

LIBERATION

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V

New Beginnings



Hans is awakened from a fitful sleep, his bedsheets tied into knots, by a banging at the door. “Florian?” Will’s voice calls out. “Florian, the healer is here.”

It takes Hans a moment to get his bearings — and to remember who Florian is, that being the assumed name he’s currently living under — but then he recognises the walls

and furniture around him: he's in his room at Castle Salgen, set aside for him on his cousin's orders. He mentally chides himself, because it's been a week since he arrived and he has yet to get used to sleeping in this unfamiliar place. But, then again, he'd been sleeping in the royal apartment at Castle Granin for his whole life, so it's not that strange that it would take him some time to adjust to new surroundings. He wonders if this is how his mother felt when she moved from her northern homeland to Granin, to be wed to his father; maybe that's why she seemed to have very little complaint, both during their captivity and on the journey over.

He's shaken out of his thoughts by more banging at the door. "Florian?" Will calls again. "Are you there?"

"Yes!" Hans shouts back. "Send him in, Will!"

The door opens, and as Healer Baecker and Will step into the room, Hans catches a glimpse of the chair set up next to the door; he grimaces, remembering the discussion — or argument, rather — they had upon their arrival at the castle regarding the sleeping arrangements. Despite him insisting that they didn't have to, despite him telling them over and over that they are no longer his bodyguards, Will and Bert wanted to sleep in his room, so that they could guard him at all times. Hans objected strenuously to that proposition, and voices were raised, until Queen Heloisa stepped in and shushed them all and told them to discuss things calmly and without shouting. In the end, a compromise was reached: Hans claimed the innermost of a pair of guest chambers, while Will and Bert took over the outer one, to act as a sort of filter, keeping themselves between Hans' room and the hallways where the common people, and servants and guards, are free to roam.

And no matter how much he insisted, Hans wasn't able to dissuade his two friends from having one of them stand guard — or sit guard, rather — beside his door at all waking times.

Be patient, Hans tells himself. Like him having to get used to an unfamiliar room, Will and Bert will likely take time to get used to a new unfamiliar situation; they have yet to fully digest the fact that they are no longer in charge of protecting him.

Hans shakes his head. "Good morning, Healer Baecker," he addresses the elder man.

"Good morning, milord," the healer replies. "How are you feeling?"

"Very well, thank you. The draught has been working: it's been over a week since I've last felt ill."

“Glad to hear that. It means we’ve found the correct dosage, and your humours are stabilising. May I examine your body?”

Hans nods as he stands up from his bed. He starts to unbutton his nightshirt.

Will, standing beside the door, averts his eyes and shifts his weight from one foot from the other.

Hans’ eyebrows knit together. “Will,” he says.

“Yes?” Will replies.

“Look at me.”

Clearly more than a bit reluctantly, Will complies, locking eyes with Hans.

“This isn’t the first time you’ve seen me naked,” Hans says. “Or the second, for that matter; how many times have we shared a bath after training? You didn’t seem to have a problem before.”

“That... was indeed before,” Will says.

Hans, still looking at his friend, takes a couple breaths. Slow and measured.

“You can step outside if you’re uncomfortable.”

“...Right. Alright. I will be right outside if you need me.”

“I won’t,” Hans reassures him with a smile, which Will reciprocates before stepping out. Hans waits until his friend has closed the door behind himself before starting to undress again, and as he does so he catches the healer’s eyes and sees the unasked question it them.

“He was there when I got injured,” Hans explains. “He blames himself for not being able to prevent it.”

Baecker nods. “I can tell the two of you are close. Not many people can command someone’s loyalty like that.”

“It’s not loyalty, it’s friendship,” Hans replies, pulling the shirt fully off to stand naked before the healer. “Will and I have known each other since we were very young. He’s my best friend.”

“As you say, milord.”



Hans stands still as Baecker examines him, prodding his arms and chest and body; he stands even stiller as the healer's hands move down to his genitals, drawing his penis aside to check the spot left barren by his injury.

“Perfectly healed. I was a bit worried when I first examined you, the area was a bit red, but it seems my fears were unfounded. You’ve been very lucky, milord: even with the proper technique and with the immediate assistance of a healer this kind of injury is often fatal, from the subsequent infection if not from the immediate shock.”

“Have you seen many men with injuries like this one?”

“A few.”

“Would any of them call themselves lucky?”

“Some, yes. You’re still alive, are you not?”

Hans concedes the point with a nod of his head, and reaches for his day clothes as the healer steps back. “So what, I just keep on taking the draught and I’ll be fine?”

“...Yes,” Baecker says, with only the slightest hesitation. “As I said, the draught rebalances your humours, and it will keep you healthy as a result. I will come by every week to check on your progress, and you may send for me if you experience any undue symptoms. The Archduke bid me take good care of you.” The healer’s lips curl into a smile. “But you should really exercise a bit more. You need to develop your muscles, and a body that moves is a healthy body.”

“I was unable to exert myself for a while, and you can probably guess why. But we’ve already made arrangements to resume my training with the blade. I start today, in fact.”

“Good. Can I see your hand?”

Hans holds it out, holding it still as the healer examines it, and then flexing his fingers on command; Baecker nods in satisfaction, and declares that wound, too, to be healing fine, though the slash across Hans’ palm will likely leave a scar.

“That’s fine,” Hans says; it will serve as a reminder of the oath he took.

“You should be careful with your hands, by the way. A wound like that could’ve damaged a tendon or severed a muscle. That would be very bad.”

“I’ll be careful.”

“See that you are. Here are your doses for the day.” The healer pulls out three ampoules from his satchel and hands them to Hans: they look exactly the same as the ones which had been delivered to him over the previous days. “As usual, one in the morning after waking, one at midday, and one before bed.”

“Alright.” Hans uncorks one of the small bottles and downs the contents in a single gulp: he’s learned to let as little of the substance as possible touch his tongue, lest the foul taste overwhelm him. He still grimaces. “You do know it’s vile, don’t you?”



“I do,” Baecker chuckles. “Unfortunately. I shall endeavour to make it more to your tastes. Add some honey, perhaps.”

“What’s in this anyway? I realise I never asked.”

“Oh, a little bit of this, and a little bit of that. Herbs, mostly. The main ingredient is silphium.”

“Never heard of that.”

“It’s also called laserworth.” Hans shakes his head, so the healer smiles. “I’m not surprised you’ve never heard of it. It’s a plant originating far south, beyond the sea, very rare and quite expensive; it was even thought extinct for a few centuries before it was rediscovered. You are again lucky that I’m one of the few herbalists who grow it.”

“Beyond the sea? Where, exactly?”

“Cirenaica.”

“That’s... very far away. Near Egypt, I think.”

“About there, yes,” Baecker says, his eyebrows rising in mild surprise. “You know your geography well.”

For a moment Hans is tempted to give in to nostalgia and tell the older man about the many days he spent in his family’s library poring over massive leather-bound books, which notably contained several maps, including an almost complete, centuries-old copy of Ptolemy’s *Geographia*; but then he decides against it, because as much as he’d like to enthuse over his studies — and also show off the extent of his knowledge — with a fellow scholar, he has to remember that he’s supposed to be Florian, the recently-legitimised bastard son of Ulrich’s brother, who wouldn’t have had access to the resources Prince Hans von Granin had at his disposal.

So he ignores the healer’s searching stare and instead asks, “How do you prepare the draught?”

“The exact method is a secret of the trade, I’m afraid,” Baecker replies, lips crinkling into a smile behind his bushy beard. “But extract the silphium’s essence and mix it with... uh...”

He doesn’t finish the sentence, so Hans raises a puzzled eyebrow. “Mix it with what?”

“On second thought, it’s probably best if I don’t tell you.”

“No, I want to hear it. What do you mix it with?”

“...Dried urine from a pregnant mare,” comes the answer, spoken so quietly Hans almost doesn’t hear it, and clearly very reluctantly.

Hans blinks. It takes a moment for the healer’s words to make their way into his mind, and when they do, he blinks again, more slowly this time. He looks at the empty ampoule, set on a nearby table, and then at the healer again.

“You’ve been having me drink *horse piss*?” he exclaims, appalled.

“Urine.”

“It’s disgusting!”

“Many a medicine is made from something disgusting; not everything can be simple willow bark extract.”

“Yes, I get it, but horse piss?!”

“Again, it’s urine. That would be the technical term, milord, and I will thank you to use it. And this kind of reaction is why I seldom tell my patients what I put in my draughts; but you insisted on knowing.” Baecker inclines his head slightly and gives

Hans an amused smile. “You can always stop taking the draught, no one is forcing you. But you’ve admitted it’s effective yourself, have you not?”

“Yes,” Hans concedes after a moment.

“If it’s any consolation, I can tell you it doesn’t taste nearly as foul as it smells while I’m preparing it. I have to plug my nose and keep all windows open to disperse the odour.”

“I understand. My apologies for my reaction, Healer Baecker.”

“Forgiven,” the healer says with a wave of his hand. “Now, I have other patients to see to, so if there won’t be anything else?”

“No. I’ll send for you if I have need of you. And you have my thanks.”

Baecker nods and, as Hans finishes getting dressed for the day, leaves the room, with Will immediately stepping inside in his place along with Queen Heloisa.

“Is everything alright?” Will asks.

“It is. Thank you, Will,” Hans says. “Good morning, Mother.”

“Good morning, son,” Heloisa smiles.



“Have you had a good night’s sleep?”

“Quite. What about you?”

“Me too, yes.”

Heloisa purses her mouth. “Look at me, son,” she says; when Hans does so he meets her searching eyes, and he can immediately tell she can see the tiredness in his own.

She inclines her head slightly, lifting her eyebrows; he sighs. “Sorry. I didn’t sleep well at all. I keep dreaming about home. I keep dreaming about Father. Sometimes I wish this all were just a dream.”

“Me, too,” the queen replies. “But no matter what happened, he will always be with us. In here.”

She places a hand on Hans’ chest, and he covers it with his own, nodding in understanding. “Thank you, Mother.”

“Sad feelings besides, how are you feeling? Did the healer find anything wrong with you?”

“Nothing at all. As long as I keep taking the draught, everything should be fine.”

“It’s this, right?” Will asks, picking up an ampoule; he uncorks it, sniffs it, and his face screws into a grimace. “Ugh. What a stench.”

“The taste is even worse, I assure you,” Hans laughs; Heloisa holds out her hand, and Will gives her the bottle.

Her mouth purses pensively as she passes the draught under her nose, being careful not to inhale too deeply. “A familiar scent. I can’t quite place where, but I’m certain I’ve smelled this before.”

“Of course you have, they gave me this back at Castle Granin, too.”

“No, that one smelled differently, I think. But no matter.” She stoppers the ampoule. “So what plans do you have for today, son?”

“I’m resuming my training with the sword. Bert has made arrangements with Ulrich’s master-at-arms.”

“Good. Try not to exert yourself too much, but do your best. You too, Wilhelm.”

“Of course, Your Highness,” Will replies.

“I thought I told you to call me Lise.”

“That... uh... feels a bit improper, if I have to be completely honest. Not because you’re the queen, but...”

“...because I’m Hans’ mother,” Heloisa concludes the sentence Will’d left hanging. “I understand. After all, you’ve known me for more than half of your life, have you not? How time flies. It seems just yesterday the three of you were scampering around the castle. And now look at you, all grown up into a fine young man.” She sets a hand on Will’s shoulder and looks at him fondly. “I’m really glad you’re by my son’s side, Will.”

“As am I, Your Highness.”

She smiles at him. “Tell you what. If I really can’t convince you to call me by my name, I’ll allow you to call me ma’am. What say you?”

Will nods. “That will be fine, ma’am.”

“Good. But I guess you should be going now. You don’t want to be late for your first day of school.”

Hans accepts Heloisa’s teasing with a smile of his own. “You’re right, Mother. Come on, Will, let’s go.”

With a final wave to his mother, the young prince leaves the room along with his friend; the queen looks at him go for a moment, then picks up the draught bottle and uncorks it again, bringing it up to her nose once more.

As she smells it, her forehead creases into a frown.

Will and Hans are met by Bertold at the foot of the staircase that runs through the full height of Castle Salgen, from where their new apartments are located on the fourth storey down to ground level. From there it's a few minutes' walk along the hallway that runs through the main building before letting out into the inner courtyard.

"A word of warning," Bert says as they walk. "The Archduke's master-at-arms... he is not a pleasant man."

"What do you mean?" Hans queries.

"He is an expert at teaching the way of the sword, to be sure. But he is a harsh taskmaster, and does not take kindly to his charges talking back to him."

"Have you met him before?" Will says.

"A few times. If you'll remember, my family's estate is on the border between Granin and Salgen, and the Kohlers' lands are right over. I was very young the last time I saw him, but I distinctly remember how... *rigid* he seemed to be."

Hans nods, and Bert's words remind him of something: "Have you heard from your families, by any chance?" he asks.

That question is addressed to both of his companion, and it's Will who answers first. "Not since the uprising. We used keep in touch by letter every now and then, but that obviously ceased when the rebels took over."

"The same goes for me," Bert says.

"I hope they're alright. I shall keep them, and you, in my prayers," Hans says, stopping for a moment to place a hand on each of his friends' shoulders and getting grateful smiles in return.

As they step into the courtyard, they're greeted by a loud harrumph. "You finally deign yourselves to show your sorry faces," a wide, stoutly-built man says: he is wearing light, supple leather armour, a sword fastened to his belt, and his hair and beard are dark but speckled with gray, short, and neatly groomed. "I was starting to lose hope."

"My apologies," Hans says. "I was held up."

"By what? Was it something more important than learning how to be a man? No, don't answer that. Line up!"

He points at a circle drawn in the dust in the middle of the courtyard, which has a rack of training weapons set a bit off to the side of it. The order clearly begets no disobedience, so Hans, Will, and Bert step up to the middle of the circle and await further instruction.

The man looks at them for a moment, then clicks his tongue. “No, that won’t do at all. Stand straight!” he barks. “Heads up, eyes looking ahead, arms by your side!”

His charges comply, stiffening up, and he nods in apparent satisfaction.

“Good. Now, let me tell you how things are going to be from now on: I’m not your friend. I’m here for one purpose and one purpose only, to teach you to fight. I will do that to the best of my abilities, but I will not go easy on you. You can quit at any time you want, and if you have any complaints, well, I don’t want to hear them. Do I make myself clear?”



“Yes,” Hans answers.

The master-at-arms slaps him roughly on the shoulder, almost throwing him off-balance. “Yes *what?* My name is Wolfgang von Kohler, but you will address me as Master Wolfgang, or sir. So let’s try that again: do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, Master Wolfgang.”

“Louder! I can’t hear you!”

“Yes, Master Wolfgang!” the three students shout in unison.

“Good!” Kohler calls out just as loud in return. “Grab a sword and let’s get started, lads.”

Breaking ranks, Hans, Bert, and Will move over to the rack, on which several swords are lined up, wood and steel both. They ignore the wooden blades, since those are for beginners, and go for the metal ones right away, picking them up, swinging them a couple times to try the weight. Will and Bert soon find a weapon that satisfies them, but Hans frowns because he doesn’t: even the lightest one feels heavy, much heavier than he remembers swords being. Several months of not exercising his muscles in any meaningful way have taken a toll on them, it seems; but he doesn’t have time to think about it, because Kohler is looking at him impatiently, so he follows his two friends back to the middle of the ring.

“Metal blades, aye?” Kohler says. “Are you sure you want to start with those?”

“We are,” Will answers. “We are, sir,” he corrects himself, after Kohler gives him a meaningful look.

“Alright. Get in position.”

They comply, drawing a leg back while raising their sword arm at the same time. Kohler purses his lips, looking at them appraisingly.

“You,” he says, pointing at Bert. “Lift the sword higher. You, back leg a bit further back, turn the front foot inwards.”

He’s pointed at Hans that time, and Hans hurries to comply; for good measure, he raises the sword a bit higher, too.

“Alright,” Kohler says again. “Show me a few swings.”

Again they comply, swinging their blades in front of them several times, shifting their weight and moving their feet slightly to keep their balance, until Kohler tells them to stop and be at ease.

“You all have some fundamentals. You’ve all trained before, have you not?”

“We have, sir,” Will replies.

“Under which master?”

Hans glances at his friends, and they exchange an uneasy look: they hadn't planned on having to answer this question. But there's clearly no way out of it, so when Kohler grunts in annoyance at their hesitation, Bert replies, “Richter Vogler.”

“Richter Vogler?” Kohler says, his eyebrows rising towards his hairline. “The master-at-arms at Castle Granin?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Huh. That's interesting. Master Vogler isn't known for training just anyone. How did you come to be under his tutelage?”

Hans answers that question. “As a personal favour from King Anselm to Archduke Ulrich, sir.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I'm a relative of Archduke Ulrich.”

The master-at-arms' eyes narrow. Hans knows the man is not stupid, no one born from a minor family rises to such an important role at court without knowing how to navigate politics, so he realises the mental calculation Kohler's making. Archduke Ulrich has no family: he's not yet married, and his older brother died years ago, also unmarried; but that same brother had been widely rumoured to have fathered at least a few children, who would of course be sent away to live somewhere out of sight so as to not cause scandal. And what better place than the neighbouring country? Probably not Castle Granin itself, but likely somewhere in the surrounding capital city. After all the families are related, but not entirely cordial with each other, so no one would think to look for a Salgen bastard in the Kingdom of Granin.

As much as he dislikes having to be undercover, Hans has to admit the fictitious identity Ulrich has thought up for him is the perfect cover story.

“What is your name, lad?” Kohler asks.

“Florian, sir.”

Kohler accepts the name with a grunt; he glances over at Hans and Bert, and they respond by telling him their names, too — and if the master-at-arms recognises in Bert the young child he'd met a few times, many years ago, he doesn't let that show. “I must warn you, I do things much differently than Master Vogler,” he says. “The fundamentals you have work, but everything else we must throw away and begin anew. Are you willing to do that?”

“Yes, sir,” the three students respond.

“I can’t hear you!”

“Yes, sir!”

“Louder!”

“Yes, SIR!”

“Good. It took three tries, and there’s three of you, so you get three times three laps of the courtyard. Let’s make it a round nice ten. Come on, off you go!”



Bert, Hans, and Will are momentarily surprised by Kohler’s command, but see the warning glare in his eye, so they re-rack the weapons they chose and take off running, keeping a steady pace and turning as they reach each corner in the walls. The interior courtyard of Castle Salgen is not that wide, all things considered, but it still takes the three of them a full thirty minutes before they’re done, and by that time Hans is visibly lagging behind, his breath heavy and laboured, his muscles aching and stinging with

pain. When Kohler orders them to stop and line up again at attention in the middle of the circle, it takes Hans a few moments to be able to comply.

Next, the master grabs a training blade of his own and shows them several forms, repeating each one a few times and making the three students imitate him, and again Hans struggles to keep up: the forms are similar to the ones Master Vogel had taught him, but different enough that whatever muscle memory he'd had throws him off completely. He's not alone in this, he can see Bert and Will have to correct themselves a few times, too, but for him it's almost as if he has to start again from the very beginning.

It's mid-afternoon when Kohler at last releases them. They've trained and toiled for many long hours, without even breaking for lunch, and Hans' muscles are screaming; he barely manages to lift his training sword enough to put it in the rack again.

They line up at attention again, and Kohler regards them silently for a moment before deeming the entire exercise "A satisfactory first lesson. There's some talent here, but there's also much work to be done. You, especially." He points at Hans. "Are you sure you want to continue, lad?"

"What do you mean, Master Wolfgang?" Hans asks. "Of course I want to continue."

"Suit yourself. But what I mean is that you are clearly not suited to being a fighter. You can learn the forms, you can train your body, but you will always be one step behind your comrades."

Kohler's words sting, and Hans has to catch his breath before he's able to rebut.

"That doesn't matter. I have to be a fighter. I have to be strong."

"Why?"

To take back my kingdom. To make those who killed my father and maimed me pay with their blood and their life, Hans thinks. But he can't say that, of course, so he just shakes his head. "I just have to."

"Suit yourself," Kohler repeats. "You are dismissed. Go eat and rest."

He turns sharply on his heel and marches away without sparing a glance behind.

After a moment, Hans hears Will exhale a breath. "Well, this was invigorating," he says. "I haven't trained this hard in years."

"And it's only going to get more difficult from now on," Bert agrees. "But it will do us good to move our bodies."

Hans nods, unsure. "Yes, it will."

Wilhelm, seemingly hearing the hesitation in Hans' voice, reaches out and places a hand on his shoulder. "Don't mind Kohler's words, Florian," he says. "I'm sure you'll catch up with us and surpass us before long."

"Do you really think so?"

"I know it so. Before you know it, you'll be marching at the head of an army to retake our homeland." Will squeezes Hans' shoulder and smiles at him. "And I'll be right by your side."

"Thank you, Will," Hans replies, returning the smile.

