Dandelion Fox (Part 1 of 2)

By Nathan Hopp

 I arrived early.

 Pulling the robes closer around me, my paws reached to feel the brick railing. Standing all alone on the bridge in the middle of the night felt strange. Dozens of Hannover’s citizens strolled across the overlapping stone steps every week, either to barter in the crowded market or marvel at a sunny day. Tonight, there was only me.

 For a few minutes I looked both ways for the silhouette of another Furren until I eventually gave up. Having nothing better to do until he came, I leaned against the right side of the bridge. My eyes glazed between the narrow waterway and the sleeping town of Hannover’s empty streets.

 Ah, Hannover: the town I lived in but rarely saw.

 “Sir?”

 I raised my muzzle away from the bridge, and towards the deep voice. To my surprise, it belonged to a young lynx. Dirt and soot caked over his worker’s clothing, his feeble paws holding onto a tall broom by his side. A chimney sweeper, probably not a day over ten.

Hesitantly, I turned to him.

 “Uh…yes?” I asked, praying he’d leave without recognizing me. “Is there a problem, young cub?”

 The lynx coughed, and tipped his cap. “No,” he replied. “I was just wondering if you have a coin or two? I’m low on currency to buy breakfast tomorrow, and the bakery is often cross when I don’t have the money to buy food.”

 I paused for a moment, then yanked several Marks from my pocket before dropping them onto the lynx’s paw. His eyes became as bright as the full moon.

 “Praise the Lord!” he giggled, shoving the bills into his pockets. “Thank you so much, sir!”

 Watching the young cub disappear behind a street further across the bridge, I sighed and stared down into the river below. The bridge stretched above the town’s largest stream, its current gentle and dim. During a summertime day like yesterday, a gathering of loud cubs, much like the lynx, would sometimes fish or swim in the cool waters a few meters beneath.

Tonight, it lay silently.

 Despite it being only midnight, I could already feel the morning dew on my bright red fur. As each second slowly counted away, I glanced above the sleeping town’s buildings. Ignoring the bright waxing moon and its twinkling friends, a taller structure could be seen from the bridge.

 Home. My home.

 My name is Eduard von Kauffmann, the eldest son of Nikolaus and Mathilda von Kauffmann.

Though by dawn tomorrow, I may no longer be.

*\*\*\**

 As my whiskers and ears twitched at the nightly ambience, I thought back to the day I first met him three years ago. Mother rarely allowed me to leave the manor and into town without her or Father. The same had been ordered to my younger sister Margarethe. However, it changed on the one week of spring when one of the horses in our stable required a new shoe.

 Father was on a business trip to Nuremburg not long after my fifteenth birthday, and the butler no longer worked for us, so I was told to travel for the horseshoe. She might have considered having the coachman do it, but I didn’t let Mother change her mind. Not if it meant I could see him.

 It was a rather short walk from our home to the blacksmith’s entrance through the light February snow. Entering inside to the smell of coal, searing metal, and humid sweat, I wrinkled my nose as I ambled up to the counter. A wooden door led to the back room, where the loud clanking of metal rang in my pointed ears.

 Right on cue, a Furren mouse emerged from the door panting and blackened with soot all over his overalls. A year younger than I, the boy held a solid build from years of labor. His eyes were a deep shade of greyish-black, but they still shone in light like obsidian stones. They weren’t deep but comforting. The moment he spotted me, his toothy grin lit up under his facial fur, and my entire body stiffened.

“Hello,” he spoke. When I didn’t—or rather couldn’t—reply, he quickly added, “Is something wrong?”

Hansel Beltz may have stood almost a whole foot shorter than me, being a Furren mouse, but I still felt smaller despite being a taller fox.

“Uh…y-yeah. I mean no, no there isn’t,” I mumbled, glancing away as my ears flushed.

In truth, he could not have been even more handsome than he already was, despite the lack of an overshirt.

“You don’t talk much, do you?” he asked after a silent moment.

I meekly nodded, and a small smile spread across Hansel’s stout muzzle.

“Take your time to say something,” he said.

Raising my eyes back towards him, I began forming the words when Herr Beltz suddenly burst from the back of the shop.

“Well hello!” he greeted. At about the same height as me, but carrying the same muscle as his kin, this larger mouse could break a tree trunk in his prime. Now, his age was showing. “Are you here for an order then, Sir?”

Taken aback by the sudden presence, I hastily nodded.

“Care to tell me your name then?” he asked, pulling out a book. “My son and I are busy nowadays.”

“Everyone has an order for something, Dad,” Hansel mildly chuckled.

Twitching my ears up, I gulped down my nervousness.

“Ed…Eduard,” I stuttered at first, then calmly continued while clutching the sides of my trousers, “Eduard…von Kauffmann. My family…my family needs the horseshoe.”

“Well why didn’t you say so?” Herr Beltz laughed before tossing the book back on the counter. “The item you requested is still drenching in water in the back room. It shouldn’t be long until the horseshoe is ready.”

As fast as a musket flash, the elder mouse shuffled back inside the back room. I was now alone with Hansel, making my tail twist and ears nervously fall.

“Are they uncomfortable?” Hansel asked abruptly, pointing to my attire. “Your clothes?”

My ears immediately perked. “Huh?”

“Your clothes,” he repeated. “Is it uncomfortable wearing those? I never understood why nobles do that.”

I looked down at myself, then to the dingy threads he wore. If any of my parent’s acquaintances ever saw him, they’d mock Hansel for his clothes behind a courteous smile.

“M-Mother tells me my clothes are made of fine cotton all the way from the highlands, while the buttons on my vest were manufactured by the finest haberdashery in Venice.”

I cleared my throat.

“In truth,” I murmured, slowly gaining my voice the more I managed to relax, “the trousers pinch too…hard on my tailbone. And…And they can be a bit…scratchy sometimes.”

 “You don’t say?” Hansel asked, seemingly intrigued. “I think it’s silly.” Hansel suddenly widened his eyes and raised a paw. “I hope I’m not offending?”

 “It is fine, Hansel,” I said, then immediately silenced myself.

 “You know my name?” he asked, looking at me with a curious gaze. “Wait a minute…I’ve seen you before.” Hansel propped his elbows on the wooden countertop. “You’re the fox none of the other cubs can play with. I’ve seen you at some of the festivals.”

 Before I was able to answer, Herr Beltz returned with the horseshoe in his paw.

 “Here you are,” he placed it on the counter. “Sad to say, somebody has to be keeping an eye on the shop. Herr von Kauffmann, is it fine for my son to assist in fastening the shoe on to your horse back at your manor?”

 “O-Of course!” the words escaped my lips, and I suddenly couldn’t believe myself.

 Meanwhile, Hansel visibly swished his tail against the light snow as he walked out with me from the shop. In an instant the humidity turned to a cool, gentle breeze, but my heart did not slow down while we walked through town.

 “How are you today?”

 “Huh?” my ears swiveled to him. “W-What do you mean?”

 The mouse beside me sniggered, and for a second, I thought I’d spoken the wrong thing.

 “I mean how are you today? Done anything interesting?”

 I blinked multiple times and slowly uncurled my nervous tail.

 “None.” I started to say, but then added, “N-None that I can remember.”

 In truth, I did not know much on how to converse with commoners my age. Speaking mostly to adults my whole life, they often only required the simplest replies when talking to you. Fortunately, as we strolled across the town bridge and past a quaint little bookshop’s decorated window, I found an answer for Hansel.

 “I…” my throat became dry, “I started….r-reading…for my tutor.”

 Hansel gave me an inquisitive look. “You like to read?”

 “Y-Yes.”

 “Me too!” his eyes unexpectedly lit up. “My present from the Christkind this year is a German translation of *Romeo & Juliet*. I still didn’t finish *David Copperfield* though. The copy I bought is only printed in English.”

 “Who is…David Copperfield?” I asked the ecstatic Furren.

 “Are you jesting?” Hansel gaped, still gripping his tool bag with the horseshoe. He stared at me in mild confusion. *“David Copperfield* by Dickens? You’ve never read him?”

 “I have,” I piped up, looking away as my cheeked heated. “I-I just…never read fiction.”

 Now it was his turn to be embarrassed. “Oh.”

We stayed silent for a long time, until I asked, “What…other books do you know?”

“Plenty!” he chirped like a robin. “There’s *Faust*, *The Count of Monte Cristo, Frankenstein,* and another recent British novel I’m interested in reading titled ‘*Treasure Island*’. I hear it has adventures and pirates!”

“Adventures?” I repeated the word like I’d never said it before.

“What books have you read?”

“Uh…” I paused, then found my tongue. “Only ones provided by my parents and tutors.”

“What kind?” Hansel asked again, still persistent.

“Um….” I spoke up, “E-European cultures, s-science, and history. M-My favorite includes Brehm's *Thierleben*, and a science book we’ve been reading titled, *Arcana of Nature*.”

Hansel whistled. “You are an interesting Furren to speak with, Herr von Kauffmann. I like you.”

We conversed back and forth until we came to the manor. Seeing it up close for the first time, Hansel made this expression of amazement I couldn’t look away from. After he had finished gazing at each feature of the exterior, I escorted him to the barn, where the family’s carriage Friesians resided peacefully in their stalls.

Petting the tamed creature’s dark mane, Hansel knelt to gently hold one of its legs. The horse neighed at the mouse’s touch and did not move in the small holding pen. It clearly trusted Hansel.

“He’s a majestic thing,” he commented while unfastening the black horse’s old shoe.

“He is.”

Hansel went to work as I quietly stood viewing his handiwork.

In the pawful of minutes he spent patiently applying the task, I couldn’t help but admire the mouse. He was friendly without any obligation regarding my family name. I began watching Hansel’s arms flex and tense with each movement made. For another odd reason, my eyes stayed glued to his paws as they nailed in the horseshoe. For a second, I wondered how they would feel holding mine.

“Phew!”

Hansel had finished sooner than expected. Tired and beat, he panted and breathed heavily as he patted the calm horse. An idea came to mind, so I turned and hurried back to the manor’s backside door. Carefully opening it, I sneaked inside and poured water into a cup. Mother disliked me being in the servant’s area, so I made haste while bringing back the cup to Hansel.

When he saw it in my paws, I offered it to him while feeling the blood rush under my facial fur.

“H-H-Here.”

I didn’t see his face, but he grabbed it and drank every last drop before giving it back to me. I raised my muzzle up to find him smiling while licking up a drop of water from his chin.

“Thank you, Herr von Kauffmann,” he told me. “Papa will be cross if I dawdle from our other projects, but it was nice speaking with you.”

“Eduard.” I piped down.

“Huh?”

“E-Eduard,” I repeated. “C-Call me Eduard.”

Without a beat, Hansel smiled and nodded with a flick of his coiled tail. In the low sunlight, his eyes shone brightly.

“Eduard,” he spoke the word like it was the most expressive of any. “Eduard, then. Shall we meet again sometime?”

I widened my eyes as my ears lowered down. “M-Mother…” I spoke, “…she does not…she does not let me v-venture out often…”

Hansel blinked. “Oh, if you say so…”

Silently, I guided him back to the front entrance that followed the pathway to town. I kept telling myself to say something, anything before he left, but the mouse beat me to it. As Hansel began walking back down the road, he turned to say, “Have a good evening, Eduard.”

 Later isolating myself to my bedroom, my heart could not stop racing. After all of these years, I had spoken to Hansel Beltz! He talked to me and asked about me while my shyness disappeared like a breeze. I had never felt so happy.

However, the feeling later turned to guilt for not saying we could meet again somehow. Mother and my sister never noticed my silence during dinner, not even during Mother’s discussions on the appearance of another wealthy family’s house she visited last week. After all, a speck of dust never entered without her permission in our home.

“You should have seen the horrid state they were in,” Mother scoffed. “Dust covered every centimeter of their library, and the food served with dinner did not even include the proper silverware. Ack, I shall never visit them again, not without our chef to accompany me.”

The elder fox sipped from her soup, now glancing to my younger sister across the mahogany table. At only five years younger than me, Margarethe already knew how to act around our parents.

“Margarethe, Herr Lutz tells me you are lacking enthusiasm in your singing lessons.”

“Yes, Mother,” Margarethe nodded.

“I shall not have to pay your tutor to waste our time.”

“Yes, Mother,” she nodded once more, slowly sipping her soup again.

“Eduard,” Mother spoke between delicate bites of the pheasant, “Katharine Fromm is the daughter of Viktor Fromm. He told me that when she turns of age, marrying her will be beneficial for von Kauffmann Timber.” She went on to describe how, if I turned of proper age, she would be the perfect wife for me.

“Yes, Mother.” Over and over. That was all I knew.

 Nightfall finally arrived, and I had fallen into near-sleep in my room when a tapping sound happened on my bedside window. At first, I ignored the noise, but then came the sudden shattering of glass. I bolted from my bed and found the window cracked, and below in the eastern yard was a small figure.

 It was Hansel. His muzzle was laced with panic as he hurriedly placed something into the bushes below before running into the neighboring forest. He carefully disappeared into the wood.

 When the staff and Mother came to inspect the damage, I did not say anything. I kept silent about the identity of the ‘ruffian scoundrel’ who ‘attacked our lovely home’, and instead wondered about Hansel’s note.

 Between my tutoring session at 11:00 and noon tea, I’d found the opportunity to sneak away to the estate’s western side. My bedroom could be seen from the cracked pane of glass being replaced by workers. Looking in the bushes two stories below, my eyes widened at the sight of a folded paper note hidden deep in the leafy bushes. Hesitantly, I ran down there and yanked it from the bush before running into my room.

 It was a letter from Hansel, telling me he enjoyed our talk yesterday and wanted to be my friend. He signed it elegantly, while I could still smell a trace of his scent on the paper.

 I sat motionless on my bed for several minutes, reading it over and over until I’d memorized it in my heart, because my brain could not digest what I was holding in my shaking paws. Hansel Beltz, the mouse boy I’d felt a special attention for since we were little cubs, wanted to be my friend. Me, the eldest von Kauffmann son and a stranger about two days ago.

 Well, that is what we did. After hiding the letter under my pillow, I wrote another letter back to him later that night. I opened my window and dropped the folded paper into the bushes below, then waited. And waited. And waited until I woke up the next day to find the note still hidden in the bush. A few more days passed, and each night no one came. I began to worry this was all in vain.

Finally, around midnight on the fourth night, my body stiffened as I saw a small figure emerge from the forest. Without hesitation in his sprints, the mouse-shaped shadow grabbed the letter and ran off, but not before I saw the faint glints come from his eyes in the moonlight. The following evening, he sneaked into the east side and left me another letter, this time having a postscript apologizing for accidentally cracking the window.

“I was only trying to wake you, and threw the pebble too hard,” it read. “Also, I’m sorry for the wait. Some wolves were questioning all the mice Furren in town, claiming they found pawprints near the scene. I was afraid I’d be caught if I went the next night. Please forgive me.”

My heart tensed, but it immediately faded the more I read it.

Two months passed on while Hansel and I continued our secret correspondences. We learned many things about each other. Hansel told me all about his time working with his father, while I told him about the few elite cotillions Mother pulled me to. I told him about her attempts to arrange for my marriage, and Father’s refusal to force it upon me.

 Hansel’s labored life as the blacksmith’s son revolved around manual work, having only a few acquaintances or regular customers in town. He had attended basics school with the other cubs but could never have many friends because of his father needing his presence at the shop. Behind those muscles, he adored the thought of traveling to other places, especially to the United States of America one day.

 “*I dream of seeing the Statue of Liberty when it’s finally built*,” he wrote to me in one of the letters, “*and see the landscapes out West. They call it a land of opportunity.*”

 We also traded small items in the bushes. When I mentioned I held an intrigued for culinary arts in one of my letters (despite never cooking before), Hansel surprised me with recipes to try. Knowing what to do, I thanked the mouse and snuck them to the estate’s chef to make. Everything suggested was delicious.

 Winter transformed again into spring, Hansel’s birthday came and went, and one morning I grew tired of simply writing to him. Now I really yearned to meet with Hansel without the need for exchanging letters. However, a significant part of me trembled in fear of Mother or Father’s retribution.

At first, I grew skeptical of the idea, until I saw the letters overflowing in my desk drawer. Each one was delicately folded and faintly smelled of soot, the kind from a blacksmith’s forge. Without waiting, I wrote him back.

 It was a week later and the last of the snow had finally melted away. As always, I waited for midnight and for the staff to fall asleep. Mother never stayed up past ten o’ clock in the evening, not even when it was the night of one of her events.

 I waited and waited, my eyes never drawing away from the windowsill. I was about to give up and go to sleep when I suddenly saw a familiar shape in the moonlight.

Carefully climbing out the window, I felt my footpaws touch the grass as I shook paws with the other sixteen-year-old Furren. His bright teeth glinted in the darkness, as did those beautiful obsidian eyes.

“Hello…” I spoke softly.

Hansel beamed, and unexpectedly pulled me into a deep hug.

“Good evening,” he replied, then slowly asked, “How was your day?”

I folded an ear. This was Hansel, the very boy whom I’ve been friends with for nearly two months in letters. He only asked about my day, but why did I suddenly feel like a thousand eyes shifted themselves on me?

“F-F-Fine…” I murmured. “I attended a tutoring session about Eastern Europe, specifically the…recent pogroms occurring to the east in the Russian Empire. Apparently, Jews and humans are being attacked and driven from their homes.”

“You don’t say?” Hansel widened his eyes in disgust. “And their new tsar is ignoring this?”

“G-Given how Alexander II—the f-former Russian emperor—was assassinated by a Jewish human a few years ago, and the Empire’s still reeling from his death, nobody in St. Petersburg is raising a paw to stop this…” I felt my fur prickle in a twinge of low anger. “T-The humans…they did not do anything against anyone, living their lives without ill will, and yet they’re being driven away for only existing.”

It looked like he couldn’t say anything, and instead looked away from me in shock. However, he did not stray too far away.

After several, silent seconds, Hansel asked, “May I ask what the tutor’s thoughts are?”

“He… He did not see them as necessary. Even Mother found herself disgusted, especially since so many humans are being driven away from the continent.” After a moment of silence, the question left my throat before I stopped myself.

“How about you, Hansel?” I hoped to change the atmosphere.

“Nothing too special,” he shrugged. “My papa and I finished forging a sword for an admiral west of here, then we had dinner. I couldn’t stop thinking about tonight.”

My heart might have literally slipped two beats.

“How long do we have?” Hansel suddenly asked me.

I glanced back up to my bedroom window, long since repaired from our first night.

“An hour,” I answered, “and a half at most.”

Hansel’s grin spread. “More than enough for a tour of the garden, I suppose?”

I widened my eyes and felt my heart race. He meant the von Kauffmann Garden, where the family’s precious white and red roses blossomed this time of year. The same place where, when I was a cub, Mother threatened to skin me alive if I ever touched her lilies.

Without waiting, Hansel grabbed my paw and pulled me in that direction.

“Well come on, Eduard,” he laughed. “Be my guide and show a commoner the reason the von Kauffmann Garden is said to be extraordinary.”

Suffice to say, I did.

In the warm night, hidden under the ambient noise of forest creatures neighboring the estate, Hansel and I walked. I guided him along the imposing hedges and watched him gaze in awe at the marble statues dotting each green passage. Some displayed vulpine lineage, others were carved of the Greek gods and goddesses, but my attention kept straying to the mouse.

Tonight, Hansel wore a simple belt-strapped pair of shorts, along with a black shirt unable to hide his muscled arms. I wore only my nightgown, which I carefully made sure did not get any specks of dirt. The last thing I needed were rumors spread by the staff.

 “Wow,” Hansel stood staring at the red begonias by an adjacent pathway. “I must say, the von Kauffmann Garden lives up to its name. Every year the cubs spread rumors that the gardeners spend months tending them.”

His eyes still shone brightly in the moonlight, making my heart beat faster and fur straighten like porcupine needles. Why was I feeling like this?

 “Mother doesn’t think so,” I said, my eyes glancing away to the other flowers. “Every year, she likes to have the gardeners change the positions of the flowers. I wouldn’t…I wouldn’t be surprised if by next Spring…the begonias became white roses and the lilies the begonias. Or if she adds five new statues and a fountain.”

 Hansel chuckled, causing my heart to jump into my throat.

 “Is it really necessary?” he asked. “Look at this place. It is amazing enough as it is.”

 “Y-Yeah,” I chuckled quietly, looking away with a hint of blush.

 “Well…” Hansel knelt down beside the begonia shrubs. “If she believes they’ll be worthless by tomorrow…”

 My tail twitched up. “What are you…?”

 The mouse yanked at something, and to my utter surprise it wasn’t the blue shade of a begonia. Instead, Hansel delicately held a single strand of a yellow flower. For a moment I stood confused, something which he began snickering for.

 Then I realized. It was a dandelion, fresh and blossoming under the blue of the shrubbery.

 “I hope Frau von Kauffmann does not mind if I take this?” Hansel smirked, then pulled another hidden dandelion from under the begonia shrub.

 “She…She does not approve of them,” I confessed, willing myself to relax. “Mother thinks they’re unpleasant…compared to the other plants in the garden. She says they should be referred to more as weeds than flowers.”

 “I think they’re beautiful, Eduard,” Hansel shook his muzzle as he stood. “Dandelions are not weeds. They can be used for medicine and are beautiful when they emerge.”

 I raised an eyebrow. “They are?”

Hansel promptly nodded. In his paw were two of the yellow plants, and a spark of the same color shone in his eyes. “Dad told me once that he gave a bouquet of these to Mom when he confessed his love to her. He could have gotten a pawful of roses or something, but these were enough.”

 “Really?” I asked, taking one of them into my paws when he offered it. “Did you…Did you know your mother?”

 “No, she died when I was three,” Hansel sighed, looking away. “I don’t remember much about her. Never did, but Dad is more than enough for me.”

Hansel looked back to me and smiled sympathetically. In the two months we corresponded in secret, I had slowly told him about my life growing up. He knew of the cold distance between me and my parents, as well as my equal yearning to know more than what is told in the walls of the manor.

Wordlessly, our eyes trailed up to the sky. They were beautiful, and enough to forget about the conversation from before. Instead, we watched the twinkling stars dance along the open sky.

“I always forget how beautiful they are…” Hansel whispered.

“Me too…”

 Everything happened so fast. My shaking paw tenderly held his, and our noses and muzzles connected.

 It was the first time I ever kissed somebody, let alone another boy. Although quick, it felt righter than anything I ever felt. Absolutely right.

 When I pulled away, Hansel didn’t say anything, and stared blankly at me with rapidly blinking eyes. Immediate panic swept from my fingertips down to my shuddering tail, and I ran back to the house without a word. If Hansel shouted for me to stop, I didn’t hear.

 In my dreams and in the morning, I told myself over and over everything was ruined, crumbling and left to rot. I had kissed Hansel Beltz, committed a sin of God. He probably never wanted to see me again. He might have now despised me.

 What was I thinking? Why did I have this sudden attraction for him, a male like me? I tried connecting the dots for an answer, but I couldn’t. I felt lost.

For hours in the morning all my thoughts were focused on what I considered a mistake. Or at least, I thought that until later in the afternoon, when one of the gardeners mentioned finding a bouquet of fresh dandelions placed on the bushes of the west wing. Directly below my bedroom window.

In a letter he hid in the same location the night after, he confessed to having a crush on me ever since we were cubs.

“*I could never find the chance to see you as often as I wanted to*,” he wrote. “*When you kissed me the night before, I was shocked you held the same feelings. I know there is no place in the world for Furren like us, but do you think we can search for it? I’m sorry I did not say it the night before, but I love you too.*”

The moment I finished reading three more times, I pulled out another paper and grabbed my fountain pen on the desk.

TO BE CONTINUED…