

LIBERATION

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VI

Out and About



Inhaling deeply a few times to regularise his breathing after the run, Hans lines up beside his friends in front of Kohler, standing straight, arms by his side.

“How do you think you did?” the master asks aloud; then, before any of the three can answer, he immediately continues, “Let me tell you: you’re still slow! And you all look exhausted, especially you. You need to build up your strength and stamina, lad.”

As he says this, Kohler points at Hans, who grits his teeth but says nothing. The master's words chafe because they're the truth: three weeks Hans has been slaving under him along with Will and Bert, and yet he feels as if he hasn't made any progress. Oh, his two friends have told him he's putting on some muscle, true, Will especially, but the reflection Hans sees in the mirror every morning tells a different story. While constant training and good meals have made Bertold and Wilhelm's muscles bigger and more defined, Hans hasn't bulked up at all, but rather he seems to have been putting on some weight, his bottom and thigh and especially his chest losing definition and becoming more rounded. How come, he asks? He's been training diligently, and yet all his efforts seem to have had the opposite effect.

"What, don't you have anything to say?" Kohler asks, leaning in, his face inches from Hans's.

"No, Master Wolfgang," Hans replies.

"Alright. On with the training then: everyone grab a sword."

The three students proceed to do so, and as usual, line up again side by side, ready to practice their fundamentals; but Kohler shakes his head.

"We've been studying the basic forms long enough," he says. "It's time to see if you can handle yourself in a fight. Today, we're sparring."

"Sparring?" Will repeats, and Hans can see his friend is looking at him out of the corner of his eyes.

"Is there an echo in here? Yes, sparring. You two." Kohler points at Will and Bert. "You're up first."

Bert and Will exchange a glance, then step up to the middle of the practice circle. They both fall into a stance, and when the master calls for them to begin, their swords start clashing. Tentatively at first, clearly trying to judge each other's skill level and attitude, and then faster, with wider swings and deeper lunges, and Hans cannot help but look on in awe: his friends are very skilled; much more skilled than he is, at least.

The duel continues for a couple minutes, the two fighters trading parries and ripostes, circling each other while looking for an opening, until Will finds one: he side-steps one of Bert's lunges, knocks his blade aside, and is inside his friend's guard before Bert has time to react, tapping his sword on the side of his chest.

"Good!" Kohler exclaims. "You've put what I taught you to good use. But you both still have much to learn: I counted at least four or five openings you've overlooked. Each."

“But I found one in the end,” Will objects.

“In the end isn’t good enough. Against a more skilled enemy you would’ve died thrice over. And let’s not forget that this was a duel, but in a real fight, being one against one hardly ever happens. While you were dawdling and taking your sweet time, your enemy’s comrades would’ve cut you down.”

Will makes a face, and the master-at-arms clicks his tongue at him.

“This is another thing you have to watch for: your face belies your thoughts and emotions, and a skilled fighter will absolutely be able to use that to his advantage,” he says. “But since you’re not convinced, let me demonstrate.” He snaps his fingers at Hans. “Come on, lad, we’re up.”

Hans blinks in surprise. “What? I’m fighting you?”

“Of course. There isn’t anyone else here for you to fight, is it? Not to mention that if I just teach you without practising myself, I’ll soon grow rusty. Come on.”

He beckons, and Hans follows him to the middle of the circle as Will and Bert clear the way. Hans strikes a stance, but Kohler doesn’t: instead, he stands straight, feet firmly planted on the ground, sword in his right hand, the tip pointed at the dirt.

“Uh...” Hans says, hesitating.

“Begin,” the master says.

Hans doesn’t move. “Master Wolfgang...”

“I said *begin*. Come on, come at me, lad.”

Hans hesitates for a moment longer, but then cautiously inches forward, his sword preceding him. The master still doesn’t move, so Hans takes a step, bringing his training blade around in a slash.

Lightning quick, Kohler’s own weapon comes up and knocks Hans’s aside, and then the master is inside his guard, quickly redoubling the hold he has on his hilt and hitting Hans square in the chest in a mighty blow that knocks the air from his lungs — if they’d been fighting with real swords, it would’ve been a mortal wound. It’s still very painful, and Hans tumbles backward to the ground, gasping for breath.

“Ha— Florian!” Will calls out, taking a step toward him, but Hans quickly raises his hand and stops his friend with a gesture.

“See?” Kohler says. “In a fight, you have to be *ruthless*. You have to dispatch each and every enemy as quickly and as efficiently as possible; and when you do, make sure they stay down.”

He steps forward and brings his sword down in an arc, straight toward Hans's neck; Hans braces for another surge of pain, but the master doesn't hit him nearly as hard this time, instead opting to tap his neck lightly with the flat of the blade.

"You're dead, boy. Well, deader than you were before."

Hans looks up at him, the master's massive frame silhouetted against the bright blue sky; slowly, he nods. "Thank you for this lesson, Master Wolfgang."



Kohler nods back, and extends a hand, pulling the young man up to his feet. "You, unfortunately, are the one who's got the most to learn. We're done for today; one hundred swings of the sword, and then you can go."

"One hundred?!" Hans exclaims: his sword is heavy, and his arms will be dead by the time he's done.

"One hundred, yes," Kohler replies. "And pay attention to your form."

Hans boggles at him for a few moments more, then he takes his stance — left foot forward and a bit to the side of his right, points turned in, knees slightly bent — and brings his sword up, then down, carefully controlling the trajectory as it descends. “One,” he counts aloud. “Two. Three.”

“Four,” Will adds, and Hans glances to the side to see that his friend has taken up position to his right, and is swinging along with him. “Five. Six.”

“I didn’t say you needed to train, too,” Kohler comments.

Will pauses, sword raised. “I know. It’s my choice.” He brings the sword down. “Seven. Eight.”

On Hans’s other side, Bert sets his stance and starts swinging too. “Nine. Ten.”

“...See you tomorrow, lads,” Kohler says, and stalks away grumbling something about idiots under his breath.

By the time the trio gets to forty, Hans’s arms are screaming, muscles protesting very loudly that they do not like this at all, no sir, thank you very much, could you stop this foolishness right now, please? Still, they persist, even though their swords — even Will’s and Bert’s — are starting to tremble as the move up and down. They make it to sixty, and then seventy, and it’s becoming increasingly difficult for Hans to raise the weapon above his head.

Sweat pours down their foreheads, moisture soaking their clothes. “Eighty-six,” Hans says, swinging his training blade, and by that point his hands are so wet and slick and the muscles so sore he loses his grip entirely, the sword clanging to the ground. Will moves to retrieve it—

“No,” Hans says, stopping his friend with a tired and sluggish hand gesture.

“Florian...” Will says, pausing mid-motion.

“Let me do this. I have to do this on my own.”

Grudgingly, Will nods, and lets Hans kneel to the ground and grab his blade before rising to his feet again. They both take their stance once more, and again swing their swords, slowly up, and then sharply down. “Eighty-seven,” Will counts.

They make it to a hundred without further incident, and at that point Hans gratefully accepts Will’s help, his friend taking the sword from his tired hands and re-racking it.

“Can we not do that again?” Bert complains, massaging his arms and grimacing at the aches. “Like, ever?”

“We will do what Master Wolfgang tells us to do,” Hans replies. “Come on, let’s get to lunch, they’re waiting for us.”

They make their way inside, and then up from the ground floor to their apartments. Like Hans said, Queen Heloisa, Gabriela, and Katrin are seated at the table, waiting the three men to join them for their midday meal, but Heloisa immediately rises to her feet as Hans enters. “Are you alright?” she asks in concern. “You’re absolutely soaked. And look at your hands.”

She grabs one of Hans’s hands and runs her finger over his palm, touching the blisters that weren’t there that morning; Hans smiles. “I’m alright, Mother, don’t worry.”

“You know I always will. I think you’re training too hard, son.”

“Perhaps. But I have to.” *I wasn’t strong enough to protect my kingdom and my father, so I must become stronger*, Hans thinks.

The look on Heloisa’s face clearly says that she doesn’t agree with her son, but she doesn’t put her objection into words. “Come,” she says instead, guiding Hans to the table. “You must be hungry.”

“Famished,” Hans agrees as he sits down. “What’s for lunch?”

“Take your pick,” Katrin says, waving her hand at the serving platters. “There’s plenty.”

“Pick for me, please? I don’t think I’ll be able to raise my arms ever again.”

“Let me do it,” Will says; he grabs a large piece of bread and ladles meat and sauce on it.

“Some vegetables, too,” Heloisa says.

Hans makes a face. “I don’t like vegetables.”

“But they’re good for you,” she replies, and gives Will a look that speaks volumes; Will, with a slight smirk, adds some vegetables to Hans’s dish, then places it down in front of him and stabs a piece of meat with his knife, holding it out in front of his friend’s face.



Hans curls an eyebrow Will's way.

"You said you can't raise your arms, so," Will shrugs.

"I'm not a child, Will," Hans protests. "I can eat perfectly fine by myself."

"So eat, then."

Hans holds Will's gaze for a moment, seeing the amusement in his friend's eyes, then sighs and takes the morsel of food into his mouth. "This is good," he says, chewing and taking the knife from Will's hand and using it to grab some more meat from the bread. "What's this?"

"Don't speak with your mouth full, son," Heloisa says, eliciting another sigh from Hans.

"It's mutton," Gabriela says. "We were lucky enough to find a good piece at the butcher's in New Town yesterday."

Hans's eyebrows rise slightly. "At the butcher's?"

“Yes, and then we cooked it this morning,” Katrin adds. “It took a while because mutton meat is usually a bit tough, so you need to stew it for a couple hours to make it tender.”

“No, what I mean is, you left the castle? You went into town?”

“We did. What of it?”

“Weren’t we supposed to not leave Castle Salgen?”

“No? I don’t think we were,” Gabriela says. “Not us, at least. We’ve been making trips outside the walls for weeks now. It would be incredibly boring if we were to stay cooped up in here all day, every day.”

“But it’s dangerous out there.”

“Not any more dangerous than it would’ve been in Granin in normal times. Before the uprising,” Heloisa says. “If they keep to the main streets and get back before dark, there’s no reason to fear for their safety.” She narrows her eyes at her ladies-in-waiting. “You *are* keeping to the main streets, right?”

“Of course,” Gabriela says.

“Most certainly,” Katrin agrees.

“Good,” Heloisa nods. “Do be careful. I care about you two, you know.”

As the two ladies-in-waiting demur, as is their usual, Hans purses his lips, realising he hadn’t considered what Heloisa, Katrin, and Gabriela were doing with their time while he and his two friends were training in the way of the sword; the thought simply hadn’t occurred to him. But if he has someone to begrudge for this oversight, it’s himself: the three women have of course their own lives, independent of the men — lives which apparently take them outside the walls and back again, seemingly moving through town with ease. Hans has never done that before, he’s always spent most of his life behind walls and closed doors, first in Castle Granin and now in Castle Salgen, only very rarely venturing outside. He’s never experienced life among the common people, and would never be able to, say, make his way to the butcher’s to purchase meat to cook for lunch the next day.

But that’s wrong, isn’t it? A ruler — a king — shouldn’t live in an ivory tower, secluded from his people, only occasionally showing his face to proclaim the law and dispense justice. What justice would that even be, handed down from above without any knowledge of how the common folk go about their day?

Maybe his father did wrong in not considering what the populace’s lives look like? No, Hans quickly corrects himself, not *did wrong*: his father would never have made

such a mistake, and Hans is sure the uprising came entirely unexpected and without warning as a result of some nobles — like Baron von Dietz — scheming for their own gain. But maybe if King Anselm had spent more time among his subject, he could've recognised the warning signs?

“What are you thinking about?” Heloisa asks.

“Huh? What?” Hans says, shaken from his reverie.

“You look pensive, and I know that look well. You're thinking about something, aren't you, son?”

“I am,” Hans says. “I'm thinking I need to speak with Archduke Ulrich.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Archduke—” Hans begins.

“Out of the question,” Ulrich cuts him off. “You're not leaving this castle, and that's final.”

“Archduke Ulrich, please, I ask you to rethink your decision,” Heloisa says. “My son is entirely correct: if he is to take his place on the throne of Granin, he has to know how the common people live.”

“He can read that in books.”

“There are hardly any books that speak of what the world looks like for someone who's not born into privilege like us,” Hans opines. “I know. I checked the library here in the castle before coming to ask you.”

“You have?”

Hans nods. “Over the past weeks what time I haven't spent training, I passed instead perusing the books you have in your collection. It's expansive, to be sure, but all the writings in there speak of things which are far removed from the real world. There are treatises on the geography of faraway lands, there are entire tomes on mathematics and the sciences, but nothing about the common folk. If I am to be king, I have to have that kind of knowledge.”

Ulrich considers Hans's words for a moment. “That may be true,” he concedes, “But there's another thing to consider. You're supposed to be dead, remember? What would the people say if they saw Prince Hans von Granin, the late heir to the Granin throne, walking among them?”

“I don't think that's going to be a problem,” Count Hoch, standing beside the Archduke's throne, opines. Everyone looks at him, and he continues, “Like Prince Hans

said, he's hardly ever ventured outside Castle Granin, so not many people would've seen him, much less remembered what he looks like. And that would've been in Granin; we're not in Granin, we're in Salgen, so the chances of someone recognising him would be incredibly slim."

"Wouldn't they see the family resemblance, though?" Ulrich says.

"What family resemblance? Forgive me for stating the obvious, my lord, but Prince Hans doesn't much resemble his father; you are much more similar to King Anselm than he is. The prince has his father's eyes, true, but overall, he takes much more after his mother instead. There's no way anyone will make the connection. "

Hans chooses to take that as a compliment. "See, Archduke Ulrich? Count Hoch agrees with me. Please, allow me to leave the castle."

"...Alright," the Archduke finally says. "But take your bodyguards with you, a few men from the castle guard as well."

"I don't think that will be necessary."

"I have to insist on that, I'm afraid. Your safety is paramount."

"I'll be joining you, too," Count Hoch says. "I know the city well. I can show you around, and guarantee that no harm comes to you."

"...Of course," Hans says. "Thank you, Archduke Ulrich. And thank you, Count Hoch."



The Count nods; the Archduke dismisses Hans and Heloisa with a wave of his hands, and when they've left the throne room, he turns to his advisor. "Care to explain your thought?"

"There isn't much to explain," Count Hoch replies. "You said it yourself, weeks ago: the boy is determined, and stubborn like his father. He would've kept insisting on going outside the walls, without letting it go; it's much better to let him have this."

Ulrich holds the Count's gaze, and then slowly nods. "Yes. Yes, I see. You're right. This is good. We give him a carrot to keep him compliant."

"I'll be sure to keep a close eye on him. As long as we have carrots, we won't have to use a stick," the Count agrees.

With more than a bit of trepidation, Hans stares at the gate leading out of Castle Salgen, looming before him and growing larger and closer with every step he takes. He's so on

edge he's nearly shaking in his boots, and his friends, walking by his side, clearly take notice, because Bert asks, "Are you alright?"

"I am," Hans nods. "Just nervous."

"Understandable."

"You'll be alright," Will adds. "We're here if you need us."

Hans nods again, and by that time the pair of guards walking ahead of the trio have stepped over the threshold; just a few moments more, and Hans is crossing it, too, and then he pauses, looking around: he's been here once before, weeks ago, when he arrived at Castle Salgen following his escape from Granin; but the streets which surround him, as well as the buildings lining the road, look much different in broad daylight that they had when they were lit by the light of torches, painting everything red-orange and casting looming shadows.

"Is something the matter, Florian?" Count Hoch asks, stopping by his side.

"No. No, everything's fine. Let's go," Hans says; Count Hoch makes a gesture of assent, and off they go, walking down the road heading away from the castle walls. And they are literally walking *down* the road, since Castle Salgen sits at the peak of the hill the city lies on, like a sleeping giant, slumbering with their head lying on a boulder.

"This whole area is called Old Town," Count Hoch says as they walk. "Centuries ago, it was the only settlement around, except for Castle Salgen itself. Over time, though, more people moved to the city."

"Seeking safety," Hans interjects.

"Just so. The growing population needed housing, and so, Salgen grew larger. That way," Hoch points, "are the Noble Estates, and over there is the market square. That's where we're headed to."

"Katrin and Gabriela said they bought some meat in a place called New Town."

"Katrin and Gabriela?" Hoch queries, raising an eyebrow.

"My mother's ladies-in-waiting."

"Right. Well, New Town is beyond the market square, at the far end of the city proper from the castle. We won't get to see it today."

"Right."

Hans looks carefully at his surroundings. Despite it being the middle of the afternoon, there doesn't seem to be that many people around; he would've expected to see men and women alike going about their business, but instead, the streets are almost empty, and whoever is present has a better than even chance of stopping in the middle

of whatever they were doing to look at the passing men. No, not look: they're *gawking*, rather.



“Why are they looking at us like that?” Hans asks.

“Like what?”

“Like...”

Hans pauses, trying to find the best adjective to describe how the people of Salgen are acting.

“They’re looking at us in suspicion,” Will supplies.

“Yes, exactly. Thank you, Will. They’re looking at us as if they’re afraid we might do something to them.”

“Oh. I honestly hadn’t noticed,” Hoch says. “They always look at me like that when I walk around the city, so I really don’t pay it any mind.”

Hans exchanges a glance with Bert and Will, and in their eyes he sees the same question he's asking himself — why are the people of Salgen suspicious and, it seems, outright afraid of their liege lord's most trusted advisor?

By that point they've reached the market square: it's a roughly rectangular open space right in the middle of the city, about a hundred metres on each side, with a raised wooden platform at one end, near their entry point, and a long, squat building — “The grain and livestock tradehouse,” Hoch explains — at the other, and here there are significantly more people around, the cobblestone pavement littered with wooden stalls from which merchants ply their trade.

“It's busier than I expected,” Hoch remarks. “Usually by this time most merchants have exhausted their goods for the day and cleared out.”

“Good chance for me to talk to someone, then,” Hans remarks. He steps towards the nearest booth — a vegetable seller, looks like — and raises his hand, calling out. “Hello? Hello! Excuse me, my good man!”

“One moment, sir, I'll be right with you,” the merchant replies; he finishes counting out change for the client he'd been serving, then turns to Hans with a polite, business-like smile. “Right. How may I—” he begins, and then he looks past Hans and stops cold, doing a double-take. “Uh... um.”

“A very good afternoon to you, kind sir,” Hans says.

“...What do you want?”

It's Hans's turn to hesitate: he'd expected a greeting, maybe some back and forth, not the merchant looking at him with an expression bordering on mild panic, eyes shifting from him to his companions — Count Hoch and the guards accompanying them, especially.

“I'd like to ask a few questions, if you don't terribly mind,” Hans says.

“I... My apologies, milord, I don't have time. It's getting late and I have no more goods to sell, so I was just about to head home.”

Hans runs his eyes on the stall: it's not overflowing, but there are still several heads of lettuce, onions, carrots, and other assorted vegetables on display. “Looks like you have plenty to me.”

“I don't,” the merchant insists. “All of these, I... I already sold to an inn here in town. The owner was supposed to come pick them up hours ago, but he hasn't shown, so it's his loss, isn't it? Ha ha. Anyway, my apologies again, but I really have to go.”

Before Hans can say anything, the merchant steps out from behind the counter and flees. Oh, he's not running, not at all, but he's walking away with purpose and without looking back.

"That was strange," Will says. "Do all merchants in Salgen behave like that, Count Hoch?"

"Usually, they don't. That was a new one," Hoch replies.

"A new behaviour, or a new merchant?"

"Either or both. Salgen is a big city, I can't remember everyone who lives in it."

"Hm."

"Do you want to try and find someone else to talk to, Hans?" Bert asks.

Hans glances around, and can't help but notice that most of the other nearby stalls, which had been bustling with life minutes earlier, are now empty, the merchants having clearly cleared out in a hurry.

"...No," he says. "No, I think I've seen enough for today. Let's return to the castle."

As Hans sits with his friends and family at the dinner table and recounts the time he's spent walking around Salgen — overall, less than two hours — Queen Heloisa's eyebrows rise multiple times, and when Hans is done, the only thing she can say is, "That was strange."

"That's exactly what I said," Will replies. "I mean, I've never seen anyone behave like the commoners we saw today, let alone that many people, all at once."

"I haven't, either," Bertold adds.

"It's weird. Katrin and I have walked all around town many times now, and the people have been nothing but cordial to us," Gabriela says. "I wonder what's different."

"You two were alone. That's what different," Hans says.

"What do you mean?" Heloisa asks.

"I mean that I couldn't tell what the people looking at us in the street were thinking, but the merchant didn't seem worried about *us*. He hesitated when he saw Count Hoch."

"And the guards," Will supplies.

"And the guards, yes, thank you, Will. But I honestly have no idea why a law-abiding merchant would be scared of the guards."

"There could be plenty of reasons," Heloisa says. "Maybe the man wasn't as law-abiding as he looked like."

“Maybe he was, yes, but everyone else? Why did all the people we saw today seemingly want nothing to do with us?”

“...I don't know. You could try to ask them yourself?”

“They'll never answer truthfully. Not with Hoch there by my side.”

“Well then, why don't you go out on your own?”

“Because the Archduke won't let me,” Hans says bitterly. “He insisted on us having an escort, remember? When we got back, I tried asking Count Hoch again if we could go without him next time, but he stood firm and said that I shouldn't try it, that the gate guard had standing orders not to let me through if he wasn't with me.”

“I guess we will have to ask the Archduke again.”

“Yes, but it took Hoch interceding for us to allow me to leave the castle in the first place. I doubt he'll listen to us.”

“We can try. After all — excuse me!” Heloisa exclaims, looking at Katrin and Gabriela, who look at her guiltily: they'd been leaning close to each other and whispering among themselves, and occasionally giggling. “Is there something you'd like to share with the rest of us?”

“No ma'am,” Gabriela says; Katrin shakes her head.

“Then, please do remember it's rude to not involve other people in a conversation.”

“Yes, of course,” Katrin says. “Apologies.”

Heloisa nods. “So, where were we?”

There is a soft knock at the door. Hans looks up from the book he's reading by candlelight at his desk and frowns: it's unusual for someone to be visiting him in his room this late at night. Standing up, he crosses the room and cracks the door open.

“Hello, Hans,” Gabriela says with a smile.

“Gabriela?” Hans asks. “Katrin?”

“Sorry for the late hour. We didn't wake you, did we?”

“No, I was still awake. What are you doing here?”

“We were hoping we could talk.”

“What about?”

Katrin makes a show of looking around the hallway. “Could we come in?” she says. “This way, no one will overhear.”

“Of course.” Hans pulls the door fully open and motions Katrin and Gabriela inside, shutting it again behind them. “So, what is this about?”



Katrin and Gabriela exchange a glance, and Gabriela nods, seemingly giving Katrin the go-ahead to talk. “Well, you see, we’ve been talking,” Katrin says. “And, well, we think we may have a solution to your problem.”

“What problem?”

“You want to leave the castle and explore the city, right? Without being accompanied by Count Hoch or the guards.”

“We were thinking that you can come with us the next time we go out to buy something,” Gabriela says. “This way, you can see the city and talk to the people without them being on guard.”

“That’s a good thought, but unfortunately I can’t do that,” Hans says. “The Archduke will never allow me to go out unsupervised.”

“You won’t be unsupervised. We’ll be with you.”

Hans has to chuckle. “While I’m sure you two can handle yourself, I don’t think the Archduke will agree.”

“Honestly? Screw what the Archduke will or will not agree on. There’s no need for you to be supervised by some man with a sword at all times, Hans, neither here in the castle nor in the city. Here, we’re surrounded by stout walls and armed men-at-arms on all sides, and the city is absolutely safe.”

“If you keep to the main roads,” Katrin adds.

“If you keep to the main roads, yes. And if you’re back before dark.”

“And the Archduke can’t object to what he doesn’t know. We won’t tell him you’re coming with us, so if you don’t tell him, either, he’ll be completely in the dark.”

“So, what about it? What do you say?”

Hans looks at Gabriela, and then at Katrin. They’re both smiling encouragingly at him, and he has to admit that what they’re proposing is tempting. He could just tell everyone he’s going to the library to study like he’s done almost all afternoons since he arrived at Castle Salgen, and instead slip out together with the two women. As long as he’s back by dinner, no one will be the wiser.

Yes, it would be an excellent idea. If not for a final sticking point.

“I still can’t,” he says, shaking his head. “The guards at the gate will recognise me, and won’t let me leave.”

Katrin’s smile grows larger, and her eyes seem to sparkle in the candlelight. “We have an idea about that, too.”

