

LIBERATION

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VII

The Girl in the Mirror



Hans sets down his knife and dabs his mouth with a napkin. “Thank you for the meal. It was delicious,” he says, always the paragon of good manners.

“It was indeed,” Bertold agrees. “Thank you.”

“It was our pleasure,” Gabriela answers with a smile as everyone starts gathering the plates and crockery in neat piles: Hans knows they’ll be left on a shelf in the hallway, just outside the door to their apartments, to be collected later by the maids and kitchen

boys for washing, with clean ones left in their place. He learned about that fact just a couple weeks earlier when he'd passed a girl carrying a pile of linens in the hallway and had wondered aloud where she was headed upon returning to his chamber. He'd simply been trying to make conversation with his mother and her ladies-in-waiting, but he received a lesson in return, which had honestly been illuminating: he had no idea there were so many people working in a castle, mostly out of sight. For most of his life, food and clean plates — and clean clothes, and hot water and soap for washing, and fresh linens on his bed, and a thousand other small things — were just things that happened, and he'd never once questioned where they were coming from; now he knows.

Well, *knows* is honestly a stretch: the women have explained the general idea, but the finer details of course still elude him. He likely wouldn't be able to properly wash a bowl or fold a sheet to save his life; he doesn't even know what the inside of a laundry room or a scullery look like. But as he closes the door, he promises himself to learn all about it when he has the chance — a king has to know how his subject live, after all.

Another time, though. Today he has something else to do.

Katrin and Gabriela meet his eye as they file out of the common room, heading deeper inside their apartments. He would follow them right away, but he knows he can't just yet, so he lets Wilhelm intercept him. "So what are you doing this afternoon, Hans?" Will asks, wiping his hands on a rag. "The library, same as usual?"

"No, I don't think so," Hans replies. "I think I'll go back to my room and have a lie in. I'm dead tired from today's lesson."

"Master Wolfgang's still working you to the bone, isn't he?" Heloisa says.

"As usual. But I wouldn't have it any other way."

The look in Heloisa's eyes say that he probably should have it some other way, that he doesn't need to be pushing himself quite that hard, that he could take it easy; but she doesn't speak her objections out loud, since she and Hans have already agreed to disagree on this point, and it would be useful to retread it. "What about you, Will?" Hans asks, turning to his friend. "What are you doing?"

"I'll be right outside your door should you need me," Will says. He doesn't add *as usual* to the end of that sentence, because it goes without saying.

This time, however, Hans does say something about it. "You do know there's no need for you to do that, right? You're free to do what you want."

"Being here for you is what I want."

Hans gently shakes his head. “Will, how many times do I have to tell you? You’re not my retainer or bodyguard, you’re my friend. I’m thankful that you care about me, but you should have some time to yourself, too.”

“My son is right,” Heloisa supplies. “You can’t always be together all the time, otherwise you’ll be at each other’s throat before long.”

“That would never happen,” Will counters, sounding offended at the mere suggestion that he might become irritated with Hans.



“It well could. People tend to get annoying and annoyed when they have no one to talk to but each other for a long time. You should decompress. Go take a walk. Do something.”

Will’s eyes flit to Hans for a moment, then go back to Heloisa. “I’m not sure I’d feel comfortable going for a walk.” *And leaving Hans behind* is, again, unspoken.

“If you’re worried about my safety, don’t be,” Hans says. “I’m going to be in my room, behind walls and locked doors, not to mention the castle guards. You sitting outside my door wouldn’t add anything to that.”

There’s just a hint of a sour expression on Will’s face. Oh, he’s trying to keep his face carefully neutral, of course, but it still shows that he’s a bit bitter at having to admit — to himself, at least, because again he doesn’t say anything out loud — that Hans is right; and he’s also unwilling to acknowledge the wisdom in Heloisa’s words, much as he does see it.

Bertold comes to the rescue. “Hans is right,” he says, passing an arm around Will’s shoulder. “Come on, let’s go, we haven’t fully explored the castle just yet. And there’s a pretty lass I have my eye on I was thinking about visiting. You can be my second as I try to woo her.”

“And maybe you can find him a pretty lass of his own?” Heloisa suggests.

“Maybe we can. If he’s interested, of course,” Bert agrees, pulling Will away and toward the door. Will is still clearly reluctant, but in the end he relents, following his friend out into the hallway — not before sparing one last look back at Hans, though.

Hans exhales a small breath. “Thank you, Mother.”

“It’s honestly impressive how much he cares about you,” Heloisa observes. “I don’t recall ever seeing a retainer quite so faithful; even the more since, as you said, he’s *not* your retainer, so he’s not bound to you by anything except his friendship.”

“Which I’m grateful for.”

“Keep telling him that. But keep a bit of space between you and him. It’s good to have boundaries.”

Hans accepts his mother’s counsel with a nod of his head. “I think I’ll retire now,” he says.

“Of course. Have a good rest.” Heloisa steps forward and embraces him briefly, then retreats away toward her own room. Hans feels guilty as he watches her go, because he hasn’t been entirely truthful with either her or Will.

Well, no, ‘not entirely truthful’ is putting it too kindly: he’s told them an outright lie, since he has no plans to spend the afternoon in his room — or anywhere in the castle, for that matter.

A minute later he’s knocking at a door, which opens a crack after a few moments, Katrin peering out. “I was starting to think you wouldn’t show,” she says in a whisper. “What took you so long?”

“I had to...” Hans begins; then he bites his lip. *Lie to my mother and friends*, he thinks. “Never mind. I’m here now.”

Katrin nods, opens the door fully, and ushers him inside before closing it again, but not without looking furtively this way and that to ensure no one’s spotted them.

“Good afternoon, Hans,” Gabriela greets him from the corner of room, even though it hasn’t even been fifteen minutes since they last saw each other. “Strip off your clothes, please.”

Hans curls an eyebrow her way. “Pardon?”

“You have to take a bath if we’re to take you out. A quick one will do, but you really do have to wash.”

“I don’t smell that bad, do I?” He raises his arm and gives his pit a sniff.

“You don’t, Wilhelm and Bertold are much worse than you in that regard,” Katrin says. “One hour in the sun and they absolutely reek. You, on the other hand...” She makes a show of sniffing him. “Yeah, I don’t smell anything really bad. I have no idea what the difference is between you and the other two, but there must be one.”

“In any case, it’s not the smell as much as it’s the sweat. You’re absolutely sopping wet,” Gabriela adds.

“A full morning of training does that.” Hans shrugs. “I’ve stopped minding it after the first two or three times.”

“Well, we do mind very much. If you’re to come out of the castle with us, you must be presentable. So go wash up. Even a quick dip will do.”

Katrin nods in agreement and pulls open a door, revealing the ladies-in-waiting’s bath room: sitting in the middle is a copper tub — another thing Hans has very recently learned is quite the luxury, since most people apparently wash themselves in wooden tubs, or even barrels — and a table with several flasks on it. “The water’s not hot, sorry,” she says. “We didn’t manage to arrange for that.”

“A hot bath in this heat?” Hans replies. “I’m thankful for the cool water, actually.”

He pulls off his shirt and grabs his trousers, then pauses. He looks at Gabriela and Katrin. “What?” Katrin asks.

“A little privacy?” he says.

“It isn’t anything we haven’t seen before,” Gabriela says. Hans frowns at her, so she continues, “Hans, we’ve been Heloisa’s ladies-in-waiting since she moved to Granin to be wed to your father. We’ve known you as long as you’ve been alive. We were there when you were born, we were there when your mother nursed you. We’ve even changed

your undergarments a few times before you learned to manage yourself. You're like a nephew to us, or a younger brother. One we care about very much."

"And besides, it's not like anything you have under your clothes interests us," Katrin says.

"...What is *that* supposed to mean?" Hans says, puzzled.

"Nothing," Gabriela answers, slapping Katrin's shoulder.

Hans looks at the two of them for a moment further, then decides there's no point in prying further or arguing, and pulls his trousers down, then his undergarments, and he stands in his bare skin in front of the two women who, true to their word, barely glance at his naked form, instead directing him to climb into the tub. "I can wash myself," he protests as they lift the flasks.

"It'll be quicker if we help you. This way we'll have more time to spend outside the castle."

Seeing the wisdom in their words, Hans relents, and lets them pour the cool water over his limbs and torso. He shivers a bit, but he honestly has to admit he doesn't mind being attended to as much as he thought he would. As Katrin and Gabriela rub at his arms and legs with wash-cloths, he notes they're not washing his hair. "It would take too long to dry and, like we said, we don't have that much time," Gabriela explains. "And you still have to shave."



“Shave?”

“Yes, your beard.”

Hans balks. “I have to shave my beard?”

“That’s what I said, yes.”

“I... I’m not sure I want to?” Hans says: ever since he’s been able to grow facial hair he’s never fully shaved it, opting to carefully trim and groom it instead. And while he has to admit that his beard is not very impressive — his father’s was much fuller and longer, similar to the archduke’s in that regard: another thing in which the two of them resemble each other — he’s pretty sure it makes him look older. Without his beard, he thinks, he will look younger than his eighteen years of age, and he tells Katrin and Gabriela as much.

“That’s what we’re getting at,” Katrin answers. “We must make you unrecognisable, remember? And you having no beard is part and parcel of that.”

“Right, about that. You said you have an idea to get me out of the castle, some sort of disguise, but so far you’ve refused to tell me what that disguise actually is. I trust the two of you, but I would like to know what I’m getting into before I fully agree to any course of action.”

The two women stop washing him and exchange a glance. “The disguise is…” Gabriela begins. “It was Katrin’s idea, actually.”

“Hey, no, you don’t get to put this on me!” Katrin exclaims. “I thought of it first, yes, but we’ve talked about it, and you agreed to support me.”

“Support her in *what*?” Hans demands. “What is the disguise you had in mind, exactly?”

Katrin looks him in the eye, smiling nervously. “Alright. So,” she says. “Promise you won’t get mad?”

Hans returns a blank look. “Why would I get mad?”

“Promise?”

“Alright,” he concedes after a few moments. “I promise I won’t get mad.”

“Good. So, here’s the thing: we’ve established that you can’t get out of the castle unless you’re accompanied by Count Hoch, because the gate guards will stop you if they see you.”

“Obviously.”

“But what if the guards don’t see you?”

“There’s no way they won’t see me. They keep careful watch, they see anyone who walks through the gate.”

“That they do. They will see you. But what if they don’t see *you*? What if they see a random servant passing them?”

“That won’t work. They know what I look like. They know my face,” Hans opines. “And I can’t cover my face, or they’ll get suspicious and ask me to uncover it, and then I’ll get found out.”

“Right. But what if you don’t look like someone the guards expect to see? Then they won’t look twice, especially if you’re with us. They’ll just give you a quick glance, and off we go.”

Hans’s forehead creases in irritation. “Have we not just been through this? The guards—”

“Oh, for God’s sake,” Gabriela grumbles, motioning for Hans to stand up; he does, and she starts drying him off. “Stop going around in circles and just tell him, Kat.”

“Tell me what?”

“Her plan, of course.”

“Our plan,” Katrin corrects.

“Nope. It’s *your* plan.”

“You agreed to it, Gabby.”

“It’s still your plan.”

“Listen, you—”

“Girls. Ladies. Please,” Hans says, stepping out of the tub to sit on a chair Katrin points him to. “Can we just get on with it?”

Gabriela pulls out a bit of soap and starts working up a lather. She gives Katrin a significant look, and Hans turns to look at Katrin.

“Right, so.” Katrin, once again, nervously licks her lips. “My thought was: the guard expect to see you. They expect to see Florian.”

“Of course,” Hans says.

“But what if they see Florence instead?”

“Who’s Florence?”

“You are.”

“...What do you mean?”

“I mean that the guards are expecting to see Florian, nephew to Archduke Ulrich. They expect to see a man. What if they don’t see a man? What if they see a woman instead?”

“But I’m not a woman.”

“But what if you disguise yourself as a woman? What if you pretend to be Florence instead of Florian?”

Hans just stares at Katrin.

Gabriela starts lathering up his face.

Hans is still looking at Katrin.

Gabriela washes the soap off her hands, grabs a razor, and hands it to Katrin.

Hans is *still* looking at Katrin.

“This is ridiculous,” he finally says.

“Told you he’d say that,” Gabriela says, looking at Katrin and shrugging.

Katrin ignores her. “Why is it ridiculous?” she asks Hans.

“Because I’m not a woman.”

“We know you’re not a woman,” Gabriela says. “We’re not asking you to become a woman. We’re just saying you could dress up as one.”

“A man dressing up as a woman?” Hans scoffs. “Like I said. Ridiculous.”

“It happens more often than you think. Remember that play we saw about a year ago, back in Granin?”

Hans thinks back to happier days, when the revolution still hadn’t swept through his homeland: his mother had heard about a company of travelling performers who’d arrived in the capital and were entertaining the populace, playing in the city squares to great success, and she’d pulled some strings to get invited them to perform in the castle courtyard for one night. He clearly remembers being captivated by the play, a tale of shipwrecks and disguises and fairies and noblemen and courtly love and mistaken identity. “I remember,” he says.

“Would it surprise you to know that all the performers were men?”

It does: another thing Hans remembers is how graceful and feminine the women in the play were, contrasting with the rough and dashing male characters. “They were?” he asks, startled.

“They were indeed. Now hold still, I don’t want to nick you,” Katrin says. She gets to work on Hans’s face with the razor — and Hans’s first instinct is to protest, to tell her to stop, but he lets go of it after a moment; it’s just a beard, it’ll grow back eventually — and continues, “Women can’t be actors. It’s the law. Or, at least, it was the law back in Granin; I think it’s the same here in Salgen, though.”



“It’s a stupid law,” Hans says.

“Agreed. But it’s the law.”

“And the point stands: you couldn’t tell the women in the play were actually men, could you?” Gabriela adds.

“I couldn’t,” Hans concedes. “But it’s different for me.”

“Different how?”

“I could never look like a woman.”

“You could.”

“You absolutely could,” Katrin agrees. “All you need is the right clothes, and a bit of colour on your face.”

“And you’re in luck: the two of us didn’t spend years on end painting Heloisa’s face for nothing. I’d like to think we’re quite skilled at it.”

“But the guards will still recognise me. You can’t disguise my face that much.”

“We don’t *need* to disguise your face that much,” Katrin counters: she’s speaking slowly, concentrating on the task at hand. “The guards will be looking for a man, remember? They’re not keeping watch for a random maiden passing through the gate. They won’t look at you twice, so you don’t need to be perfect, you just need to pass a cursory inspection, a quick glance, and you’ll be set.”

“But what about the people in town?”

“The people in town don’t know what you look like. They’ll just see a woman, and that will be that.”

“But...”

Hans doesn’t finish that sentence.

Katrin, her work done, leans back. Gabriela passes Hans a towel. He wipes his face.

“But?” Gabriela gently asks.

“I can’t,” Hans insists. “I look nothing like a woman. They’ll see right through me.” *And then I’ll get laughed at and Ulrich will hear about it and he’ll get angry and I won’t be able to leave the castle any longer even with Count Hoch escorting me and everyone will know I tried to disguise myself as a woman and—*

“Hans,” Katrin says, cutting through his thoughts. “Hans. Deep breaths.” She reaches out and takes his trembling hand and waits until he looks up into her eyes. “We won’t force you to do this, alright? It’s your choice. You can say no at any point.”

“What if I say no right now?” he asks, carefully keeping his voice steady.

“Then we won’t do it. Simple as that.”

“But, while you can say no at any point, you don’t need to say no right away,” Gabriela says. “You say you won’t look like a woman? Well, I say otherwise. I think you could do this.”

Katrin nods. “I agree. So, here’s what I think: we dress you up and paint your face, and then you take a look at yourself,” she motions with her head to the full-height mirror hanging on the wall of her and Gabriela’s quarters, visible through the bathroom door, “and then, if you say no, if you say that you don’t want to do this, that’s it. You’ll take the clothes off, wash the colour off your face, and we’ll never speak about this ever again.”

Hans looks at Katrin for a moment longer, then he glances at Gabriela, who smiles encouragingly. He turns his head to look at the mirror: actual glass instead of polished metal, another incredible luxury, which Archduke Ulrich is apparently able to afford with nary a thought, since both Hans and everyone in his retinue have one in their

quarters. And, once again, he finds himself wondering what the common people have instead, what life is like outside the castle walls.

What's more, he finds himself suddenly curious: while he has to admit he doesn't look nearly as manly as someone like Will, he'd like to think he doesn't look half bad, either. Anyone who sees him will clearly see a man. But Katrin and Gabriela are seemingly convinced they can make look him like a woman.

So why not let them try?

"Alright," he says. "Let's do this."

Gabriela claps her hands in delight. "Oh good, this is going to be so much fun," she says.

"Absolutely," Katrin agrees. "Come right this way."

She takes Hans by the hand and follows Gabriela as she moves from the bathroom to the bedroom. They leave Hans standing in the middle of their quarters and step up to the bed, upon which several skirts and dresses and blouses are laid — they've clearly gone digging through their wardrobes and chests beforehand. As they discuss which one they will have Hans try first, his hair stands on end as a stray draught passes over his bare skin.

"Unfortunately we don't have that many clothes ourselves," Katrin says, pulling holding a dress up to Hans; she shakes her head and lays it back on the bed. "Archduke Ulrich gifted Heloisa his late wife's full wardrobe when we arrived and settled in, but most of those are too eye-catching. We're trying to make you anonymous here, the guards'll raise their eyebrows if they see a noblewoman leaving without an armed escort."

Or a man dressed as a noblewoman, Hans thinks. Gabriela presses a linen slip — not unlike the undershirts he wears every day, except this one goes down to his calves — into his hands and helps him pull it over his head, smoothing until it falls properly, without any wrinkles. "What about undergarments?" he asks.

"Oh, right," Gabriela says, and hands him a pair of breeches, identical to the ones he'd taken off earlier. "Yeah, I know," she responds with a laugh to his raised eyebrow, "not very feminine, are they? But it's not like anyone is going to see them under all the layers. Or were you planning on showing someone?"

"I wasn't planning on showing anyone."

"We can lend you some of our underwear if you want," Katrin says.

“I’ll take the breeches.” He threads his legs through the holes and pulls them up, again smoothing the slip down. He takes the dress Katrin hands him and passes that over his head, too, also carefully running his hands over it to smooth all creases and wrinkles.

Katrin purses her lips. “We need to pad your chest a bit.”

Hans looks down at his non-existent cleavage. “Is that really necessary?”

“Yes. We don’t need that much since women usually aren’t very developed at the age you look like, but an entirely flat chest will raise some questions.” She motions, and Hans complies with her unspoken order, taking the dress off again, and then the slip.

“Arms up,” Gabriela says; again he complies, and she passes a wide band of cloth over his chest, tying it behind his back. Turning him around, she reaches inside and—

“Ow,” Hans complains.

“...Ow?”

“That hurt.”

“It did?” Katrin asks. “Huh.” She pokes at his pectorals. “They do feel a bit soft.”

Moving slowly, she gingerly puts her hand into the makeshift brassiere, cups the flesh she finds, and scoops it upwards, frowning at the result.



“What’s the matter?”

“You’re going to need less padding than I thought,” Katrin says. She holds out her hand and Gabriela hands her a few wads of soft cotton cloth, which indeed aren’t that big; she inserts them into the band, then stands back and nods, satisfied at the result.

Gabriela directs Hans to don the slip and dress again. They have him sit on a stool next to the window so the light falls on his face and get to work, spreading a slightly sticky balm — “Olive oil, beeswax, and honey,” Gabriela explains; “It moistens and smooths the skin,” Katrin adds — over his features, then painting them with brushes dipped into pots containing powders of various colours. Light yellow goes on first, then pink, then a lighter and darker pink both; Hans notes that unlike the first two, the latter two only go on part of his face, and so does the red that comes next, spread over his cheeks. The women switch to thinner brushes and thicker pastes, having him close his eyes before lining him with a colour barely darker than his skin’s, which they explain

will accentuate his features and make his eyes look larger; his lips get painted a slightly darker shade, “To make them look plumper.”

Their work apparently finished, they stand back and fully take in Hans’s features.

“Whoa,” Gabriela breathes out.

“Right?!” Katrin says. “It’s just... I don’t have the words. It’s honestly incredible.”

Hans frowns at them. “What’s incredible? I look bad, don’t I?”

“I... wouldn’t say that. Not at all.”

“Not at all,” Gabriela agrees. “Hold on.” She moistens her hands and runs them through Hans’s hair. “It would help if your hair was a bit longer, but you still look very nice. Want to see?”

Hans sighs, takes the hand she offers him, and stands up. “Alright, let’s get over with it,” he says, heading for the mirror, “so we can be done with this ridiculousness and—”

His breath catches.

It takes Hans several seconds, nearly a full minute in fact, to entirely come to terms with the fact that the girl he sees in the mirror is him and not an illusion or a trick of the light. He’s seen the dress she’s wearing before, worn by both Katrin and Gabriela, but on her, it hangs differently: she’s taller than the other two women flanking her in the reflection, but lithier, and no less beautiful. Her face looks really familiar, and after a moment he realises the reason: she looks very much like his mother. A more youthful version of Heloisa, and the shape of her nose and cheekbones is slightly different, as is the colour of her eyes, but the family resemblance is undeniable; anyone who sees the two of them together would immediately mark them as being mother and daughter.



Unconsciously, he raises his hand and takes a step forward, touching the cool glass surface, but it does nothing to dispel the image he sees before him. His fingers go to his face next, and the girl uncannily mimics his every movement.

“Oh,” he whispers.

“So what do you think?” Katrin softly asks.

Hans doesn’t answer; his lips seem unable to form words, to do anything but breathe shallowly, his eyes fixed upon the otherworldly creature standing in front of him, chest rising and falling in rhythm with his own.

Several minutes later, he comes to at last. “This... this is impossible,” he mumbles. “That can’t be me.”

“But it is,” Gabriela says.

“Is this some kind of magick? Are you two witches?”

“I can assure you, we’re not. It’s just years and years of practice.”

“And some fine starting material,” Katrin adds. “Most men would not look half as good as you do, Florence.”

“...Florence?” Hans asks.

“Of course. Like we told you, when you’re like this, you’re not Hans, and you’re not Florian, either. You’re Florence.”

“Florence...”

“So what do you think?”

Katrin’s repeated question registers in Hans’s mind this time, and he answers, “I think you did something incredible. I never would’ve thought it possible for me to look like this.” It’s like a fairytale: a princess borne out of a swan; or, rather, an ugly duckling.

“Glad to see you approve,” Gabriela says, rubbing Hans’s shoulder. “Now, if you’re done admiring yourself, we can get a move on and go into town. We don’t have that much time.”

Hans looks at her, then at Katrin; then he looks at Florence.

He’s still scared. There’s a chance he will get found out nevertheless, and scolded and ridiculed for his foolish attempt to leave the castle. His first instinct is to say no, to tell Katrin and Gabriela thank you for your effort, but I’m not going to go through it, thank you very much, and doff the clothes and wash his face and go back to his rooms and forget about all of this. Forget about going into town.

Forget about Florence.

But he has to admit it would be a waste. The two women have gone to all this effort, and done an excellent job. It would be a shame not to put their work to good use, wouldn’t it?

And where’s the harm? After all, this is a one-time thing. When he takes off the clothes, Florence will disappear, never to be seen again. It would be a shame for her to exist only for a scant few minutes.

Hans nods.

“Right,” he says. “Let’s go.”

