similar symptoms — aches, brittle bones, a burning or chilling sensation. And that imbalance, those symptoms, are also solved with a draught.”

“Hm.” Ulrich looks at the healer, eyes narrowing. “And what would happen if my nephew were to take that draught? The one meant for women.”

“Why on earth would he do that?” the healer says, a puzzled look on his face.

“Answer the question,” Gunner says.

Baecker glances at Gunner, but replies as ordered. “I’ve seen some such cases before. I have no idea why anyone would do it to themselves, but there are men who castrate themselves and take the women’s draught. And, well, their body develops as a woman’s would.”

Ulrich's eyebrows rise. "What do you mean?"

"I thought it would be clear, my lord. I'm talking about them growing... ah..." The healer gestures at his chest, hands moving to mimic the appearance of breasts. "And they become soft. Delicate. As I said, like a woman."



"Yes. Yes," Ulrich says, nodding and pointing at the healer. "Do that."

"...Do what, my lord?"

"Make that draught for Pri— for my nephew. Instead of the other one."

Healer Baecker's eyes go wide. "Does... does your nephew *want* to—"

"Of course he doesn't. Who would want that? But you're not going to tell him about it."

"I can't do that, sire!" Baecker protests. "I took an oath! Doing such a thing would go against—"

“Your family lives in the castle, right?” Gunner says, cutting him off; the healer turns to look at him. “You have a wife, a son, and a young daughter. Am I correct?”

“...Yes...?”

“Well, it would be a *real shame* if anything were to happen to them.”

“But as long as you do what I’m ordering you to, and you keep this conversation among ourselves, nothing will happen,” Ulrich adds. “You have my word on that.”

The healer looks at him, then at Gunner, then back again.

“So what will it be, Healer Baecker?” the archduke asks.

“...I will do as you order, my lord,” Baecker replies, and he hangs his head.

Gunner nods. “Good. Dismissed.”

Archduke Ulrich waits until the door has closed again before letting out a cackle. “Oh, this is perfect. This is *absolutely* perfect.”

“My lord, I don’t understand,” Gunner says. “I followed your lead, but can you please explain?”



“Don’t you understand, my friend? I said before that I was worried because Prince Hans is charismatic, because he inspires people. Well, let’s see how many people he can inspire once he’s a soft, effeminate sissy.” He smiles widely. “Mark my words, Gunner. This I swear: no man of my cousin’s blood shall sit on the throne of Granin ever again.”