

LIBERATION

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VIII

Point of View



Despite having decided to go along with the women's plan, he still feels a bit uneasy as they prepare to leave their chambers: after the brief moment of euphoria he's had at the thought of being able to pull the deception off, there are so many things that could go wrong before the day is out and he's back to the safety of his own room.

Chief among his concerns is, of course, being spotted and identified by someone before they actually leave the castle. Like Katrin and Gabriela said, the chances of being recognised decrease exponentially the further away they get, because there are fewer people who *could* recognise him; but that also means that he is currently in the most dangerous place he can be. So it's with more than a bit of trepidation that he waits at the back of the ladies-in-waiting's chambers, hidden behind a screen, as Gabriela opens the door and steps out into the apartments' common room, checking it carefully by looking this way and that, before gesturing for Katrin and Hans to join her. They repeat the process with the door leading out into the hallway, and once that door has closed behind them Hans can exhale a breath of relief.

He really doesn't know how he would explain his current appearance were he to run into his mother. Or, possibly worse, if he somehow encountered Will. The thought of his best friend looking him up and down, eyes going wide as he fully takes in what he's wearing, and then a sneer of disdain forming on his lips... Hans doesn't think he could stand that.

Gabriela and Katrin guide him through the hallways, and Hans realises they're going the long way around: there is a much more direct route from their apartments to the stairs, and from the stairs to the door letting them out into Salgen Castle's inner courtyard, but, as they explain in response to his whispered question, that would incur the risk of running into the guards which patrol the inside of the Archduke's seat of power.

Hans glances this way and that as they make their way through parts of the castle he's never laid his eyes on. The rooms are smaller than what he's used to, the ceilings lower, the walls bare instead of being richly decorated by hanging tapestries and paintings. Even the stairs aren't the ones he usually takes when heading outside for his swordsmanship lessons: instead of going down the grand staircase, he finds himself descending a narrow, cramped spiral flight of steps — and holding the skirt his dress a few inches higher off the floor than normal by pulling on it with both hands to avoid stepping on the hem. “Please try not to fall; us carrying your unconscious body back to our apartments would be difficult to explain,” Katrin jokes. He inquires with his companion as to the reason everything's so different, and they shrug and smile as they explain that of course it's different, they're passing through the service wing, which isn't meant to be seen or used by anyone important.

“Where the Lord of the Castle and his guests and other notable people go, everything is big, shiny, and impressive,” Gabriela explains. “It’s meant to awe and to be remembered. Why do you think Ulrich has a throne room?” Hans, who’s never considered the question before — why *would* Archduke Ulrich have a throne room? He’s not a king — nods as she continues, “Where lesser people go, everything is small.”

Hans doesn’t say anything in response, but he frowns. What Gabriela said doesn’t sit right with him, for reasons he can’t quite put his finger on; he just has a gut feeling that there’s something wrong with it.

There are several other people here, but they pay the trio no mind: they’re all servants who are either busy attending to some task, or making haste to someplace else. At one point, as they round a corner, Hans bumps into a tall older man coming from the other direction, but that too has no consequences: the man simply mutters, “Apologies, lass,” and continues down the hallway, barely breaking step and without looking back. Hans decides to take the gendered noun as further testimony to Katrin and Gabriela’s skills in the art of disguise.

He’s still very intimidated when he ducks through a small door and finds himself facing the castle gate, standing tall and severe in front of him across the courtyard. It’s wide open — he knows it’s normally only closed at night and in cases of emergency — but is guarded by a contingent of men-at-arms. He counts a dozen at least, milling around in small groups, talking among themselves while keeping a lazy eye on the people coming and going. The two women were right, the guards aren’t paying that much attention: some are even escaping the heat of the day by sitting at a small wooden table set up in the shadow of the castle walls, whiling away their duty shift by gambling away their wages.

“Don’t just stand there, they’ll notice you,” Katrin whispers, stepping up beside Hans and slapping him lightly on the back. Hans nods and, as Gabriela takes up position at his other side, handing him a handbasket she apparently acquired from somewhere — she has one for herself and one for Katrin, too — he steps forward.



“Let’s keep our distance. Don’t come too close,” Gabriela says. “But don’t make it look like you’re trying to stay away.”

“How do I do that?” Hans returns.

“I don’t know. Just walk casual.”

“And keep talking. It’ll look weird if we’re not talking,” Katrin adds.

“Right. And what do we do if they stop us?” Hans queries.

“They’re not going to stop us, don’t worry.”

“We’re just three young ladies heading out into the town to do some grocery shopping,” Gabriela agrees.

“For the time being, try to look happy. Lighten up a bit. Laugh.”

Hans realises he’s grimacing. “Easy for you to say,” he mutters, and forces his face to relax as the gate grows closer and closer; the castle walls now loom above them. “What’s there to laugh about?”

“Anything you might find funny. Like, I don’t know... imagine Count Hoch and Archduke Ulrich kissing.”

The image Katrin’s words conjure comes to Hans’ mind unbidden, and it’s so absurd he can’t help but snort, and then break into a fit of giggles. “Oh, *come on*,” he chuckles. “Why did you pick *that*?”

“Because it makes no sense, right? It’s something that could never happen.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Two men kissing? No way.” Gabriela and Katrin exchange a glance and a smirk, and Hans frowns in mild confusion as he looks at them. “What?”

“You’re such an ingénue, Florence” Gabriela says.

Hans, having learned a few languages as part of his princely education, recognises the word, but by itself it does nothing to clarify why they seem so amused. “What do you mean?”

“Men kissing men is not a rare thing. Nor is women kissing women.”

“It isn’t?” Hans says, frown deepening.

“It isn’t,” Katrin confirms. “I mean, people who do that don’t really advertise it, of course, because the Church frowns upon it. But it happens.”

The revelation surprises Hans. He doesn’t know what to think about it: on the one hand, he doesn’t get the feeling Katrin and Gabriela are joking; but on the other hand... well, it’s just *weird*, isn’t it? Men kissing men? It’s as if he kissed Bert or...

His steps falter, and he stops dead in his tracks in the middle of the road. He’s several metres past the threshold, too, the imaginary line separating the inside of the castle from the outside, from Salgen City. Katrin and Gabriela make it a bit further before they too stop and turn to look back at him.

“What’s wrong? Come on,” Gabriela asks.

“...Right,” Hans says, shaking himself out of his thoughts. He takes a step forward

“What, ho! Lass! What’s the matter?” one of the men-at-arms shouts. “Forget something?”

Hans freezes. He knows he should turn around, answer the guard, but then his voice, if not his face, will give him away...

Katrin huffs. “Looking for your purse?” she says. “Seriously, Florence, you do remember you gave it to me to hold, don’t you?”

She pulls out a purse and holds it out at arm’s length for everyone to see; after a moment Hans nods and grabs the purse from her.

“You’ll have to forgive her,” Gabriela says. “She’s a bit of a scatterbrain.”

“Good thing she’s just a servant who has to focus on simple tasks, aye?” the guard replies.

“Same as you, mate. What about those cards? Are you working hard or hardly working?”

The men-at-arms erupt into laughter, and Katrin mutters, “And that’s our cue,” as she grabs Hans’ arm and pulls him away from the guards and away from the gate, further into the city. They walk along the main road for a couple hundred feet, and then the two women guide him into a side alley. “What the hell was that?!” Katrin exclaims.

“What the hell was what?” Hans replies.

“You just froze there. You almost got found out. And you were through the gate already, all you had to do was keep walking. What gives?”

“I... don’t know. I don’t know what happened.”

“See that it doesn’t happen again,” Katrin chides him.

Gabriela nods. “You’re not the only one who’s putting herself at risk here, Florence,” she says. “You have to be careful about this.”

“Right. Sorry,” Hans says. “But speaking of being careful, I just realised something: what about my voice?”

“What about it?”

“I mean, it’s a dead giveaway, isn’t it? It doesn’t really match what I’m wearing.”

He gestures down at himself. Katrin and Gabriela both visibly hesitate, and exchange a glance.

“*What?*” Hans demands. “Do you have something to say?”

“Yes,” Katrin answers, exhaling the word in a breath. “Florence, dear, I’m really sorry for what I’m about to say, and please don’t take this the wrong way, but... your voice *does* match your current appearance.”

Hans blinks. “It does?”



“It does.”

“It matches your usual appearance, too,” Gabriela quickly adds. “It’s just that... no offence, but it’s not the most manly voice I’ve ever heard. It’s kind of androgynous.”

“Taken in isolation, it could belong to either a man or a woman. I don’t think anyone would be able to tell what sex you are just by hearing your voice. So you don’t have anything to worry about that.”

“...Right. Alright,” Hans says.

He doesn’t quite know how to feel about this revelation. It’s good, isn’t it? It means there’s a much lower chance of him getting exposed today. But still, the thought of there being nothing left to identify him as a man at first blush makes him feel...

...uneasy?...

...no, that’s not the right word. It’s something different, something weird, something he’s never felt before. Something he can’t identify.

But he doesn't have time to dwell on that thought for the moment, he has things to do and places to be today. So he shelves it away to examine later, and repeats, "Alright. If you say so." He gulps. "So, shall we get going? I want to see as much as I can of Salgen City before we have to go back."

"Of course," Katrin answers; she gestures toward the end of the alley.

Once they're back on the main street, Gabriela takes the lead in playing cicerone: "Over there is the market square," she says, pointing along the road. "To our right is the Old Town, and to our left are the Noble Estates. It's best if we keep out of that area."

"Why?" Hans asks.

"It's quite a bit more upscale than the rest of the city."

"The nobles really don't like it when the lower classes hang around their mansions," Katrin adds. "And since they're the ones who rule the city, the watch tries to keep them as happy as possible."

"Isn't the watch supposed to keep order in the city?" Hans asks again.

"It is. But different quarters get different levels of order."

"Depending on who lives there," Gabriela agrees. "The Noble Estates are patrolled the most and policed the most, the watch is quick to clear away anyone who doesn't look like they belong, so they don't bother the good people living there."

"You'll never see one of them in the Noble Estates, for example," Katrin says: by that point they've reached the market square, and the 'one of them' she's talking about is a beggar, sitting on a street corner on what looks like a pile of rags, pewter mug on the pavement in front of him; he's calling for people to have pity on a poor old man. Katrin does, her hand dipping into her purse and coming out grasping a few bronze coins, which she deposits in the beggar's cup with a clinking noise.

"The blessing of Saint Giles on you, kind lady," the beggar says with an almost-toothy smile — he's several short of a full set.

"He wasn't there last time," Hans says as they keep walking, entering the market square proper; he looks around and spots a few more mendicants and panhandlers and continues, "None of them were."

"You were with Count Hoch and a troop of castle guards, right?" Katrin asks; when Hans nods she spreads her hands and shrugs in a well-there-you-have-it gesture.

"The Noble Estates being policed the most doesn't mean the rest of the city isn't policed," Gabriela says, "and those poor sods ruin the scenery, so they get cleared out

every now and then, and especially when they know someone important will be coming through.”

“Out of sight, out of mind,” Hans says with a slow nod of understanding.

“Yes. Doesn’t take them long to come back, though.”

“How much money did you give that man?”

“About half a dozen pfennigs, I think,” Katrin answers. “I didn’t count exactly.”

“I... don’t know how much that is,” Hans admits.

“That’s only natural, you’ve never had to deal with money in your life. Come here.”

Katrin pulls Hans off to the side, away from the crowd, and retrieves a few coins from her purse, holding them in the palm of her hand so he can see them clearly.



“This one is a heller, this is a pfennig, and this is a groschen,” she says, pointing to a copper coin, then a bronze one, and then a silver one in turn; the last one is smaller than

the other two. “Two hellers to a pfennig, and seven pfennigs to a groschen,” she continues.

“And then you have two groschens to a batzen, and fifteen batzens to a thaler,” Gabriela supplies.

“Thalers and batzens I know,” Hans says. “I’ve studied some accounting and bookkeeping.”

Gabriela nods. “Those are gold, and we don’t have any on hand because they’re worth a lot.”

“How much exactly?”

“I couldn’t tell you what a thaler can buy you, but half a dozen pfennig is enough for a hot meal at most inns.”

Hans frowns. “Wait, so, one thaler is fifteen batzens,” he says, counting on his fingers, then continues mumbling, “times two, times seven, divided by six, let’s say two meals a day, so divided by two...” He looks up at the two women. “So a thaler would be enough to feed fifteen to twenty people for a day? Have I got that right?”

“I’m not as good at maths as you are, but that sounds about right,” Katrin says.

“Why doesn’t Archduke Ulrich do that, then?”

“Why doesn’t he do what?”

“Feed those people.” He gestures at the beggars. “And clothe them, too. When I studied accounting I looked over some of Granin’s books, and overall, the kingdom was juggling numbers in the hundreds of thousands of thalers; I imagine Salgen isn’t that far off. With just a tiny fraction of that, every single person in this city could be fed and clothed. And probably housed, too. Why doesn’t Ulrich do that?”

Katrin and Gabriela look at each other, and then shrug. “I don’t know,” Gabriela admits. “I’ve never given it any real thought.”

“Me either,” Katrin adds. “It’s just how it is.”

Hans is still frowning: this whole situation makes him uneasy. He’s been living in Castle Salgen long enough that he knows it inside and out; the noble wing, at least. He knows what it looks like, how much it’s decorated, and while he has no idea how much the gilding, tapestries, paintings — or, hell, the glass mirrors his family has in their chambers — costs, he’s sure it’s a lot. Why wasn’t that money put to better use?

Isn’t a ruler supposed to care about his people?

“Florence?” Katrin asks. “Is everything alright? You’ve spaced out again.”

"I haven't spaced out," Hans replies. "I'm just... thinking. But that's something I can do later. Right now, we don't have that much time until we have to go back, am I right?" Katrin and Gabriela both nod in confirmation. "Let's keep going then. Show me more of the city."

Katrin and Gabriela nod again. Katrin takes the lead this time, and she wastes no time in guiding Hans through the small passages between the market stalls, pointing out how most everything is available for purchase: there are all manners of food and drink on display, from flour to bread and from grapes to wine, even if that last one seems to be a rarity, with beer and ale being more abundant. And beside edibles, there are various artisans plying their trade, from leatherworkers to blacksmiths to tinkers to tailors offering both brand new items for sale, to mend broken ones for a fee, and sometimes, the base materials to make those items, like cloth and yarn and stitching needles. Hans is captivated: he's never seen so much bustling humanity all at once, and while it is a bit disorienting to be in the middle of such multitude, he's happy to be learning something new.

"And that guy over there with the grindstone," Gabriela says, pointing, "will sharpen and hone any dull blade. Knives, scissors..."

"Swords," Hans nods.

"No, not swords."

"Why not?"

"No one has swords here. By law, commoners aren't allowed to carry swords."

"Aren't the city watch and castle guards commoners?"

"They are, but they're the exception. There's not enough nobles to keep order if they were the only ones who could bear arms."

Hans purses his lips. *Much like what happened back in Granin*, he thinks: enough people were tricked into supporting the rebellion that the army and castle guards had found themselves outnumbered, and at that point, even having better armaments wasn't enough.

No use dwelling on the past, though. "So this is the market square. What else can you show me?"

Gabriela shields her eyes with her hand, peering at the sky, apparently judging the sun's position. "I'd reckon it's going to be about two hours until Heloise or the boys start looking for us, so we probably should go back soon. You need some time to take off your disguise, after all. But we have enough time to see New Town, at least."

“That’s where the butcher you bought the meat a few day back is, right?” Hans says; on the two women’s affirmative nod, he continues, “Lead the way, then.”

The trio moves out of the hustle and bustle of the market, venturing further from the castle. “This is New Town,” Gabriela says as they walk down the street — *literally* down: in this part of the city, the road slopes away from the high plateau on which the oldest parts of Salgen sit, including Castle Salgen itself. The crowd is thinner here, but there’s still plenty of people around. “Despite the name, it’s not the newest part of the inner city: that would be Stonewall.”

“And there’s an outer city as well, I gather.”

“Of course,” Katrin answers. “That’s even newer, and—”

“Beg your pardon, milady,” a young man says, bumping into her.

He starts to walk away, but Katrin’s basket falls to the ground and her arm snaps like a snake, lightning quick, her hand clamping around the young man’s wrist.

“That’s not yours,” she says, lashing out with her leg, too, hitting him on the back of the leg, making him collapse down on one knee. Hans is momentarily confused, but then he notices what the man is holding in his hand: Katrin’s purse.



“Hey! Gedoffme!” he protests, squirming and pulling and trying to escape Katrin’s grip, but she’s not letting him go; she takes up position behind him and places her other hand against his shoulder and pushes. The movement is slight, but the boy cries out in pain. He loses hold of the purse, which falls to the ground; Katrin nods to Gabriela, who picks it up. Hans notices that the crowd has thinned slightly around them, everyone giving them just a bit more space, even though no one is overly gawking at the unfolding scene.

“Now, whatever shall we do with you, lad?” Katrin says. “Call the watch, maybe?”

The lad blanches. “No, please, don’t call the watch. I’m sorry, I’m really sorry, but my family is hungry, and—”

“Still doesn’t give you the right to steal from a poor, defenceless woman, does it now?”

Katrin puts more tension on his arm, drawing a profanity from the young man's lips. He's barely more than a boy, Hans notes, maybe fourteen or fifteen; not that much younger than Hans himself. For someone so young to have to turn to crime to survive...

"Let him go, Katrin," Hans says.

Katrin gives him a look of surprise. "Beg pardon?" she says.

"What's your name, lad?"

"Bite me," the boy answers; Katrin applies a bit more pressure. "Ow ow ow! Alright! Kristian!"

"I think Kristian's learned his lesson and won't try anything of the sort again anytime soon. Am I right?" Hans asks, looking at him. Kristian eagerly nods. "See? Come on, let him go."

Katrin complies after a second, and Kristian looks at them warily, slowly getting to his feet while massaging his wrist. "Thank you, kind lady. I promise this is the last time I—"

Hans raises his hand, and the boy stops speaking. Rooting inside his purse, Hans pulls out a single coin, a groschen, and holds it out. "For you."

Kristian eyes him in suspicion. "What's the catch?"

"No catch. You said your family is hungry, didn't you?" Kristian nods. "Then take it."

"Thank you," Kristian says, doing so.

"Now scam."

The boy scrams, at remarkable speed too, and Hans looks at him go. The mood in the crowd around them shifts: the excitement apparently over, all who'd stopped to watch resume going about their business.

Hans turns back to his companions. "Now, where were we?"

"That was really kind of you," Gabriela says, a warm smile on her lips. "Not many people would've done that."

"Yeah. Most would've just turned him over to the city watch," Katrin agrees.

"You weren't going to do that, were you?" Hans asks.

"Pfft, of course not," Katrin dismisses with a wave of her hand. "If I did that, the guards would've thrown him in the stocks, or, worse, cut off his hand. Or his head. He didn't deserve that."

"Glad we agree."

"Mercy is an important quality for a ruler," Gabriela says.

Katrin nods in agreement. "You'd have made a great queen, Florence."

"A great king, you mean," Hans opines, just the hint of a frown creasing his forehead.

"...Right, my apologies. With you looking like that, for a moment I forgot... And I'm doubly sorry, I should've said 'you'll make' instead. You promised to take back your throne, after all."

"That I did. So, what were you saying before we were so rudely interrupted? About the outer city?"

"Right," Gabriela says. "Well, that's even newer. But we've never been there. It's not safe."

Hans curls an eyebrow. "Why?"

"You remember how the guards at Castle Salgen don't pay much attention to who is coming and going? That's because the screening is not done between Castle Salgen and Salgen City, but rather between the inner and outer parts of Salgen City."

"Inside and outside the walls, you mean."

"Precisely. Only the citizens of Salgen are allowed into the inner city. Outside, there's no checks: pretty much anyone can move in from the countryside, or from another country entirely, and just start living there. And 'anyone' includes people who are unwilling to play by the rules."

"Like Kristian back there?"

"No, Kristian was just a hungry kid," Katrin says. "Gabby means people like poachers, smugglers, bandits, robbers, and the like. Actual outlaws."

Gabriela nods. "The city watch barely patrols the quarters outside the gates, and the slums not at all. It's a free-for-all out there, so it's best if we stay in here."

"Agreed," Hans says; he's putting himself at risk already just by being out of the castle dressed as a woman, there's no need to invite any more trouble. "So how about you show me to the butcher's?"

By the time they return to the castle, their baskets laden with goods, the sun is just a sliver of the sky away from touching the horizon. Hans talks amiably with his companions as they cross the gate, and makes sure not to get distracted by stray thoughts as he did while leaving.

They make their way through the service wing again, taking a detour to deposit their shopping in the kitchens, where a space in the pantry is marked and sectioned off —

everything in there is reserved for nobles, Gabriela explains — before climbing back up the narrow spiral staircase to the noble wing.

As they did while leaving, Hans hangs back while the two women open the door to their apartments and peer in; but no one is there except Perceval the dog, who looks up at them curiously from his bed by the wall, ears perking and tail thumping against the stone floor when he sees them.

“I don’t have time for you, boy,” Hans says under his breath, “but I promise I’ll be back shortly.”

And then he jumps as he hears a door unlatch and creak open.

“Hans? Is that you?” Heloisa calls.

Hans’ instincts almost betray him, choosing for him to stand still instead of fleeing, but Katrin saves him: she throws open the door to his room and pushes him inside.

“Hans?” Heloisa repeats, and Hans realises what he has to do, closing the door almost completely, just a crack open, enough for his voice to pass through while making it impossible for his mother to see him.

“Yes, Mother, what is it?” he calls back. “I’m not decent right now.”

“Didn’t you just come back?” Heloisa says, and by her voice Hans judges she’s in the common room by now.

“No, I’ve been here a while.”

“Weird, I thought I heard the door open.”

“Oh, that was us,” Gabriela says. “We were out of the castle.”

“Right. We’ve just come back now,” Katrin adds.

Hans offers silent thanks to the two women before he speaks again. “Since you’re here, can you bring some water so I can wash up?” he asks. “I wanted to clean myself, the library was so dusty, but I didn’t realise I didn’t have water in here until I’d taken off my clothes.”

“Oh, of course,” Heloisa says. “I have some in my chambers, I’ll bring it to you right away.”

“Uh... leave it in front of the door?”

“Why?”

“I said I’m not decent.”

“I know what you look like, son. I gave birth to you. There’s no need to be shy. I’ll be right back.”

“I’ll do it!” Katrin offers, her voice slightly too loud and a bit more high-pitched than normal. “I think Gabby had something to ask you, your highness?”

Heloisa sighs. “Girls, I told you, call me Lise. So, what is it?”

Hans hears receding footsteps and Gabriela and Heloisa talking among themselves; he can’t quite make out the words, since they leave right away. A second later the door to his room opens, and Katrin steps inside. “That was close,” she says.

“Too close,” Hans agrees. “Help me take this off before they return.”

With Katrin’s assistance, Hans removes his dress, which she lays on the bed and carefully folds before placing it inside one of his trunks, explaining that it’s too dangerous to take it back to her and Gabriela’s room for the time being. Off come the slip and the band around his chest — and he winces a bit at the soreness behind his nipples — which join the dress in its hiding place; they move to his bathroom, where he carefully washes his face with soap to remove all traces of Florence from his skin.

Picking a fresh outfit from the many he has at his disposal, Hans gets dressed again, and leaves his room just as Bert and Will return from wherever they’d gone: upon seeing him Will does a double take, then stops dead on the threshold.



“What?” Hans asks.

“You’ve shaved,” Will says.

“Oh. Yeah,” Hans replies. “Yes, I did. I wanted to try it, see how I looked.”

“I think it suits you,” Bert says. “What do you think, Will?”

Will, still staring fixedly at Hans, slowly nods. “It does. You look...” He pauses, seemingly searching for a word, before landing on, “...good.”

“Thank you,” Hans says; for whatever reason, the tips of his ears feel warm. “So how was your day?”

“Terrible,” Bert answers, making a face. “Would you believe this man,” he slaps Will in the chest with the back of his hand, “is completely unable to talk to women? Seriously. As soon as a cute gal so much as looks his way, he clams up.”

“No I didn’t,” Will counters.

“Yes you did. And I brought you along as support, even.” Bert sighs. “Ah well. And what about you, Hans? Did you have a good afternoon?”

Hans smiles. “Yes. Yes I did.”

And he’s not lying, he really *did* have a great afternoon; though what he did exactly during that afternoon is to forever remain a mystery to his best friends. And above all, since it was so dangerous, he promises himself he will never repeat the experience.