

The King's Delight

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Dedication

For Jen, who is to blame/thank for this whole thing. You're the best kind of bad influence.

Author's Note

The author has chosen to use UK English in this book.

ChapterOne

The man brandishing the staff was fast, but Felix was faster. He dodged the blow aimed at his midsection effortlessly, employing all the agility his lithe twenty-three-year-old frame possessed, but as he watched his opponent circle round again and saw the determined glint in the other man's eye, he knew that the time for finesse was past if he wanted to win. He ducked low and charged forward without warning, wrapping his arms around his opponent's waist and knocking him down before he had a chance to brace himself.

The man let out a grunt as his back hit the hard-packed dirt and his staff clattered to the ground, earning a whistle and a cheer from the members of the Royal Guard who had gathered to watch the pair spar. Felix forced the man's hands over his head and straddled his waist, pinning him in place. "Do you yield?" he demanded, his breath coming in short pants and the warm afternoon sun beating against the back of his neck.

His victim let out a low chuckle, his own breathing laboured. "I yield. Now for the sake of all that's holy, let me up. I'm too old to be lying in the dirt." His light

brown hair was threaded with silver and when he smiled, the lines in his face betrayed his age in a way his well-muscled physique didn't.

Felix grinned back and clambered up, standing and holding out a hand as those watching drifted away, leaving him alone with his father.

Janus Hobson grabbed hold and pulled himself to his feet, dusting himself off. "Good job, son. Any time you want to join the guard, there's a place for you."

Felix beamed at his father's approval. "Thanks, Dad. I still don't think the Royal Guard is the place for me, though."

"Are you sure? You'd be an asset."

Felix shook his head. "I was hired to work as the king's groom. That's what I'm trained for. I know you had dreams of me joining the guard and carrying on the family tradition but truly, I'd be terrible at it. I don't think I'm of the temperament to remain silent and keep watch over the royal arse."

His father gave a wry smile. "The correct term is His Majesty, King Leopold."

Felix shrugged. "You know I've never been good at observing formalities. Which is why, starting tomorrow, I have a job taking care of the royal horse's arse instead."

Janus snorted. "Maybe it's best if you can only offend the king's horse instead of the man himself." He reached up and ruffled Felix's hair like he was still a boy rather than a grown man, and Felix didn't begrudge him the gesture. "I'm sure you'll do very well as the king's groom, son. And your mother and I are proud of you."

Felix beamed. Even though he didn't exactly need his father's reassurance, he appreciated it. "As long as I remember which end needs the feed bag and which the shovel, I can't make too big a mess of it, surely?"

His father laughed, their shoulders bumping as they walked from the packed-dirt training grounds together. Their footsteps left little puffs of dust in their wake. "You spent four years in Fortescue apprenticed under their head groom, and then you worked alongside him for another two. You're more than fit to take the position of the king's groom here. If you still can't tell one end of a horse from the other, either you had a terrible teacher or the horses in Fortescue are very different from ours."

In truth, the years of training in Fortescue had been long and gruelling. When Felix had received the invitation to come back home and work in the castle stables, he'd been glad of the chance, but he wouldn't trade the experience he'd gained while he

was away. He truly did adore working with horses. He loved the magnificence of them—their sheer size and strength, the sleek muscles and glossy flanks, the wide eyes that seemed to stare into his very soul. Getting a horse to trust him and follow his commands always felt like a victory and a conspiracy all at once—he and his mount, joined in silent accord. He'd worked hard to learn as much as he could, and during his time in training, he'd taken every bit of advice given to him by other more experienced grooms, carving out a reputation for himself as an excellent horseman in the process.

An unexpected benefit of leaving Lilleforth had been the freedom of not being pigeonholed as “the captain of the guard's son” and having his actions reported back to his father. That alone had more than made up for the early mornings, backbreaking labour, and literal mountains of horseshit that he'd dealt with on a daily basis.

It had also meant that when he'd finally acknowledged it wasn't the cleavage on the kitchen maids that made his heart beat faster but the gentle curve of another stable boy's arse—which hadn't been *that* much of a revelation—he'd been free to explore the possibilities without worrying that someone would tell tales. Not that he'd thought his parents would mind, at least he'd *hoped* not, but a young man was entitled to some privacy, after all.

He'd gotten to explore those inclinations in all their glory a few months after he'd arrived in Fortescue as a fresh-faced lad of seventeen. Up until then he'd kept what he liked to himself, unsure how one even went about finding someone with the same desires as him. But that had changed when a visiting stable master had caught Felix's gaze lingering on the cut of his riding trousers a moment too long. The man had sidled up to him and, with a wink and a smile, invited Felix for what he'd called “a stroll in the meadow.”

There had been a meadow, certainly, but very little strolling. There *had* been a lot of rolling, some writhing, and a lot of desperate panting culminating in an absolutely spectacular buggering that had driven any thoughts of ever bedding a maid from Felix's mind forever.

By the time the stable master left Fortescue at the end of two weeks, Felix had learned a lot of things that had nothing at all to do with equine care, although there *had* been a riding crop involved one memorable evening. Felix had been both shocked and thrilled to discover that when it was a lover brandishing the crop, it was *nothing* like when his father had put Felix over his knee as a boy, and that in the bedroom, he relished the sweet slap of leather against his skin.

Felix took every opportunity to practice his new skills after that, and by the end of his six years in Fortescue, he was quite the expert when it came to giving and

receiving a good rogering—along with a spanking—whenever his favorite stable master came to visit.

One of the stable boys had even shed a tear when he said goodbye, and Felix would have been touched except for the fact that the lad had been cradling Felix's spit-damp cock when he'd whispered, "I'll miss you."

Yes, one could say his education in Fortescue had been thorough on all fronts.

As he walked now, shoulder to shoulder with his father as they crossed the cobbled courtyard of the castle, Felix found himself wondering if he'd be able to have the same kind of adventures here. Surely now that he was a grown man, there was no need for stories to be carried back to his father? It was part of the reason he hadn't joined the Royal Guard in the first place. He knew himself well enough to know that he'd itch and chafe under the weight of his father's benevolent supervision, no matter how well intentioned it was. At least working in the stables, he'd have a measure of freedom—unless the king was prowling around, of course.

Felix still had no idea whether the king rode or not. He didn't know whether he ever made his way to the stables or even what the man looked like up close. By design, Felix hadn't seen the then-crown prince, except in passing, since he'd been a boy of twelve and his father had still called him Flick. Felix's mouth had always run to trouble, and his parents had thought it wise for him to steer clear of all persons royal and potentially offendable after the time he'd failed to recognise the prince and inadvertently called him a stuck-up little tit. There had been a grudging apology and some grovelling, but after that, throughout his teenage years and beyond, Felix had made himself largely invisible where Prince Leopold was concerned.

Oddly enough, that hadn't prevented him from forging a kind of friendship with the prince's closest confidant, Mattias—Chancellor Allingdon—which was how he'd come to land the job as the king's groom. Felix was fairly certain that Mattias had forgotten that he had insulted Leopold long ago, although it was also possible that he remembered and had hired Felix because of it.

Still, Felix had no clue what kind of man he'd be dealing with. He hoped that the king wasn't a man who was cruel to his horses, or Felix might not be able to hold his tongue if he encountered it.

"Does Leo ride," he asked his father, "or does he only have a horse for the look of the thing?"

"It's *King Leopold*," his father said with a sigh, "or Your Majesty or sire, and you'd best not forget it."

“Well, obviously I’m not calling him Leo to his face, am I? If he’s like any of the other royals I met while I was away, he’s probably got a stick fair up the royal arse.”

Janus chuckled. “Oddly enough, he only has a stick up his rear end when it comes to the care of his horse. And in answer to your question, he’d ride every day if given the chance. He absolutely adores being on horseback. You and he are alike in that way, at least.”

Relief spread through Felix. A man who loved horses couldn’t be *too* much of an arse, surely? As long as Felix remembered his manners around him, he’d be fine.

As if reading his thoughts, his father patted his shoulder. “Keep a hold of your tongue and take good care of Blackbird, and you’ll get along fine.”

“Blackbird?”

“The king’s mount. She’s a gorgeous great thing, black as a raven and sweet as a nut, and he’s besotted with her. Guard that horse with your very life, son.” He hesitated. “Of course, when I say guard her with your life, I’m speaking as the captain of the guard. As your *father*, I say if someone wants to take her badly enough and you’re in danger, let them have her. The king can always get another mount, but I only have one son.”

Felix swallowed the lump in his throat. “Thanks, Dad. I’ll try and remember that if I encounter any vicious-looking horse thieves.”

“See that you do. I want to see you grow old, settle down, and find yourself a nice lass,” Janus said, and something about the way his eyebrows were raised made the comment feel very much like an invitation to tell his father the thing that Felix suspected he already knew.

He swallowed again. “About that...”

His father stayed silent, and Felix knew he was waiting, doubtless aware that Felix regarded silence as an enemy to be bludgeoned to death under the sheer weight of words.

“I don’t think I’m inclined to lovely lasses, actually.”

It wasn’t all *that* uncommon for like to be attracted to like, and most people didn’t seem to care what other people did in bed, but it wasn’t something Felix had ever explicitly shared with his father either. He stared at the ground as he walked, his chest tight.

Janus gave a noncommittal hum, and when he spoke there was no judgment in his tone. “I had wondered. A good-looking boy like yourself, living in a kingdom the size of Fortescue, yet your letters never once held any mention of romance.” Felix risked a sideways peek and found his father regarding him with a soft look. “It’s all right, son. You’re in good company.” Janus lowered his voice. “Royal company, if the stories are to be believed.”

Felix almost stumbled over his own feet at that. “How do you know that?” he asked, intrigued. “Has the king said—”

His father chuckled. “Nobody has said a word. The castle staff have been the very soul of discretion, as they always are when it comes to lovers. But I didn’t become the captain of the guard by failing to see what’s in front of my face. And the fact is the king has turned down seven marriage proposals from princesses in surrounding kingdoms in the past two years since he took the throne.”

“That doesn’t mean anything, though.”

“Not on its own, no. But very occasionally I’ve admitted young men to the castle for private meetings with His Majesty, and I do not believe that there is any business so urgent that it needs to be discussed in the king’s bedchamber at midnight.”

“There might be other reasons. Maybe it’s espionage and he’s meeting his spies.” Felix wasn’t sure why he found it so hard to believe that the king held the same inclinations as him, but even considering it made his heart flutter in his chest.

“Yes,” his father said drily. “Jim, the baker’s lad, is highly trained in espionage. That must be it.”

That startled a laugh out of Felix. They approached the small side door to the castle that led in through the wet room and laundry area to the kitchens. “Fine. Your explanation makes more sense.”

It was cool inside the stone walls, the shade a welcome relief from the midday sun, and Felix and his father both splashed cold water on their faces at the washbasins that were set on a wooden trestle for just that purpose. Janus wiped the sweat from the back of his neck with a damp cloth. “You keep what I’ve told you quiet, mind,” he said. “Not because it’s wrong, but because it’s nobody’s business but the king’s.”

Felix nodded. He *could* be discreet when the occasion called for it. Felix had no desire to jeopardise his father’s position by failing to hold his tongue. Besides, if anyone could appreciate the freedom a little privacy afforded, it was him. Still, he was glad he’d shared with his father today. It meant that if whispers *did* get back to

him about Felix bedding the occasional lad around the castle, at least his father wouldn't be too surprised.

"Are you moving into your cottage today?" His father's voice pulled him from his thoughts.

Felix nodded. "I'll finish moving my things after lunch and then spend the afternoon with the horses." Felix's new position as the king's groom came with his own small cottage adjacent to the stables, and after six years of bunking in shared quarters at Fortescue, he was looking forward to the privacy.

"And when are you meeting the king?"

Felix made a face. "Matty said—"

"You mean His *Excellency*—"

Felix rolled his eyes. "Fine! *His Excellency, Chancellor Mattias Allingdon*, says he'll arrange something next week, but that Leo—His *Majesty*, I'm *trying*, all right?—is snowed under for the rest of this week with some sort of quarterly meetings. But Matty also said there's no rush because Leopold won't have time to ride this week anyway."

His father was obviously fighting to hold back laughter. "You really do struggle with titles, don't you?"

"I swear, they'll be the death of me." Felix let out a frustrated sigh. "Maybe when I meet the king, I'll just nod and smile and stay silent."

His father did laugh then. "I'm remembering now why we kept you away from King Leopold when he was still only a prince." He patted Felix's shoulder in a comforting gesture. "Try not to worry, son. As long as you take good care of Blackbird, I suspect the king will forgive you anything. And Felix? It's good to have you back."

He pulled Felix into a rough hug, and Felix returned it wholeheartedly.

It was good to *be* back.

Felix was looking forward to settling into his new position, getting to know the horses and the other grooms, and being able to see his family more often than his previous annual visits to Ravenport had allowed.

And from a personal viewpoint, now that he was home for good, Felix was in a place to entertain the possibility of maybe finding someone for more than a casual stroll in the meadow. While he'd enjoyed sowing his wild oats over the past few

years, waking up next to a different body every morning was losing its thrill, and he was starting to yearn for something more than a fling.

Felix knew that, objectively, he was attractive. His past lovers had praised his long limbs and lean build, his honey-gold eyes and long lashes. There had even been a hasty, filthy ode composed by a lusty bard that sang the praises of his soft skin and thick, dark hair, and how perfect it was for tangling fingers in during a quick rut against a wall. He'd been told he had a mouth made for kisses and sin.

And that was all well and good, but surely there must be more? What he really wanted was to find someone with shared interests that went beyond the physical.

Surely, in a city the size of Ravenport, there must be at least one available man who'd find him attractive *and* intelligent, someone who would look past his surface good looks and see the person underneath...someone who was willing to while away more than a single evening with him? Perhaps there might even be someone who worked at the castle.

He could only hope.

Chapter Two

"Idon't *want* to." Leopold, King of Lilleforth, pouted and sat back in his ornate desk chair with a huff. He folded his arms across his broad chest just in case his long-suffering Chancellor Mattias was in any doubt about exactly how much Leopold didn't want to sit through an entire day of meetings. "They don't really care about what I have to say anyway. I'm just a figurehead in most of these matters. You know that."

Mattias gave a sigh, one that seemed to have been dragged directly from the soles of his boots, and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Exactly," he said in resigned tones that spoke of having had a similar conversation countless times before. "You're His Majesty King Leopold Augustus Salisbury, reigning monarch of Lilleforth. You're known for being approachable, a man of the people, who oversees his kingdom with a firm but fair hand. And you know very well that part of that is you personally overseeing the quarterly budget and administration meetings. So stop pouting, put your boots back on, and pretend you give a damn. They'll be here in ten minutes, and you'd better have stopped sulking like a stropky child by then and be prepared to give these people the attention that they need and deserve."

Leopold gave the man a narrow look but Mattias remained unmoved, as Leopold had known he would. His chancellor was his best friend and a necessary thorn in his side, and Leopold wouldn't be without him—except for times like this when Mattias insisted that Leopold fulfil his role properly.

It was many years since a seventeen-year-old Mattias Allingdon had found a lost fourteen-year-old Prince Leopold wandering the woods and returned him home, but Leopold still remembered it vividly. He'd thought that his rescuer had hung the moon, and it was also the first time he'd felt the stirrings of attraction for a boy—confirmation that while his future might hold a princess or a noblewoman, there was definitely room for dalliances with a dashing young man or two along the way.

And perhaps it had been selfish, but Leopold had begged—demanded, really, with all the arrogance of youth and privilege—that his father do something to keep his interesting new friend around.

And because Leopold was the prince, of course he'd gotten his own way. At least, that was what he'd thought at the time. Looking back now, he reflected that his father's acceptance of his demands had been far more calculated and pragmatic than he'd realised at the time.

Leopold's mother had passed away when he was only two, and he'd been raised by nannies and nursemaids for as long as he could remember, but at fourteen he'd been something of a handful—too old for the nursery, too young for court. So when he'd taken a shine to Mattias, his father, who had been grateful to have his wandering progeny returned in one piece, had seen an opportunity to keep his son in check while giving him the illusion of freedom. He'd offered Mattias a position as Leopold's companion, practically begging him to stay.

Mattias had jumped at the chance. It was some years later that he'd told Leopold he would have taken any opportunity to escape his drunken father and poverty-stricken home life.

And although their relationship had never developed into anything more than friendship, Leo and Mattias *were* friends, the two of them as thick as thieves. Upon finding that Mattias was both trustworthy and level-headed, Leopold's father had been thrilled and had put plans in motion for the boy's future.

Mattias had received further schooling as well as hand-to-hand combat training, and once he was proficient, he was appointed Leopold's personal bodyguard. The two boys had remained glued to each other's side as they grew older, getting each other into and out of trouble in equal measure. Mattias, though, was always the voice of reason, and thus had been steadily rising through the ranks in the years since. He'd been helped along by the education he'd received, which had encompassed all the areas of royal protocol, diplomacy, and strategic planning that

the future king's right-hand man might need to know, because the king was no fool.

Mattias was knighted on his twenty-first birthday at Leopold's request, and one of the first things Leopold had done upon ascending to the crown two years ago had been to appoint Mattias to the position of chancellor. There was nobody Leopold trusted more—which didn't make it any less irritating when Mattias was right.

Leopold gave his own sigh and bent down beneath the desk to wrestle his footwear back on, grumbling under his breath about power-hungry little upstarts. When he emerged from under the desk, Mattias looked him up and down before getting out of his chair and walking round to Leopold's side of the desk. He crouched in front of his king, straightening his collar and smoothing his hair until Leopold batted his hand away. "I assume you won't be wearing your coronet today?"

"You just said I'm a man of the people, so no," Leopold said, savouring the petty triumph. He hated his coronet—it was uncomfortable, and it felt like any sudden move would send it toppling—and found any excuse he could to avoid wearing it. It wasn't an argument he always won, but today it seemed he had the victory.

Mattias threw him a rueful smile. "As you wish. I'll go and see if they're ready for us, *Your Majesty*."

Leopold screwed up his nose at the use of his official title, but he knew why Mattias had done it. It was a gentle reminder that it was time to fall into his public persona, that of Lilleforth's all-knowing, benevolent king, rather than a thirty-two-year-old man who had no time for unnecessary pomp and ceremony, who would rather be out riding his horse, and who still grumbled whenever he had to wear his boots indoors.

Leopold huffed, fidgeted with his collar, and settled himself with his hands clasped loosely on his desktop, leaning slightly forward and giving every appearance of an interested, engaged leader. "Go on then, send them in."

The sooner they started, the sooner they'd be done, and if Leopold played his cards right, maybe he'd be able to persuade Mattias to go riding with him this afternoon.

* * *

Several endless hours later Leopold watched the retreating back of his housekeeper, and when he was sure she was gone and the door had closed behind her, he let out a groan and slumped forward, his head hitting the desk with a loud thunk. "Are we done?"

“We’re done.”

He didn’t need to look up to know that Mattias was rolling his eyes.

“Thank the gods,” Leopold said with a sigh, lifting his head. He hated the quarterly review meetings, even though he knew they were necessary. “I’ve never been so bored in all my life. Why do I even need to know how many pounds of flour we’ve used this month? I feel like I’ve been in this office for days—no, *weeks*. Maybe I’ll go riding, get some fresh air.”

Mattias nodded. “I’m not free, but let me arrange a squadron of guards and—”

“Nooooooooo, not with the guards, it’ll be no fun.” Leopold’s head thunked against the desk again. “Ow.”

Mattias snorted. “That’s what you get for being dramatic.”

Leopold narrowed his eyes. “Are you showing disrespect to your king, Chancellor?”

“Definitely, Majesty,” Mattias said, plopping down in the chair opposite Leopold and extending his long legs to drop his feet on the desk. The *royal* desk. “Are you planning to do anything about it?”

“I might,” Leopold grumbled, but they both knew it was a lie. Mattias was his best friend, and Leopold would be lost without him. *Still*, Leo thought, *he could at least pretend to have some sort of respect*. “Are you sure I can’t go for a quick gallop by myself?” he asked, hoping against hope.

“If you ride, you need guards, Leo,” Mattias said, arching an eyebrow. “Riding alone is too risky.”

“But if I take the guards, it won’t be a ride, it’ll be a *show*, and all the little sycophants will crowd around and I’ll have to walk my horse sedately and *behave*,” Leopold grumbled, that long-buried spoiled teenager rearing to the surface for a moment. He just wanted to ride—to race across green grass, breathe deeply and get some fresh air in his lungs, and feel the wind in his hair. It didn’t seem like too much to ask. “Why can’t I go alone just this once? A ride will relax me after the morning I’ve had.”

“Yes, because an assassination attempt is always a soothing way to spend an afternoon,” Mattias said drily.

“I’m the king. I could order you to let me ride.”

“You could, certainly. But I’ve grown somewhat fond of you over the years, and I’d rather not see you murdered. No guards, no ride.” He gave Leopold a look that dared him to disagree.

Leopold sighed, shoulders slumping, and dropped his head back onto the desk, more gently this time. After a moment he turned to find Mattias watching him, wearing the smug air of someone who had won their latest battle. “Anyway, what do you mean you’re *somewhat* fond of me?” he muttered. “You adore me as your king, surely?”

Mattias grinned, showing even white teeth. “As your subject? I’m devoted to you. As your friend who’s known you for over half your life? You’re tolerable—when you’re not being a stubborn arse.”

“I should have sent you back to your father as a teenager,” Leopold muttered.

“And I should have left you crying in the woods when you were a lost brat, yet here we are.”

Leopold made a show of rolling his eyes, but he couldn’t help his smile at the familiar teasing. His and Mattias’s bickering had long since had any sharp edges smoothed out through years of affectionate repetition.

Mattias took his feet off the desk and sat up straight. “As your chancellor *and* your friend, I’d advise that you get started on that pile of official correspondence. I’m fairly certain there are several marriage proposals in there, and if you ignore them for much longer, the senders will start to assume that the lack of a no indicates an acceptance.”

Leo screwed up his nose. “Why do other kingdoms *insist* on throwing princesses at me? They must know I’m going to say no by now.”

“They *throw princesses at you* because not only does Lilleforth have a port and coastal access, but you also hold strategic alliances with the other two most powerful kingdoms on the continent. The royal advisors assume that you’ll have to marry eventually, so it makes sense that they might as well put their candidate forward and hope for the best. Besides,” he added, “you’re not unattractive.”

That much, Leopold knew, was true. He’d been blessed with a pleasant countenance that featured piercing blue eyes, a strong jaw, a fine, straight nose, and thick, glossy hair that was so black it almost looked blue in the sunlight. Leo had no desire to be one of those squat, round kings, and so he made certain to keep himself fit. He spent time outdoors riding, training with the guards, chopping wood, and lifting bales of hay in the stables, which resulted in a well-muscled

physique, and he was justifiably proud of it. It was certainly effective when wooing an attractive lad.

Still, he felt vaguely annoyed at his physical attractiveness being used as a selling point. “I feel like a prize steer on the auction block,” he grumbled.

“And you think those poor girls don’t? Just imagine the indignity of being presented as a marriage candidate and knowing you’ll be refused, just because your potential husband is also the realm’s most confirmed bachelor.”

“That’s you, surely?” Leopold teased.

Mattias quirked a crooked smile. “My reasons for not taking a bride are quite different to yours, as you well know. The woman I marry needs to be extraordinary, purely because when she marries me, she gets *you* by proxy—and you’d stretch any wife’s patience.” He ran a hand through messy golden hair that was showing the barest hint of silver at the temples.

“Have I mentioned your total and utter lack of respect today?”

“Several times. Have I mentioned that you really must deal with that correspondence?” Mattias stood and stretched, making himself appear even taller than he already was, and walked toward the door. “And *no riding*.”

It was almost as if he thought Leopold couldn’t be trusted.

“Fine,” Leopold muttered. “I’ll do the paperwork. But I don’t want to see anyone for the rest of the day.”

Mattias gave Leopold a nod, pausing with one hand on the door handle. “We can go riding tomorrow, just the two of us,” he conceded. “I’ll make time.”

“Not today?” Leopold gave his best wide-eyed look, the one that had persuaded a variety of young men to come tumbling into his bed over the years.

Mattias ignored it, immune after half a lifetime. “Not today. I have work to do, and you have far too much correspondence to ignore it any longer. It won’t kill you to wait until tomorrow.”

Easy for him to say.

After Mattias had taken his leave, Leopold heaved a resigned sigh and flicked through the important but mind-numbing paperwork that was stacked on his desk in an accusing pile.

There were, indeed, several proposals. They weren't *presented* as proposals, of course. There was an etiquette to these things. One was an invitation to a ball in a neighbouring kingdom to celebrate the princess's coming of age, and one was a letter informing him that Princess Sophia, heir to the throne of Evergreen, was traveling his way. It came with an invitation to host her and her retinue for a week while she passed through Lilleforth, which of course came with the unspoken assumption that Leopold would host a banquet for his royal guests.

Leopold tipped his head back and gave a long exhale. Turning down the first invitation was easy enough, but the second one was trickier. He had no good reason to refuse visitors, and it would be nothing short of a slap in the face not to host an event to welcome his guests. Leo had to hand it to whoever was in charge at Evergreen; they were clever. It looked like just this once, Leopold might have to actually meet the princess he was planning on rejecting.

Princess Sophia was older than many of the princesses who sought to court Leopold, having reached her mid-twenties unwed. She had a reputation for dismissing her suitors out of hand, much like Leopold did. He could only assume that, also like him, she was under pressure to find a suitable partner—and Leopold was eminently suitable, even if he did say so himself.

Leopold put the letter to one side to discuss with Mattias later.

He ploughed through half the pile of correspondence, but his heart wasn't in it and his concentration wandered. Eventually, after reading the same paragraph four times and failing to make head or tail of it, he threw down the document and stood, pacing up and down restlessly as he ruminated on the unfairness of it all. He was the head of the *entirecountry* and perfectly capable of looking after himself, yet here he was confined to the castle and forced to write letters as if he were a naughty child with unfinished lessons.

Well, he'd never stayed in his rooms for lessons when he was a child either, and the one time he *had* gotten lost, it had turned out perfectly fine. Better than fine, even, because he'd gotten Mattias out of it.

Did a king *really* need permission from his chancellor to go riding on his own lands?

No, Leopold decided. He didn't.

He was the king, and he didn't need permission or guards just to go out for an hour or two and clear his head. If he wanted to go riding, he'd go, regardless of what that mother hen Mattias had to say about it.

Still, he made sure the coast was clear before he slipped out of his office.

Chapter Three

Felix wiped the sweat from his brow with a rag, rolled his neck, and then tipped the last two buckets into the horse troughs, which were now filled with fresh, clear water. The stone sides had been scrubbed clean, and they were free of all traces of the slime and muck that inevitably gathered.

“Since when does the king’s groom take care of the troughs? That’s what the lads are for.”

Felix turned to find the stable master, Mother Jones, leaning against the fence and watching him with a raised eyebrow. Mother—there’d been some sort of a mix-up on his birth certificate, apparently—was somewhere in his late forties, all long and lean and whipcord muscle that spoke of a lifetime of hard work. He had been the stable master for approximately forever and Felix had fond memories of his own time as a junior stable hand working under the man.

It was Mother who, at Mattias’s request, had arranged for Felix’s placement in Fortescue. The man was devoted to his horses and good at his job, although it seemed that wrangling their newest hire, Davin, was proving to be something of a challenge. Davin often disappeared for hours at a time, and no matter how often he was told an honest day’s work wouldn’t kill him, he didn’t seem inclined to take the risk.

Felix shrugged. “I’ve already taken care of Blackbird and Shadow and the water was getting low. Ollie’s out working with the yearling and Davin’s wandered off again, so it was easier to do the job myself than try and track the little bugger down.”

Mother threw his head back and gazed at the heavens as if praying for strength. “Slack little shit. When I find him, I’m sending him to you, and you can give him something to do that’ll make him regret dodging his duties.”

Felix grinned. “I’m sure there’s a pile of shit somewhere that needs shovelling.”

Mother’s answering smile showed off crooked teeth. “There’s always shit that needs shovelling.”

“I recall a pile that Davin was meant to move the day before yesterday, and it’s been uncommonly warm,” Felix said, “so it should be properly ripe. He can start with that.”

Mother hummed and gave a nod. “I swear, that boy doesn’t seem to know one end of a shovel from the other, but I’m sure with enough practice he’ll figure it out.”

Technically Felix held no power over the stable boys, but in practical terms, he was the king’s groom, and the position carried an innate sort of authority. On Felix’s first day there, Mother had told the lads that they were to obey any orders from Felix as if they came from Mother himself. Then he’d told Felix to feel free to give the lads a clip around the ears if he caught them shirking.

Felix had nodded, even though he had no intention of clipping any ears—well, not unless it was really and truly deserved.

Hells, it wasn’t that he didn’t understand the desire to slack off. It didn’t seem that long since he was sixteen himself, and he’d been guilty of sneaking away for the afternoon more than once. The difference between him and Davin, though, was that he’d always, always made sure he’d completed his tasks first. Then again, Davin was barely fifteen, and it wasn’t that he was lazy so much as he was easily distracted, and as Mother had mentioned, he genuinely seemed clueless. Felix was confident that, given time and enough shovelling, they’d get Davin to realise that the animals were reliant on him for their basic needs, and that would motivate him to do his job.

At least nobody was relying on the stable lads to take care of the king’s horse—that job was Felix’s alone, and he did it gladly.

Based on the last few days, he could see himself settling into his role well enough. His cottage was well appointed, far nicer than anywhere he had stayed in Fortescue, he got along with Mother and the lads, and best of all, in Felix’s opinion, was the bond he was starting to build with the king’s horse, Blackbird.

The king’s mount had her own separate stable which she shared with Shadow, the grey gelding who was her companion horse and who had taken a liking to Felix immediately. The feeling was mutual.

It hadn’t been quite as easy with Blackbird, but after several days spent getting acquainted, Blackbird seemed to have accepted Felix as someone to be trusted, and now her head lifted and she let out a happy sound whenever Felix came into view. Of course, her affection could have been based purely on the fact that he always made sure to bring her an apple or a carrot when he came to see her, but Felix liked to think that she recognised him as a man of good character rather than just a source of treats.

Blackbird really did have a sweet nature, as Felix had discovered when taking her out in the mornings for her exercise. The first time he'd ridden her he'd been...not nervous, exactly, but aware that their relationship was new, so he'd made sure to start off slow, walking her sedately across the cobbled courtyard and giving her the chance to get a feel for the weight of him. But when they'd left the castle compound and she'd caught sight of the green fields in front of her, she'd huffed once, a shiver of restrained impatience running through her, and he'd *known* that she wanted to run.

Once he'd let her have her head, she'd proved an absolute joy to ride—fast, certainly, but also responsive, allowing Felix to guide her along the worn tracks that ran through the long grass without pulling on the reins even once. It was then that Felix had decided that if staying in His Majesty's good graces meant sometimes getting to ride Blackbird, then even if upon meeting the king he discovered him to be an absolute twat, he'd still be on his politest behavior.

In truth, Felix was somewhat surprised that he hadn't seen the king yet. His father had assured him that Leopold loved to ride, but it had been a week and Felix still hadn't met him. Although there *were* those quarterly reports that Mattias had told him about, so maybe it wasn't so surprising.

And it did mean that he had the pleasure of riding Blackbird most mornings. They'd started to go farther afield, and as far as Felix was concerned there was no more invigorating feeling in the world than galloping over open ground and through wooded trails with the crisp morning air fresh on his face as he rode for long miles, only turning back when the sun rose higher in the sky and Blackbird slowed to a trot, letting him know that she was ready to go home. Felix didn't know how the king could own such a wonderful beast and not ride her every single day.

"His Majesty must be itching to go for a ride by now," Mother said, as though reading his thoughts.

"Oh?" Felix patted at the damp skin of his arms with some rough towelling before draping it over the wooden railing enclosing the yard.

"Aye. He doesn't normally go this long without getting a leg over."

Felix smirked and raised an eyebrow. "Is that so? I'd heard stories."

"His *horse*, without getting a leg over his *horse*." Mother sputtered, and Felix laughed. "Little shit." Mother threw a wet rag at Felix, who caught it, still laughing.

It did remind him of something he'd meant to ask about, though. "Is it true what they say about the king?"

"Well, it depends," Mother said with a wry smile. "Are you talking about the rumour that His Majesty is smarter than he lets on and has a plan for every circumstance, or the one where he's nothing but a pretty man with an empty head and the chancellor's the one who runs the kingdom? Maybe you mean the tale that he'll bed anyone with a pulse—or perhaps that he's never been kissed?"

"Oh." Felix hadn't realised there was such a selection. "Um..."

It was Mother's turn to laugh. "There's not a king born who doesn't have tales told about him. But I feel that you *actually* mean the one where he prefers a fine manly chest and a set of bollocks to a buxom wench?"

Felix swallowed. "That...yes."

"I don't know about the other stories, but that one has some truth to it. He's discreet about it, but he's had a lover or two over the years. And he's charming enough that he doesn't have any trouble finding willing bedmates." He gave a soft smile. "Truth be told, I'm rather fond of His Majesty, even if he can be an arse at times."

Felix sighed as he leaned against a stable door and folded his arms over his chest. "You call him an arse, yet you insist on using his title."

"Aye, well. It's about respect, isn't it? It's important, showing the proper respect." Mother ducked his head in a tiny bow, and Felix wasn't sure he even knew he was doing it. "He's the *king*, after all."

"Even if he's an arse?"

"Even if he's *sometimes* an arse," Mother said. He tilted his head. "You must remember the king, lad. You grew up here."

He shrugged. "Let's just say that given my mouth's tendency to run on, after I insulted Leopold once, it was decided that it was in my best interests not to be wherever he was. I haven't seen him since I was twelve."

"Ah," Mother said, eyes sparkling with mirth. "You called him names, I remember now. I'd forgotten that."

"Let's just hope he has as well," Felix said as they both walked into the stable. "Hopefully, he won't recognise me as the boy who insulted him."

Mother hummed. “You look nothing like the skinny little whelp you were as a child. I think you’re safe.”

“I was not a skinny little whelp!”

“You were,” Mother said with a grin. “You were built almost entirely of elbows and ribs.” He looked Felix up and down, appraising. “Not anymore, though. You’ve grown into a fine young man. If I were you, I’d take advantage of that and find yourself some company in the evenings. I’m sure there are plenty who’d be willing to help you sow your wild oats.” Mother’s smile widened. “Oh, that’s a good one! Oats, right? Because you’re a groom.” He prodded a nearby sack of feed with his boot just in case Felix had missed his meaning. “Oats, right? Feed?” He might have carried on in that vein indefinitely, but his attention was caught by something outside the door, and the next minute he was striding across the stable and out into the yard, bellowing as he went. “*Davin!* Where the blazes have you been?”

As the sound of shouting and Mother’s boots on the cobblestone receded, Felix fiddled idly with a set of reins that were looped over Blackbird’s stall and thought about what Mother had said. The problem was he didn’t *want* to sow any more wild oats. He’d done plenty of that. No, he was ready for something more settled in his life. But it wasn’t like someone was just going to fall into his lap, was it?

Perhaps he should just be satisfied with his casual liaisons for now. After all, he was good-looking enough and could be charming when the occasion called for it, and there was no denying that he was a talented lover. What was a one-time thing for him might turn out to be the night of his partner’s life, and really, it would be churlish of him to keep his talents to himself when there was an entire city of men out there, at least some of them desperate for cock.

Besides, Felix *did* love a tumble in the sheets, and he suspected he’d miss it if he gave it up completely. Maybe he’d continue to sow his oats after all, and if he was lucky, what started as a casual dalliance might grow into something more.

He just had to find a willing soul to dally with.

He was pulled from his thoughts by the movements of a slow-moving figure slinking across the yard—and whoever this was, they *were* slinking. They had a battered, wide-brimmed hat pulled down low over their face and they were progressing at a snail’s pace, pressing their back against any available wall and pausing before almost gliding to the next bit of wall.

Felix stood out of sight inside the stable doors and watched, intrigued. Was it a spy? An assassin? Someone sneaking away to meet a lover? Or was this just an adult version of Davin, someone skiving off from his duties? Whoever it was, as

they got closer, Felix was able to make out that it was a grown man, tall and well-built, and his attention was captured by the man's deliciously thick neck. Despite his face being obscured, Felix felt drawn to the stranger, enchanted by both his solid musculature and his almost feline manner of gliding forward.

Perhaps it was because he'd just been thinking about such things, but Felix couldn't help but wonder if the man would make the same lithe, catlike movements if Felix were to take him to bed and whether he'd crawl up the mattress while wearing a wicked smirk. He poked his head out the door a fraction to see better in the hopes of catching a glimpse of the stranger's face, and it was then that he realised the man was heading straight for the stables.

He ducked back inside, mind racing. Should he clatter about a bit to make his presence known and give him the chance to change course? Or should he stay hidden and see what he was up to?

Really, Felix already knew what he'd do—he'd always been the curious sort. He slipped back inside and hid in the shadows of the empty stall that was next to Blackbird's. If the stranger intended mischief, he'd be in an excellent position to put paid to his plans and put all that training with his father to use. And if his intentions were more innocent, and it was just someone coming to take a break from his daily routine?

Well, the man in question *did* have marvellously broad shoulders, and Felix had more than fulfilled his own duties for the day. Perhaps, if the stranger was agreeable, he could offer him an afternoon's entertainment.

It couldn't hurt to ask.

Chapter Four

Leopold slipped across the yard towards the stables. The homespun shirt that he'd filched from a pile in the laundry room was rough against skin that was more used to soft linen. He ignored the itch. It was a small price to pay for being able to move unseen through the castle.

He wasn't so foolish as to think he wouldn't be seen, but he'd done all he could to make himself unmemorable. He'd acquired a long leather coat from a hook on the back of the boot room door that trailed almost to the ground and hid most of his well-cut trousers—there was a limit to which garments belonging to strangers he was willing to wear, after all. He'd also worn his good riding boots in anticipation

of being able to take Blackbird out, but once he'd hidden his distinctive dark hair with a battered hat that might have belonged to one of the gardeners, he was satisfied that a casual observer, at least, wouldn't mark him as anyone important.

After picking his way across the stretch of distance between the laundry room and the stable, flattening himself against any available wall and checking that Mattias wasn't lying in wait for him as he sometimes did, he made it safely to the stables. He slipped inside and stood with his body pressed flat against the door, eyes adjusting to the dim interior. There was nobody in sight and he took a moment to inhale, the tension leaving him as his nostrils filled with the rich, familiar scents of fresh straw, horse sweat, and the undercurrent of dung. He sometimes wished he'd been born into a life like this rather than one of duty and expectation. But the thought was only ever fleeting and usually a result of petulance at being denied his own way. In reality, for all his grizzling, he was aware of his privileged position and knew that plenty of people would gladly trade places.

Besides, if he wasn't the king, he doubted he'd have a gorgeous girl like his Blackbird.

He approached the horse, admiring the state of her glossy black coat and well-brushed mane and tail. Whoever the new groom was, they knew what they were about. Leopold resolved to make time to meet them, if only so he could charm them into turning a blind eye when he wanted to sneak out like this. Mother Jones, his ridiculously named stable master, had standing instructions to send a boy to inform the chancellor, much to Leopold's chagrin.

Blackbird tossed her mane in recognition and Leopold petted her, running the flat of his palm along her cheek. "Hello there, pretty," he murmured. "Shall I take you for a ride?"

The horse nickered in agreement and blew out a great wet breath, turning her head and nuzzling hopefully against his hand. Leopold fed her the sugar lump he was hiding there and patted her cheek again before going to fetch his saddle. It was a bulky, heavy thing. Under normal circumstances he would have sent word and Blackbird would have been prepared for him by his groom, but Leopold had always prided himself on his fitness and it was no problem for him to lift the saddle from the rack where it was kept and carry it across the stables to Blackbird's stall. He was almost there when, from the darkness, a voice rang out.

"Tell me, have you a death wish?"

Leopold fumbled the saddle, almost dropping it, and whirled on his heel to find himself facing someone he'd never seen before. "What?"

A young man stood there, arms folded across his chest. He nodded at the saddle. “I only ask because that’s the king’s saddle, which makes me think you were about to steal the king’s horse, and he won’t take kindly to that.”

Leopold took a moment to look his accuser over before replying. The young man was tall, lean but not lanky, and he had messy dark hair and expressive features that were marked by a determined crease between his brows. He was undeniably attractive beneath the frown.

This must be Blackbird’s new groom, and he obviously had no idea who Leopold was. “Let me guess. You’re the groom, and you’re loyal to your king?” he said, secretly pleased at finding someone who was a devoted subject.

“What? Hells no. I don’t give a damn about the king. But I’ve been warned that there’s a stick jammed fair up the royal arse when it comes to his horse, and I’d like to keep my job past the first week. So if you could find a different horse to steal, or better still take none at all, I’d appreciate it.”

Leopold raised an eyebrow. “And if I insist on taking this one?”

“Oh, then I’ll definitely hunt you down and hurt you,” the young man said without a trace of a smile. “It’s my job.”

Leopold let out a disbelieving snort, vaguely insulted that his impressive physique wasn’t giving the young man so much as a moment’s pause. “You think that *you* could hurt *me*?” He puffed out his chest. “I could bend you in half over that tack table and not even break a sweat doing it.”

Leopold only realised what he’d said when a slow smile spread over the young man’s face and his gaze travelled up and down Leopold’s body in a manner that was both disconcerting and flattering and made Leopold’s heart beat faster. “I’m sure you could, and with all that muscle of yours, I’d probably rather enjoy it. But bending me over the tables aside, I still can’t let you take the king’s horse, I’m afraid. Although you are rather handsome. Leave the horse and I might be persuaded to let you go if you win my favour.” The groom’s smile widened, and his eyes sparkled with mischief.

Leopold was torn between being offended by the young man’s assertion that he had a stick up his arse and intrigued by his proposition—because it definitely *was* a proposition, judging by the way the groom appeared to be waiting for an answer. He decided to play along, the thrill of anonymity making him bold. “And how, exactly, would I win your favor?” he asked, lifting the saddle and hefting it over the rail of the stall while noting the way the young man’s gaze followed his flexing muscles. He took a step so they were almost within touching distance, folded his arms over his chest in a way that displayed his build to best advantage, and waited.

The groom's tongue traced over his lower lip at the same time his gaze continued to roam over Leopold's body, his interest obvious. "I'm just saying that perhaps you could return that saddle, and instead of riding the horse, we could find another way to fill your afternoon and get your heart racing."

Oh, this was tremendous.

His new groom was *seducing* him. This was the most fun Leopold had had in ages, and if he played his cards right, it might just get better. He smirked and stepped up so close that they were almost toe to toe, placing himself firmly in the lad's space. It had been far too long since anyone had captured his interest like this fearless, forward little brat who was making his blood heat and want thrum through his veins in a way that he had sorely missed. "Are you suggesting a roll in the hay, sweetheart?" he purred, right into the lad's ear.

A deep flush rose on the boy's cheeks, the high colour only adding to his attractiveness, and Leopold desperately wanted to take him to bed, get his hands all over that lean frame, and make him blush for other, filthier reasons.

He had a moment of disappointment when the lad shook his head. "I would *never* suggest a roll in the hay." But then the boy smirked and said, "Everyone knows hay's far too scratchy. But there's a decent bed in my cottage if you're interested."

"Oh, I'm interested if you are," Leopold breathed out, sliding a hand around to the small of the lad's back.

The groom's breathing hitched and his eyes widened before he leaned in and kissed Leopold without warning. Leopold, heady with excitement and ever-growing arousal, kissed him right back. He found himself swept up in the way the young man's mouth moved against his expertly, their tongues brushing, and the warmth of the lad's hand where it came to rest on the nape of his neck and settled there. They kissed until Leopold was breathless, and when the groom pulled back, he was grinning, eyes bright and lips ruby red and plump.

Leopold wanted nothing more than to ruin him.

He gripped the lad's hips, pulling him closer and murmuring, "Tell me, do you have a name? I need to know what to call the man who's seducing me, surely?"

"Felix," The boy breathed out. "It's Felix."

"Felix." Leopold rolled the name on his tongue like a rich port, tasting it.

"And you?" Felix asked, raising an eyebrow. Leopold's mind blanked for a second. "Or do horse thieves not have names?" Felix's mouth quirked upward.

“I—uh—Leopold,” he stammered. It had been so long since anyone had asked him who he was, it honestly didn’t occur to him to give anything but his real name.

“Oh, so because you share a name with the king, you thought you could share his mount as well?” Felix’s grin widened.

“My father was a staunch royalist,” Leopold said. It wasn’t a lie.

He slid his hands around from Felix’s hips, letting them roam up and down his back, exploring all that lean muscle and promise. When he squeezed ever so gently at that perfect peach of an arse, Felix let out a tiny whimper before surging forward and pressing Leopold back against the door of Blackbird’s stall. He plastered their bodies together and kissed him again, hungry and demanding, and Leopold’s cock stirred and thickened in his trousers.

Felix slid a hand between them and rubbed at the growing bulge there. “It seems someone’s agreeable to an afternoon delight.”

Leopold’s knees threatened to buckle as something like lightning coursed through him at the intimate touch—which was patently ridiculous, he was the *king* for heaven’s sake—but somehow Felix had managed to bewitch him. He couldn’t say he minded. It had been a long time since he’d been this attracted to another man.

“Won’t you get in trouble for deserting your post?” he asked, even as he rocked against Felix’s hand. “After all, you’re supposed to be guarding the royal mount.”

Felix’s answering grin was a mischievous thing that Leopold wanted to lick out of his mouth. “Technically, I’m detaining a potential thief. And I’ve had no word that the king will ride today, so we shouldn’t be disturbed. So, what do you say?”

“Hmmm.” Leopold wrapped his arms around Felix’s neck and leaned in for another longer kiss. “Yes,” he said once they parted. “You’ve convinced me to leave the horse alone and take a different sort of ride.”

Felix let out a warm, rich laugh, then cupped Leopold’s erection once again and caressed him through the cloth, the sensation so delicious that Leopold whimpered. Felix pulled back and took his hand away and Leopold was at once bereft, but it turned out that Felix had only moved so that he could steer them into the empty stall and give them more privacy.

Once there, he cupped Leopold’s face in his hands and kissed him, soft and delicate, and the confidence of his movements gave the impression that Felix knew exactly what he was doing and would likely prove an excellent cocksman. Leopold certainly hoped so, since it had been far too long since his last assignation. He slid his hands down Felix’s back and slipped one hand under the hem of his shirt and

back up, skating his fingertips over Felix's ribs and soaking up the feel of bare skin under his touch. Felix moaned against his mouth and ground forward, his cock a hard line as he rocked against the bulge in Leopold's trousers and pulled the collar of his shirt aside, peppering little kisses along his collarbone.

Leopold tilted his head to the side to allow better access, rutting forward against Felix's cock and savouring the frisson of arousal that ran through him. "Can I fuck you, Felix?" he murmured.

"Please, Leo." Felix's breath was warm against the damp skin where the ghost of his kisses lived.

"Oh, it's *Leo* now, is it? That seems awfully familiar." Leopold was aware how ridiculous he sounded given what they were currently doing, but he was having *fun*. He hadn't met anyone so delightfully disrespectful in a long time, and he intended to make the most of it.

"Well, I can't exactly call you Leopold, can I?" Felix said, pulling back and running a hand through his hair. "Leopold is the *king*, whereas Leo is a very sexy horse thief I met in the stables. If you insist on me calling you Leopold, I'm afraid I'll have to call the whole thing off." He took another step back and stood in an insouciant slouch, one hand perched on his hip with an eyebrow raised in silent challenge.

Delightful.

"I've always felt Leo had a nice ring to it," Leopold said, right before he grabbed Felix by his shirtfront and swung him around so that his back hit the wall of the stall hard enough that the timbers shook. Felix sucked in a sharp breath and his eyes darkened. He reached a hand out and fumbled with Leo's belt, and Leo's cock throbbed in anticipation of Felix's touch. Behind them, the horse whinnied loudly and hooves clattered as Blackbird moved about, and then her head came into view and she nuzzled at the side of Felix's head. He let go of Leo's belt and, laughing, shoved at her head.

Leo huffed in frustration. "Not now, Blackbird."

Felix froze against him at the same moment Leopold realised his mistake.

"What did you call her?" Felix stepped to one side so he was out of Leopold's reach and tilted his head, his eyes flicking up and down as if seeing him for the first time before settling on the expensive leather riding boots that Leopold was wearing. "Those aren't the boots of a scoundrel or a thief. They're top quality."

"Yes, they are."

“And your trousers are far too fine for a commoner.” Felix’s eyes widened, and Leo could see the moment the truth dawned on him. “You’re—you’re not stealing this horse, are you?”

“No, I’m not,” Leopold agreed with a sigh.

Felix made a high-pitched noise in his throat and continued to back away, a tremor in his voice as he pointed at Blackbird. “This is—is this *your* horse? Are you—are you *him*?”

“The king with the stick up his arse?” Leopold sighed again, inexplicably disappointed. “That would be me, yes.”

He’d been having *fun*, and now that Felix knew who he was, he was doubtless going to turn into just another apologetic forelock-tugging lackey, and Leo wouldn’t get to spend the afternoon naked with this delightfully pretty lad after all.

Instead of bowing and scraping, though, Felix took a couple of rapid breaths and, apparently having gathered his wits, turned an accusing finger on Leo. “You set me up! You let me insult you and proposition you, and now I’m going to get sacked for it, aren’t I? And what are you even doing here? I was specifically told that if you wanted to ride, I’d get plenty of warning, and instead you come skulking down here dressed in God knows what—” He broke off mid-sentence and took a step closer, eyes narrowed. “Did you *steal* that coat?” Leopold felt warm breath against his cheek as Felix leaned in and examined the coat more closely. “You did! That’s my father’s coat! He’s captain of the guard, not that you’d care. Anyway, you can’t just go around taking people’s clothes for your own entertainment. What’s he meant to wear home at the end of his shift?”

Leo’s eyebrows rose. The only one who dared to speak to him like that was Mattias, and he probably should have been offended, but instead he found himself intrigued, if only by the sheer size of the balls on his new groom.

“Your father is captain of the guard?” he asked, to give himself time to regroup.

Felix nodded, jerky and suspicious. “So?”

“Janus is a good man.”

“Yeah, he is.” Felix sighed and fixed his gaze on the ground. “So, I guess you’re going to relieve me of my position now. *YourMajesty*,” he added belatedly, and it sounded suspiciously like *Fuck you*.

Leo couldn’t help but smirk. Perhaps all wasn’t lost if the boy still had some spark left in his belly. “Let’s see. So far, you’ve accused me of being a horse thief, implied that you’d only release me if I slept with you, and then, when you found

out who I really am, yelled at me for *borrowing* a coat and shirt from the laundry. I really *should* dismiss you.”

Felix’s head snapped up at that. “You never said you *weren’t* stealing the horse,” he argued hotly, “so technically, I *was* doing my job.”

“And the part where you tried to seduce me?” Leo asked, enjoying himself enormously now that he was back in control.

Felix’s mouth opened and closed again, and then he shrugged as if he knew that what he said wouldn’t matter. “I thought you were my type, and I wanted to get you into bed. Looks like that won’t be happening now either.”

Leo couldn’t help the laugh that came bubbling up out of him. Such refreshing honesty was rare, and he found himself wanting more of it—more of *Felix*. And having it confirmed that the attraction went both ways was just the icing on the cake as far as he was concerned.

He rested a hand on Felix’s shoulder, gratified when Felix didn’t flinch away but instead gave an uncertain smile. “I suppose that you did only threaten to harm me to protect Blackbird, even if she is my own horse,” Leo said, mind ticking over, “which means you’ve proven yourself loyal. So no, I’m not going to dismiss you.” He was distracted for a moment by the way Felix’s face lit up with a hopeful expression and by the curve of his lush, Cupid’s bow mouth, but he managed to drag his gaze away and get back to the matter at hand. “I can’t help but feel there’s a better place for you than the stables, though. Given who your father is, I’m assuming you’ve been trained in the defensive arts?”

Felix nodded rapidly. “Weapons and hand to hand both.”

“So why haven’t you joined the guard? Are you such a terrible soldier?” Felix ending up in the stables just didn’t make sense otherwise.

Felix bristled. “I’m good! But I didn’t want to work for my father. In the guard I’d be under his eye all day, and I wanted—” He swallowed. “I wanted to be able to have a roll in the hay without my dad knowing about it, okay? And I’m good with horses, so Mattias—I mean, Chancellor Allingdon—arranged for me to train in Fortescue. I worked there until he invited me back to take the position in the stables.”

“So that’s why I haven’t seen you before,” Leo mused. “You’ve been away.”

Felix nodded. “Six years, sire.”

Leo hummed in response, mind whirring with possibilities. Felix, far from crumbling under royal disapproval, had shown himself to possess a spine of steel,

which made him even more attractive, and Leo found himself intrigued. He still wanted to bed him, of course, but he also wanted to get to know him better.

If Felix was telling the truth about his skill with a weapon, he might actually be the solution to several problems at once, assuming he was willing, of course. Well, there was only one way to find out.

“Follow me,” Leo said and turned on his heel and marched back to the castle. He didn’t bother to check and see if Felix had followed him, but smiled when he heard footsteps behind him hurrying to catch up.

He did so love a young man who could take direction.