

THE HERMEPORTA

Words by Hogarth Brown

Excerpt from *The Hermeporta Beyond the Gates of Hermes*

‘I’ve spent so many years like this, Illy.’ Hermes paced on the spot. ‘I’m not even sure if I can remember what I looked like,’ Hermes glanced down at himself. ‘To become human again – what if I don’t like it? What if I don’t like myself?’ Hermes added before jumping up to hover above the ground in rapid circles, as Illawara checked the slab of stone again for cracks. Illawara took the fruit juice out of her satchel and offered some of it to Hermes to give him energy, before finishing the rest herself.

Illawara clapped her hands together. ‘Well, there’s only one way to find out. You’ve said for years that this is what you wanted. Now stop flapping and rest on that stone,’ she said. Hermes obeyed her but continued talking.

‘I’ll be able to eat and chew again,’ he said with excitement, ‘and use my hands to eat solid food, break my own bread-pick my nose even.’ Illawara giggled.

‘I’m curious to see what you look like – I’ll still love you, but I’ll be disappointed if you’re ugly ...’ Illawara said. Hermes’ beak dropped open and his feathers stood on end.

‘I doubt that,’ he guffawed.

Illawara raised her finger, ‘A quick question, I hope you don’t mind, but I’ve always wanted to ask you: how did it



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feel the first time you were changed? How exactly did it happen?’ Hermes froze and seemed to gasp for air.

‘I, I–’ Hermes tried his best to speak, but couldn’t get the words out. A painful cramp darted through his stomach, though he tried to conceal it. Illawara winced in sensing his pain. In a rush, she crouched next to him.

‘Hush, it’s okay, Hermes, it’s okay. I shouldn’t have asked; that was selfish of me. I know you can’t tell me yet what happened to you.’ She bent down and stroked the crest on his head. ‘But one day I’ll learn of it, I promise.’ Hermes nodded. Her words encouraged him.

‘Okay, let’s get this over with.’ Hermes said, able to speak again. Illawara clapped her hands again with glee, before reaching down to rummage in her bag for the little glowing bottle of Transformation Tincture. She gave the phial a shake to enliven its formula, which coiled and twisted like a blue storm behind the glass.

‘Are you concentrating Hermes?’ He nodded. ‘Try and remember yourself as you were before.’

‘Yes, yes, I’m concentrating, Illy. Let’s hurry up, it’s getting cold.’ Hermes said, calling up from the rapidly cooling floors.

With great care, Illawara began to unscrew the lid off the tincture. A wisp of gas escaped from the phial as the seal opened, and curls of cold blue fire began to ripple around the edge of the bottle, as Illawara began to expose its dropper. Crouching to aim above Hermes, Illawara pressed on the rubber of the dropper to allow three fire-like drips to fall onto Hermes’ head and body. Hermes flinched.

‘Keep still,’ Illawara cautioned as the drops spread across

him, until his entire body became encased in the gentle lapping of blue flames. Illawara stood back with a grand gesture before she uttered the words she had practiced:

‘What has passed shall come again,
What is forgotten shall be remembered.
Unjust be the form this body maintains,
So be this curse dismembered.’

With a rush, the blue flames leapt up, and Illawara stood back as Hermes began to crackle like a firework. His short legs began to lengthen at speed; his petite wings stretched out into arms, and his primary feathers became fingers, while his long beak shortened into a fine nose. From the little bird emerged healthy bones, and new flesh could be seen manifesting through the shimmer of the blue flames. The curve of a neck, the arch of a spine, sculpting and forming as his sinews reshaped and knitted together, and ran in rivulets across the emerging body. His ribcage, acting like a loom, gathered the loose threads of his flesh.

Eventually, any remaining feathers were pulled within and absorbed by rich brown human skin. Hermes’ little crest of feathers, so familiar to her, unfurled and spread across his scalp to become a thick mass of dark curly hair. Before Illawara’s eyes Hermes transformed back into a handsome youth. After the last of the flames had subsided, Hermes clutched at himself with embarrassment, trying to protect his modesty at finding himself completely naked in front of Illawara. She stood open mouthed at the manifestation before her – vapour lifted from Hermes’ skin as he shivered

in the chilling air.

'Oh my God!' Illawara exclaimed. 'So this is what you look like. Not what I imagined at all.' Hermes glanced down at himself like a stranger. 'My goodness,' Illawara continued, gawking as she walked around her friend, 'you're a real person ...' She then corrected herself, 'I mean, I've always known. It's just I couldn't imagine you like-' Hermes clutched at himself to try and avoid her gaze. 'Let me look at you,' she said, half in shock and half giggling, her hand over her mouth. Hermes stood unamused.

'I will not. Are you trying to flirt with me?'

Illawara almost screamed with surprise, stifling the sound by cupping her mouth with her other hand.

'Your voice is so different. I'm going to have to get used to it.' Wide-eyed, Illawara shook her head in disbelief. 'Well, you're definitely not ugly.'

'Stop staring at me. You're acting like that trucker. You should be ashamed of yourself with your gawping.' Illawara frowned and crossed her arms.

'Oh c'mon - how could you say that? That's cruel, please.' Illawara scowled, ogling, before giving out a wobbly whistle with her hands braced on her hips, 'seems like the bird has become a cat.' She purred before sweeping away, 'besides, can you blame me for staring? I've had no idea of what you looked like before.' She turned away from Hermes and tossed her side pouch behind her. 'You can cover your modesty with that.'

'You've nothing else?' said Hermes, 'this is not funny, Illy.'

'I know,' Illawara said still turned away, 'have you covered

yourself yet?' Hermes snatched up the side pouch from the floor and held it to his groin.

'Yes, but do I have any clothes? Did you bring anything?' he said, almost tumbling to the floor from dizziness and exposing yet more of himself.

'I didn't pack any.' Illawara said turning around, half shielding her eyes.

'What? No clothes? You're joking?' Illawara shook her head.

'I don't remember you asking for any.'

'Oh, that's just typical.' Hermes raised his voice, 'do you expect me to go to the Medici's party naked? You're totally irresponsible,' he huffed. 'We've travelled here through hundreds of years in time, and you can remember to bring a pineapple but not trousers or underpants.'

Illawara saw something in the distance before she clicked her fingers like a magician, and rubbed her hands together. She declared with bravado: 'It's time to go shopping.'

'You're crazy' Hermes whispered to himself.

'Hermes, my friend, watch and learn, watch and learn ...' Illawara was embodying the character of a travelling showman. Helpless, Hermes shook his head with woe and tried to ignore the chill that crept across his buttocks. With nonchalant leisure, Illawara strode into the green enclosure, at the middle of the cemetery, where wild roses were climbing their way up one of the sidewalls of the Camposanto. She plucked one of the yellow-pink flowers, a sprig of leaves and three of its thorns. Illawara skipped back to place them in a small pile on the scorched stone that Hermes had vacated to shelter in an alcove. Illawara

used the tincture again, allowing three drops to consume the flower and its parts before uttering:

‘For what is leaf be woven grained,
For what is flower be fabric tamed,
And from its pollen, our money gained.
In rosy thorn–thy find thy scabbard,
In rosy boots–thy stride maintained.’

In an instant, the flames rose again as the tincture got to work on the rose and its parts. The petals of the flower began to stretch and then billow out, and to turn themselves into a wide sleeved silken shirt: yellow on the body, and then graduating to a blush on the cuffs and collars.

The leaves and the veins of the plant began to break off here and there, and twisted themselves into elegant brocade that entwined at the cuffs and collar, before stitching and fixing in the present centuries’ style. The yellow pollen and stamens at the centre of the flower, swelled like seeds, to burst open into coins of Tuscan Scudo. The remaining leaves twisted and wove themselves into differing items: a fine green coat, followed by a cape, a hat, a waistcoat, stockings, and breeches, all with similar trimmings to the shirt. A pair of the thorns became two fine red boots, the third a handsome dagger and scabbard.

With the work completed Illawara shook the items out in the fading light and the garments gave off a heady scent of wild rose, which filled the air before passing. She took up the dagger, and with a grand gesture unsheathed it from its scabbard. The high-pitched sound the metal gave out

seemed to shatter from the walls in tiny pieces. Glowing red reflections shone up and down the steel in the twilight as she inspected it. Illawara found a drying stem to drop upon the blade and posed satisfied when it fell sliced in half. Hermes looked on agog.

‘I’m impressed.’ Hermes said.

Illawara nodded and tried to not look too smug.

‘I know my plants remember. It takes a lot of patience and practice but they can teach you their secrets – if you take care of them.’