LIBERATION

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X
Encounter



Hans looks away from his reflection as he hears a knock. “Enter,” he calls.

The door opens to admit Healer Baecker. “You wanted to see me, sir?” he asks.

“I did,” Hans nods. “I wanted to talk to you about… about my body. Thank you, Will, you can go,” he adds, looking past the older man to his friend, who’s standing on the threshold and was clearly debating with himself whether to stay or leave.

Hans knows Will well enough to see that he's reluctant to leave, but is deciding to trust Hans on this. "We don't have much time until we have to go," Will says; Hans makes a gesture of acknowledgement, and Will retreats outside, closing the door behind himself.

Hans' eyes return to the healer, to find him frowning. "Usually when someone asks to speak with me, it's not a good sign. Are you feeling unwell?" he asks. "Or maybe experiencing some side effects from the draught?"

"Nothing of the sort. I feel perfectly fine, except... well, maybe I am having side effects," Hans says. "Since I've started taking the medicine you provide, my body has been..." He hesitates for a long moment before, prodded by the healer's questioning gaze, concluding, "...changing."

"Changing how?"

"It is perhaps best if I show you."

Hans takes a step back and slips off his shirt, and then his undershirt, too, draping them over the back of a nearby chair: he stands still and straight, and asks, "See?"

"Yes, I do see," the healer says, eyebrows arching. "When did this start?"

"From the very beginning, I think. But it's been slow, and I didn't realise what was happening until recently. Do you have any idea what may be causing... this?"

Hans gestures at his chest with both hands, moving them up and down in a motion which highlights how the flesh behind his nipples has a definite convex shape: it distinctly resembles a pubescent girl's bosom. Not that Hans has ever seen anyone's bosom close up, but he's been living in close quarters with three women for a while now, first in Granin and now here in Salgen, and he's had more than a few accidental glimpses of their bare chests: they are of course more developed, but similar in shape to the one his own has taken.

"I don't," Baecker says. "May I?"

Hans gives silent permission by inclining his head, and the man leans in, examining him closely. He runs his hand over the skin, downward from the collarbone, and Hans sucks in a breath through his teeth as the sparse hair stands up on end and his nipples perk up at attention.

The healer quickly pulls his hand back. "My apologies. Did that hurt?"

"No, it didn't hurt, it's just... they're quite sensitive."



Baecker hums pensively. He extends his hand again, prods the two mounds with a finger, then places it lower, at the crease where the curve and the remaining flat part of Hans' chest meet. The nipples are evidently more distant from the ribcage than they should be: not by much, half an inch at most, but they are. "There's definitely something going on here," the healer murmurs. "Have you noticed any other effects?"

"My breeches seem to be getting tighter. And, um." Hans looks away. "My... my member seems to be shrinking a bit."

"The last one is to be expected, given your... condition," Baecker replies.

"You mean considering what's been done to me?"

"Yes. If you'll pardon the frankness, it's quite common for men who have lost their virility to find their member diminishing in size. That is unfortunate, but nothing much can be done about it. Everything else, however, is nothing I have seen before." He straightens up and continues, "I will have to study the texts carefully, see if I can perhaps

alter the formulation of the draught somehow, but I can't guarantee anything. I'm sorry to say this, but medicine is hardly an exact science."

"I'm certain you're doing you're best," Hans reassures him. "Do you think I should stop taking the draught?"

An undecipherable expressions passes over Baecker's face for a moment, puzzling Hans, but then it's gone almost as soon as it'd appeared. "Best not. If you stopped, the heat and general malaise you experienced before you started taking it would soon return; and, if you didn't resume, it would put your health in danger. Does this," he gestures vaguely at Hans' chest, "trouble you? You said you're feeling fine."

"I am feeling fine," Hans confirms. "It's just that my chest is sensitive, like I said. It's distracting when it rubs on my undershirt."

"Understandable. I would advise wrapping it in soft cloth: linen works best, or cotton perhaps, though cotton may be difficult to procure, it's quite expensive."

Hans frowns: thinking about spending money for something he doesn't really need feels a bit bad. Especially since it's not *his* money: he's been staying in Castle Salgen for a while now, rent free, living off his cousin's money — which, by extension, is the people's money — without contributing anything to the wealth of the country; while outside, there are plenty of people who are barely making ends meet. And sometimes not even that, as he clearly saw when he went out on the town with Katrin and Gabriela. He thinks about Kristian, the wary and disbelieving expression in the lad's eyes as Hans let him go, even giving him a bit of money to feed his family.

Hans hopes he's doing well.

"Linen will do," he says.

The healer inclines his head in acknowledgement. "As you say, sir," he replies, and unties a satchel from his belt. "I have here your draught for the next few days. I would've sent a boy to deliver them as usual, but since I was already coming here..."

Hans takes the bag from him and pulls out one of the phials; he grimaces as he gulps down the contents. "Not as bad as the first doses, but still quite vile. Still, you have my thanks, Healer Baecker."

"Will there be anything else?"

"No, this is all I need for today."

"I am always available. Do call me if you require my services."

He gives Hans a polite bow before leaving the room. As the door closes Hans looks around, searching for something with which to bind his chest. There's nothing he

could use in sight, so he steps across the room and opens one of the trunks, and stops short.

Right there, neatly folded on top of his other clothes, is the blue dress he wore on his day out, weeks ago now. He looks at it for a few moment, then reaches out, almost mesmerised. He pinches the cloth, feels the texture with his fingers. It *is* quite soft. Maybe—



What in the hell am I thinking? he scolds himself, his hand snapping back as if he's been bitten by a viper. Even if the dress is beautiful, he can't wear it; not in his room, nor around the castle.

Shaking his head, he carefully moves the offending item of clothing aside. Looking deeper into the trunk, he locates a length of cloth which seems to be acceptably soft and wraps it around his chest, tying it at the back with some difficulty: it would be much

easier to have Gabriela do it, as she'd done when she'd helped him get ready for their day out, but he's in a hurry. He still makes a mental note to learn how to tie a chest band properly, since it doesn't seem he's tightened it quite enough — his pectorals are sticking out at least as much as they'd done when he'd last worn one, and that had been with a bit of padding, even. At least, he confirms by putting his undershirt and shirt back on, none of it shows under his normal clothes, and — he twists his torso, shifts his weight around — it doesn't impede his movements, which is good: the moves and skills Katrin and Gabriela have been teaching him require a good range of motion and quick reactions. He's not planning to use any of that in the near future, of course, or at all if he can help it, but it's better to be prepared.

Hans walks to the door and opens it. "I'm ready," he announces. "Let's go."

"Alright," Will says, "let's go."

"Hey, no, I was about to win!" Bert complains, motioning at the table with his right hand, a few cards clutched in his left.

"We can stay here and play if you want, but I'm willing to bet Master Wolfgang will make us run until we drop dead if we're late."

That's enough to convince Bert. With a huff, he lays his hand of cards on the table — as it turns out, he'd been bluffing: he was nowhere near close to being able to win — and he and Will rise from their chair. Together with Hans, who stops a moment to pet Perceval and promise he'll play with him once he comes back, they leave their chambers, heading for the courtyard.

"So what did you want to ask the healer?" Bert asks as they walk.

"You can't ask him that, Bert," Will objects.

"Why not? I'm curious."

"This is about Hans' health. What if he doesn't want to tell us?"

"It's fine, Will," Hans says, touching his friend's arm; when he turns to him, Hans smiles. "It was just a check in, to see if everything in my body is working as it should."

"And is it?" Bert insists.

"Yes. Don't worry." Hans studiously ignores the look Will gives him, the one he knows means, 'I'll always worry about you,' and continues, "There's nothing wrong with me. I'm coming to train with you two today, aren't I? I wouldn't do that if I were ill."

"Yeah. See, Will?" Bert prods Will with his elbow. "I told you he was fine."

"I wasn't worried," Will replies; Bert just gives him an amused grin.

They keep chatting as they make their way through the castle and out into the courtyard, where Kohler is waiting for them: his eyebrows arch when he sees Hans. As usual, the trio stands at attention in front of him and greets him with a loud, "Good morning, Master Wolfgang!"

Kohler hmpf-s. "You're late. You, and you," he points at Will and Bert, "three laps of the courtyard. Off you go. Florian, you stay. I want to speak with you." Will glances at Hans, receiving a nod in return, before running off with Bert. As soon as they're out of earshot, Kohler turns to Hans again. "What are you doing here, lad?" he asks.

"I'm here to train, of course," Hans replies.

"I thought I'd made myself clear the last time we saw each other: no matter how hard you work, you'll never—"

"I still want to train," Hans cuts him off.

Kohler blinks; whether it's from being interrupted — to Hans' knowledge, no one has ever dared to that before — or because of Hans' words, the young prince can't tell. "Beg pardon?" Kohler says.

"You explained yourself perfectly, Master Wolfgang," Hans says. "I know I'll never be as strong or as skilled in the sword as my friends can be. But that's no excuse: I may never be the best, but I won't stop trying to get better. So please, allow me to keep training under your tutelage."

There's renewed respect for Hans in Kohler's eyes as he looks at him. The master-at-arm places a hand on Hans' shoulder and nods. "Good lad. Alright, I'll keep teaching you."

"Thank you, Master Wolfgang," Hans nods back.

"Let's see if you're still in the mood to thank me after doing five laps of the courtyard. The three your friends are doing, and two more for interrupting me." A slap on the back sends Hans running. "Come on, kid, off you go."

Despite the gruelling training session looming before him, Hans can't help but laugh as he replies, "Yes, Master Wolfgang!" while setting off.

Breathing heavily, Hans wills his body to stand at attention as Kohler looks him and his two friends over; after a moment, seemingly satisfied, the master-at-arms nods. "That's all for today. Dismissed, lads."

The air goes out of Hans as he sags to his knees, his legs suddenly unable to support him. Bert and Will are visibly relieved, too: the day's training has been particularly gruelling. Will extends a hand, and Hans gratefully accepts being pulled to his feet.

"One more thing before you go," Kohler says as the trio turns to leave.

"Yes, Master Wolfgang?" Bert asks; Hans would, too, but he's not quite caught his breath.

"I'm only going to say this once, so listen closely: in all the years I've spent training young men in the art of the sword, I can count on two hands the ones who've made me proud." Kohler demonstrates by raising his hands, fingers splayed. "You three are among them."

Hans starts in surprise, as do Will and Bert: they, too, are clearly astonished by the master-at-arms' words. "But... we can't be the best students you've had," Will objects.

"You're not. Not even close. You especially." Kohler points at Hans. "No offence meant, lad."

"No offence taken, sir," Hans replies.

"But a pupil being a good swordsman doesn't make a master proud. There are more important things than that."

Hans wants to ask what those more important things are, but he's warned off from it by the look in the master's eye; instead, he says, "Thank you, Master Wolfgang."

"This doesn't mean I'm going to go easy on you, mind. Now off you go, get some rest. I want you here on time day after tomorrow, or it's six laps of the courtyard instead of three."

Without waiting for their answer, Kohler spins on his heel and walks away. "Huh," Will says. "That was unexpected."

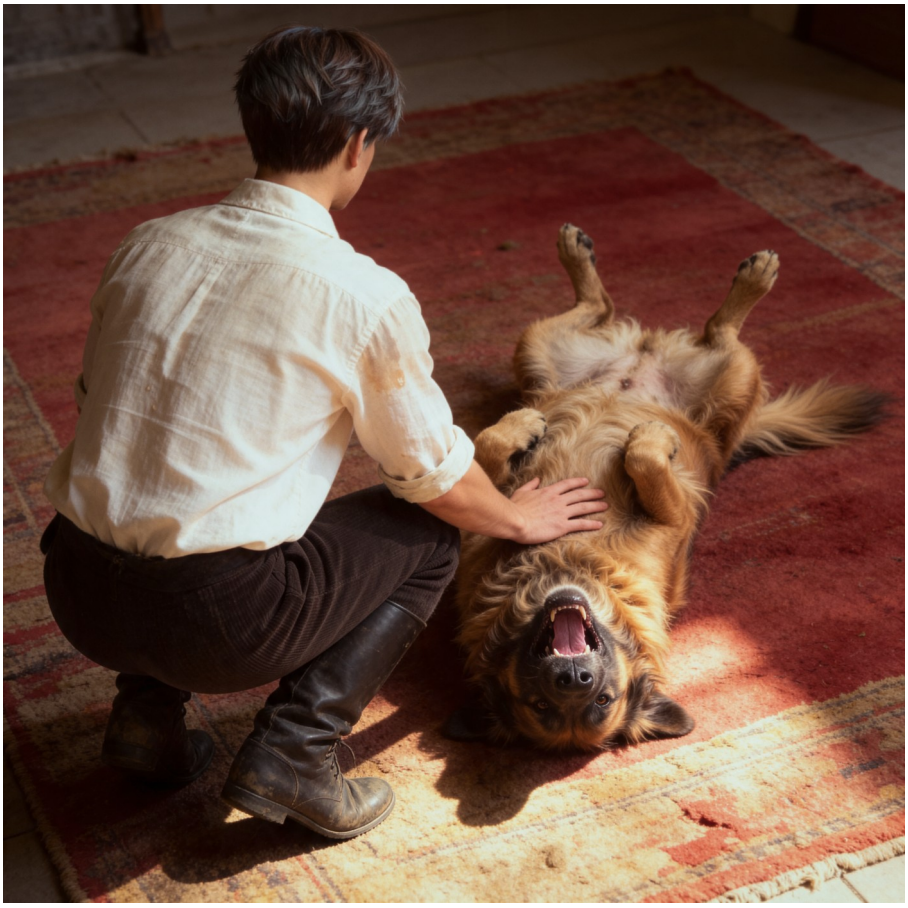
"It was," Bert agrees. "He always seemed grumpy and unapproachable when I met him as a child. But that could've just been me. I heard stories about him, mind, all of them bad, but but apparently he does have a soft side."

"Seems so. Man, I'm tired. Let's go back."

They make their way back inside the castle proper and up to the guest apartments they're occupying. When they arrive, they find Katrin, Gabriela, and Heloisa sitting in the main room, variously keeping busy: Heloisa and Gabriela are crocheting, while Katrin is reading a book.

"Welcome back," Heloisa says. "How did training go today?"

“It went well. It was tiring, as always,” Hans replies, crouching down to rub Perceval’s belly, to which the hound responds by wagging his tail. “But Master Wolfgang told us he’s proud of us.”



“And with good reason,” Heloisa smiles. “I’m proud of you, too, even if I don’t say it often.”

“Thank you, Mother,” Hans says, returning the smile.

“What’s for lunch?” Will asks. “I’m absolutely famished.”

“Lunch isn’t here yet, actually,” Gabriela says.

“Huh. That’s weird; usually food is on the table by the time we get back from training.”

“Usually, yes. But today they’re running a bit late.”

"I've asked one of the maids and she told me the Archduke is entertaining some guests," Katrin says. "Noblemen from the city, I think. And as a result, the servants and kitchens are absolutely swamped. The food is probably ready, it's just that there's no one on hand to bring it up."

"Why don't we do it, then?" Hans says. "We can go down to the kitchens and fetch the food ourselves."

"Really?" Gabriela says. "You don't mind?"

"I don't, really." Hans stands back up, Perceval complaining with a whine about the interruption in belly-rubs, and looks to Bert and Will. "Come on."

Bert makes a face. "Aw, do we *have* to? I'm tired. And it's not our job."

"It's not, but I'm sure the servants would appreciate it. They work hard all day, every day; if we can make life easier for them, why not do it?"

"Alright," Will says, smiling at Hans. "Let's go."

"Are you sure you don't mind?" Heloisa asks. "Katrin and Gabriela could do it."

"It's not their job, either. And besides, we're basically freeloading here, aren't we? Might as well make ourselves useful once in a while."

Heloisa smiles and nods, and then waves as Hans leaves their apartment once more with his friends. Will starts down the hallway, taking a few steps; then he stops, turning back. "Uh... do either of you actually know where the kitchens are?"

"I do," Hans and Bert says at the same time; they exchange a look, and Hans raises an eyebrow. "I've been trying to court a girl who works there," Bert explains.

Will purses his mouth. "Wait, weren't you courting a chambermaid? Tiffany? I remember us visiting her and her friends once."

"Different girl. Madeleine. Tiffany told me she wasn't interested, so I switched targets. What about you, Florian?"

"I...'ve been exploring," Hans says.

"On your own?" Will asks.

"On my own, yes," Hans replies. "I'm not with you all the time, Will."

"You've been wandering the castle without anyone guarding you?"

Hans realises his mistake when he sees the worry in Will's eyes. "No, I'm sorry, I misspoke. Katrin and Gabriela were with me."

"I still don't like it. It would be easy for someone to get to you if you're somewhere with lots of people you don't know without me and Bert being there."

"Oh, for the love of— Wilhelm!" Hans exclaims. "I'm fine! It's fine! Like I said, Gabby and Kat were with me, and you know what they're capable of, don't you? And besides, *who* would even get to me? The..." He looks around, suddenly conscious of the argument being witnessed; he lowers his voice, and continues, "The people who know me as anything but Florian can be counted on the finger of one hand. Nothing's going to happen to me, Will. Relax."

Will crosses his arms and gives Hans a glare which speaks volumes. Specifically, it says, 'I still don't like it when you're out of my sight.' But he doesn't voice his objections out loud, so the two of them just keep looking at each other in the eye until Bert clears his throat.

"Anyway," he says, "I'm getting hungrier by the minute, so can we go?"

It takes a moment, but Will nods. "Yes. Let's go."

Hans takes the lead, and they make their way along the hallway, soon veering off from their usual path to duck into a small door, half-hidden behind a curtain. They move through cramped hallways, and taking several turns, and after a few minutes emerge into the kitchens, where several cooks and servants are busy bustling here and there, looking very frazzled.

"Excuse me," Hans calls; he's ignored. "Excuse me!" he repeats, louder, and this draws the attention of one of the cooks, who looks up from his work, face streaked with sweat: with all the fires they have going, the room is very warm.

"Yes?" he asks.

"Is the midday meal for the guest apartments ready?"

The cook's eyes narrow. "Who're you?"

"Right, I don't think we've been introduced. We're currently residing there," Hans says, motioning to Will, Bert, and himself. "I'm Florian, the Archduke's nephew."

The suspicion disappears from the cook's eyes, and he pulls off the bandanna he has wrapped around his head, dipping down into a bow. "My apologies, sire, I didn't know," he says.

"No need for apologies," Hans replies. "We were just wondering if you need some help bringing the food upstairs. We could do that, since I see you're quite busy."

"You..." A pause. "You want to help us do our work?"

"We do," Hans nods. "Right?"

He prods Bert and Will, who nod, too. The cook is clearly very puzzled, but he nods back. "Everything's ready, sire, it's being kept warm. And you have my apologies for the

delay. It only needs plating." He points at a few pots and trays of food which are set just a bit away from the large fireplace that's roaring away near the far wall.

"Alright. Plate it, then."

The cook nods again before calling loudly for the kitchen maids, who hurry over — one of them meeting Bert's eye and smiling — and start distributing the food into plates. As they do so, Hans looks around, watching the activity unfolding in the room: everyone is quite busy preparing the food which will be then sent all over the castle, from the Archduke's chambers to the guardroom next to the gatehouse where the soldiers who watch who comes and go usually take their meal. And he realises just how little he knows of the common people's lives; he's been out of the castle into Salgen City, yes, but he's had no chance to see how they all go about an ordinary day. That would be something worth seeing, he muses.

He's shaken out of his thought when someone bumps into him. "Beg your pardon," a voice says.

"No worries," he says, turning around and locking eyes with Kristian.

Because it *is* Kristian, the young lad whose arm Katrin almost dislocated when Hans was on his outing with her and Gabriela: he's currently standing frozen on the spot, arms laden with pots and pans and other cooking implements, searching eyes looking carefully at Hans, examining him like an insect under a magnifying lens. Then recognition sparks in his eyes.

Kristian opens his mouth—

"Oh, hello, Kristian!" Hans exclaims, pre-empting him. "Fancy meeting you here!"

"Uh... hello?" Kristian says. "What—"

"But then again it's obvious I would find you here, isn't it?" Hans continues, trying desperately to not give the boy a chance to speak. "You work here after all, don't you?"

"Um. Yes. But—"

"Yes, of course, of course. How is everything going?"

"You know this lad, Florian?" Will asks.

"Of course I know him," Hans replies. "He's Kristian. He works here in the kitchen, I met him the last time I was down here. What do you do here again, Kristian?"

"I'm... a scullery boy," Kristian says.

"Good for you, good for you. Oh, look, I think our food is ready!" Hans points, and indeed the maids have finished preparing the plates and laid them on the trays. "Why don't we..."

He drifts off as he meets Kristian's eye again. No, Hans realises, he can't leave now: if he does, it will leave Kristian hanging, with a thousand questions and zero answers floating around in his mind; a recipe for disaster. What he must do is to speak with the lad — alone, of course — and hope he can convince him to keep his mouth shut.

"...why don't *you* go on ahead, Will? You too, Bert. I'll be along shortly."

Will gives him a surprised look. "You're not coming with us?"

"No, not yet. First, I want to talk with Kristian for a bit." He passes his arm over the shoulder of the astonished boy. "You know, catch up. It's been a while since we've seen each other after all, hasn't it?"



"It has?" Kristian says.

"Yes it has. Like I said, go on." Hans makes shooing motions with his hand. "Tell my mother I will be along shortly."

"Florian, you know what I think about this," Will says.

Hans theatrically sighs. "Wilhelm, really? Do we have to start the argument all over again?"

"No we don't," Bert says, pulling Will away. "Come on, Will."

Very reluctantly, Will picks up a tray and starts following Bert; it takes a bit more prodding on Bert's part, but finally, after several looks back at Hans, he steps out of the door.

Hans exhales a small breath. But the crisis isn't over yet, he has another fire to put out. "So." He looks to Kristian again. "Hello."

"Hello?" Kristian replies. "What just happened?"

"What is happening is that I need to speak with you, so if you'll just leave those," Hans gestures at the pots and pans Kristian is carrying, "somewhere and *come with me?*"

The last few words are growled between gritted teeth, and Kristian immediately realises they're not a request: he nods. Hans, arm still around Kristian's shoulder, guides him out of the kitchen and into the adjoining scullery, where they leave the dirty dishes, and then out of another door and down a corridor and into another room — a small wine cellar, looks like — where he closes the door and leans on it, putting himself between Kristian and the exit.

"What are you *doing* here?" Hans demands.

"I'm working," Kristian counters, defensively. "Obviously."

"Since when do you work here?"

"Since a few days ago. My sister's friend's friend said they needed some help here in the castle kitchens, they were a few hands short in the scullery, and here I am."

"Right."

"What are *you* doing here?" Kristian asks. "And why are you dressed like that?"

"Why am I..." Hans looks at the boy, puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"Why are you pretending to be a man?"

"I..." Hans frowns. " *What!?*"

"Yeah, I mean." Kristian gestures at Hans — at his clothes, presumably. "I heard that guy call you 'Florian,' and you're wearing trousers right now, and your face is bare rather than made up, but you're clearly not a Florian."

Hans is so astonished by Kristian's words that it takes him a few moments to respond. "...Well, I am," he says, barely keeping himself from sputtering in indignation. "My name is indeed Florian. I'm Archduke Ulrich's cousin. I mean nephew."

"Pull another one. I know what a woman looks like, milady."

"It's 'milord,' young man," Hans warns, feeling heat crawling up his neck and his hair standing up on end.



Kristian rolls his eyes. "Sure it is. And don't call me young man, you're not that much older than I am. Milady."

"You..." Hans raises a finger and points it at Kristian's face. "You sure have a smart mouth for someone who's an inch away from being thrown into the deepest dungeon this castle has to offer. Like I said, I'm related to the Archduke. I need only say the word, and I'll have guards here within the minute."

Kristian takes a step back. Crosses his arms. Narrows his eyes at Hans. "You're not going to do that."

"But I will."

"No you won't," Kristian counters, shaking his head. "When that other woman was about to break my arm, you could've let her. When she was about to call the city guard on me, you stopped her. If you were to have me clapped into irons, you'd have done that back then. But you didn't. You let me go. And you gave me a coin to buy food for my family." He shakes his head again. "You're not the kind of woman who has someone arrested for trying to steal a purse, and you're not the kind of woman who has someone arrested just because he knows her secret."

Hans wants to object, wants to protest, wants to tell Kristian that yes, actually, he is the kind of woman — wait, no, that kind of *man* — who would have a commoner arrested and thrown into prison and possibly executed just to keep her — *his* — secret safe, but the truth of the matter is, he just isn't. Many of the men he knows would do that, of course: Archduke Ulrich, certainly; Count Hoch, probably; Will and Bert, Hans has to grudgingly admit, possibly.

But Hans isn't like any of them. That's just something he can't find it in himself to do.

He sighs.

"Did you put that coin to good use, at least?" he asks.

"I did," Kristian says. "It fed us for a day and a half."

"Did it buy so little food?"

"Oh, no, it bought plenty of food. I just have a big family."

"Right." Hans exhales another breath. "Alright. Kristian, I know I really don't have any right to ask this, and I certainly can't force you, but please don't tell anyone you saw me out in the city? I'm not supposed to go out there."

Kristian tilts his head in surprise. "You're not? You said you're related to the Archduke, which makes you a noblewoman, doesn't it?"

"It does," Hans says, not bothering to correct Kristian about his gender.

"Why aren't you free to come and go as you please, then?"

"It's... complicated. I really can't explain. But again, please don't tell?"

"I won't."

"Really?"

"Really. I owed you for not having me arrested anyway, so let's call us even."

"Thank you."

Kristian inclines his head in acknowledgement. "Can I go back to work now? The head cook's already riding my arse about slacking off and I've been working here for just a few days. And I need this job. Big family, lots of mouths to feed."

"Of course." Hans steps away from the door, pulling it open, and Kristian makes to step outside; then he stops.

"I'm sorry, though, I don't think I've caught your name."

"You have. It's Florian."

"Is it?"

They exchange stares for a moment, then Hans sighs once again. "Florence."

Kristian's smirk is absolutely insufferable. "Pleased to make your acquaintance, Madame Florence," he says. "And if you ever want to sneak out of the castle again and need a guide to the town, I'm your man."

He gives Hans a mock salute and then walks off. Hans looks at him go, then shakes his head and heads back to his chambers.

"There you are," Will says when he walks through the door. "Is everything alright? It took you a while."

"Everything's fine, thank you, Will," Hans answers. "I'm sorry for being late, everyone. Kristian and I had lots to talk about."

"Kristian?" Heloisa asks.

"Scullery boy. I first met him a couple weeks ago," Hans says, and sees Katrin and Gabriela's eyebrows rise toward their hairlines in surprise, "and ran into him when we went down to the kitchens."

"Oh, then it was nice of you to stop and chat. Is he doing alright?"

"Yes, he's fine," Hans nods; then looking directly at the two ladies-in-waiting, he repeats, "He's fine."



Gabriela and Katrin both nod, almost imperceptibly, their heads making the tiniest motion up and down.

Heloisa smiles. “Good to hear. Well then, shall we eat?”