



# The Royal Rogue (Tales of Lilleforth #3)

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** Thomas Malone is the new Captain of the Guard at Lilleforth Castle. He loves his job, but it leaves him no time for himself. Its been way too long since hes had anyone share his bed, let alone his life. To say hes frustrated is an understatement.

To make matters worse, the King's disreputable cousin Evan Devere, the Duke of Ravenport, is back from his travels. Evan is as scatterbrained as he is attractive, which is a shame—if Evan had even half a brain, he'd be exactly Thomas's type. As it is, Thomas has resigned himself to spending his days keeping Evan out of trouble.

But when a threat emerges against the crown, Thomas and Evan have to work together to find whos behind the plot, and Thomas discovers there's more to Evan than meets the eye. So when Evan suggests that they act on their mutual attraction, Thomas throws caution to the wind and agrees. After all, it is just a fling, right? There's no way Thomas is actually going to fall for the sexy, infuriating cousin of the king.

No way at all.

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# Page 1

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## Chapter One

“Excuse me, Captain?”

Thomas Malone tensed at the words. Judging by the speaker's tone, he had a fair idea where this conversation was leading, and it was nowhere good. He turned to face the young guard who was hovering at his elbow. “What is it, Sam?”

The young man fidgeted. “Only, you said watch the duke and let you know if he does anything that might be a problem, and I turned away for a minute and now he's, um. Well, he's disappeared, is the thing.” Sam ducked his head to avoid Thomas's gaze. “So, I thought that I'd better tell you?” The sentence ended like a question and Thomas had a pang of sympathy for Sam, who'd only been working at the castle for a month.

He suppressed a sigh and did his best to school his expression. There was no point in taking his frustration out on the messenger. This was his own fault. He should have known that bloody Evan bloody Devere, Duke of Ravenport, would turn out to be more than a match for a junior guard. The man was slipperier than a wet cat.

“Thank you for telling me. Where was he when you last saw him?”

Sam's brow creased. “Last I saw, he was sharing a jug of wine with that visiting earl, the tall one?”

Thomas glanced around the room and his suspicions were immediately confirmed. The Earl of Aramanthe was also missing.

Bugger.

“Leave it with me, Sam,” he said before striding out of the ballroom, past the couples in all their finery who were watching the king and his husband performing a waltz, past the servants in their best livery carrying trays filled with wine. Thomas made a beeline for the staircase at the rear of the castle that led to the bedrooms and then headed upstairs. By the time he reached the top, the sound of the musicians playing was nothing but a faint echo.

As he approached the suite of visitors’ rooms where the Earl and Countess of Aramanthe were being housed, he heard other, less refined noises—ones that were far too familiar, at least where the duke was involved.

“Oh, yes! There! Harder!”

Thomas stopped at the end of the corridor leading to the bedrooms, closed his eyes, and let out the sigh he’d been holding back. Why did this happen almost every time the duke was left alone with a visiting dignitary?

When Thomas had taken over as Captain of the Royal Guard some months prior, the duke had been out of the country. He’d returned to Lilleforth several weeks ago, around the same time as the ambassadors for the current round of trade talks had begun to arrive, and had proceeded to flirt with a variety of visitors to the kingdom, charming more than one of them into bed.

Thomas was still finding his footing as Captain of the Royal Guard, and while it wasn’t strictly part of his job, he’d taken it upon himself to keep a weather eye on the duke in order to extract him from any potentially awkward situations.

His motivations were purely selfish. Thomas didn’t fancy being sent into battle just because a bloody duke had started a war by debauching the wrong person—no matter

how annoyingly attractive said duke was. And if that meant Thomas had to stand here and listen to the sounds Evan always managed to draw from his partner, then escort him safely back to his own rooms before he started a diplomatic incident, it was a small price to pay.

A tiny, petty part of Thomas was tempted to go and knock on the door and spoil their fun, but on second thoughts he held back. He'd made the mistake exactly once of opening a bedroom door unannounced in his search for the errant duke, only to find a naked Evan balls deep in the representative for Weatherstone, who had been bent over the foot of the bed.

To make matters worse, Evan hadn't even paused in his fucking. He'd just laughed and asked if Thomas would like to join them as he'd thrust forward in long, even strokes that made the muscles in his thighs flex in a most distracting manner. The man on the receiving end had been so lost to pleasure Thomas doubted he'd even noticed anyone else was present.

Thomas had stammered an apology and backed out of the room, but the sight of Evan's long muscled legs and gorgeous arse had been burned into his memory ever since.

It truly was a magnificent arse, a perfect peach of a thing. If it had belonged to anyone else, Thomas would have been tempted by the offer.

It was just a shame its owner was such an irresponsible, addlepated fool.

Because that was what the man was, first and foremost—a fool. A handsome fool to be sure, but a fool nevertheless. The duke was charming, but his head was so empty that if there had been a single sensible thought in there, it would have rattled like a penny in a water jug.

His official position within the kingdom was something of a mystery—possibly because he wasn't responsible enough to be put in charge of any one thing. He seemed to drift in and out of the country, travelling far and wide before reappearing in Lilleforth, usually leaving some tale of inappropriate behaviour in his wake.

There was a reason he was known as Evan the Embarrassment.

The duke sailed through life like a brightly dressed, slightly confused peacock, showing no interest in etiquette or diplomacy or politics. Instead, he spent his time bedding anyone who took his fancy and amusing himself drinking and carousing. He was easily distracted and prone to woolgathering. Thomas had lost count of the times in the past weeks that he'd found Evan coming out of the wrong bedroom in the guest quarters and had to guide him to his own rooms.

He sighed again and leaned back against the stone walls, getting comfortable. He had learned that Evan liked to take his time with his lovers, and judging by the glassy-eyed expressions of pleasure he'd glimpsed on the faces of those staggering out of his rooms, it was time well spent.

Thomas fought down a twinge of envy. It had been months since he'd bedded anyone. Between coming to grips with his promotion, training his new recruits, and now babysitting the duke, there simply hadn't been time—which was a crying shame. There was nothing he would have liked better than to find a young man in town and take him back to his cottage for a night of fun and fuckery. Instead, here he was, holding up the castle walls and doing his best not to become aroused by the moaning and panting that echoed through the corridor.

The noises drifting from the bedroom grew louder and more frequent, the words replaced with incoherent shouts of pleasure. Thomas shifted against the wall, crossing his legs as his cock twitched despite himself. It didn't help that he could so easily picture the smooth, round globes of Evan's arse. Not for the first time he wondered if

maybe he should have taken Evan up on his invitation.

No.

Unlike Evan, Thomas was not a fool. Evan might only be the cousin to the king and he might have commanded all the respect of a damp duck, but he was still royalty, second in line to the throne in fact, and Thomas was under the employ of the king. He had no intention of risking his nice new job and the comfortable cottage that came with it just for a quick fuck with a pretty idiot.

No, he'd go down to the town on his evening off and find a different pretty idiot. Just as long as they had startling green eyes, a wicked smile, dark hair, and a long, sinewy build with hips that swung like a pendulum when they walked.

Not that Thomas had a type or anything.

He pushed away thoughts of the duke's attractiveness and busied himself with pacing the length of the corridor. Thomas was light on his feet, and he prided himself on his ability to glide silently into a room and take stock of a situation before anyone else had even noticed he was there.

Nobody expected stealth from a man who towered over them at over six feet four inches and was built like a brick privy, and it had come in handy more than once—especially with the newer guards who needed a close eye kept on them while Thomas sorted out which of them had potential and who had joined purely for the wages and the free boots. Plus it was fun to watch the young guards flail when he appeared seemingly out of nowhere.

Thomas wasn't sure how many times he paced the length of the corridor before the bedroom door creaked open and Evan popped his head out.

When he saw Thomas, his mouth pinched for just a second before he blinked and his face settled into a sheepish smile as he slipped out the door.

“Your Grace,” Thomas said coolly.

“Captain. Fancy seeing you here.” Evan ran a hand through his tousled hair, somehow making it messier, and tugged at the sleeves of his coat.

His deep blue coat, which was nothing like the emerald green one he’d been wearing earlier. That one had matched his eyes—not that Thomas had been paying attention to the colour of Evan’s eyes. It was just that he was trained to notice these things.

“Begging your pardon, Your Grace,” he said, stepping forward and extending a hand. “It appears you’re wearing the earl’s coat.”

Evan’s brow creased and he glanced down at himself, patting the front of the jacket in question. “Am I?” He shook his sleeves out and gave a shrug. “I’ll bring it back later when Remy is awake. I’m afraid I fucked him senseless and now he’s taking a nap.”

Thomas blinked at the man’s brazenness, and before he could stop himself, he blurted out, “Sir, you need to show some caution! Are you not worried about the countess finding out about you and her husband?”

Evan smiled, apparently unconcerned. “Is that why you were hanging around?” His expression shifted to something mischievous. “Or were you hoping for an invitation to join again? Because if you just give me an hour, I’m sure I can?—”

Thomas’s jaw dropped at the implication. “Absolutely not! It’s my duty to protect members of the royal family,” he said stiffly.

Evan stared at him blankly for a second. Then something in his brain must have

engaged, and his expression brightened. “Oh! Well, the countess is quite lovely, and she and her husband have a very accommodating arrangement. But it’s sweet of you to be concerned for my safety.” He stretched and let out a yawn. “You know, I think Remy might have worn me out as well. I’m going back to my rooms for a nap. Good night, Captain.”

And with that, he meandered down the hallway, whistling a jaunty tune. Thomas stared after him, caught between frustration and attraction. When he found himself still staring at the hypnotic sway of the man’s hips, though, he forced himself to look away.

The Duke of Ravenport was not someone Thomas could afford to be attracted to. No matter how wicked the curve of his smile or how attractive his lithe build, he was still a walking disaster, and not worth Thomas risking his job for.

He just needed to remember that.

Thomas stood with his back to the wall, eyes ahead as befitted the occasion. There wasn’t usually a guard during breakfast—King Leopold and his husband, Prince Felix, preferred to eat in the kitchen given half the chance—but due to all the visitors for the trade negotiations, they were using the formal dining hall, which meant a guard was expected, and as the Captain of the Guard it was proper that he make an appearance.

He wasn’t quite sure what he was guarding the guests from—a randomly thrown bread roll, perhaps?—but he didn’t mind this part of the job. There were worse ways to spend a morning than listening to the chatter of nobility who seemed to think he was deaf and blind, and he heard all sorts of interesting things while pretending to be a coat rack.

Take the Earl of Aramanthe, for example. He’d been casting furtive glances around



the room since he sat down, and he was twitchier than a startled ferret. For an awful, fleeting moment, Thomas wondered if the duke had been lying when he said the earl's lady wife was aware of their arrangement and now the earl was in a world of trouble, but no. The countess was seated next to him consuming a poached egg in tiny, delicate bites with a serene expression on her face, and she gave no indication of being displeased with her husband for his adventures the night before.

The door swung wide on its hinges, bouncing off the wall and making Thomas jump. Moments later, the Duke of Ravenport lurched into the room, still dressed in last night's clothing. He was clutching his temple with one hand. "I wish to complain," he said loudly, "about the wine last night."

King Leopold raised an eyebrow. "That was the finest wine in the kingdom."

"Well, somebody must have tampered with one of the bottles I had because I feel like bloody death this morning," Evan said, throwing himself into a chair and dropping his head onto the tabletop.

"One of the... seven bottles?" Prince Felix said wryly.

"Who even counts?" The duke flapped a hand. He grasped the stem of an empty goblet and waved it in the air. "Actually, another glass might be just what I need. As a restorative."

King Leopold let out a cough that sounded suspiciously like a laugh as a servant rushed to fill Evan's request.

After sitting up and taking a long sip from his glass, Evan let out a contented sigh. "Better. Breakfast?" he asked hopefully. A maid returned in minutes with a plate of porridge laced with honey and apple, and Evan fell upon it like a starving man. "Porridge! Do you know, I once visited a kingdom where they ate eels for breakfast?"

The thing about travel,” he said around a spoonful, “is that visiting other places is all very interesting, but foreign countries only seem to serve food that’s, well. Foreign.” He wrinkled his nose. “I wonder why that is?”

“They probably say the same when they come here,” King Leopold said.

Evan’s brow furrowed. “Well, no. Our food isn’t foreign. It’s real food.”

Thomas bit back a smile despite himself. Evan might not be the sharpest knife in the drawer—if anything, he was duller than a blunt spoon—but at least he was entertaining.

Out of the corner of his eye, Thomas saw the Earl of Aramanthe stand and move down the table, settling in the empty seat to Evan’s left. He didn’t say or do anything else, but Thomas’s curiosity was piqued. Perhaps the earl was hoping for a repeat of last night’s performance.

Conversation gradually picked up around the table, and it was when everyone was otherwise occupied that the earl leaned in close to the duke. Thomas took a subtle half step forward so he could hear better.

The earl spoke low and urgently. “I believe you have something of mine, Your Grace.”

The duke turned to face him, wide-eyed. “Have I?”

“Yes. That’s my coat you’re wearing, and I was wondering if I might have it back. It’s a favourite.” His hand darted out and he froze with his fingertips on the lapel, like he wanted to snatch the coat from Evan’s body but didn’t quite dare wrestle a member of the royal family out of his clothing.

Evan tilted his head, and his expression resembled that of a confused spaniel. “Why would I have your coat?”

The earl blinked. “We had... drinks last night, Your Grace.”

“Did we?”

The earl let out an indignant huff, nostrils flaring. “Surely you remember!”

Evan leaned forward, and just for a second, his vacuous expression brightened with a gleam of mischief. “Perhaps if you were to drop your trousers, it would help jog my memory?”

The earl made a choked sound, his face turning bright red. “I-I?—”

Evan laughed and wrapped an arm around the earl’s shoulders. “I was jesting, Remy. Of course I remember last night. How could I forget a lovely tight arse like that? It was delightful.”

Watching the array of emotions playing over the earl’s face as he decided whether to be flattered or scandalised at the duke speaking so freely about the state of his arse was the most entertaining thing Thomas had seen all week. The duke might be addlepatated a lot of the time, but he kept things interesting.

In the end the earl gave a weak smile. “Thank you, Your Grace. I would quite like the coat back, though.”

“Of course. It doesn’t fit me anyway.”

Evan stood and peeled out of the too-long jacket, slinging it carelessly into the earl’s lap. Then he plopped back down in his seat, stretching his arms over his head and

leaning back. The front legs of his chair lifted from the ground and the back legs scraped across the stone, leaving him balanced precariously. Thomas darted forward, gripped the duke's shoulders from behind, and pulled him to his feet a bare second before the chair fell backwards from under him, the wood clattering loudly.

The duke staggered back and Thomas clamped an arm around his belly instinctively, holding him upright. Evan's full weight settled against Thomas's chest, his dark hair brushing Thomas's cheek as he let out a startled laugh. Thomas relaxed his grip and waited for Evan to step away, but the duke seemed content to stay where he was, which presented Thomas with a problem. As much as he was enjoying the heat of another man's body, this was in no way appropriate. He could hardly stand here all morning cradling the duke.

He cleared his throat and removed his arm from Evan's midsection. "Are you all right, Your Grace?"

Evan stepped from the circle of his arms and turned and perched his arse on the edge of the table, his eyes dancing with merriment. "You know, for somebody whose title is Your Grace, I really don't have any at all, do I? Grace, that is."

Thomas bit his lip. The duke wasn't wrong, but Thomas wasn't about to agree with him. He liked his job, thank you, and planned to keep it.

It seemed Evan wasn't expecting a reply. He shoved off the edge of the table, wobbling slightly when he stood. "I think I shall go and recover in my rooms."

Then he leaned over and stole a slice of toast and jam from the king's plate before strolling from the room in a slow, rolling gait that would have been more at home in a bordello than a castle.

Thomas wondered briefly how it was that a person who was so inherently clumsy

could somehow move with all the fluidity of a prowling tomcat before pushing the thought aside. There was only one thing he knew for sure about Evan Devere, Duke of Ravenport.

Attractive or not, he was a right royal pain in Thomas's arse.

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### Chapter Two

Thomas stifled a yawn and subtly arched his back, trying to stretch out the stiffness that came from standing in one spot for hours. He hadn't expected today's trade talks to take so long, but the light filtering through the window of the chancellor's office had softened from the brightness of midday to late afternoon hues, and still here he stood watching over the king and the prince as the day dragged on.

The trade talks were supposed to be a formality.

Thomas had been under the impression that this was just a renewal of the standing agreements with the neighbouring kingdoms, who traded a percentage of their raw materials for port access. The whole affair was generally cut and dried—a several weeks' long diplomatic exercise consisting of balls and dinners and plenty of good wine followed by some token negotiations, after which everyone would go home happy.

And most of the negotiations had gone exactly as planned—a signature, a handshake, and a glass of wine to celebrate.

Others, though?

As the days had gone by, the meetings had become filled with a brittle tension as time after time, Prince Felix had directed a cold smile at certain visiting dignitaries before suggesting that perhaps the figures they were presenting were in error and offering new terms in Lilleforth's favour. Each time he'd been met with incredulous refusal, and each time he'd continued to smile and then, after presenting information that

showed his estimates on their production were correct—information that he absolutely should not have had—he'd politely insisted.

Every last one of the ambassadors who had been challenged had caved.

The king's spy, whoever he was, was very, very good.

Thomas rolled his shoulders. This was the last meeting of the day, and he hoped it would be a short one. The Earl of Aramanthe was seated across from the king and the prince consort wearing a condescending smile, but his expression changed to one of confusion when Prince Felix said, "I'm sure this is all a misunderstanding and one of your secretaries made a silly mistake with the figures you sent us, but it turns out that your grain yield was almost double the amount we were told. Of course, that means in the interests of fairness a new agreement is necessary. I took the liberty of making some adjustments." He slid a sheet of paper across the table.

The earl took the paper and examined it silently for a moment. A vein throbbed in his temple as he squinted at the figures, his expression darkening. But when he opened his mouth to speak, Felix slid another sheet of paper over to him. "I think you'll find these figures are more accurate."

The earl's brow creased and he snatched up the paperwork. As he examined what was written there, all the colour drained from his face. Gripping the paper tightly enough to crinkle the edges, he swallowed, his throat clicking. "Of course," he said. "A clerical error, as you say."

"Mistakes happen," King Leopold said, leaning forward. "But as you need port access and we need your grain, we're willing to overlook it." He held out a quill.

The earl glanced from the king to the papers in front of him and back to the king, and whatever he saw made his shoulders sag.

Thomas didn't miss the look of triumph that passed between the king and his husband. To see Prince Felix now, poised and regal, nobody would have guessed that he'd started out working in the stables before capturing King Leopold's eye, and then his heart. After their marriage, the king had appointed Prince Felix his chancellor, and he'd taken to the role like he was born for it.

The earl grabbed the quill and signed his name, his mouth a tight line.

"Excellent. Won't you have a glass of wine to celebrate?" Felix said with a sharp smile.

"No, thank you, Your Highness," the earl sniffed. Then he pushed his chair back and stood, giving a stiff bow before sweeping from the room.

"Ooh, he doesn't look happy. Why do you suppose that is?"

Thomas jolted. He glanced sideways to find Evan, Duke of Ravenport, leaning against the wall next to him with a glass of wine in his hand. Thomas could have sworn he hadn't been there a moment ago. The duke's shirt was untucked and unbuttoned, and Thomas glimpsed a smattering of dark hair on his chest. Judging by the state of him, he'd only just rolled out of bed.

Thomas was tempted to ignore him, but while Evan was mostly harmless, he was also royalty, and Thomas wasn't going to risk offending him. So he said, "I don't believe the trade agreement went as he'd planned, Your Grace."

Evan pushed himself off the wall and moved closer, pausing to gulp down some of his wine when it came dangerously close to slopping out of the glass. "There seems to be a lot of that about this week." He leaned in close, voice low. "Do you know, people are saying the king has a spy?"



Thomas resisted the urge to roll his eyes. “I think it’s safe to assume that all kings have spies, Your Grace.”

Evan’s brow creased like it hadn’t occurred to him before. “I suppose they must.” He took another mouthful of wine. “You’re not a spy, are you?”

Thomas fought to hide a smile. “Not me, Your Grace.”

The duke looked Thomas up and down, his gaze lingering in a way that suggested he liked what he saw, and Thomas found himself straightening his spine and puffing out his chest for reasons he couldn’t quite explain. “Hmmm,” the duke said, “I suppose not. A strapping, handsome fellow like you? Far too memorable. You’d never blend in.” He stepped up close and thrust his glass in Thomas’s face. “Drink?”

After the long day he’d had, Thomas was sorely tempted. But since he still had to attend the formal dinner that evening, he declined. “No, thank you, Your Grace. I’m still on duty.”

Evan let out a noisy sigh. “I can’t find anyone to drink with me, Thaddeus.”

Thomas suppressed a sigh of his own. “It’s Thomas, sir.”

“Is it? Are you sure?”

“Completely sure, sir.”

Evan gave a hapless shrug. “I’m terrible with names. Memory like that thing with holes, me. Can’t remember the name of it, though.” He let out a soft laugh. “That’s funny. I can’t even remember the name of the thing that’s like a bad memory.” He took another sip and peered at the bottom of the now empty glass. “Maybe I’ll find the Earl of Orange. He might need a drink after all that.”

“Earl of... Orange, sir?” Was there an Earl of Orange? If there was, Thomas hadn’t met him.

Evan rolled his eyes. “You know, the one who just left looking like someone pissed in his porridge. Remy. The Earl of thingy.”

“Aramanthe.”

“Bless you!” Evan said brightly. “Anyway, I’m going to find Remy and see if I can’t cheer him up over a few drinks.” He tottered rather unsteadily over to the chancellor’s desk, and Thomas wondered whether the duke had started drinking early this morning or if he just hadn’t stopped since last night. Evan paused, scooped up a bottle of wine and another glass, and sashayed out the door, ignoring the incredulous looks King Leopold and Prince Felix were giving him.

Thomas blinked. Encounters with the duke often left him feeling like he’d missed something, and this time was no different.

It was Prince Felix who spoke first. “I was bloody well looking forward to that wine.”

King Leopold laughed. “Let him have it. Given the agreement we signed with Falsmark for our wine supplies today, I don’t think we’re going to run short.”

Felix grinned. “That was a good deal, wasn’t it? Perhaps you should reward me for my excellent negotiating skills. We could?—”

Thomas shifted slightly from foot to foot and let out a low cough, a subtle reminder that he was in the room—the royal couple had a tendency to forget that they weren’t alone. Felix’s mouth snapped shut and his cheeks flushed pink.

Leopold, fighting back a smile, said, “You’re dismissed, Captain. We’ll see you

tonight at dinner.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

Thomas slipped out of the room and headed toward the kitchens, smiling as the sound of the king’s laughter followed him down the corridor. Those two were hopelessly in love, and they deserved every bit of their happiness.

He just hoped that one day he’d find someone who looked at him the way Leopold looked at Felix.

Thomas ate his supper quickly. He had a long evening ahead of him, and he still had to stop by the barracks to make sure that the guards on duty at the dinner tonight were properly turned out. Thomas had been beyond flattered when the king had recommended him as the replacement for Janus Hobson as Captain of the Guard. Not that it had come as a complete surprise—he and King Leopold had forged something of a bond during his time working at the palace—but that closeness just made Thomas more determined to prove that he was worthy of his appointment.

He slipped into the barracks soundlessly and leaned against the doorframe. There were maybe half a dozen men, most of them sitting or lying on their beds. Nobody noticed him, all too distracted by young Sam, who was holding forth on a well-worn subject.

“I don’t see how nobody’s caught him yet, though.”

“Ah, lad,” said Philip, one of the older guards. “The Rogue is a slippery character. I’ve heard nobody knows who he is except the king himself, and he’s never been seen.”

“I’ve heard he’s the most handsome man alive,” interrupted Darcy, who was almost

as new to the barracks as Sam. “His hair is as black as a raven, and his eyes shine like precious jewels, and he prowls around the place like a tomcat. He’s very popular with the ladies and has half a dozen bastards in Ravenport alone. That’s why they call him the Rogue.”

“I thought they called him the Rogue because he left that lord tied up in his smallclothes in the town square in Falsmark with a sign on his chest saying, ‘Cheats at cards and on his wife’ that time?” Arthur said.

“Well, I heard he stole a whole kingdom’s treasure and lives in a hidden castle in the mountains, and he’s only loyal to the king because they were secret lovers,” Sam said.

Thomas let out a snort and stepped forward, taking petty satisfaction in the way all the men in the room jumped at his unexpected presence. “Lucky I’m not the Rogue,” he said. “I could have slit your throats while you were spouting nonsense.”

Sam ducked his head. “Sorry, Captain. Only, we were just saying that whoever the king’s spy is, they’re bloody good. The visitors are all properly pissed that someone told all their secrets, but nobody knows who did it.”

“A spy ? Are you saying that King Leopold, who is good and honest, employs someone to discover the secrets of the other kingdoms through less than legal means?” Thomas asked, arching a brow and folding his arms across his broad chest.

Sam swallowed. “Um.” The colour drained from his face.

Thomas was tempted to tease him for a little longer, but he took pity on the boy’s stricken expression. “Because if you were saying that, you’d be right. All kingdoms have spies. But as to who the Rogue is, nobody’s figured it out yet.”

“It’s a woman,” Philip said confidently. “Stands to reason.”

“Oh?” Thomas said.

Philip nodded. “Some pretty little thing who seduces the men with her wiles and then teases their secrets from them.”

“That’s...” Thomas paused and thought about it. “That would actually make sense.”

“But we know it’s a man,” Sam insisted. “Darcy just said. Handsomest man alive, he said.”

Thomas shook his head. As soon as there was a mention of espionage, the topic of the Rogue came up, and the speculation as to their identity grew wilder every time. “So what you’re saying is that nobody knows who the Rogue is, and nobody has ever seen them, but we do know that they’re the handsomest man alive, had a secret affair with our king, and is a womaniser—as well as being a woman?”

Sam blinked at him. “Wait. That doesn’t make sense.”

“I knew you were a smart lad,” Thomas said, grinning. “The Rogue is a mystery, and he can stay that way as far as I’m concerned. The king trusts him, and that’s good enough for me.”

“But if you had to guess, knife to your throat, who do you think he might be, Captain?” Sam asked.

“I personally haven’t given the Rogue much thought,” Thomas said, which was a blatant lie. He’d thought about the Rogue plenty—just not the way Sam meant. But he was hardly going to admit to his guards that he’d spent more than one lonely evening contemplating the subject of the Rogue and wondering what it might be like

if someone like that—a handsome, dashing man of mystery who was as lithe as a cat—were to share his bed. If Thomas had a set of specific, filthy fantasies about the Rogue, that was nobody’s business but his own.

Besides, it wasn’t like they’d ever come to pass. Thomas had no doubt that if anyone ever did find out who the king’s spy was, they’d be dead in the blink of an eye. The Rogue’s reputation for charm was only surpassed by his reputation for ruthlessness.

Thomas should not have found that as attractive as he did.

He dragged himself out of his thoughts. He was here to inspect his men. He clasped his hands behind his back and barked out, “Guards, present!”

They scrambled to line up, and he took his time looking them over. They all passed muster more or less, and Thomas gave a satisfied nod. “You’ll do. Now go and get some supper. You’re expected at the great hall before sunset to stand guard at the king’s dinner. Don’t be late.”

“No, Captain,” they chorused and trooped toward the door.

Thomas followed at a distance, but while they veered off toward the kitchen, he took himself to the great hall where he found the serving staff flitting about, making last-minute preparations for the dinner to celebrate the end of the trade talks. Thomas was just glad that all he had to do was stand near the doors, look imposing, and make sure Evan didn’t throw up on someone or insult them badly enough to start a war.

It didn’t take long before his guards trooped into the hall and positioned themselves around the walls, and soon after that the guests started to stroll in. They were elegantly dressed as befitted the occasion, but they also wore matching stiff expressions, doubtless at the thought of having to go home to their own kingdoms and explain why they were bringing back substantially altered trade agreements. Still,

even though the tension in the air was palpable, everyone pasted on suitably fake smiles, and they were impeccably polite to the king and prince consort. Even the duke, seated to the left of the king, was on his best behaviour.

And maybe it was the excellent food and free-flowing wine, but the atmosphere gradually became more jovial. The evening passed with no sign of trouble, and when the great hall was empty apart from the king and his husband and the duke, Thomas finally allowed himself to relax.

The guests would be leaving over the next few days, and then Thomas would be able to take a day off. Perhaps he'd go and find himself a young man. Thomas's height and muscular build meant he never had a problem finding someone to grace his bed, and a good time was generally had by all. Sometimes such a good time was had that the next morning whoever Thomas had taken to bed would suggest something more permanent, but Thomas had no qualms about saying no and then looking pointedly at the door until they got the hint and left. It probably made him look like a bit of a bastard. But then, you didn't get to be Captain of the Royal Guard without being a bit of a bastard. Thomas had definitely done things for his king and country that might have raised eyebrows in any other profession.

And besides, while it seemed callous, none of his lovers had ever been quite the right fit, no matter how talented they were between the sheets, and Thomas had no interest in starting an affair when he knew it wasn't going anywhere. Thomas wanted someone handsome in his bed, certainly, but he also wanted someone clever, someone who stimulated his intellect as well as his dick. Thomas had found that with his promotion came a certain amount of deference from the castle staff, and he missed people arguing with him. Back when he'd just been a guard, there had been a certain amount of back and forth with the other guards that was absent now, and the need to be challenged was like a weird itch in the back of his skull.

He wanted a lover who wouldn't hesitate to tell him he was wrong sometimes,

someone clever enough and bold enough to challenge him. At the same time, he wanted someone who would let him pin them down and fuck them through the mattress. Was that too much to ask?

He didn't think so.

The king and his husband left the great hall arm in arm, and the duke stood and stretched and stumbled his way over to Thomas, wine glass in hand. "Lord, I hate these formal things," he said with a sigh. "Can I stop behaving now?"

And perhaps it was the long, tiring week he'd had, but Thomas couldn't help himself. "Did you ever start, Your Grace?"

The duke's mouth dropped open for a second, and then he clutched at the front of his shirt. "Such disrespect! I should have you flogged!"

Thomas froze, but then he caught the mischievous gleam in the other man's eye, and the temptation to play along was too great. So instead of apologising like a sensible person might have done, he raised an eyebrow and said, "And who will you be ordering to flog me, Your Grace? The Captain of the Guard, perhaps?"

The duke threw his head back and laughed. "Oh, I knew you had a fun side in there somewhere!"

An unexpected warmth ran through Thomas as the duke's laughter echoed off the high ceiling, and he allowed himself to smile. "Perhaps, sir," he admitted. "But as I am the Captain of the Guard and not the entertainment, it's probably best I keep it hidden."

"Quite right," the duke said. "How are you meant to intimidate anyone if you're perceived as fun ? But don't worry, you hide it well." He clapped Thomas on the



shoulder and meandered out the doors.

By the time Thomas had made his way back to his own cottage, he still wasn't sure whether the duke had meant what he'd said as an insult or a compliment. In the end, he told himself that it didn't matter because Evan Devere was an idiot.

But still, he hoped it was a compliment.

## Page 3

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### Chapter Three

“ A drink for you, Captain.” The barman set a pint of ale on the table in front of Thomas. “From the young man at the bar.”

Thomas looked over, and a man who looked to be barely in his twenties raised a hand in greeting. Thomas had seen him in here once or twice before. He was lithe and lean with sandy hair, and he was good-looking and close enough to Thomas’s type if he didn’t look too closely. He gave a nod of acknowledgement.

The young man’s answering smile lit up his entire face. He hopped off his bar stool and headed towards Thomas’s table. He sat and put his own ale down. “I’m Ned.”

He extended a hand and Thomas shook it. “Thomas.”

Ned spun his pint glass around between his palms and looked Thomas up and down before saying, “I’ve seen you in here before. Would I be right in thinking you’re looking for company?”

Well, that was unexpected. Not the offer itself, because this particular tavern was where you went when you were either conducting business that you wanted kept secret, or you wanted the type of company that Ned was offering. But there was usually a ritual—a back and forth of getting to know each other, and some playful mutual flattery. Ned was skipping those steps, and his approach had all the subtlety of a cudgel to the face.

Thomas took a moment to sip his ale. Ned was shorter than him by a full head, and he

did have a nice smile, but Thomas would have preferred to exchange a few sentences before he decided if he was taking the other man to bed. And there should be flirting. Thomas liked the flirting part. He was good at it too, whatever the duke had implied about him hiding his fun side.

And why was he even thinking about the duke right now when there was a pleasant young man offering him a night's company?

Ned was still looking at him expectantly and when Thomas didn't answer right away, he leaned forward on his elbows.

Oh. This was where the flirting happened.

But instead of telling Thomas how he'd like to sit in his lap and see what came up or any of a dozen other well-worn lines that would lead into a merry banter that ended up with them in bed together, Ned said in a low voice, "You're the Captain of the Guard, right?"

Thomas nodded, unsure why it mattered.

Ned perked up, his eyes alight with excitement. "Do you think we could go back to the castle? You could give me a tour of all the hidden passages. Ooh, maybe I could suck you off in the throne room!"

Thomas stiffened. "Absolutely bloody not!" The idea of abusing his position—and the king's trust—like that made a shudder of distaste run through him.

Ned's face fell. "Well, can we at least go back to your rooms? Only, I live with my mum, and I can't be sure she won't disturb us."

Any spark of interest that had been there fizzled out faster than if someone had pissed

on it. At thirty years old, Thomas was well past settling for a quick fumble with someone's mother in the next room, and Ned wasn't tempting enough for Thomas to want to take him back to the castle. Not many people got to see the inside of Thomas's cottage. He had standards.

And suddenly, the thought of spending the night with Ned was exhausting. He sighed and pushed his chair back from the table. "I'm sorry, Ned. I don't think I am looking for company after all."

Ned's smile transformed into a scowl. "What do you mean, you're not looking for company? You're here, aren't you? And you were happy to take my drink and lead me on. But now it's time to pay the piper, you've changed your mind?"

Pay the piper?

Did Ned really think a pint of ale entitled him to Thomas's company?

"You're the one who sent me a drink," Thomas said, "but if you're so upset, I'll pay you back the cost."

"It's not the drink," Ned said, his mouth twisting. "It's that you haven't given me a chance. I'll bet I could make tonight a good night for you if you'd let me." In seconds he was out of his chair, and his weight settled in Thomas's lap as he straddled him uninvited. He licked his lips. "Are you sure you don't want to take me home?" he asked with a leer.

Thomas didn't try to hide his shudder, but Ned was either oblivious or ignorant because he leaned in, possibly for a kiss, and at the same time he reached down and cupped Thomas's balls. Thomas froze for a second before giving a single mighty shove, hard enough to send Ned flying onto the tavern floor.

He hit the ground with a thump and stared up at Thomas, mouth hanging open in shock.

A few of the other patrons laughed and one of them called out, "I see you still can't take no for an answer, Ned!"

Ned glared at the man who'd spoken and for a moment it looked like he was going to argue, but then the barman pulled out a small wooden club and rested it on the bar, and Ned's mouth snapped shut.

Thomas stood abruptly. He'd come out in search of a nice friendly fuck, but now he wanted nothing more than to put the evening behind him.

He stalked out the door, alone and unsatisfied, as Ned shot him a narrow-eyed look from where he was still sprawled on the floor. If looks could kill, Thomas would have been a lifeless heap.

Maybe the duke was right. Maybe nobody could tell he had a fun side. Why else would Ned feel he could proposition Thomas without observing the usual niceties?

He trudged back to his cottage and took himself to bed and then lay there wondering what was wrong with him that he was turning down willing young men. But as much as he mourned the lack of a companion for the night, he couldn't regret his decision. In the end, Ned hadn't been interesting enough to catch his attention, and then he'd turned out to be disturbingly pushy as well.

Thomas didn't want that. He wanted someone flirty. Someone fun.

He punched his pillow and huffed in frustration, and it took a long time to fall asleep.

"Put some effort into it, Sam! My mum can swing a staff harder than that!" Thomas

barked.

“Yes, Captain!” Sam panted and swung his staff wildly in the direction of Darcy, his sparring partner. Darcy responded by ducking low, rushing forward, and knocking Sam off his feet. A flurry of dust flew up and Sam let out a pained yelp as his arse connected with the hard-packed dirt of the training yard, his weapon clattering to the ground next to him.

They’d been training for an hour, and this was the third time in a row that Darcy had sent Sam tumbling into the dirt. Around them, the other guards continued working in pairs as Darcy grinned and twirled his staff in victory. Sam let out an exasperated huff, and Thomas sympathised. He remembered being upended during his own training, and it never got any less humiliating to find yourself sitting in a cloud of dust while your arse ached. Still, that didn’t mean Sam got to stop trying.

“Good work, Darcy. Up you get, Sam, and go again,” Thomas said.

Sam stayed sitting in the dirt, muttering something under his breath.

“What was that?” Thomas said.

Sam rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. “Nothing, Captain.”

Thomas fixed him with a look.

Sam swallowed and said, “Only, it’s not fair that I have to train with someone who’s always going to win. Darcy’s half a head taller than me, and we all know he’s good with a staff.”

Thomas pinched the bridge of his nose. “Well, you’re not going to bloody well learn anything fighting someone who’s no good, are you? The whole point of this is for

you to be able to beat your opponent, no matter if he's bigger than you. Besides, if someone's threatening His Majesty, it's not like you can say, 'Excuse me, but can you please send an assassin who's more my size?' is it? You need to be prepared for anything."

Sam's face, already pink from exertion, flushed darker red. "Oh." He ducked his head and stared fixedly at his boots, but the tips of his ears were still visible and they fairly glowed.

Seeing the slump of Sam's shoulders, Thomas sighed and lowered himself to the ground so he was sitting cross-legged next to Sam. He reached out and laid a hand on his shoulder. "Listen, it took a lot longer for him to bring you down this time, right?"

"I s'pose," Sam muttered, drawing patterns in the dirt with a fingertip.

"There you go. That proves you're getting better. It won't be long before you're the one putting someone on their arse."

Sam raised his head. "You really think I could beat someone? Even if they're bigger than me?" There was naked hope in his voice.

"Course you can, if you set your mind to the task and pay attention." Thomas stood and extended a hand. Sam took it and pulled himself up. Bending over, Thomas picked up Sam's staff and handed it to him. "Start trusting your instincts. Watch Darcy's feet, see if you can tell when he's planning to attack. And remember, the bigger they are, the harder they fall."

Sam nodded, taking his staff and squaring his shoulders. Thomas stood back, leaning against the wooden railings as the two young guards started circling each other. In all likelihood Sam would get his arse handed to him again, but he was still trying and that was the important thing.

“My money’s on the little one,” a voice said close to his ear.

Thomas whirled to find the duke standing beside him with his elbows propped on the railings. He sucked in a sharp breath. Thomas was stealthy, but it seemed he had nothing on the duke. “Where did you come from? Your Grace,” he added hastily.

The duke gave a lazy shrug. “I was bored, so I thought I’d come and watch.” He nodded at some of the men who had stripped out of their shirts and were now bare chested, their muscles glistening with sweat in the afternoon sunlight. “It’s quite the view.”

Thomas generally tried not to pay any mind to how his men looked shirtless, and he certainly wasn’t going to comment on it. As their captain, it wasn’t proper. “What makes you think Sam will win, Your Grace?” he asked, hoping to change the subject.

“Look at the set of his shoulders,” the duke said. “He’s decided he’s got something to prove.”

“Darcy’s bigger and more experienced, though,” Thomas said.

“Doesn’t matter. That one is prepared to do whatever it takes.”

The clatter of timber drew Thomas’s attention back to Sam and Darcy, and damned if the duke wasn’t right. There was a determined glint in Sam’s eye and a confidence to his movements that hadn’t been there before. He was intent and focussed as he successfully dodged out of the way whenever Darcy swung his staff, and as Thomas watched he darted forward and, with a well-placed blow, knocked Darcy’s staff from his hands. While Darcy was still staring in dismay at his empty palms, Sam tackled him to the ground and straddled him, pinning him in place.

Sam sat there with his chest heaving, grinning from ear to ear. “I won, sir!”



“I told you, Thomas,” the duke said. “Never underestimate a desperate man.”

A tendril of warmth curled in Thomas’s belly at the duke finally remembering his name. “Yes, Your Grace.”

“Can you call me Evan?” the duke said. “Trying to keep all these titles straight makes my head hurt.”

“I really shouldn’t,” Thomas said. “It’s not proper.”

“But I’ve asked so nicely,” Evan said, his expression turning wicked. “Besides, when has anything about me been proper?”

Thomas laughed despite himself. “I’ll try, Your Gra—Evan.” He rolled the name around on his tongue. It felt strange but not bad—more like he was tasting a forbidden treat, one that he might get addicted to if he wasn’t careful.

Evan beamed at him and the sunlight caught the green of his eyes, making them sparkle like the water in the harbour on a summer’s day. Then his smile shifted and became teasing as his gaze lingered on Thomas’s mouth, and just like on a summer’s day, Thomas felt his skin heat under Evan’s stare.

“Excuse me, Captain?” Sam said from where he was still straddling Darcy. Darcy didn’t seem to mind, and Thomas wondered idly if they were more than friends. “I was wondering if you wanted us to go again,” Sam said. He ran a hand over his sweaty brow and through his hair, making it stick up in damp tufts. He’d fought hard, and Thomas decided that he deserved a reward.

“No, I don’t think so. Off you go, Sam.” He raised his voice a little to be heard over the bitten-off grunts and the sounds of wood on wood. “You’re all dismissed for the day.”

Sam was quick to jump to his feet, pulling Darcy up with him. They both headed towards the barracks while the older guards took the time to place their weapons back into the timber racks where they belonged before leaving.

Evan bent and picked up Sam's staff, holding it in front of himself with both hands. "You know, that looked rather fun." He swung the staff around in a wide arc and Thomas had to dodge swiftly to one side to avoid getting smacked upside the head.

"Oops!" Evan said. He flashed Thomas a wide smile and spun the staff again. "Can I have a turn? I think I'd be quite good at it."

Thomas took a moment to weigh up whether he was more likely to earn a reprimand for refusing the duke's request or for whacking him with a big stick. In the end he reasoned that his chances were fairly even either way, but that he'd get in slightly less trouble for an accidental blow than an outright refusal, so he might as well play along. "Certainly," he said, grabbing Darcy's staff out of the dirt. "Have you ever fought before?"

Evan laughed. "Heavens, no. I'm more decorative than dangerous. But how hard can it be, really?" He held his staff out in front of himself and waved it. His movements were so stiff and awkward that Thomas wanted to grab the weapon from him before he could hurt himself, but Evan had a firm grip on the staff and a gleam in his eye that told Thomas he'd be wasting his time. "So I just hit you, do I?"

"You try to hit me," Thomas said.

"I mean, you're a substantial target," Evan said, looking Thomas up and down. He took a half step forward and swung his staff in a jerky motion that only managed to frighten off the ravens that were perched on the fence railings. "I meant to do that," Evan said. "Terrible things, blackbirds."

“Try and relax,” Thomas said.

Evan took a deep breath and rolled his shoulders, and some of the tension left his frame. He was still holding his staff all wrong though, and Thomas couldn't help himself. “Begging your pardon, but.” He dropped his own weapon and stepped forward, then grasped the duke by the shoulder and spun him so his back was against Thomas's chest. He placed his hands over Evan's and gently adjusted his grip, then pulled the staff closer to their bodies so that Evan's elbows were bent at the correct angle. “Like that,” he said, “and plant your feet. Otherwise you'll end up arse over teakettle.” He slid a foot between the duke's and nudged them out into a wider stance.

Perhaps Thomas was imagining it, but he could have sworn Evan leaned against him. His body was a warm, solid weight, and Thomas exhaled slowly and willed his cock to behave.

After a moment Evan let out a long breath of his own, stepped forward, and turned to face him. When he advanced this time, it was with more confidence, and before Thomas could blink, Evan had managed to aim his blow in the right direction. In what was surely a stroke of luck, his staff connected solidly with Thomas's. His face lit up with a grin, and he swung again.

This time Thomas was prepared, and he blocked the thrust easily, holding his own weapon at each end, raising it sideways, and using his bulk to shove Evan backward.

For a moment it seemed like Evan might hold his ground, but then he stumbled back a step and promptly fell over, landing on his arse in the dirt. He sat there, arms resting on his raised knees, and let out a chuckle. “Well done, Captain. You must be a skilled fighter to take me down so easily.”

Thomas wasn't sure what to say to that, so he wisely stayed silent and extended a hand. Evan reached up and grasped his forearm in a surprisingly firm grip, pulling

himself to his feet. He reached around and dusted off the seat of his pants with a sigh.

“Did you want to try again, Your Grace?” Thomas prayed the answer was no. Apart from that one lucky blow, Evan seemed to be as hopeless at this as he was at everything else, and Thomas had no intention of being the one who sent him to the physician.

Evan brushed at the dust on the front of his tunic. “Call me Evan. And I don’t think so. Physical activity isn’t for me after all.” He paused, and the corners of his mouth tugged up in a wicked smirk. “Well, not this physical activity.”

Thomas swallowed as the image of Evan’s bare arse flashed through his mind. He pushed it away and busied himself picking up their weapons and putting them in their racks. When he turned around it was to find Evan’s gaze fixed on him, assessing him in a way that sent a shiver up his spine for no discernible reason.

“Was there something else?”

Evan blinked. “You know, I think there was, but I can’t quite—no, wait. Yes! Leo wants to see you.”

Thomas paused in his movements. “Did His Majesty say why he wanted to see me?”

“Oh, I think it was something about a threat to the crown.”

Thomas’s gut clenched. “Someone threatened the king?”

Evan’s eyes widened. “Did they? Then you should go and tell Leo about it at once!”

Thomas opened his mouth to tell Evan he was an idiot, then thought better of it. Instead, he hurried up the path to the castle.

“We don’t know much,” King Leopold said, running a hand through his messy hair. From his tousled appearance, Thomas suspected it wasn’t the first or even the tenth time he’d done so today. “Just that there have been some whispers around the place that someone is targeting a member of the royal family. Nothing concrete, but I want you to be extra vigilant until all the guests have left. Double the patrols.”

“Of course, Your Majesty,” Thomas said, his mind already ticking over.

“It might be nothing,” Prince Felix said, leaning over from where he was sitting next to the king and smoothing down his husband’s errant locks, “but given that it’s not the first time someone’s tried to knock Leo off his perch, we prefer to exercise caution.”

“I’m not a parrot,” Leopold snapped, shooting Felix a glare. That in itself was evidence that the king was more worried than he was letting on. “Besides, they might not be coming for me. They might be after you.”

Felix snorted. “They know better than to take me on.” He patted the short sword he kept strapped to his thigh. He wore it at all times and had done so ever since someone had kidnapped him back when he’d still been the king’s bodyguard and secret lover.

Thomas shifted where he stood with his hands clasped behind his back. “And I assume the source of information is reliable?”

The king raised an eyebrow. “Incredibly reliable.”

Prince Felix rolled his eyes. “You can just say it’s the Rogue, Leo.” He turned his attention to Thomas. “He’s never been wrong yet.”

A thrill ran through Thomas at being trusted with the knowledge that the notorious spy existed—and was a man. He wondered for a moment if he’d met the Rogue

without knowing it before he pushed the thought aside. He had more important matters to deal with. “I’ll let the men know to be on the alert for suspicious behaviour, sire,” he said. “Will the crown prince need a special guard?”

Felix shook his head. “We’ve already sent Davin to Evergreen to visit Matty and Sophia until we get to the bottom of this.”

Thomas nodded. It was a smart move, and it was common enough for the crown prince to visit Evergreen that it wouldn’t arouse suspicion. “I’ll assign extra guards for Your Majesties immediately and increase the patrols.”

King Leopold let out a long sigh. “Thank you.”

Thomas gave a short bow and took his leave, but he hadn’t gone more than ten paces before there was the rapid clatter of boots on the stone floor and Prince Felix fell into step beside him, expression grim. “Listen, Thomas,” he said, voice low and urgent, “I know the protocol is to capture whoever it is and try and get information out of them, but if someone is coming for Leo, you do whatever you need to keep my husband safe. And if that involves a knife to the throat, so be it, you hear me?”

Thomas gave a sharp nod. If it came to it, he wouldn’t hesitate to protect the crown.

“I couldn’t take it if something happened to him. He’s—” Felix broke off and let out a shaky breath. Then he blinked rapidly before squaring his shoulders. “Leo is the king, and he must be protected at all costs. God knows I can’t run this bloody kingdom on my own. There’s far too much paperwork.” He offered Thomas a wobbly smile.

“I understand, Your Highness,” Thomas said quietly. “I’ll do whatever it takes.”

Felix nodded, then turned on his heel and walked briskly back to the office he shared

with his husband.

Thomas straightened his spine and took a deep breath as he prepared to go and sort out the extra shifts. Luckily there were enough members of the Royal Guard that providing extra protection wouldn't be overwhelming, and he began to mentally pair them up as he walked down the hallway. He'd almost made it to the staircase when once again there was the sound of footsteps. He spun around to see King Leopold hurrying toward him, one hand raised as a sign to stop.

Thomas waited until the king had reached him before asking, "Yes, Your Majesty?"

The king took a deep breath, his hands on his hips. "I don't know what Felix told you, but I can guess. Take no prisoners, am I right?"

Thomas stood quietly, unsure what he was expected to say.

King Leopold took his silence as confirmation. "Thought so." His voice dropped to a low growl. "Well, the same goes both ways. If he's in any danger, don't hesitate."

Thomas gave a grim smile.

"Understood, sire. Knives out at the first sign of trouble."

"Good. Hopefully it won't come to that, but I won't risk Felix's life for anything. I almost lost him once, and I don't care to repeat the experience."

And with that he walked back to his office, his spine stiff.

Watching him go, Thomas felt a pang of sympathy, but it was tinged with envy. Leo and Felix's affection for each other was obvious, and Thomas had to wonder.

What must it be like to be so in love with someone that you'd do anything to keep them safe?

When Thomas doubled the guard with an order to watch for anything suspicious, his men were smart enough not to ask any questions, and their increased vigilance as they moved about the palace filled Thomas with professional pride. But more than that, it reassured him that the king and his husband would be kept secure.

Thomas liked King Leopold and Prince Felix. But then, most people did. They were often found hanging about in the kitchens or the stables, and they rarely stood on ceremony. And it was more than a little endearing, the way they were stupidly devoted to each other.

From a more selfish—or pragmatic—viewpoint, though, Thomas wanted them safe simply because if anything happened to either of them, the result would be out and out war, and nobody wanted that.

But as the visiting dignitaries began to leave in dribs and drabs over the following week, he began to think that just this once, the Rogue might have been mistaken. Either that or the increased number of guards around the castle was acting as a deterrent.

He kept the instructions he'd received to take no prisoners to himself. It wasn't fair to burden his men with that kind of responsibility. Instead, he'd instructed them that if they did see anything out of the ordinary, day or night, they were to report to him immediately. So far he'd been alerted to two midnight trysts and an early morning attempted custard theft, but nothing that threatened the security of the king.

So when there was a hammering on the door of his cottage late one evening, he was prepared for more of the same. But instead he was greeted by a frantic, red-faced Darcy. "Captain, come quick! There's a stranger in the castle!" he panted. "They're



all dressed in black, and they were hiding in the shadows!”

“Are you sure? Did you get a good look at them?”

Darcy shook his head. “Didn’t see their face. The cloak had a hood. But they were tall and skinny, and they were sneaking into the guest wing. I left Philip following them and came straight here.”

Thomas’s gut tightened, and the hair prickled on the back of his neck. He took the time to check the knife in the hidden sheath in his boot before setting off for the castle at a run. Darcy ran alongside him, and they only slowed when they reached the side door that led into the laundry. Lowering his voice, Thomas said, “Did you see where they went exactly?”

Darcy nodded. “Philip and I followed them past the first three sets of rooms and then they turned off to the left, so I came to get you.”

Thomas bit back a curse. That particular passage led to the rooms where the Viscount of Calthrope was staying. He was a squat, unpleasant little man who was an insufferable bore, but he was also rumoured to be a favourite of the Calthropite king. If anything happened to him, there would be hell to pay.

“Well done. Go back to your post. I’ll take it from here.” He patted Darcy on the shoulder. When the guard left, Thomas didn’t take the stairs to the guest wing. Instead, he made use of a myriad of hidden passages that would take him there without alerting anyone to his presence.

He emerged minutes later in the guest quarters through a concealed doorway. He exchanged a nod with Philip, who was hovering near the end of the hallway, and jerked his head toward the stairs, indicating the other man should go back to his post. Whatever was happening, Thomas was confident he could handle it himself, and he

saw no need to put one of his men at risk.

Once Philip had left, Thomas slipped quietly along the passage leading toward the viscount's quarters. The door was ajar and as Thomas crept silently closer, he heard the low rumble of voices. He eased the door open. By the light of the flames flickering in the fireplace, he could just make out the viscount's stout outline and a second taller figure that was little more than a dark shape. They appeared to be embracing.

His shoulders sagged with relief. They were lovers.

Then the viscount made a desperate, wheezing noise and Thomas froze.

Wait.

Thomas had taken his share of men to bed, and none of them had ever made a noise like that. He squinted against the darkness just as the logs in the fireplace shifted, causing a shower of sparks. The flare of bright light lasted only moments, but it was enough to make it clear what was happening.

The shrouded figure wasn't embracing the viscount. He was choking him.

Thomas was momentarily frozen, but it only took a split second before his years of training kicked in and instinct took over. He drew the knife out of his boot and slipped silently into the room, creeping up behind the hooded figure. He clamped one hand over the stranger's mouth and with his other hand pressed the tip of his blade to their throat.

The figure tensed and then grasped the viscount's skull, displaying a surprising amount of strength as they twisted it viciously to the side. There was a sickening crack, loud in the silence, and a moment later the viscount's body tumbled to the

floor with a thud.

Thomas stared down in dismay. The viscount was utterly and undeniably dead, his head tilted at an unnatural angle that would have been incredibly painful if he hadn't already been dead. And Thomas hadn't been able to stop his murder.

A wave of helpless fury swept over him, and using all his considerable strength, he spun the hooded figure around and slammed his back against the door. The man let out a low grunt and went to fight back, but Thomas pressed his blade more firmly against his throat. "Don't move," he growled, and reached out and snatched back the stranger's hood.

A pair of familiar green eyes stared back at him.

Thomas froze, his brain screeching to a halt. He closed his eyes for a moment in case he was seeing things, but when he opened them again, he still had the Duke of Ravenport pinned to the door with a knife at his throat. "You... you just killed the viscount," he said, swallowing thickly.

"To be fair," Evan said with a nonchalance that was almost disconcerting, "he deserved it. Now, are you going to help me get rid of the body or not?"

### Chapter Four

Thomas wasn't sure what was more shocking—that Evan Devere, all-round hapless idiot, had just killed a man with such ruthless efficiency or that he was so casual about asking Thomas to help him with body disposal.

No, it was definitely the killing part.

“You... what?”

Evan reached up lightning quick and grasped Thomas's wrist, pulling his arm away from Evan's throat. The duke spun Thomas on the spot and twisted his arm halfway up his back before he had time to blink. The knife clattered to the floor and Thomas found himself shoved against the wall with a strength that belied the duke's lean build.

“That's better,” Evan said, his breath warm against Thomas's ear as he pressed against Thomas's back. “Now, I'll ask again. Are you going to keep your mouth shut and help me with the body or do I have to kill you as well?”

Thomas threw his head backward sharply, hoping to catch Evan off guard. It was dirty fighting, but since he'd just had his life threatened, he felt this was one of those situations where the rules of sportsmanship probably didn't apply.

Evan, though, just dodged and laughed. “Captain, you fight like a street brawler! I knew there was a reason I liked you! Mind you,” he added as he yanked Thomas's arm further up his back, “I also fight dirty.”

Thomas froze as something cold and sharp nudged at his ribs.

What the hell was Evan doing with a knife? He could barely manage cutlery!

Thomas closed his eyes, barely daring to breathe. His mind whirled and spun as he picked through what he knew and tried to make sense of this whole mess.

Evan—bumbling, scatterbrained Evan—had killed someone, and he wasn't the least bit bothered about it. And furthermore, he'd snapped the viscount's neck with an ease that suggested he'd done it before. He'd escaped Thomas's grasp, which was no easy feat, and now Thomas was the one being held at knifepoint. It didn't make any sense.

Except suddenly the pieces fell into place, and it did .

All the air rattled out of Thomas's lungs in one long breath at the enormity of what he'd discovered.

Evan Devere was a joke. Everybody said so. He was a man who moved between kingdoms at will, swanning over borders with no rhyme or reason, and nobody ever questioned him, because why would they? He was known to be a fool. And certainly, if you looked closely, he was always where he shouldn't be, at the periphery of a scandal or an unfortunate accident, but nobody ever did look closely because again, why would they? Evan was harmless.

Right until he wasn't.

“You're... you're him, aren't you?” Thomas said finally. “You're the Rogue.”

Evan leaned his chin on Thomas's shoulder and let out a long sigh. “You know, it's almost embarrassing that after all these years, when I finally get caught out, it's by one of the bloody guards. ”

“You. You’re the Rogue,” Thomas said, because he felt it bore repeating, if only to help him come to terms with the way his entire world view had just been tipped on its side. “And you just killed the viscount.”

“Guilty as charged,” Evan said, “but he was a threat, and he would have killed me if given half a chance. I just beat him to it.”

Some of the tension left Thomas at the confirmation that at least Evan was on the side of Lilleforth and not just a murderous lunatic who went about snapping necks for entertainment.

Thomas dared to turn his head slowly to the side, and out of the corner of his eye he saw Evan regarding him with a raised eyebrow. “So, what’s it to be, Captain? Are you keeping my secret and helping me, or are you and the viscount going to be found dead in each other’s arms in the morning by the Duke of Ravenport when he wanders into the wrong guest room?”

Thomas considered his options.

True, the duke had just killed a man, but it wasn’t like he’d killed him on a whim. It was to keep the king safe, and that made it acceptable. Thomas himself was prepared to take lives in his service to the crown. It was part of the job, and Thomas understood the weight of an oath to protect the king. Really, there was only one possible answer. “I’m helping you.” After a moment’s thought, he added, “If only so people don’t think I slept with that overbearing oaf.”

Evan’s laugh was warm and rich and nothing at all like his usual mindless tittering. “I knew I could trust you to make the right choice.” He released Thomas’s arm from where it was held up his back and the point of the knife disappeared from his ribs.

When Thomas spun around, Evan was crouched over the corpse, uncurling the

viscount's tightly clenched fist. He prised the man's fingers open and plucked a small vial from his palm, holding it up. "Hemlock. Meant for one of the royal family, but he wouldn't say who and refused to tell me who sent him. I'd like to think I could have got him to talk, but he was being remarkably stubborn about it. Said he'd die before revealing his secrets."

"Well, he wasn't wrong," Thomas said before he could stop himself.

Evan let out a startled laugh, but then his expression turned serious as he stood. "It's funny because it's true, but it also leaves us at a dead end."

Thomas blinked, unsure if he'd heard what he thought he'd heard. "Us?"

"You just said you'd help me, so yes. Us."

"I thought you meant disposing of the body!" Thomas's heart thumped against his ribs as just for a moment, something close to panic washed over him. But he closed his eyes and took several deep breaths and reminded himself that as the Captain of the Royal Guard, he'd been hired for exactly this.

Whatever this was.

Evan shoved the very dead viscount with his boot. "We do need to shift him, but I also thought we could work together and figure out who's behind this before another bloody assassin turns up. You're observant, and you're smarter than people give you credit for. Besides, nobody gives the staff a second look. So really, you're perfectly placed to poke around a bit and find things out. Or you can be my cover story while I look around. Think about it. The duke's where he isn't meant to be again, but it's all right. The captain is keeping an eye on him."

He flashed Thomas a brilliant smile and his eyes sparkled. It made desire surge inside

of Thomas, hot and molten and startling. He told himself that now was not the time to think about how much more attractive Evan was when he was clever and confident instead of acting like a tipsy fool.

Sadly, telling himself now wasn't the time didn't make Evan any less attractive. And it didn't help that Evan's logic was flawless. People would assume Thomas was there to keep an eye on the errant royal, and because he was always around, they'd also promptly forget they'd seen him. There were times when he got tired of standing in the corner of the room like part of the furniture, but he could see how in this instance, his constant presence in the background could work to his advantage.

Their advantage, since apparently he and the duke were now partners.

"Fine, but you'll have to teach me the basics of spying."

Evan's face split into an easy grin, and the heat in Thomas's belly flared again. "Oh, that's easy. Just act like you're meant to be there."

"Where?"

"Wherever it is that you're not meant to be. Now, what about the back stairs to the guest wing?"

"What about them?"

Evan rolled his eyes. "For the viscount to fall down and break his neck, obviously."

"That's quite brilliant," Thomas said, his admiration for the duke growing. "They're known to be tricky."

The staircase was close by, but it was also mostly deserted due to the stone steps



being narrow and set at an awkward angle. It was handy for when someone didn't want their comings and goings to be seen, though, so it was feasible that the viscount would be using it.

"I thought so, yes," Evan said, rolling his shoulders before crouching and grabbing an ankle and starting to drag the viscount towards the door. "We can prop him up between us so it looks like he's in his cups and carry him that way."

"Or," Thomas said, "I could check if there's anyone about." He ducked out the door and strode along the passageway at an unhurried pace, just as he would if he was doing his regular patrol, his footsteps echoing through the silence. He turned left, then left again, and then right, until he could see the staircase in question.

There was nobody in sight.

He walked casually back to the viscount's room, where he found Evan sitting on the side of the bed, his ankles crossed as he leaned back on his elbows. It showed off the lean length of his body, and it was incredibly distracting. Perhaps it had something to do with the fact that instead of his normal bright colours, Evan was clothed from head to foot in black and the fabric of his clothing was clinging to him in a way that was guaranteed to set Thomas's pulse racing. "There's nobody about," Thomas said, averting his gaze. This was not the time to be thinking about the duke's narrow hips or finely shaped calves. He bent and scooped the cooling corpse into his arms, which was an excellent way to kill the flare of lust in his belly.

The body was—quite literally—a dead weight, but Thomas was able to lift it without any trouble, and he didn't miss the way Evan's gaze lingered on his straining biceps.

It occurred to him that perhaps Evan had posed on the bed like that deliberately. For the first time, Thomas considered that maybe the attraction he felt went both ways.

He shoved the thought aside as something to ponder when he wasn't carrying a dead man, and strode toward the door.

They made their way to the top of the staircase without being seen and once there, Evan said, "We'll carry him down to the first landing. It's important that we arrange the body so it seems like he fell. Otherwise it will look suspicious."

Thomas eyed the treacherous staircase. "Or I could just do this."

He hoisted the viscount up in his arms and threw him down the stairs.

He winced as the crack of a skull on stone steps rang out, followed by a series of meaty thuds as the body tumbled downward, gathering speed as it raced toward the first landing. Thomas expected it to stop there, but the force of his initial throw meant it rolled merrily over the smooth patch of stone and careened halfway down the next set of steps before coming to rest with one arm at a peculiar angle. The viscount's head lolled to one side, and sightless eyes stared up at the ceiling.

He looked exactly like a man who'd fallen down the stairs.

Evan cleared his throat. "Well, yes, that's one way to do it."

He turned and headed back towards the guest wing, his steps rapid, and Thomas hurried to catch up. "Wait, are we just leaving him there?"

"Obviously. This is the perfect chance to look around his room for anything that might tell us who he's working for."

Well, that made sense, but Thomas still felt a lingering sense of guilt. "But we're not leaving him there for too long? I don't want one of the maids stumbling on the body."

Evan turned the door handle of the viscount's chambers. "Trust me. I've done this before."

They stepped inside and Evan wasted no time, lighting a lantern and tipping the contents of the viscount's trunk out onto the bed. He went through all the pockets of his clothing with a quiet efficiency, and in the inside pocket of the man's coat he found a square of parchment folded over into tight squares. Unfolding the paper, he held it up to the light. Thomas leaned over his shoulder to get a better look and snorted.

It appeared to be a crudely drawn rendering of a cock and a pair of oversized balls, similar to the scribblings the younger guards sometimes did when they were bored. It was decorated with little pairs of circles around the edges where whoever drew it had been doodling.

"Good to see the viscount was paying attention in all those meetings," Evan said. "Doesn't help us, though." His brow furrowed. "Damn. I never checked the pockets of his robe before you threw him down the stairs."

A flash of memory came to Thomas then, of the day Evan had swanned down the passageway wearing a coat belonging to the Earl of Aramanthe. That hadn't been the first time he'd seen the duke in someone else's jacket either. Another penny dropped. "Wait, is that why you're always taking people's clothing?"

Evan turned to face him and raised an eyebrow. "You're really not just a pretty face, are you? Smart and handsome. How is it that you're single, Thomas?"

He blinked. Was Evan flirting with him? Heat rose in his cheeks, and he did his best to ignore it.

Evan's smirk suggested he'd noticed, but he didn't mention it. Instead, he said, "And

in answer to your question, can you think of a better way to rifle through a man's pockets?"

The lamplight flickered, casting shadows over his features, and Thomas was suddenly all too aware of how close they were standing and the elegant curve of Evan's throat where he'd tilted his head back.

"Should we go back and check his pockets now?" Thomas asked, stepping back and fixing his gaze on the wall in an effort not to be distracted by the very pretty man in front of him.

"Oh, I'll do it when I go back and discover the body," Evan said. "I don't know why all these idiots think the best place to store their secrets is in their coat pockets, but that's invariably where I find them."

"Perhaps they think that keeping them on hand is safest, and they aren't taking jacket-stealing scoundrels into account?" Thomas suggested.

"I suppose that does make sense," Evan said. He looked at the paper in his hand again before slipping it into a pocket in the lining of his cloak.

"So what do we do now?" Thomas asked.

"I'll have another look around in here while you keep watch, and then we both go back to bed. In an hour or so I'll make a terrible discovery on the back stairs, and someone will come and fetch you," Evan said.

Thomas nodded and headed for the door. Just as he went to open it, Evan said quietly, "And Thomas?"

He paused, his heart beating faster. Was Evan going to mention the simmering

attraction between them? Perhaps he was going to suggest a tryst later. “Yes?”

“If you feel the urge to share that you know who I am, rest assured I won’t hesitate to kill you, and whoever you’ve told as well.”

Or not.

Thomas was shocked at how easily people accepted the lie that the Viscount of Calthrope had slipped and fallen to his death. Of course, the story was greatly helped along by the absolute hysterics Evan pitched.

Thomas could only stare in admiration as Evan wrung his hands together, moaning and wailing to anyone who would listen about how he might never recover from the shock of finding one of his dearest new friends dead on the staircase and wasn’t anybody going to fetch him a large brandy?

The remaining guests had gathered at the top of the stairs and were staring wide-eyed as the body was carried away to wherever bodies went—Thomas didn’t know, and didn’t care to find out. Since they had a convenient audience, Thomas cleared his throat and said, “I’m sorry to ask, Your Grace, but did you notice anything suspicious about the viscount’s death? Only, we’ll need to investigate.”

Evan turned to face him, dabbing at his eyes with a handkerchief he’d produced from his pocket. “I don’t think so,” he said. “To be fair I didn’t look very closely, what with all the blood from where he hit his poor head. But I don’t think Stephen would have been involved in anything unsavoury. He was mainly interested in wine.” His brow creased. “Perhaps it was the wine that caused him to take a tumble.”

“Possibly, Your Grace,” Thomas said. “He did like a drink.”

“That’s why we were friends,” Evan said with a nod. “Man after my own heart.” He

stumbled slightly and steadied himself by clutching at Thomas's sleeve. "I need to sit down. Perhaps you'd like to escort me to my chambers, Captain?"

"Of course, Your Grace."

Evan leaned against his side and Thomas placed a careful arm around his shoulders as they walked slowly away from the staircase, and it seemed to act as a signal for the rest of the onlookers to disperse. Once they were inside Evan's chambers, the duke straightened up and ran a hand over his jaw. "Right. Obviously, the ambassador for Falsmark is involved."

"The ambassador for Falsmark is fifty if he's a day!"

"And yet he was fully dressed in the middle of the night. Doesn't that strike you as odd? I mean, most of the lookie-loos were yawning in their nightclothes, but this man was wide awake and dressed. I say he was up to no good."

"You're usually fully dressed at night," Thomas stated.

"And I'm usually up to no good."

"You make a fair point," Thomas said, "but I don't think it's reason enough to start pointing fingers at the ambassador."

"No, but it's something, which is more than we had before." He strode across the room and flung himself into the armchair next to the fireplace, hooking one long leg over the arm and sprawling sideways. "I need to think about this for a bit. And you need to sleep."

"I'm fine," Thomas protested, but his body chose that moment to make a liar out of him as an enormous yawn escaped. He placed his hands in the small of his back and

arched backward to combat the stiffness there, fighting another yawn as a heavy cloak of weariness wrapped itself around him. So far this evening he'd witnessed an assassination, been drawn into a spy plot, been threatened with his own murder, and had to deal with the same dead body twice. It was starting to take its toll. But as tired as he was, the night wasn't over yet. "What will you tell Their Majesties?" he asked, hoping they weren't expected to have a meeting with the king at this late hour.

Evan let out a yawn of his own. "I'll tell them nothing tonight. It's too bloody late. Tomorrow I'll meet with them and tell them that we've dealt with a potential assassin, that you're assisting me, and that we have it all in hand."

"But we don't have it all in hand. We don't have anything in hand!"

Impossibly, Evan grinned. "You forget that I've been doing this for a long time, and I'm very, very good at it. Go and get some sleep, and by the time I talk to Leo and Felix tomorrow, I'll have more of an idea who's behind this."

And the thing was, despite all evidence to the contrary, Thomas believed him. After all, Evan Devere was the Rogue, and according to the stories Thomas had heard, he'd never failed yet.

Thomas just hoped the stories were true.

### Chapter Five

Evan waited until Thomas had left to cast aside his casual demeanour and sit properly in his chair. Then he proceeded to drop his head in his hands and let out a low groan.

Thomas was right.

He did not have this in hand. He did not have this in hand at all.

It was his own fault. He'd allowed himself to be distracted by what amounted to a youthful crush on the captain. He'd been swayed by Thomas's handsome face and square jaw, his wonderfully dry wit, and of course, all that magnificent muscle—and in doing so, he'd seriously underestimated Thomas and his powers of observation.

Despite the constant bed-hopping that was both part of his job and a pleasurable hobby, Evan hadn't been truly drawn to someone in years. But Thomas had gotten under his skin without even trying, and Evan didn't know what to do with that. He'd been taunted by images of Thomas pinning him down and fucking him through the mattress, and once that fantasy had popped into his head, he hadn't been able to shake it, no matter how hard he tried.

Not that he'd tried very hard.

In the past he'd always claimed he didn't have a type—other than willing—but it had become abundantly clear to him over the past few weeks that he did have a type and that it was a muscular blond giant named Thomas Malone.



And so he'd made a game of trying to entice Thomas with some subtle flirting, telling himself all he wanted was a little harmless fun, perhaps a night or two in the captain's bed to get this attraction out of his system. But while he'd been mooning over Thomas and trying to tempt the man into making all his fantasies come true, he'd almost missed the clues that had pointed to the viscount and his skullduggery.

He consoled himself that he hadn't missed the danger signs when it mattered, and he had managed to prevent a regicide, but it had been far too close for his liking. And now the only leads he had to catch whoever was trying to kill someone in his family were a well-dressed ambassador and a badly drawn cock and balls.

He huffed out a sharp breath that was almost a snort and sat up straight. This was no time to start wallowing in self-doubt. He'd succeeded with less in the past, and he'd succeed here too.

The alternative was unthinkable.

If anything happened to Leo or Felix, it would trigger a war, so it was Evan's job to make sure that didn't happen.

And in all his years of espionage, he'd never failed yet.

Of course, Evan hadn't set out to be a spy. Did anybody?

When he was younger, he'd just assumed he'd spend his days supporting his cousin the crown prince and sort of lolling around the place. Except he'd always been a nosy little bugger, and as he grew from a gangly youth into a good-looking and personable young man, he discovered that his natural curiosity and keen observational skills combined with his easygoing charm meant people seemed to want to confide in him—which translated into a habit of knowing all sorts of things he wasn't meant to know. After he'd opened his mouth a few times at dinner and inserted his foot

directly in it by sharing observations that were better kept secret, the king had taken him aside.

He'd thought he was about to get a dressing-down, but instead the king had said, "Evan, how would you like to travel, use your charm and your skills, and help protect the kingdom at the same time?"

He'd gone on to propose that Evan take advantage of his popularity and privilege to move between kingdoms, keeping his eyes and ears open, and report back.

"You mean... like a spy?"

The king had nodded. "Exactly like a spy."

Evan had immediately been entranced with the idea. The king had cautioned that there would be danger involved and that he'd be sworn to secrecy, but to seventeen-year-old Evan, who was hungry for adventure, that had just made the whole thing more intriguing.

And so, after gaining his parents' dubious approval, undertaking intensive hand-to-hand and weapons training, and spending several months learning tricks of the trade from a certain shadowy gentleman of the court who was looking to hang up his knives, Evan had embarked on his first bout of spying—and he'd never looked back.

He'd taken to it like a duck to water, and nobody had bothered to look twice at the young royal who wandered the halls in foreign castles with an innocent air.

Nobody had looked twice in ten years.

Of course, there were disadvantages. He couldn't take a proper lover, for example. The risk they'd discover his secret was too great. And he had to admit that the role of

palace idiot was starting to wear thin—sometimes he wished that instead of pretending he didn't know his left from his right and couldn't remember anyone's name, he could just be himself and finally match wits against someone equally clever, without fear of exposing himself.

He'd bet Thomas would give him a run for his money. The man had a keen wit and a sharp mind, even though he hid it behind a cloak of deference.

Evan perked up at the thought that at least he could be himself with Thomas. The man was ridiculously attractive, and Evan was looking forward to spending more time with him while they were trying to figure out who was behind the attacks on the king. And if Evan happened to charm Thomas into his bed, so much the better.

God. Leo was going to laugh his arse off when Evan told him that the Captain of the bloody Guard had been the one to finally figure out he was the Rogue.

Or perhaps he wouldn't be surprised at all. After all, Leo was the one who'd appointed Thomas as captain in the first place, so he obviously knew there was more to the man than met the eye.

Evan heaved another sigh and bent to pull his boots off. It had been a long night, and he had to be up before dawn for a meeting with the king. It was how they usually did things. He'd send a message and meet with Leopold and Felix in one of the empty cottages while it was still dark, pass on everything he knew, and then slip away to the castle where he'd go back to bed for a few hours. He'd emerge mid-morning complaining about the lack of breakfast, and nobody would know that he'd been up at the crack of a sparrow's fart.

He'd stripped out of his shirt and was unbuttoning his breeches when there was a knock at the door. He frowned and debated ignoring it, but the knock came again, more persistent this time.

He ran both hands through his hair so it looked like he'd been sleeping, and shuffled over and opened the door.

It was Thomas, and his mouth dropped open at Evan's half-dressed state. He closed it again and his Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed.

Evan flashed him an easy smile. "Enjoying the show, Captain?"

Thomas swallowed again and his gaze swept down to the floor, but Evan didn't miss the way his eyes lingered on his bare torso on the way down. "Sorry to disturb you."

"It's fine," Evan said, opening the door wide enough to allow Thomas entry. "It's not like you haven't seen my arse hanging out before."

Thomas's blush reached right to the tips of his ears, which Evan took as a good sign. "So why are you here?" he asked when Thomas stepped inside. "Because if you were planning on seducing me, you only need to ask."

Thomas's eyes widened. "What? That—no—not that you're not—I mean?—"

Evan took pity on him. "I'm teasing, Captain."

A look of relief passed over Thomas's features, but it was followed by a flash of regret—and wasn't that interesting?

The chances of getting Thomas into bed were looking better by the minute—just as soon as they'd sorted out the plot to kill the king, of course.

"Since you're not here to seduce me, I assume this has to do with the viscount?" Evan asked.

Thomas cleared his throat again. “Well, on my way downstairs I passed the ambassador’s chambers and the door was open. The room was empty.”

“And?” Evan wasn’t sure what Thomas was telling him, but then a thought struck him. “Wait, are you suggesting now would be a good time for me to go and look through his things while you stand guard?”

Thomas’s cheeks went pink and he cleared his throat. “No, actually. I, um, already did. I remembered what you said, and I went through the pockets of his jacket.”

“Oh, aren’t you a clever one?” Evan said.

Thomas’s brow creased as though he thought Evan might be mocking him.

“No, I mean it,” Evan said. “I’m genuinely impressed at your quick thinking.”

“Oh,” Thomas said, his face flaming, and he gave Evan a shy smile. “Anyway, I found this. I thought it might be important.” He held out a tightly folded square of paper.

Evan hadn’t thought it was possible to be more attracted to the captain just by virtue of his competence, and yet here he was, fighting the urge to back Thomas into the door, pin him in place, and kiss him senseless.

But Evan hadn’t become the best spy in six kingdoms by giving in to random urges, so he busied himself unfolding the paper square.

It was another rough drawing of a cock and enormous balls, almost an exact copy of the other one. He turned the paper sideways, then held it up to the light.

It remained a crudely drawn cock and balls.

Thomas tilted his head to the side and tapped his fingers against his chin. “I’m not much on the courting scene, but perhaps this is a thing people do now? Maybe the viscount had an admirer.”

“Perhaps,” Evan mused, “but it doesn’t explain the ambassador having a copy as well.” He handed Thomas the paper. “Here. Something to remember me by.” He gave a wicked grin. “Mind you, you’d need a bigger sheet of paper to draw mine properly.”

Thomas raised an eyebrow. “Is this your idea of a courting gesture, Your Grace?”

Evan snorted out a laugh. “If you like. And you’ve helped me dispose of a body and seen my bare arse. Call me Evan, for heaven’s sake.”

Thomas’s cheeks flushed that delightful pink again, and he tucked the paper into his pocket. “Sorry, Your—Evan. Force of habit. But it’s probably a good idea for me to keep referring to you by your title anyway. You never know who’s listening, and we don’t want whoever is behind this thinking we’re on informal terms or that I’m helping you. Not that I’ll be much help, what with you being...” He swallowed and ducked his head.

“Being...”

“You know.” Thomas’s blush deepened and he lowered his voice. “The Rogue.”

It was then that Evan had one of those flashes of insight that made him so very good at what he did.

Thomas Malone had a serious case of Rogue worship.

It was far more common than Evan had ever expected. Even though he’d never

revealed his identity, rumours abounded, and he'd heard plenty of chatter about himself. There were a lot of people, men and women both, who fantasised about being the one to discover the identity of the mystery man—and then being thoroughly debauched by said mystery man. The logic seemed to be that anyone as competent and dashing as the Rogue must surely be an outstanding cocksman. Evan was an outstanding cocksman, but that had nothing to do with being a spy and everything to do with plenty of experience and some excellent teachers along the way.

But it wasn't something he'd expected from his strait-laced, sensible captain.

Thomas was still watching him, eyes dark, and Evan was sorely tempted just for a second to try and coax him into his bed right now. But then Thomas let out a jaw-cracking yawn that had Evan yawning, and really, if he was going to seduce the man, wouldn't it be better to do it when they were both fresh and well rested? He got the impression he'd get exactly one chance to impress Thomas, and he didn't want to waste it. He'd rather avoid the embarrassing possibility of falling asleep with someone's cock in his mouth.

Once had been enough.

“You're right, of course,” he said, giving Thomas a warm smile. “We don't want to tip anyone off. But perhaps you can call me Evan when we're alone.”

And you can use my name when I finally straddle those thick thighs and ride you , he didn't add.

There would be time for that once they'd discovered who was behind the threat to the king.

“ Did you really have to kill Calthrope?” Leopold asked, arms folded as he rested his arse against the edge of the kitchen table in the deserted cottage.

“I really did. He had a vial of hemlock and refused to give me any information about who it was for. And given the circumstances, I needed to shut him up immediately.”

“Circumstances?” Felix asked, his head snapping up from where he’d been resting it on the tabletop. “What circumstances?”

Evan blew out a long breath. He’d hoped to sort of... glide past the part where he’d been caught, but obviously that was a vain hope. Not much got past Felix. “I was caught out while I was interrogating him, if you must know. And since I wasn’t sure how that was going to turn out, I thought it best to kill him so that if it went badly for me, at least the job was done.”

Leo straightened up. “What do you mean , you got caught out? You don’t get caught. That’s the whole point of you.”

Evan flapped a hand at him. “In my defence, that captain of yours is very light on his feet for a big man. I was busy trying to make sure you didn’t get killed when he snuck up on me and put a knife to my throat.”

“Excuse me?” Leo’s eyes widened. “ Thomas got the drop on you? What did you do?”

“Well, I snapped the viscount’s neck, obviously, and then when the captain saw it was me, he sort of... figured it out from there.”

Leo sat suddenly in a rickety chair and rested his head in his hands and groaned. “Please tell me you didn’t kill Thomas? Or tie him up somewhere and leave him there?”

“What? No.” Evan sat opposite him. “I gave him the choice of keeping his mouth shut and helping with the body or having his throat cut. He chose to help with the



body. He's incredibly strong and very good in a crisis, did you know?"

Leo lifted his head and glared at Evan. "Of course I know. That's why I put him in charge. Tell me what happened next."

"Well, long story short, Thomas threw the viscount's body down the stairs for me. It was very impressive. Later I went and found my poor dear friend Stephen, who tragically fell to his death on the back staircase."

"And did you search his room?"

Evan rolled his eyes. "Please. Of course I searched his room. And the body. But I didn't find anything except a drawing. So now we're trying to figure out who else was involved. We suspect the ambassador for Falsmark."

"We?" Leo asked.

"Well, since Thomas knows what's going on, I've asked him to help me keep an eye out for suspicious activity. He's already proven rather useful. Nobody will give him a second look since he's the captain and he's always around the place, and people assume that because he's big he's not all that smart, when nothing could be further from the truth. He's very clever."

Felix raised an eyebrow. "Not to mention handsome."

"Is he?" Evan said airily. "I hadn't noticed."

Felix snorted. "Liar. You've been watching him for weeks."

Damn. Evan had thought he'd been subtle. Then again, this was Felix. "Fine," he huffed. "He's a strapping great draught horse of a man and I want to ride him into the

sunset. Happy?"

Felix grinned. "Very. I like seeing you smitten."

"I'm not smitten. I'm attracted. There's a difference." Evan wasn't sure why he felt the need to defend himself.

"Stop meddling, sweetheart. I'm sure Evan can take care of his own affairs," Leo said.

"Exactly," Evan said. "Besides, I'm more interested in finding out who's trying to kill you than anything else."

"You'll figure it out," Leo said. "You're the best there is."

Evan couldn't help the surge of pleasure that rolled through him at Leo's praise. He knew his cousin had faith in him, but he was so used to people rolling their eyes and calling him an idiot that it still shocked him to hear a compliment spoken aloud.

Warmth curled in his chest alongside a fierce determination to do whatever it took to eliminate the threat. He couldn't imagine what it must be like to have the responsibility of an entire kingdom on your shoulders, and he'd always been quietly grateful that Leo, and not he, had inherited that burden.

No, he was happier behind the scenes—and if that meant playacting at making a fool of himself to keep his family safe, that was a price he'd happily pay.

Besides, at least there was one person who'd stopped underestimating him now that Thomas knew he wasn't as dense as he appeared. Not that it mattered what Thomas thought. It was just... nice not to be dismissed for a change, that was all.

It had nothing to do with Evan wanting to impress the man.

Nothing at all.

He pushed his chair back from the table and stood. “I’m going back to bed. I’ve only had three hours’ sleep.”

Felix and Leo stood as well, their chairs scraping the stone floor, and stepped outside into the predawn darkness and disappeared into the gloom, heading up the road to the castle.

Evan waited until they were well out of sight before following them, and by the time he got to the side door that led through to the kitchens and nodded at the yawning guard there, the first streaks of daylight were painting the sky pink.

Once in his room, he kicked off his boots, stripped out of his clothing, and climbed into bed, too tired to bother with a nightshirt. He let out a relieved sigh as he pulled the quilt over his naked body and tried to sleep. His mind kept circling back to the earlier events of the night as he tried to see what he might have missed. But it was a fruitless exercise, and in the end Evan pushed those thoughts aside and chose to turn his attention to something much more pleasant.

Thomas was attracted to him.

That much had been clear from the disappointment on Thomas’s face when Evan had said he was teasing about seducing him. He wasn’t sure why he’d said that and a part of him regretted it. What if Thomas took him seriously?

Then again, it had proven that Thomas was interested. And now that Evan knew Thomas was attracted to the Rogue and the Duke of Ravenport both, he was far more confident in his chances of charming his burly captain into bed.

Evan was eager to get his hands on all that glorious muscle, but he was also determined to take things slowly. He'd flirt and tease and make a game of it, letting the anticipation build. He got the impression that Thomas would enjoy that—he'd certainly seemed to enjoy their flirting so far. And when Evan finally did seduce Thomas, it would be all the sweeter.

He was starting to suspect that underneath his efficient exterior, Thomas had an adventurous streak that was just crying out to be explored, and it would be such fun to unleash it.

Evan couldn't remember the last time he'd had a lover just for fun, but he was looking forward to it. It would be refreshing to bed someone without having to stay alert and check their pockets afterwards for once, or to extract information from them in their post fucked-out haze before sneaking away. To be able to curl up beside a solid bear of a man and take the time to enjoy his own fucked-out haze without worrying about concealed weapons.

Would Thomas's position as a captain translate to being bossy in bed? Or would he be someone who was happy to relinquish responsibility for a change and let Evan be in charge? Evan couldn't decide which he'd prefer.

But he couldn't wait to find out.

## Page 6

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### Chapter Six

Now that Thomas knew Evan was the Rogue, he wondered that he hadn't seen it before. Granted, Evan did a bloody fantastic job of acting like a brainless, harmless, waste of space, but still. Thomas had always prided himself on his powers of observation, yet he'd missed that Evan's entire 'brainless and harmless' act was just that—an act.

And what was more, he'd never once wondered why it was that wherever Evan went, disaster seemed to follow. Or rather, like everyone else, he'd assumed that Evan was a victim of bad luck rather than the cause of it, and it was simply unfortunate that he was always in the wrong place at the wrong time whenever something tragic happened.

Like a viscount falling down the stairs, for example.

The morning after they'd dealt with the body, Evan had stayed in his bedroom until almost noon. Then he'd wandered into the kitchens like a lost lamb, forlornly asking if there might be something to eat. Thomas had been eating his own lunch, and he'd had to hide a smile when Cook had looked at Evan with something like pity and asked if the poor dear wouldn't like some cake after the terrible shock he'd had.

She'd actually called him a poor dear—like he was an orphan or a stray kitten and not a man who could snap someone's neck in the blink of an eye.

Now that Thomas was in the know, it was fascinating watching Evan swan about the palace, drifting in and out of spaces where he didn't belong, wearing his absent-

mindedness like a cloak that shielded him from prying eyes.

Thomas had thought Evan was handsome before, but now that he knew the man possessed a working brain and a ruthless streak, the seeds of attraction he'd previously felt had only grown, blossoming into both genuine admiration for Evan's skills and a desire for Evan to hold him down and fuck him stupid—or even better, the other way around, although Thomas was open to whatever was on offer.

Thomas wasn't sure what that said about him. Surely someone being an infamous spy and a killer to boot should have killed the flicker of arousal he felt? But instead, the flicker was now a roaring flame. All the fantasies he'd entertained about the Rogue were suddenly much more real now he could put a face to the name. When he imagined Evan pinning him down against the sheets—or against the wall, or the table, or any other flat surface—it made his blood heat and his cock stiffen. And when he imagined himself doing the pinning? His blood ran even hotter.

He was helpless in the face of his attraction.

He shifted restlessly where he was standing outside the king's offices. Now was not the time to be thinking about Evan pinning his anything to anywhere. And it wasn't like it would ever become a reality. Evan wasn't interested in Thomas. He'd said so. He'd made a point of saying he was teasing, like he was worried Thomas might get the wrong idea. The rejection had stung more than Thomas wanted to admit.

And yet, he flirted with you in the first place. Maybe he did mean it after all.

Thomas pushed the thought aside and straightened his posture. He needed to focus on finding out who was threatening the king and stop worrying about whether the duke liked him.

As if summoned by a thought, Evan appeared at the end of the long hallway. Even at

this distance Thomas recognised the sway of his hips as he meandered aimlessly past a group of court officials who were chattering among themselves. The group seemed unaware that Evan had paused right next to them, ostensibly to look at one of the many tapestries that lined the walls, but Thomas had no doubt it was so that he could take in the details of their conversation. Once the men had made their way to the staircase and disappeared out of sight, Evan lingered a moment longer then straightened up and strode towards Thomas with a determined gleam in his eye.

“Are they in there?” he asked. “No, wait, of course they’re in there. You’re not guarding an empty room.” He swung the door open and paused, raising an eyebrow. “Well, are you coming in or not?”

Thomas followed him inside.

King Leopold looked up from the pile of papers on his desk and drawled, “No, please do come in, Evan. We’re not busy at all.”

Evan flapped a hand. “It’s paperwork. It’s not going anywhere. And I’m here to do you a favour.”

Leopold sat back in his chair. “Oh?”

“Yes. I’m taking you riding.”

Leopold and Felix exchanged a glance.

Thomas cleared his throat. “Excuse me, Your Grace, but given past events, it was decided that Their Majesties can only ride with a full contingent of guards.”

Evan rolled his eyes and threw himself into the chair across from Leopold’s desk, stretching his long legs out in front of himself. “Yes, because nothing says everything

is fine and we suspect nothing like a king who rides three and four days a week suddenly staying locked up in his office. Or worse, going riding but taking half the guard with him.”

Thomas opened his mouth to argue and then shut it. Evan was, of course, right. Thomas wondered again how he’d ever thought the duke stupid.

Leo sighed. “I understand what you’re saying, but Thomas is right. The last two times someone tried to kill one of us we were on horseback, so you can see why I’m not in a hurry to go riding right now.”

“It would be nice, though,” Felix said, letting out a wistful sigh of his own. “We haven’t been out in almost a week.”

“Exactly,” said Evan. “Everyone knows you love your horses, Leo. And Felix was a stable boy before you married him.”

“Excuse me, I was the royal groom,” Felix said.

“Same thing,” Evan said, with all the carelessness of someone whose position had always been at the top of the heap. “Anyway, my point stands. If you two stay indoors much longer, it’s going to look suspicious.”

Leo arched an eyebrow. “So, in order to not get killed, you want me to go and do the one thing that I’ve been told I’m not allowed to do in case it gets me killed?”

“In a nutshell, yes.”

Leo looked over at his husband. “Well then. I suppose we’re going riding.”

Felix’s face split into a grin and he pushed himself to his feet. “When are we



leaving?”

Despite his initial misgivings, Thomas found himself looking forward to being out in the sunshine and fresh air. And proving Evan’s point, Mother Jones, the stablemaster, commented, “I think Blackbird missed you, Your Majesty,” as he saddled the king’s horse. Their recent absence hung like an unspoken question in the air.

“I’ve been wading through the paperwork from the trade deals, and Felix is a monster who refused to let me out until I’d finished it,” Leo said, with just enough of a pout to make it believable. Thomas knew that it wouldn’t be the first time Felix had kept Leo at his desk despite the king’s protests.

Mother accepted the explanation with a soft smile. “Ah well, you’re due a nice long ride then,” he said, petting Blackbird’s cheek.

One of the young grooms was still preparing Thomas’s mare, Poppy, when a cheerful voice rang out across the courtyard. “Hello!” Evan strutted across the cobblestones, his hands clasped behind his back, and peered at Thomas’s mount like he’d never seen a horse before. “Is mine here somewhere? I might take him out. For a bit of fun.”

Mother Jones’s eyebrow shot up in surprise. “You’d like to ride... for fun, Your Grace?”

“Why not? It’s a lovely day for it.” Evan tilted his head back and inhaled, closing his eyes. He opened them a moment later and wrinkled his nose. “Lord, it stinks of horse shit.”

“You generally find that in the stables,” Felix said with a laugh.

Evan laughed along with him and then wandered over to the main stalls. “It’s this

one, yes?" he asked, making a vague motion in the direction of a compact grey gelding, almost like he wasn't quite sure what his horse looked like.

"Ollie!" Mother called.

His youngest groom in training came running from the other end of the stables and skidded to a stop in front of him. "Yes, Mister Jones?"

"Prepare His Grace's horse, quick as you like," Mother said.

Ollie set about his task while Felix saddled his own horse, and before long they were on their way, the clatter of hooves on cobbles giving way to soft thuds as they rode out through the gate and into the broad, sweeping meadows that surrounded the stables. They headed in the direction of the nearby woods. Leo and Felix rode alongside each other and Thomas stayed back far enough to give them some semblance of privacy. Evan pulled his horse up alongside Thomas, wobbling precariously in his saddle right until they were out of sight of the stables. Then he said in a low undertone, "I'll be right back."

"Where are you going?" Surely Evan wasn't leaving them?

Something of what he was thinking must have shown on Thomas's face. Evan grinned and said, "Watch and learn, Captain."

Seconds later, his horse shot forward at a gallop, weaving wildly back and forth across the rough dirt path that had been carved through the meadow by thousands of hoofbeats.

If Thomas didn't know better, he would have passed the display off as Evan's inability to do anything properly, including controlling his horse. But since he did know better, he paid attention, and it didn't take long to work out what Evan was

doing. He rode between the various raised hillocks and high points that littered the meadow, travelling in a wide, sweeping pattern, veering between any raised areas that might provide some sort of vantage point. Then he lingered at the highest point, ostensibly to try to calm his horse, for exactly long enough to scout out the surrounding area.

Evan had taken ineptitude to an art form, and all Thomas could do was watch in admiration. But at the same time, he wondered if Evan ever got sick of being taken for a fool. If it grated, to be so easily dismissed.

That thought, and any others, were driven from his head when Evan stood in his saddle. Thomas's mouth went dry. A wave of desire flooded through him as Evan turned from side to side and Thomas was treated to the sight of his thighs flexing, the curve of his arse outlined by the tight fabric of his trousers. He swallowed around the sudden lump in his throat, imagining what it might feel like to run his hands over the firm mounds of flesh.

Evan on any given day was attractive, but Evan on horseback was enough to knock the very air from his lungs.

When the duke rode back to his side, Thomas dragged his gaze away from Evan's thick, toned thighs with difficulty.

"Well? What did you learn?" Evan asked, eyes bright.

"Amazing how that horse of yours insists on stopping at the top of every rise, isn't it?" Thomas said. "See anything interesting?"

"No, but then, I didn't expect to," Evan said. "People who trade in hemlock and secrets don't suddenly stage clumsy ambushes."

That made sense but begged the question. “If you’re not expecting an attack, then why are you here?”

Evan’s mouth quirked up into a smile. “I wanted to talk to you, obviously.”

Thomas’s heart flip-flopped in his chest for a split second and a thrill ran through him before he remembered that Evan wasn’t attracted to him, and this didn’t mean what he wanted it to mean. Evan was obviously here to update him with news about who was behind hiring the dead viscount while there was nobody to overhear them.

He pushed aside the stab of disappointment. “What have you found out?”

“What?”

“About who’s behind the threat. You said you needed to talk to me, so I assume you have news.”

“Oh that,” Evan said, like a plot against the king wasn’t the most important thing happening in the kingdom right now. “No, nothing new on that front. And I don’t need to talk to you. I want to. I thought it might be nice to spend time with an attractive man who doesn’t think I’m an idiot.”

Thomas blinked and a pang of sympathy ran through him, but at the same time, he couldn’t help but wonder—was the duke actually flirting with him right now, or was it just wishful thinking on his part? He cleared his throat. “You’re not an idiot.”

“No, but don’t tell anyone. I have an image to uphold.”

“You do act the part very well, though,” Thomas added, unable to resist.

Evan’s brow creased. “I’m not sure if that’s an insult or a compliment, Captain.”

Thomas grinned. “It’s whatever you choose it to be, Your Grace.”

“I thought I told you not to use my title.”

“And yet here you are using mine,” Thomas said. “And it’s difficult to change the habits of a lifetime. My job requires me to maintain a certain level of formality.”

Evan shot him a wicked smile, his gaze heated. “Well, that’s no fun. I’ll just have to get you relaxed around me, won’t I?”

Oh. He was flirting.

Thomas bit his lip. Playing along would be a terrible idea. The worst idea. Getting tangled up with Evan would surely only end in disappointment and hurt feelings when the duke moved on to his next conquest. The sensible thing to do would be to avoid any kind of involvement.

But Thomas was tired of being sensible. He wanted to experience passion with someone as wild and attractive and tempting as the duke—who was the Rogue, and who was apparently equally interested in Thomas.

When would he ever have another chance to pursue his fantasies?

Thomas took a deep breath to settle the butterflies flapping madly in his stomach and said casually, “Perhaps you will. I’m open to offers.”

Evan’s mouth dropped open and then it snapped shut again, and the naked hunger in his expression sent a thrill coursing through Thomas’s veins. He’d rendered the Rogue speechless, and he had the feeling that wasn’t something that happened often.

It was immensely satisfying.

He spurred his horse into a trot and rode away. He was tempted to look back, but instead he kept his gaze trained on the king and his husband, settling into a steady pace and making sure that he rose up in his saddle high enough that Evan got his own eyeful of flexing thighs. Two could play at that game.

And they were playing a game, he was certain of that now. A game that, if he played it well enough, might lead to him winning a very attractive prize—one with bright green eyes, a seductive laugh, and an arse like a peach.

Evan huffed out a laugh from behind him and caught up to him just as Thomas slowed his horse to a walk a suitable distance behind the royal couple. It was obvious that some of the tension that the king had been carrying had eased, and his posture was loose and relaxed. Felix, too, was smiling, and Thomas felt a surge of fondness for the pair of them. “Thank you for thinking of this,” he said quietly to Evan. “They needed the distraction.”

“As long as they don’t ask to stop and fuck in that grove of trees,” Evan replied, equally quietly.

Thomas let out a snort. “You know about that?”

Evan grinned. “Sadly. I stumbled upon them one day while out riding. Someone was groaning in what I thought was pain, and I assumed they were in distress.” He cleared his throat. “It turned out that while someone was getting their arse turned pink, my assistance was not required. In fact, they were decidedly ungrateful for my attempted rescue.”

Thomas laughed. “I learned early on to turn a deaf ear to any noises I heard coming from the king’s bedroom, and I always make sure to move out of earshot when they stop at the grove on their rides,” he admitted.

Evan laughed as well, loudly enough that Felix cast a quizzical glance back at them. Evan's eyes sparkled with mirth, their deep green colour putting Thomas in mind of precious gems. "Leo didn't talk to me for three days afterwards, and Felix couldn't look me in the eye for a week." His smile widened. "Ride with me?"

For a split second, Thomas's ears deceived him, and he was certain the duke had said, "Ride me." He had a vivid, startling vision of Evan straddling him and sinking down on his cock right before Evan flicked his reins and spurred his horse into a full gallop, his meaning becoming clear as he went racing out ahead.

Thomas squeezed his thighs together to ease the tightness in his trousers that the thought of a naked, willing Evan had caused. It was a mental picture he'd be revisiting tonight in the privacy of his own cottage, but right now it was decidedly inconvenient trying to ride with a thickening cock.

When Evan raced past, Leo laughed, spurring his own ride on, and Felix did the same, and after a moment Thomas signalled Poppy to pick up her pace. Soon all four of them were galloping across the green fields. Their horses cut a swathe through the lush, thick grass, their long legs eating up the distance, and their thundering hooves matched Thomas's racing heartbeat as he gave chase, losing himself in the pleasure of riding fast just for the hell of it.

Evan raced ahead, covering the ground at a ridiculously fast pace. Thomas urged Poppy forward, driven by a combination of competitiveness and a ridiculous desire to impress the Rogue. He almost caught up several times, but then Evan would lean forward in the saddle and surge ahead again, and Thomas would find himself left behind.

They rode for several miles like that, and they'd reached the edge of the woods by the time Evan slowed his horse to a walk. Thomas had sweat beading his hairline and his chest was heaving—partly from the ride and partly from the thrill of watching Evan

as he'd raced across the meadow with his body low to his mount, his arse in the air.

He dismounted and patted Poppy's side, and Evan threw one leg over the back of his saddle and slid to the ground with an elegance Thomas could only dream of. It was unfair how Evan could make the most mundane actions seem seductive. Surely, he was doing it on purpose.

Leopold came thundering up to them with Felix trailing behind. "Bloody hell, Evan. You ride like the devil himself is after you!"

"Or men with swords, perhaps," Evan said drily. He turned to Thomas and shot him a pleased smile. "I must admit, you gave me a run for my money today."

Tendrils of warmth curled in Thomas's belly and he had to resist the urge to puff out his chest. "That's quite a compliment coming from you."

"I've been chased by the best, but I do believe you might be the one to catch me, if I'm lucky." Evan's smile became teasing.

The warmth flooding Thomas shifted and became a different kind of heat, sharp and molten, and hunger thrummed through his veins. "If you're very lucky," he agreed, his voice rough.

Evan laughed, low and pleased. Their eyes locked, and the air between them grew heavy with unspoken promise, the weight of it gathering like an approaching thunderstorm. Evan leaned forward the tiniest amount and for a moment Thomas wondered if he was about to kiss him, but then Evan let out a frustrated breath and took a step back, and whatever it was that had been brewing between them was gone, chased away like a leaf on the breeze.

Thomas tried not to let his disappointment show. He told himself it wasn't like he'd



wanted Evan to kiss him—not in the middle of a field with the king and his husband watching, anyway.

“So,” the king said, apropos of nothing, “we should go back.”

“Already?” Evan said. “We’ve only just—oh. I see.”

Thomas glanced over to find that Felix had untucked his linen shirt and was using the hem to mop his brow, apparently unaware that his lean, toned stomach was on display. Leo was staring at it in much the same way a cat would stare at a twitching mouse’s tail—like he was just waiting for the chance to pounce.

“Yes,” Leo said, his voice strained. “I’ve just remembered I have something important to do back at the castle.”

He gave Felix a hungry look, his gaze raking over his husband’s bare skin.

Felix paused in his movements and looked down at himself, a slow, teasing smile spreading over his features. “Right. Yes. That important thing. I remember now,” he said, tracing a fingertip over the ridges on his stomach and easing the hem of his shirt up far enough that Thomas caught a glimpse of one tight brown nipple.

Maybe not completely unaware then.

Leo started off in the direction of the castle at a lazy gait, and Felix joined him. Given that they were exchanging glances hot enough to spark a bonfire, Thomas wondered if they’d actually make it as far as the castle or if they’d end up stopping at the secluded grove of trees after all.

Evan gave a cough that sounded suspiciously like a laugh and mounted his horse with an easy grace. Thomas followed suit and they set off back the way they’d come, at an

even slower pace than Leo and Felix. “Want to wager that the important thing Leo has to do back at the castle is Felix?” Evan asked.

“I’d be a fool if I did,” Thomas said with a laugh. “That’s a losing bet.”

“Shame,” Evan said with a sigh. “I was looking forward to claiming my prize.”

“I doubt there would be much of a prize. It’s not like I have anything to offer a duke.”

“Well,” Evan said, his voice low, “I was thinking of demanding a kiss.”

Thomas twisted sideways in his saddle to find Evan smirking at him. He drew his horse to a halt, his stomach fluttering with anticipation. But then Evan looked Thomas up and down, tilting his head to the side, and said, “But then again, perhaps not.”

That stab of disappointment had no right being as sharp and sudden as it was.

“No,” Evan said, a teasing smile creeping onto his face. “When I kiss you, I’d prefer it to be your choice, not a wager or an obligation. I like my lovers willing.”

And with that he rode off before Thomas had a chance to tell him that he was quite willing, thank you very much.

Judging by the wicked grin Evan flashed him before he rode away, he already knew.

### Chapter Seven

Evan examined himself in the looking glass, adjusting the embroidered lace cuffs of his crimson shirt and polishing the toes of his shoes on the back of his stockings in a way that would have had his valet tutting, had he agreed to have one. As it was, he claimed that he didn't come home at night half the time anyway and learning a new person's name was far too much work when it was easier to dress himself, and the palace staff accepted his explanation at face value.

He would have been insulted at people thinking he was so addlebrained he couldn't learn a valet's name, except he'd spent years convincing them it was true. It meant nobody ever questioned him too closely when unfortunate events occurred, because who, for example, was interested in hearing from a man who couldn't even recall the name of the woman who had mysteriously choked while sitting across from him at dinner?

And if he happened to wander into the wrong bedroom while visiting a foreign palace? Well, his reputation for absent-mindedness preceded him. It never occurred to anyone that maybe he'd been in there deliberately, rifling through drawers and taking notes. If anything, people assumed he'd been looking for a quick shag.

Which was only true some of the time.

If Evan had ever told anyone the truth about that part of his profession, they would have been surprised to learn that a lot of the time when he supposedly took someone to bed, it was an illusion. He relied on plying them with good wine until they were falling-down drunk, then telling them in great detail the next day what a marvellous

time they'd had. Most people were so embarrassed at not recalling what he assured them had been the best sex of their life that they never questioned it. Plus, people were so very chatty when they were drunk. The trick was striking the balance between 'drunk enough that I will tell you my secrets and remember nothing tomorrow' and 'pissed as a newt, maudlin, crying, and no use to anybody'.

Someone knocked at his bedroom door. "Come in, Captain."

The door handle turned and Thomas entered. "How did you know it was me?"

"I guessed you'd take the excuse of escorting me to tonight's dinner to catch up on—" He broke off when he turned from the mirror and saw Thomas properly for the first time.

Oh, Evan did love a man in uniform.

Thomas always looked good, but tonight he was particularly mouthwatering in his full dress regalia. He wore polished black boots that hugged his calves, form-fitting tan trousers, and a shirt and jacket that were stretched tight over the breadth of his barrel chest and thick biceps. Evan could practically hear the buttons creaking as they strained to contain all those muscles, and he desperately hoped they'd lose that particular battle.

He couldn't seem to tear his eyes away from the sight in front of him, and the corners of Thomas's mouth tipped up in a hint of a smile when he asked, "Are you quite all right?"

Evan cleared his throat. "You look very..."

Delicious. Fuckable. Enticing.

“...handsome tonight, that’s all.”

Thomas’s smile widened. “Thank you. You look rather fetching yourself.”

Evan allowed himself a moment to preen. Knowing he looked amazing didn’t mean he didn’t like hearing it.

“So,” he said, turning back to the mirror—ostensibly to check his reflection, but in reality to give Thomas a better view of his arse—“the ambassador for Falsmark shows no signs of leaving even though the talks are over, so I think we can safely assume he’s involved in the plot against Leo.”

“Either that or he’s enjoying the free hospitality,” Thomas said. “Has he said or done anything else suspicious?”

“No, which makes him all the more questionable in my opinion,” Evan said. “He never drinks more than half a glass of wine at dinner, always retires early, and doesn’t dally with any of the other guests. That’s the behaviour of somebody who’s trying to remain unnoticed.”

“And yet you noticed him,” Thomas stated.

Evan turned to face him, picking up his burgundy jacket and slipping it on, then running his hands down the front to smooth any errant creases. “That’s because I’m the best at what I do. My mission tonight is to jolly the ambassador along until he agrees to drink with me, then get him tipsy enough to spill his secrets.”

He spun around, arms outstretched. “Now, do I look like a brainless fop who can only remember the location of his left bollock because it’s attached to the right?”

Thomas’s voice was rough when he replied. “Trust me, sir, in those trousers

everybody knows where both your bollocks are.”

Evan beamed. He'd shimmied into his tightest black trousers with the intention of impressing the captain with his best features. It was having the desired effect if the way Thomas's pupils had gone dark was any indication.

“Why, Captain,” he purred, “are you attracted to me?”

Thomas's face flushed pink, and was it wrong that Evan found it delightful seeing such a big man so easily flustered?

Evan stepped closer, just to see Thomas's reaction.

Thomas's breathing hitched but he didn't back away, and when Evan pressed a hand against his chest, Thomas's thundering heartbeat told him all he needed to know. “You are attracted.” He let his mouth curve into a teasing smile. “Perhaps we could have that kiss after all?”

Thomas's eyes closed as he tipped his head back as if praying for strength, and when he spoke his tone was more wistful than anything. “We shouldn't. You're the duke and I'm just a guard.”

“And the king is married to a stable hand. Besides, I'm a very attractive man. You'd be a fool to pass up this opportunity.”

That startled a laugh out of Thomas, and some of the tension drained out of his frame. “Does that actually work as a seduction technique?”

Evan shrugged. “Sometimes the best way to get people to do what you want is to tell them to do it. For example, at some point in the near future you should take me to bed and fuck me.” He gave Thomas his most winning smile. “You won't regret it.”

Thomas's voice was a low growl when he said, "I'm sure I won't," and for a second Evan's hopes were raised, but then Thomas blew out a sharp breath and added, "but right now you're supposed to be at dinner and I'm supposed to be guarding the door, so perhaps this is a discussion best continued later."

Evan couldn't decide if he was annoyed at Thomas for being so damnably sensible or encouraged by the promise contained in that one word—later. In the end he opted for encouraged. The additional flare of arousal caused by someone telling him no was a welcome surprise.

He sighed loudly and stepped back. "Fine. We'll talk later, after I get the ambassador tipsy, take him back to his rooms, and see what I can find out."

Thomas nodded, but his brow furrowed and his mouth was pinched into a flat line.

It took Evan a moment to identify what he was seeing—it wasn't something he was familiar with—but then it hit him.

Thomas was jealous.

The knowledge should not have caused warmth to curl in his chest, and it definitely should not have been followed by the urge to set Thomas's mind at rest. And yet he found himself saying, "Did you know the ambassador has five children? Personally, I've never quite worked out how he was able to get a wife in the first place." He screwed up his nose. "The man looks like a frog that was hit with a shovel."

Thomas blinked. "Wait, does that mean you don't plan to, um..."

"Seduce him? Heavens, no. I have standards."

The crease disappeared from Thomas's brow, and he let out an undignified snort. "He

does have a very unique look about him.”

“Frog. Shovel,” Evan repeated with a soft laugh.

He was still laughing when he opened the bedroom door—only to be confronted by the froglike features of the ambassador in question. Evan froze with Thomas directly behind him.

The ambassador blinked as he looked them up and down slowly, and it was obvious he was wondering what business the Captain of the Guard had with the Duke of Ravenport.

Well, that wouldn’t do at all. The last thing Evan needed was for the ambassador to start asking questions. Still, he hadn’t become the best spy and assassin in six kingdoms without being able to think on his feet.

He pretended he hadn’t noticed the man at all and half turned, grabbed the front of Thomas’s shirt, and tugged him down, surging forward until their mouths met in a messy kiss.

Evan was prepared for Thomas to freeze or possibly even pull back. What he wasn’t prepared for was for Thomas, after a split second of hesitation, to bring one broad hand up and cradle Evan’s face, or for him to kiss him back with such intensity that Evan quite forgot that they were meant to be putting on a show, so lost was he in the feel of Thomas’s hands on his skin. Heat and hunger spilled over when Thomas dipped his tongue into Evan’s mouth with unexpected boldness. Evan’s heart pounded and his cock throbbed in the confines of his now-too-tight trousers when Thomas ran a wide, warm palm down his spine and cupped his arse.

A breathy moan escaped him, but it was drowned out by the sound of the ambassador clearing his throat.



Thomas sighed against his lips and broke their kiss, and Evan whimpered at the loss. It took a moment for him to gather his wits before he turned to face his guest—which made it that much easier to act like the addlepated fool everyone expected him to be. “Ah,” he said, still reeling from the sheer audacity with which the captain had plundered his mouth. “Hello.”

“Your Grace,” the ambassador said in a voice that dripped with disapproval. His gaze flicked between Evan and Thomas.

Thomas simply stared straight ahead with his hands clasped behind his back, acting for all the world like their kiss had never happened and he hadn’t shaken Evan to his very core.

That smug bastard. Evan made a mental note never to play cards against him, because his poker face was second to none.

For now, though, Evan smiled brightly at the ambassador and said, “You’ve met the Captain of the Guard, I assume?”

“I haven’t had the pleasure,” the ambassador said.

“Neither have I yet, but I have high hopes for after dinner,” Evan said breezily through lips that still tingled.

The ambassador gave him a hard stare.

Evan stared right back before tilting his head to the side, knowing it gave him the appearance of a confused puppy. “You’re the man from Fapping, aren’t you? I’ve quite forgotten your name.”

The man’s brow creased. “Marchesi, Your Grace. Ambassador for Falsmark.”

“I knew you were something to do with an F!” Evan exclaimed. “You’ll have to pardon me. I’m hopeless with names. Now, what are you doing at my rooms, exactly?” He widened his eyes in mock horror and clapped a hand to his chest. “Oh, we didn’t have an assignation planned, did we? Only my memory really is terrible, and I find myself enthralled with the captain. I mean, look at him. He’s mouthwatering. I was helpless against his... charms. So I’m afraid I’ll have to cancel our arrangement. In fact, I think it’s best if we pretend it never existed.”

The ambassador went bright red. “I’m a married man! We don’t have an arrangement!”

“Yes, exactly like that!” Evan said, and winked.

The ambassador opened his mouth like he was about to argue, then closed it and pinched the bridge of his nose, his shoulders drooping in defeat. “Quite so, Your Grace.”

“Excellent. Shall we go to dinner?” Evan beamed at him and stepped out of the bedroom with Thomas by his side, then pulled the door firmly closed behind him, locking it and pocketing the key.

The ambassador had been lurking around his rooms, and Evan wanted to know why. But whatever it was, it would have to wait. It wouldn’t do to show his suspicions now.

They walked toward the dining hall and Evan kept up a string of inane chatter, babbling about whether fish pie or pigeon pie was tastier and what wine went best with both, all the while turning over the events of the afternoon and trying to work out what reason the ambassador could possibly have for sneaking into his rooms. He considered briefly that perhaps by some weird twist of fate the man had come to proposition him, and dismissed the thought with a shudder.

No, he was certain that Marchesi had other, more sinister intentions.

He just had to work out what they were.

“Y our Grace?”

Evan startled, his inattention for once not faked. He’d been observing Thomas standing near the door and gotten distracted by the line of his calves, busy imagining running his tongue up them later tonight. “Hmm?”

“I said, are you planning on staying in Lilleforth for much longer?” Ambassador Marchesi said.

Evan blinked in feigned confusion. “Why? Am I meant to be going somewhere? I hope there’s not a carriage waiting. I’d quite like to finish my supper first.”

“No, I just meant do you have plans to travel? You’ve been in Ravenport for quite some time. Surely you’re ready to set off on another little adventure?”

Evan caught another glimpse of Thomas standing by the door in parade rest with his spine straight and his chest pushed out, the way his hands were clasped behind his back highlighting the sheer breadth of his shoulders. “Oh, I don’t know,” he said. “Lilleforth has its attractions. I might stay and explore them further.”

He cocked a curious brow at the ambassador. It was interesting that the man was so interested in Evan’s movements, given that this was the second farewell dinner the king had thrown. A farewell dinner was normally the sign for the last few guests to pack their bags since it was considered a breach of etiquette to ask outright when someone was leaving, but Marchesi seemed oblivious.

Luckily, Evan had never cared about etiquette.

“What about you? Aren’t your obligations here fulfilled? I would have thought you’d be on your way back to Falsmark and their fine wines. Speaking of which, top up?” He lifted his glass from the table and waved it about, slopping some of the contents over his hand. “Oh, bugger.”

A serving boy darted forward with a bottle of wine and filled up his glass, and Evan downed a mouthful. “Mmmm,” he said. “This is a Falsmark red, right? The late harvest from the western river region if I’m not mistaken.”

The ambassador narrowed his eyes. “I wasn’t aware you were such an expert on our wines, Your Grace.”

Oops . He’d been distracted, and forgotten he was meant to be ignorant.

“Well, I don’t know about that, but I can drink like a champion!” Evan flashed him a bright smile. “I only remember this one because I drank enough that I fell down a staircase once.” He took another swig and let the smile fall from his face. “Of course, it didn’t end as badly for me as it did for poor Calthrope. Such a dreadful business.”

“Dreadful,” the ambassador said with a sigh. Evan didn’t miss the way his jaw tightened at the mention of the dead man. He definitely knew something, and Evan was determined to get the information out of him.

“We should drink to his memory,” he said suddenly, lurching forward and waving the serving boy over. “It’s the least we can do.”

The ambassador pulled a face. “I don’t really drink.”

“Nonsense. It would be disrespectful not to mourn the loss of my friend with the finest wine, and I can’t toast him alone.” Evan gave Marchesi his best pleading look, the one that had never failed him yet. “Just half a glass?”

The ambassador hesitated but gave a terse nod. “Half a glass. I find more than that gives me a sour stomach.”

“Excellent!” Evan exclaimed and clapped Marchesi on the shoulder. He grabbed a full glass off the tray and thrust it into the man’s hand.

The ambassador eyed the glass warily.

“To Stephen,” Evan proclaimed, draining his glass and looking at the ambassador expectantly.

The ambassador took a small sip, and his expression turned pleased. He tipped his head back and emptied the glass, then gave a little hum.

“That’s the fellow!” Evan said cheerfully and nodded at the server, who filled both glasses to the brim.

The ambassador only hesitated for a moment before taking the second glass and drinking half of it in one swallow, and Evan smiled to himself. They were drinking the rarest and most potent of the Falsmark wines, and Evan had taken their server aside earlier, slipped him a handful of gold coins, and requested that their glasses remain full at all times.

He sipped his own second drink carefully. Evan often had a full glass in his hand and people assumed he was always three sheets to the wind because of it, but it was amazing how a few deft movements could spill the contents of a glass over the sides. Which was a damn shame since this particular wine was delicious, but it couldn’t be helped.

Besides, he had several bottles stashed in his room, and he was hopeful that at some time in the near future, a certain captain of the guard might be tempted into sharing a

glass—among other things.

He tried to imagine what tipsy Thomas would be like and how it would taste kissing his wine-soaked mouth. For all that Thomas gave the impression of being solid and sensible, Evan was convinced that hidden beneath his staid exterior there beat the heart of a confident, skilled lover.

Just look at how he'd responded earlier .

Despite Evan pouncing on him with no warning, he hadn't faltered. Rather, he'd taken control of the kiss as easily as breathing, and while Evan was usually the one in charge, he had rather enjoyed being swept off his feet.

He just needed Thomas to sweep him a little further—across the room and into his bed, to be precise—and he was confident he could make it happen.

The ambassador had barely finished emptying his glass when their server filled it again. Marchesi beamed at him and drank the contents without hesitating. Evan chattered mindlessly through a fourth glass, then a fifth, watching the ambassador carefully, and before long the man's cheeks were rosy and he was wearing the smile of someone who had hit the happy, loose-lipped stage of drunkenness, which was exactly where Evan wanted him. Right now, Marchesi would tell the world and its neighbour his business without hesitation.

Evan put a hand on the ambassador's arm. "Oh my," he said, full of fake concern. "You look rather in your cups, Ambassador."

Marchesi nodded, his brow creased, and let out a hiccup.

"Me too," Evan lied, leaning in close and giving a good impression of a drunken giggle. "Do you, shall we—" He waved a hand vaguely, spilling the rest of his own

wine. “—oops! I think I need to take a walk. Join me? Otherwise I’m likely to fall into the garden beds again.”

“Yes, a walk,” Marchesi said faintly, swaying gently where he sat.

Evan stood and drew the ambassador to his feet, throwing an arm over his shoulders and pulling him close, mainly to keep the man upright.

When he glanced over, he caught a shadow of displeasure passing over Thomas’s features, and something like guilt squirmed low in his gut at the thought that it might upset the captain to see him touching someone else—which was ridiculous . They weren’t even lovers yet. The most they’d shared was some harmless flirting—and one spine-melting, toe-curling kiss that had heat racing through Evan’s veins every time he thought about it.

Evan found himself removing his arm from around Marchesi’s shoulder and guiding him to the doors with a hand on his elbow instead. He was rewarded with an upward twitch of Thomas’s lip that said the gesture was appreciated—and just like that, the heavy, unpleasant feeling in his gut vanished as quickly as it had arrived.

It was lucky that Evan was playing the tipsy fool. It meant he didn’t have to hide his smile of relief.

Marchesi was currently listing hard to the left, which boded well for Evan. His original plan had been to question the man and search his rooms as quickly as possible and hopefully find out who was behind the threat to the throne.

That was still the plan, but once the ambassador was dealt with, Evan had a new plan. He was determined to find Thomas and kiss him again—and this time he’d make sure they weren’t interrupted.

As far as plans went, it was flawless—right until the ambassador drew to a halt in front of Thomas, blinking up at him owlishly. “I know you,” he proclaimed. “You’re the captain!”

“Yes, sir,” Thomas said.

The ambassador beamed up at him, and it might even have been amusing except the next thing out of his mouth was, “Weren’t you and the duke kissing earlier?”

His voice rang out with the too-loud confidence of a happy drunk, falling into one of those unfortunate silences that occur in public spaces, and the words echoed off the high ceiling.

There was a collective gasp as the rest of the dinner guests turned as one, craning their necks like a gaggle of particularly curious geese to look at Thomas and Evan. Evan personally thought their reaction was a bit rich given that their king had married a groom and their stablemaster was in love with another prince—although of course Mother Jones hadn’t known Vasily was royalty when he fell for him.

Evan sensed Thomas stiffening next to him and waited to see how he’d respond. Being known as the captain’s lover would give Evan an excuse to be seen with Thomas at all hours and in all locations. Nobody would look twice at the duke and his latest conquest. But more than that, imagining Thomas as his lover made warmth curl in his chest, and suddenly he was desperate to be able to pretend, even for a while, that there was someone in his life who had chosen him to share theirs.

He turned to Thomas and raised an eyebrow in silent query. It was a lot to ask, and despite their earlier conversation, Evan understood that Thomas might have changed his mind. He didn’t think he would have—the captain didn’t strike him as a man who faltered once he made a decision—but still, he prepared himself for a refusal.



But Thomas gave a tiny shrug, his eyes dancing with amusement, and something settled in Evan at the knowledge that Thomas was willing to go along with this madness. Really, he had all the hallmarks of a great spy, and Evan would be sure to tell him that later. But for now everyone was still watching, and Evan found himself unsure how to proceed.

Before he could think too hard about it, the decision was taken from him. He found himself lifted off his feet by strong arms that settled under his thighs, holding him in place, and then Thomas's mouth was on his, kissing him with unexpected vigour.

Evan's face heated and his heart pounded as he tangled his hands in Thomas's hair and kissed him back. Having Thomas take charge again sent a thrill running through him, one he could easily get used to. He found himself hungry for more, and didn't want the kiss to end. But he was aware of the stares and whispers surrounding them—and he hadn't become the best at what he did by getting lost in the heat of the moment—so he reluctantly dragged himself away from the taste of Thomas's lips, panting slightly, and said, "Does that answer your question, Ambassador?"

The ambassador gave a tipsy nod, eyes wide, and Evan shoved gently at Thomas's chest. It was like massaging a rock. "I think I should take the ambassador for his walk now," he said quietly. "I'll find you later?"

Thomas nodded, eyes wide, and set Evan down. His cheeks were flushed, his lips were swollen, and his expression was both dazed and happy, like he wasn't sure how he'd come to be kissing Evan but was perfectly willing to do it again given the chance.

Well, that made two of them.

Evan guided the ambassador from the room, humming cheerfully to himself. Just as soon as he had this spying business out of the way, he could spend the rest of the

evening focusing on what was really important.

Seducing his captain.

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### Chapter Eight

Thomas had always thought of himself as unflappable.

As Captain of the Royal Guard, it was a point of pride that very little rattled him. Yet here he was pacing the floor of his cottage, his nerves jangling like a pail full of spoons while he waited for the duke.

It was ridiculous.

As soon as he'd finished his shift he'd hurried back to his cottage, only to spend the evening worrying that the duke wouldn't find his quarters up to scratch even though they were as neat as a pin. Still, he'd made sure both his teeth and his sheets were clean and brushed his dark blond hair into some semblance of order. He'd kept his dress uniform on purely because he'd seen the way Evan had looked him up and down like he was some tasty treat from the kitchens.

He'd stuck his head outside no less than ten times, sure he'd heard someone approaching, only to be met with empty darkness. And now, as the evening dragged on and there was still no sign of his guest, Thomas was forced to admit with a heavy heart that it seemed like the duke had changed his mind and he was waiting in vain.

Or maybe he took the ambassador to bed after all.

Thomas shook his head to dislodge the thought and the sour twist in his belly that accompanied it.

He took a deep breath and reminded himself that someone was plotting against the royal family and Evan's job was to find out who it was using any means possible. Obviously, Evan's first duty was to keep the king and his husband safe—and as the Captain of the Guard, that should be Thomas's main concern as well, not whether a man he'd kissed twice was shagging for king and country.

But he couldn't help the possessive streak that burned low in his belly whenever he was around the duke. Something about Evan set Thomas alight in ways he'd never experienced. He found himself overcome with a deep, aching need to put his hands all over Evan and claim him. He wanted to pin Evan under him and make him squirm, make him beg, to see his usual devil-may-care attitude replaced with wide-eyed desperation as Thomas took charge and wrapped a hand around both their cocks and stroked them to completion.

To say that Thomas had had a lot of very detailed fantasies about the Rogue over the years was an understatement—and he had every intention of bringing at least some of them to life, if Evan ever bloody well turned up.

He huffed in frustration and paced the length of the room once more, trying his best to reassure himself that Evan would be here. Thomas had found him to be a man of his word. Well, apart from that whole spying thing, which didn't apply here.

Picking up the poker, he crouched to prod at the fire that was blazing merrily in the hearth. He was so intent on his task that when a hand landed on his shoulder, he dropped the poker with a clatter. His heart pounded with a mixture of relief and anticipation when he looked up to find Evan standing behind him, a pleased smirk on his face. "I didn't hear you," he said, standing to his full height and running his hands down the front of his uniform.

"No, well, you wouldn't. Spy, remember?" Evan dragged his gaze slowly up and down Thomas's body, his voice rasping when he said, "You left the uniform on."

Thomas swallowed, nerves fluttering, and dragged a hand through his hair. “You said you liked it.”

“I like it very much,” Evan said, “but I think I might like what’s underneath better.” He took a step closer.

Thomas’s breath caught and his heartbeat thundered loud in his ears. “I thought you weren’t coming,” he confessed, and immediately felt like a fool.

Evan gave a lazy shrug. “The ambassador is a rambly drunk. We had to circle the castle twice before he stopped talking. I left him asleep in the kitchens.”

“Did he let anything slip?”

“Nothing useful, and I don’t want to talk about it right now. I have other things on my mind.” Evan looked him up and down again and his mouth curved up. “He did tell me I’d chosen a handsome bedmate, though. And I tend to agree.” He licked his lips. “I’d rather like to kiss you now.”

Thomas found himself leaning forward without any conscious thought. Evan met him halfway, their lips clashing in a desperate, hungry kiss. Thomas closed his eyes and soaked in the taste of red wine and the sensation of Evan’s tongue curling around his. All thoughts of ambassadors and plots and spying left his head when Evan pushed himself up on his toes and plastered himself against Thomas’s front, tangling a hand in his hair and kissing him with an urgency that stole his breath away.

When they finally broke apart for air, Evan’s eyes were dark pools and Thomas saw his own need reflected there. It seemed only natural to hook his palms under Evan’s thighs, hoist him up, and carry him over to the bed. Evan wrapped his arms around Thomas’s neck and buried his face in the curve of his throat, leaving a trail of clever kisses that burned like hot coals and threatened to set Thomas completely alight.

Setting Evan down next to the bed, Thomas tugged at the shoulders of his jacket and Evan slipped out of it easily, letting it drop on the floor before grasping the hem of his shirt and pulling it over his head with lithe grace. The shirt joined the jacket on the floor and Evan ran a hand through his dark locks, his mouth curving up in a teasing grin as he stood there with his hands on his hips, putting himself on display.

Thomas's cock was already half-hard, but it stiffened further at the sight of Evan shirtless, his mouth curled up in a wolfish grin. He was lean but Thomas knew for a fact that there was a lot of compact strength packed in that limber frame. Evan boasted a generous dusting of dark chest hair and Thomas reached out and ran his fingers through it, tracing patterns against Evan's skin.

Evan let out a shuddery breath. Emboldened, Thomas grasped Evan by the hips and kissed him again, slow and deep this time. Moaning against his mouth, Evan settled his hands at Thomas's waist and pulled him close as he started to grind against him, his body rolling in a slow, sensual rhythm.

Thomas shivered at the press of Evan's body, the prominent bulge in his trousers rubbing against his own rapidly hardening cock, and then Evan let out a breathless laugh and hooked one leg around Thomas's calf, tipping them sideways so that they landed on the bed in a tangle of limbs.

Thomas was caught off guard for a moment, but his earlier fantasies of pinning Evan to the bed came flooding back and with a single deft move he rolled them so that he was on top and Evan was caught beneath him. Grinning at him, Evan slid his hands down and clutched at Thomas's arse, and the strength of his grip and the extra pressure of their bodies rocking together sent Thomas's heartrate soaring as his cock did its best to break out of its fabric confines.

Suddenly, Thomas was hungry for skin on skin, desperate to be rid of the barrier of clothing between them. He sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed, pulling

his boots off. There was the distinctive clatter of metal on stone as the small stiletto knife he kept hidden in his boot hit the floor.

Thomas froze for a second and Evan sat up and glanced at the discarded knife. “Tell me, Captain, what other weapons do you have hiding under that uniform?” he asked with a teasing smile, his gaze lingering on the obvious bulge in Thomas’s trousers.

“Why don’t I show you?” Thomas said, returning Evan’s grin. He continued to undress, his heart beating faster in anticipation as he shed his shirt and jacket. He fumbled with the fastenings, his fingers clumsy with haste, but he finally succeeded in undoing his trousers. He shoved them down along with his smallclothes in one sweeping motion and kicked them away.

Once he was naked, he faltered for just a moment, but then Evan let out a low, appreciative groan and said, “Oh, look at you,” and any lingering nerves Thomas might have had fled. He clambered back onto the bed and sprawled out, looking at Evan’s clothed body expectantly.

It was Evan’s turn to sit up, and he kicked his own boots off with such vigour they landed halfway across the room. There was the unmistakable clang of metal bouncing on stone—not once but twice—as a pair of tiny but doubtless deadly daggers hit the floor. Evan stilled, then gave a grin that was decidedly roguish. “Um, ignore those.”

Thomas laughed and nodded toward his own knife. “I won’t mention yours if you don’t mention mine.”

“Deal.” Evan finished undressing with impressive speed and climbed back onto the bed, and when Thomas got a good look at the entirety of Evan’s naked body, any hidden weaponry was forgotten.

Evan was gorgeous. His body was built of smooth skin, long lines and lean muscle,

and he moved with a predatory grace. His erection bobbed against his stomach as he propped himself up on one elbow, the other hand wrapping around his cock and moving in slow, lazy pulls.

Thomas's mouth went dry, and he wanted.

He leaned forward and pulled Evan against his side so they were pressed together chest to hip and kissed him for all he was worth. Evan's skin was warm, and his erection was a solid line of heat. Moaning into his mouth, Evan made little hitching movements that set Thomas's cock throbbing and his blood racing, and he shuffled an inch higher up the bed and thrust his hips forward so that their cocks dragged against each other. Thomas ached with the need for more and reached between them, but then he hesitated, unsure if he had the right to take control.

Evan must have sensed his uncertainty, and he broke their kiss long enough to rasp out, "You're in charge, Captain."

Nobody had ever used Thomas's title in bed before, and he was not prepared for the shudder of arousal that ran through him. The words, combined with Evan's warm breath against his neck and the press of his skin, had Thomas dangerously close to spilling right then.

He let out a low growl and wasted no time wrapping one broad palm around both their cocks. Evan pressed up into his hand, urging him on, and Thomas stroked them off fast and urgent, his palm slick from where they were both hard and leaking. Clamping a hand over his, Evan guided their movements. The soft skin of his palm in contrast to the heat and hardness of Evan's erection dragging against his own length had Thomas's cock throbbing like a second heartbeat. It barely took a dozen strokes before Thomas found himself teetering on the edge of climax.

He wasn't the only one. Evan threw his head back and moaned, clutching at



Thomas's shoulders, then tensed and came in hot, sticky spurts between them, coating their joined hands. The broken sounds Evan made and the splash of cum against his skin was all it took to have Thomas's balls drawing up tight, his cock pulsing as he came and added to the mess. Evan continued to pant and shudder against him, and Thomas worked them both through their release with gentle touches.

Once they were both spent, Evan let out a contented sigh and dropped his head against the curve of Thomas's shoulder, pressing a series of kisses along his collarbone that had him squirming. Then, in one quick motion, Evan reached over the side of the bed and retrieved his shirt from the floor, wiping both Thomas's hand and their stomachs clean before Thomas had even realised what he was doing.

Evan dropped the shirt and leaned in for a kiss, and Thomas melted against his mouth. They kissed slow and lazy until Evan gave Thomas a gentle shove, rolling him onto his back and throwing an arm across his chest as he moulded himself to Thomas's side with a contented sound.

Thomas let out an answering hum as he drifted in his own happy daze, his body heavy with satisfaction and his very bones liquid. He wasn't sure what had made this particular tumble between the sheets so satisfying. Perhaps it was simply that it had been such a long time since he'd bedded someone.

But even as he thought it, he knew that wasn't it. No, there was just something about being with Evan that made the entire experience better. Maybe it was Evan's playfulness, or his unabashed admiration, or simply that he'd given Thomas permission to take charge. Whatever it was, Thomas knew one thing—he wanted more.

He soaked up the weight of Evan lying against him and ran a hand down his back in long, even strokes, wondering when they could do it again. Then he wondered if Evan wanted to do it again or if he'd meant for this to be a one-time thing.

Thomas hadn't had a chance to ask him before they'd fallen into bed, and as the minutes stretched out in silence, the last happy traces of his post-sex haze drifted away. Evan hadn't left yet, which was a good sign, surely? His hand came to rest at the small of Evan's back and he found himself pulling the man closer, as if to ward off the spectre of him leaving.

Evan came willingly and threw one long leg over Thomas, a twin to the arm over his chest that was pinning him in place. After a few moments, though, he sighed and said, "You know, I don't think this is going to work."

Thomas tensed, his gut twisting. He should have known he wasn't good enough for a duke. He did his best to shove down his disappointment and opened his mouth to tell Evan it was fine, that they could just pretend this had never happened, but he found himself unable to form words. The best he could do was to force out, "Oh?"

Evan traced a fingertip over the dips and valleys of Thomas's chest and stomach. His movements were gentle, affectionate—which made no sense, given what it sounded like he was saying. Those weren't the actions of a man having regrets. But his meaning became clear when he propped himself up on one elbow, wincing. "This mattress of yours is bloody dreadful. Next time we'll go to my bedchambers."

Thomas wasn't sure whether he wanted to kiss the duke or push him out of bed for making him think the worst. The kissing won, of course. He rolled them both over and settled on top of Evan, propping himself on his elbows. Evan's breathing caught when Thomas leaned down and captured his mouth in a hungry, possessive kiss. When they broke apart, Evan beamed up at him. "So I take it you'd like there to be a next time?"

It really was impossible to be annoyed at Evan in the face of his rakish charm. "Actually, I'd like there to be many more times," Thomas found himself saying. "Tonight barely counts."

Evan's eyes sparkled with mischief. "Tonight's not over yet." He rolled his body against the length of Thomas's frame in a way that suggested it wouldn't be long before he was ready to match his words to his actions. And even though it was barely half an hour since he'd spent, Thomas found his own arousal burning hot once again. He rutted against Evan's body, his cock stiffening rapidly.

Lunging up, Evan flipped Thomas onto his back, and before Thomas could catch his breath, Evan was moving down his body leaving a trail of wet, open-mouthed kisses that had Thomas groaning, filthy and desperate. Evan didn't stop, kissing his way along the jut of Thomas's hip bone before licking a hot stripe up the length of his shaft.

Thomas clutched at the sheets, his spine arching when Evan took the head of his cock in his mouth and sucked lightly, his tongue flicking over the slit in tiny, teasing movements. Thomas groaned, and his entire world narrowed down to Evan's mouth on his cock, hot and wet and overwhelming. "Oh!" he gasped out. "Oh! Oh!"

Evan pulled off long enough to shoot him a wicked grin, then swirled his tongue around the head once more before taking more of Thomas in his mouth, his head bobbing as he licked and sucked on Thomas's throbbing cock, his mouth sliding up and down in a steady rhythm. Need surged through Thomas and noises escaped him that he hadn't even known he could make. Heat pooled in his belly low and urgent, and it wasn't long before Thomas found himself clutching at Evan's head, his hips rocking upward and thrusting into his willing mouth.

Then Evan reached a hand between his own thighs and there were the unmistakable sounds of him stroking himself off as he continued to swallow around Thomas's length. Evan looked up at him from under dark lashes, grinned around his mouthful of cock, and gave a clever flick of his tongue, and any last shred of control Thomas might have had snapped. Every nerve in his body lit up and he grasped a fistful of Evan's dark hair, thrust into his mouth, and spilled down his throat.

Heat pulsed under his skin and satisfaction flooded his entire body as Thomas all but melted into the mattress. Sparks danced behind his eyelids and his cock twitched with the aftershocks of his powerful orgasm.

Evan's breathing quickened and he pulled off Thomas's softening cock with a low groan. Thomas's eyes snapped open in time to see Evan sitting back on his haunches, head thrown back and eyes closed, one hand wrapped tightly around his cock as he reached his peak, spilling over the bedsheets and Thomas's spread thighs.

Slumping forward, Evan let out a shaky breath. When he lifted his head, his eyes were heavy-lidded and his mouth was curved up in a lopsided smile. He looked the very definition of well-fucked.

Thomas grinned back at him and he had no doubt that his own smile was just as debauched, but he couldn't bring himself to care. He lifted the arm by his side in silent invitation and Evan wasted no time snuggling up in the space there and resting his head on Thomas's shoulder, breathing warm puffs of air against his skin.

"You know," Thomas said, "there are plenty of stories told about the Rogue, but nobody ever said he was a cuddler."

"Mmmm," Evan said. "Perhaps because the only people who know that are dead."

Thomas was certain he was joking. Well, almost certain. Regardless, it was hard to see Evan as a threat when he was curled up against Thomas like a cat who had found a particularly comfortable lap and had no intention of moving—even if Thomas was aware that this particular cat had claws more deadly than most. His body was a comforting weight, and before long Evan's breathing had turned slow and even as he drifted off to sleep.

Thomas gazed at the sleeping duke, noting the way his long, dark eyelashes fanned

out over his cheeks, the pink flush to his cheeks, and the soft pout of his mouth.

He debated for far too long over whether he should wake him up. Part of him said it would be the sensible thing to do. He had no idea whether Evan had intended to fall asleep or if he wanted to stay the night. But another, selfish, part of him whispered that perhaps Evan did want to stay and Thomas was allowed to enjoy this without questioning it, and that it wouldn't be the worst thing if they just happened to find themselves bundled up beneath the quilt in the morning.

Besides, Thomas got the impression that not many people got to see Evan like this, still and quiet and unguarded.

It felt like he'd been given a gift, and he didn't want to waste it.

So he rolled Evan gently onto his side and wrapped the quilt around them both. Then he curled up behind him—always the big spoon—and threw an arm over Evan's sleeping form, holding him firmly in place.

And despite the fact he was currently spooning the most dangerous man in Lilleforth, he was asleep in under a minute.

When Thomas woke up, he was the little spoon.

He wasn't sure how it was even possible, but somehow in the night he and Evan had changed places, and now there was a face pressed against his shoulder and an arm gripping him around the waist. Evan's breath was warm on his bare skin, and it took Thomas a moment to register that most of his body was uncovered. He lifted Evan's arm and rolled over and couldn't help but smile to himself. Not only had Evan switched their positions during the night, he'd also made off with most of the quilt, and it was piled on top of him in a cosy heap.

Thomas was tempted to steal it back just to see the expression on Evan's face, but he refrained. Duke in his bed or not, he still had a regiment of guards to oversee. He slipped out of bed and pulled on a pair of trousers and a shirt, then went and stoked up the embers of last night's fire to take the chill off the air.

At the clink of metal on stone, he turned back toward the bed. It was empty and Evan was sitting at the table wearing his trousers. He was bent over, collecting his secret knives from the floor and slipping them back into his boots.

Evan lifted his head, his expression serious, and propped his elbows on his knees. "Thank you for last night. But I'll understand if you don't wish to repeat it."

Thomas frowned and his shoulders slumped. One night in his bed and the duke had changed his mind?

"This is not me changing my mind," Evan said with a rueful smile, and Thomas had to wonder if his disappointment was that obvious or if the man was just incredibly good at reading people. "Last night was the most fun I've had in a long while. But I did rather back you into a corner by kissing you in front of the ambassador, and I don't want you to feel obliged to carry on a charade that could damage your standing as Captain of the Guard."

Oh.

That was unexpectedly considerate, and Thomas was reminded that the flippant, self-absorbed duke that everyone saw was an act. It was true that perhaps there would be stares and whispers from his guards, but Thomas found that the thought didn't bother him as much as the idea of putting a stop to this fledgling arrangement did. And besides, the whispers wouldn't last—not if his men knew what was good for them.

Thomas might never get the chance to dally with someone as attractive and clever as

Evan again, and he had no intention of walking away before he'd fulfilled every one of his fantasies.

He prodded at the fireplace with the poker, raising a flurry of sparks, before straightening and facing Evan. "That was the most fun I've had in a long while too. I don't intend to stop just because some people might not approve. And it's not like the court can say anything. After all, if the king can marry his groom, what's to stop a captain and a duke cavorting a little?" Then, feeling bold, he strode over to Evan, cupped the side of his face and tilted his head up, kissing him lightly. And in case it wasn't clear, he added, "If you recall, you already had me half seduced before the ambassador turned up last night."

Evan arched one eyebrow. "Only half?"

Thomas gave a shrug. "Perhaps three quarters." He retrieved his own boots, sitting on the side of the bed to pull them on. The hidden space where his knife normally lived was empty, and when he glanced around the floor the blade was nowhere to be seen. His brow creased. "Where's my?—"

"Think fast." The stiletto came whistling through the air towards him.

Thomas reached up instinctively and plucked it out of midair. "Is that how you seduce all your lovers?" he asked, heart racing. He eyed Evan warily to make sure there wasn't another one on the way. "By throwing knives at them?"

"Only the ones who can handle it," Evan said with a smirk.

As Thomas slipped the stiletto into his boot, he couldn't help but feel like he'd passed some sort of test.

Scooping his shirt up from the floor where it had landed last night, Evan pulled it

over his head just as Thomas had a sudden memory of him using that same shirt to clean them up the previous night.

Evan tensed and wrinkled his nose, then let out a sigh and said, “I’m going up to the castle to bathe and change. And after that I’m going to spend the day listening at keyholes. Come to my room tonight to compare notes?”

Thomas nodded. The search for the would-be assassin was their top priority, after all. Still, Evan’s messy hair and rumpled shirt made him even more rakishly attractive, and Thomas found himself asking, “Just to compare notes?”

Evan’s eyes gleamed with promise. “Well, perhaps not just that.” And with that he strode out the door and Thomas hurried after him.

Tonight couldn’t come soon enough.



### Chapter Nine

Evan liked to solve his problems in the bath.

He had long ago learned that chasing too hard after the answer to a question often led to it slipping from his grasp, but circling round, slowly and carefully, then casually sidling up to the solution usually worked best—and what better place to think than while having a nice, relaxing soak? So the first thing he did upon his return to the castle was order a bath brought to his room. He sank into the tub with a sigh of relief, the stiffness in his back and hips from Thomas's lumpy mattress easing as the hot water worked its magic. He'd known falling asleep in that terrible bed was a bad idea, but he hadn't been able to bring himself to leave the captain's side.

And even as he arched his back, the knots popping along his spine, he found he didn't regret it. Thomas had lived up to every one of his expectations. And honestly, it had been worth a little discomfort just for the experience of throwing that knife and getting to see Thomas catch it with inhuman speed. Evan's cock stirred at the memory, but he ignored it for now.

He needed to concentrate on finding out who was threatening the king and then remove the threat. Once that was taken care of, he could daydream about his big, burly guard and his thick thighs and thicker cock to his heart's content. For now he closed his eyes and sank down into the bathtub, inhaling the herb-scented steam and letting his mind drift.

He turned what he knew so far over in his mind, idly examining it from all angles and hoping against hope that there would be a moment when all the pieces slotted

together tidily and told him what he wanted to know. But by the time the water had started to cool, he had to admit that as far as solid evidence went, they had very little.

Calthrope and the hemlock.

Two scribbled drawings of a dodgy cock and balls.

An ambassador who Evan distrusted on instinct but who hadn't actually said or done anything incriminating—apart from being outside Evan's rooms last night.

Evan sighed and sat up, reaching for the soap. Lathering up the washcloth, he cleaned himself quickly and climbed out of the tub. At least the crick in his neck and the stiffness in his hips had abated.

He dressed and took himself down to the kitchens for breakfast and then spent the morning meandering around the castle, looking for all the world like he didn't have a thought in his head. Nobody paid him any heed as he listened in on the conversations of various palace staff, and why would they? He was a duke, yes, but at the same time he was a nobody, and as such there was no need for anyone to guard their words around him.

He learned that Vasily, the Koroslovan prince who was also the ambassador, was planning a trip home with Mother Jones, his husband. He discovered through the grumbling of a cluster of guards that the ambassador for Falsmark apparently had no intention of leaving any time soon. The guards were placing the blame for the extra hours they were still working squarely on the last few guests who had refused to take the hint and go home.

Despite his best efforts, though, he didn't hear anything that might help him find out who was behind the threat to the crown, or even who the would-be assassins were targeting. His money was still on the king, although the crown prince was also a

possibility.

By the time evening rolled around he was forced to admit defeat. He hadn't even managed to search the ambassador's room—the man hadn't made an appearance all day, asking for his meals to be sent to his room and claiming illness. He might have been nursing a hangover, but Evan suspected that the man knew he was under suspicion and was lying low. It was what he would have done in the same situation.

Evan disliked admitting defeat. It felt a little too much like living up to his reputation as a simpleton. But as much as he tried, he couldn't find the key that would unlock this whole mystery.

He went back to his own chambers after supper in something of a sulk. He hadn't seen Thomas all day, although he'd heard him shouting at his new recruits and putting them through their paces while he was lingering near the training yards and listening to the other guards grousing.

He ran a hand over his face and pulled out the drawing of a cock and balls and set it on the table. He frowned as he sat down and examined the creased paper. The picture boasted ridiculously oversized balls and had those small circles in odd positions all around the outside, and the cock itself was crude and badly shaped—if Evan's shaft had curved the way the one in this sketch did, he would have been seeking out a physician—so he could only assume the drawings were someone's idea of a bit of fun. But if that was the case, why had the Viscount of Calthrope kept the picture on his person? And why did the ambassador have the same sketch?

It made no sense.

Perhaps the ambassador's tastes ran to a nice bendy dick after all, despite his wife and children. Maybe he really had been coming to Evan's room to propose a dalliance?

Evan shuddered at the thought and thanked his stars that Thomas had been there, and been willing to go along with his charade—which, it had turned out, was no charade but a genuine attraction. It had resulted in a highly satisfying romp, one which Evan had every intention of repeating.

He'd aimed to miss when he'd thrown that knife at Thomas, because he wasn't in the habit of stabbing his bedmates. It had been partly a tease, and partly Evan showing off, and he'd been prepared for Thomas to flap and squawk and perhaps mutter threats. But seeing the way Thomas had plucked that knife out of midair without blinking an eye? It had made Evan's insides melt into a puddle of pure, unfettered lust. Apparently, Evan was weak for a competent man who was good with sharp objects.

Or rather, for one particular man who was good with sharp objects.

Sighing, Evan went back to examining the picture. He was still tracing a fingertip over the curve in the shaft when there was a light tap at the door. He hurried over, arranging his face into an expression of polite confusion just in case it wasn't Thomas. But when he opened the door his captain stood there, just as solid and reassuring and stupidly attractive as always. He swung the door wide, and Thomas stepped inside. Evan locked the door behind him.

Thomas raised an eyebrow. "Are you kidnapping me?"

Evan laughed. "Please. Like a big, strong bear of a man like yourself couldn't shoulder that door open in five seconds."

Thomas's face creased into a smile at the compliment. "Probably less," he agreed, rolling his shoulders and flexing his muscles.

"The lock is to keep busybodies out," Evan said. "We don't want anyone wandering

in and overhearing our business.”

Thomas hummed. “The only person I’ve ever seen wandering into the wrong rooms and overhearing things is you.”

“And that’s the way I’d like it to stay,” Evan said briskly. While he’d come to terms with Thomas finding out who he was, he had no intention of anyone else learning his secrets.

He led Thomas over to the table and they sat down, side by side. Evan tapped a finger against the drawing. “This is the only thing we have that might lead us to our possible victim.”

“You mean our possible killer?”

Evan remained silent and waited for Thomas to catch up.

“Of course,” Thomas said finally. “You’d prefer to deliver a nice, tidy assassination to answering any awkward questions.”

“I’d prefer that nobody was trying to murder my cousin at all,” Evan said pointedly, “but since it seems he has a target on his back, it’s my job to protect him and his husband. If that means somebody ends up with a snapped neck, so be it. I find it far more efficient to take care of a problem as soon as it arises.”

Thomas fixed him with a glare. For a moment Evan wondered if he’d changed his mind about helping after all, struck with a case of belated scruples, but Thomas proved him wrong when he said in a low voice, “It’s my job, actually.”

Evan blinked at him. “What?”

“It’s my job,” Thomas repeated. “As Captain of the Royal Guard, the safety of the king and his husband is my responsibility. I’m prepared to do whatever’s necessary, and if that means breaking a neck or wielding a blade or throwing a body down a staircase, so be it.” He gave a shrug of his massive shoulders. “I didn’t get this job because of my ability to dance a gavotte, Evan.”

Hearing from his own lips that Thomas was not only fiercely loyal but had a pragmatically violent streak should not have lit a fire in Evan’s belly like it did. That didn’t stop his cock twitching at the reminder that despite his reserved demeanour, the captain was a dangerous man. It really should not have made Evan want to bend over the table, drop his trousers, and beg Thomas to take him, please.

Evan took a deep breath and said, “ Our job, then,” fighting the urge to clamber into Thomas’s lap and kiss him until they were both breathless. He gave himself a mental shake and pushed the burst of arousal aside. He hadn’t become the best at what he did by neglecting his duty and leaping into a handsome man’s bed—even if that man was also loyal and clever and had thighs like twin oaks that Evan wanted nothing more than to climb.

With an impressive display of willpower, he turned his attention back to the dick drawing. “I wish I understood this. Is it a joke? A secret signal?”

“You mean like ‘when the cock crows at midnight, attack’ kind of thing?” Thomas said, brow furrowing.

“I don’t think this is the type of that crows,” Evan said, “or attacks. But it might be some sort of code.”

“But what does it say ?” Thomas muttered, the crease between his brows growing deeper as he drew a piece of paper out of his pocket, unfolded it, and laid the second sketch next to Evan’s. The drawings were strikingly similar, as if the original had

been traced over.

Evan reached out and picked one up, turning the picture this way and that. “They’re not even very well drawn. There are all these little marks around the outside.” He ran a finger around the outline, pausing at the sets of two tiny circles set at intervals up the shaft and around the oversized circular shapes that were meant to be the bollocks, and sighed in frustration. He prided himself on being clever yet here he was, stymied by a badly drawn curvy cock. “I hate not knowing things,” he admitted quietly. “It’s literally my only job to know things. If I can’t do that, then I might as well join the regular guard and spend my time leaning against the wall and complaining about the hours.”

“Who’s complaining about their hours?” Thomas asked. “Is it Philip? Because he’s always been a grumbler.”

“I didn’t catch their names, but I overheard a few of the guards earlier today and they’re not all that happy. Having to work extra nights is wearing on them.”

Thomas jerked upright. “Wait. What did you just say?”

“I said they’re not happy having to do extra night shifts. Why?”

Thomas went very still, and Evan could almost see the wheels turning. Then Thomas reached out, picking up one of the drawings slowly and holding it up to the light, and his eyes went wide. “I knew this looked familiar! It’s the extra guards!” He put the paper back down and waved a hand at it. “Usually, we only have a pair on the main gate at night, but since the threat I’ve had two along the walls at intervals and at every possible entry to the castle. See?”

Evan did not see. “Thomas, it’s a drawing of a cock.”

“No, that’s just it!” Thomas ran a broad palm over the paper, smoothing out the creases. “This is a plan of the ground floor of the castle!” He grinned at Evan as one thick finger traced over the lines. “What we thought was the slit is the main gates. See that big oval that looks like a knob? That’s the main courtyard. And the castle itself does follow a slight curve, only you barely notice it because the space is so big. Whoever drew this just made it curvier. Those two giant bollocks? They’re the separate areas that house the kitchens and laundry and the staff quarters at the far end of the castle!”

Evan let out a long breath as he saw what Thomas was saying. “And those little circles are where you’ve posted your extra guards?”

“Exactly.”

For a split second Evan wanted to kiss Thomas for his brilliance, but then his mood plummeted as the implications of what they had discovered hit. Seconds later the smile fell from Thomas’s face, his expression turning grim as he reached the same conclusion. “Someone who’s planning to get in under cover of night needed to know where the guards were posted. And the fact they have this means there’s a spy in my ranks.”

“And it’s not me, for a change.” Evan rubbed a hand over his chin. “But this confirms that Calthrope wasn’t working alone, and that at least one person in the castle is working with whoever is behind this.”

Thomas turned the piece of paper over in his hand like he was gathering the nerve to speak. Evan waited, and finally Thomas said, “It’s not that I doubt your ability to find out who’s behind this, but maybe it’s time the king and his husband went on a trip. For their own safety.”

He crossed his arms over his chest, forearms flexing, like he expected an argument,



but Evan was already nodding his agreement. “Excellent idea. Vasily is leaving to visit his family tomorrow morning. Perhaps Leo and Felix can tag along.”

Thomas pinched the bridge of his nose. “I say this with the greatest respect, but you being an idiot isn’t a total act, is it?”

“What? You said yourself that they should go on a trip. This is perfect!”

Thomas sighed. “Do you have any idea what goes into preparing for a trip?”

“Of course I do!” Evan said indignantly. “I travel all the time!”

“And I’ll wager you give the staff a day’s notice, and when you go to leave, your bags have been packed and your horse is ready, and you ride out the castle gates without giving a second thought to the poor sods who had to do all the work.”

That was closer to the truth than Evan wanted to admit. “What’s your point?”

“My point,” Thomas said slowly, “is that one man travelling is a lot different than the king and his husband going on a trip of indefinite duration. It’s not realistic to expect the staff to have the royal couple ready to travel in half a day. Move the trip until the day after tomorrow.”

Thomas’s commanding tone sent a shiver down his spine, and he couldn’t deny the wisdom in what he said. “You’re right, of course. We’ll delay the trip by a day. And once they’re gone, you and I can track down our troublemaker and deal with them in peace.”

Thomas gave the barest ghost of a smile. “You think we’ll be able to do it?”

Evan raised an eyebrow. “There’s a reason that the Rogue is legendary, Thomas. I’ve

never failed yet.”

The tense set of Thomas’s shoulders eased the tiniest bit. “Have you really never failed?”

“Hand on my heart, not even once.” Honesty compelled Evan to add, “Well, apart from last week when someone put a knife to my throat and I was forced to conclude my business prematurely.”

Thomas had the decency to look at least slightly shamefaced. “To be fair, a strange man dressed in black was strangling a visiting viscount. I was obliged to intervene.”

Evan grinned. “Honestly, the viscount wasn’t going to tell me anything. You just hastened the inevitable.” He pushed his chair back and stood, scooping up one of the drawings, and strode toward the door. When Thomas didn’t follow, he paused. “Well? Are you coming to break the news to Leo and Felix about their trip?”

Thomas sucked a breath between his teeth and made a seesawing motion with one hand. “They’ve retired early.”

“But they’ll still be awake, surely.”

Thomas gave him a flat look. “They’ve retired early. Even if they are awake, do you want to risk disturbing them in the middle of whatever they’re up to?”

Evan paused, considered what Thomas was saying, and folded the map carefully and tucked it into a pocket. “Perhaps first thing tomorrow then. I’m truly happy Leo has found love. I just don’t want to see it in quite that much detail.”

Thomas let out a snort. “Ironic, seeing as you’ve built your career on being caught in compromising positions.”

“Well, yes, but those positions are designed as a distraction,” he said. For reasons he couldn’t quite explain, he found himself adding, “Most of the time it’s an illusion anyway.”

Thomas blinked, his mouth opening and closing before he asked, “Really?”

“Really. It’s only occasionally that someone takes my fancy and I bed them. A lot of the time it’s a matter of getting them tipsy, putting them to bed, making a tremendous amount of noise, and telling them the next day how marvellous they were. People are, by and large, stupid. So if someone as dashing and attractive as me tells them they’re the best I’ve ever had, their pride has them believing it.”

Thomas raised an eyebrow. “Dashing and attractive, are you?”

“So people tell me,” Evan said airily. “I’ve heard them. ‘Not a brain to bless himself, but at least he’s attractive.’”

Thomas’s smirk disappeared and he stood suddenly, and two steps had him right in Evan’s space, a wall of tall, rugged muscle that took Evan’s breath away. But his touch was gentle when he reached out and tilted Evan’s chin up, capturing his gaze. “They’re wrong about you being brainless,” he said quietly. “Just because you act the fool doesn’t make it true.”

Evan’s breath caught in his throat and his chest squeezed tight. Thomas was seeing him for who he truly was. “I know,” he said, “but thank you anyway.”

Thomas ducked his head and caught Evan’s mouth in a tender kiss that had his heartbeat fluttering. Evan stood up on his tiptoes and leaned into the kiss, and when Thomas slid his hands down Evan’s back and pulled him close, the heat of the other man’s hands on him had his cock taking an interest. He was reminded once again of how delicious his captain had looked sprawled out naked that morning. All thoughts

of maps and kings and plots fell out of his head. The only thing he was interested in right now was getting to see Thomas like that again—and in his own bed this time.

He pulled back from the plush softness of Thomas's mouth, slightly breathless, and his voice was rough when he said, "Bed?"

Thomas's face split in a wide smile. "I thought you'd never ask."

### Chapter Ten

Evan had been mistaken when he'd claimed he was attractive.

Attractive didn't even begin to cover it. With his lean, long-limbed build, his tousled dark hair, and ocean-green eyes, he was mouth-watering. But more than that, there was a catlike quality to his movements that made every twist of his hips a temptation, every arch of his spine an invitation to get to know him better in all the most intimate ways.

Or perhaps only Thomas saw him like that, knowing as he did what the man looked like in the heat of passion.

Still, watching Evan peel out of his brightly coloured clothing with casual elegance, his muscles rippling under his skin like silk, had Thomas forgetting how to breathe. When Evan looked back over his shoulder with a coy smile, Thomas found himself mesmerised. The smile became a smirk, like Evan knew exactly what Thomas was thinking. His voice was a low purr when he said, "I'm glad you're enjoying the view, but are you planning on undressing yourself at all?"

His teasing broke Thomas out of his trance. He began to remove his clothing with absolutely no grace, fumbling with the lacing on his trousers and almost tripping over his boots in his haste. When he glanced up, face heated, he half expected Evan to be laughing, but instead he found him staring at Thomas's bare chest with blatant admiration.

Evan looked like he wanted to devour him.

It struck Thomas anew that Evan was the Rogue and the Duke of Ravenport besides, and vastly more important than Thomas would ever be—yet here he was looking at Thomas like he was a prize to be won. It helped ease any lingering doubts he had about the difference in their stations, and the intensity of Evan's gaze only stoked the fires of arousal that were already burning low in Thomas's belly. He found himself straightening his spine, standing with his feet spread wide and crossing his arms over his chest to better show off his bulk.

Evan's breathing caught, and in one quick movement he'd crossed the distance between them and tangled one hand in Thomas's hair, dragging him down for a long, filthy kiss. Setting his hands on Evan's waist, Thomas dipped his tongue into the heat of Evan's mouth and slid his hands around to the perfect globes of Evan's arse, giving a gentle squeeze. The flesh was firm and plump under his palms, and Evan moaned against his mouth as the movement brought their bodies into contact, and he moaned louder when Thomas squeezed his arse again, harder this time.

Evan wrapped his arms around Thomas's neck and his kisses became more urgent as he rutted forward, his cock dragging against Thomas's bare stomach and leaving damp trails.

Thomas turned them and, still kissing Evan, walked him backwards across the room toward the massive four-poster bed. When the back of Evan's knees hit the side, Thomas placed a hand on his chest and gave him a gentle shove. Evan landed with a soft whump, throwing his hands behind him to steady himself. The lamplight cast shadows up and down the length of his body, highlighting the dips and curves of his muscles, his long limbs glowing golden as he sat perched on the side of the bed. He grinned up at Thomas and spread his legs wide in silent invitation.

Thomas dropped to his knees, barely breathing. Ever since Evan had sucked his cock last night, he'd been hoping for a chance to return the favour. He took pride in being able to take a man apart with nothing but his mouth, and Evan's cock was so very

pretty like this, long and pink, and flushed and damp around the head. He licked his lips and leaned forward, steadying himself with his palms on Evan's thighs, and took the shaft into his mouth.

Evan made a tiny, shocked sound, and that was all the encouragement Thomas needed to continue. He inhaled deeply, taking in Evan's scent before he slid his lips further down, an inch at a time, enjoying the weight against his tongue. He set up a slow, lazy rhythm, bobbing his head and gradually increasing the suction until Evan was clutching at his shoulders and panting. His own cock was hard and aching, and Thomas wrapped a hand around it and stroked himself, groaning in relief around Evan's length. When Thomas flicked his tongue over the slit, Evan's cock pulsed and leaked, and he swallowed around the burst of salty liquid. Evan let out a low moan and grabbed a handful of Thomas's hair, steering him none too gently forward.

Thomas let himself be led, burying his face between Evan's thighs as he licked and sucked while stroking himself to the edge of completion. Evan gave a series of short, desperate thrusts and his cock throbbed hot and heavy in Thomas's mouth. A tremor ran through Evan's thighs, and Thomas hummed around his mouthful of cock as he reached underneath and fondled Evan's balls, then gave a gentle tug. That was all it took for Evan to cry out, arch his spine, and come in Thomas's mouth.

The broken sounds Evan made as Thomas swallowed around him were enough to send Thomas over the edge. His cock throbbed, heat raced through him, and Thomas spilled mere seconds later, his release painting the side of the quilt.

He stroked himself through it until he was spent, and rested his head against Evan's thigh as his entire body went as limp and boneless as his cock. Evan ran his fingers through Thomas's hair with slow, gentle movements that very nearly had him drifting off, and he could have stayed like that for days except it got to a point where he couldn't ignore the ache in his knees from the stone floor any longer.

Thomas reluctantly levered himself to his feet and stood, unsure what happened next. Did he join Evan on the bed, or was he supposed to get dressed and leave? He'd only ever seen Evan leaving other people's bedrooms, not the other way round. But by the same token, Evan had invited him here, and he didn't think he was enough of a bastard to kick Thomas out while his cock was still damp.

Was he?

Evan answered his question by standing, draping his arms around Thomas, and kissing him, slow and sweet. Then, in one swift motion, he pulled Thomas downward, sending him off balance, and they landed on the bed in a tangle of limbs. Thomas let out a surprised laugh when Evan rolled him onto his back and straddled him, grinning down at him. "I hope you weren't thinking of leaving because I have plans."

"It never crossed my mind," Thomas lied.

"Good," Evan said, and leaned down and kissed him with surprising tenderness. Thomas kissed him back, wrapping his arms around Evan and pulling him down so they were plastered together. Evan made a surprised sound in the back of his throat, but Thomas got the feeling he really didn't mind being manhandled, not if the way his lips curved up into a smile against Thomas's mouth was anything to go by.

When they parted, Evan propped himself up on his elbow, expression hopeful, and said quietly, "You can leave if you'd prefer, but I'd rather like it if you'd stay the night?"

Warmth flooded through Thomas at the request, and he almost felt bad when he said, "If I stay, I'll have to leave early. I'm on the dawn shift."

"And I have to break it to Leo and Felix that they're going to Koroslova." Evan



wrinkled his nose. “Terrible place. Much too cold for my delicate constitution.”

Thomas suspected Evan was about as delicate as a cast iron frying pan, but he kept that opinion to himself.

Evan kissed him once more before he settled his head on Thomas’s chest and threw an arm over him with a contented sigh that suggested he wasn’t moving any time soon. Thomas didn’t mind. They fitted together like Evan was meant to be there, and in his current boneless, fucked-out state, it was almost perfect.

Almost.

Something was poking into Thomas’s shoulder from underneath the feather pillow he was currently resting his head on. He shuffled around a little and managed to get a hand under the pillow, only for his fingers to close around cold, hard steel.

It took him a moment to identify what he was feeling, but once he realised what it was, he pulled out the short blade and examined it with a mixture of amusement and disbelief.

Of course the Rogue slept with a weapon. Of course .

Still, he couldn’t resist faking outrage when he prodded Evan in the side with the handle of the blade. “Really, Evan?”

Evan’s head jerked up. When he saw what Thomas was holding, he didn’t even try to hold back his smile. “Don’t tell me you’re surprised?”

“Not even slightly,” Thomas said. “I just hadn’t planned on getting impaled in my sleep.” If he was honest, there was something deeply arousing about sleeping with a man who always had a weapon within arm’s reach. Perhaps he would let Evan impale

him later—just not with a knife.

Evan rolled his eyes and took the blade from him, dropping it off the side of the bed where it hit the rug with a dull thud. “Better?”

“Much,” Thomas said with a smile.

“I feel very unprotected right now,” Evan muttered as he settled himself back against Thomas’s chest. “An army could come for me in my sleep.” Thomas got the feeling he was only half joking.

“Don’t worry,” he said as he wrapped an arm around Evan and pulled him close, “I’d fight an army to keep you safe.”

And he was surprised to find that he meant it.

Thomas woke before dawn—somehow, he was the small spoon again—and let himself soak up the warmth of Evan’s body for a few extra minutes before reluctantly easing out of Evan’s grip and sitting on the side of the bed. He stood and stretched and yawned, smiling at the memory of the night before. Evan had woken him sometime in the small hours of the morning with a trail of light kisses down the side of his neck, which had led to other, more purposeful kisses. That had led to Evan climbing on top of him and grinding his cock in the crease of Thomas’s hip, and Thomas rutting up against Evan’s belly. They’d found a rhythm that worked and moved together, slow and lazy and barely awake, until they’d collapsed against each other in a sticky, sweaty mess. Thomas had barely had the energy to reach out and grab the corner of the bedsheet to wipe them clean before they’d both fallen back into a deep sleep.

Evan was still out cold. His face was half buried in the pillow, his hair was tousled, and his shoulders were bare where the quilt had fallen away when Thomas climbed

out of bed. He looked so tempting that Thomas wanted to climb back in just so he could run his hands over that bare skin. He settled for sitting on the side of the bed and brushing Evan's hair off his forehead before leaning in, his lips brushing Evan's cheek in a soft kiss.

The effect was immediate. Evan's eyes snapped open, he sat bolt upright, and between one breath and the next he'd grabbed Thomas around the waist, shoved him onto his back, and straddled him, holding a forearm across his throat while he thrust his other hand under the pillow—only for it to come back empty.

Thomas's head spun with the speed and grace of Evan's movements, and was it wrong that despite the threat to his person, his cock gave an interested throb at Evan's deadly display of skill?

Probably.

Still, he was heartily glad he'd insisted on removing the knife the night before. "Looking for something?" he said drily, pushing Evan back off him with a grunt and standing next to the bed, safely out of reach.

Evan blinked and glanced between Thomas and his empty hand and back again, and he had the decency to look at least slightly sheepish. "Would you believe me if I said it's almost reflex at this point?"

"I would actually," Thomas said, "which is why I took your pointy toy off you last night." He bent down and picked up Evan's knife from the floor, balancing it upright on one fingertip before tossing it upward in an arc and catching it by the handle with ease. He spent a moment examining the knife before holding it out to Evan on the flat of his palm. "That's a nice piece of weaponry."

"Only the best," Evan said, tucking the blade back under his pillow and patting the

spot with his palm. Thomas didn't think he even knew he'd done it.

Evan stood and stretched. Now that he was more awake, Thomas was fairly sure his murderous urges had abated, so he risked stepping closer and cupping the back of Evan's skull in his palm, pulling him in for one lingering kiss before releasing him with a sigh. "I have to go," he said, fishing about on the floor for his clothes and pulling them on. "Early patrol."

"And I need to inform Leo and Felix about their unexpected trip," Evan said, running a hand through the dark tangle of his hair.

Thomas tugged his boots on. "How do you think they'll take the news?"

Evan shrugged. "Leo trusts me. Felix does too, despite how he reacted when he became chancellor and found out the truth of my position."

"Was he upset that the king was keeping a secret from him?"

Evan laughed. "No, he was mad at himself for not seeing it. He glared at me every day for a week."

"I can imagine," Thomas said, grinning. "It's quite the shock to discover you're not a bumbling fool." He turned toward the door and then paused. He wanted to ask when they could do this again, but he wasn't sure if Evan wanted that, and he didn't know how to broach the subject without coming across as demanding—or worse, needy.

He was still searching for the words when Evan said, "You know, if Leo and Felix ride out with Vasily and Mother, the rest of the guests will have to leave too. And do you know what that means?"

"Apart from a hellish day for the staff?"

“That, yes. But it also means that if you stayed here for the night, neither of us would have to rush off in the morning.” He flashed Thomas a bright smile. “We could do this again, if you’re not busy.” He made a vague gesture in the direction of the rumpled bedclothes, and Thomas took ‘this’ to mean ‘fun, dick-related things that end with orgasms’.

Thomas wanted nothing more than to say yes, but the temptation to keep Evan on his toes was too great—and he deserved at least a little teasing, what with the whole ‘tried to pull a knife’ thing. Thomas schooled his expression. “It happens that I am busy.”

“Oh.” Evan’s face fell. “I suppose you do have other duties.”

He looked so crestfallen that Thomas didn’t have the heart to continue. He bit back a smile and said, “Just one. As Captain of the Royal Guard, it falls to me to keep a close eye on the only member of the royal family in residence.”

A smile lit up Evan’s face when what Thomas had said registered, and he perked up immediately. “Oh! Well, I’m all in favour of you keeping a close eye on the royal member. Perhaps a hand as well.”

Thomas snorted and Evan’s smile widened. “So, I’ll see you tomorrow after supper?”

“Of course,” he said, warmth flooding his insides. It still didn’t seem real that someone as clever and attractive as Evan wanted to bed him, but obviously the attraction was there, even if this was only temporary—and it had to be temporary. Thomas had never heard of the duke entertaining a serious affair in all his time working at the castle.

His stomach twisted, and Thomas told himself it was hunger. Still, he decided he wasn’t going to think too hard about what would happen if and when Evan grew tired

of spending his evenings with a lowly soldier, or the time came for him to start travelling again.

Instead, he was going to make the most of their arrangement, however long it lasted.

### Chapter Eleven

The meeting took place in the same unused cottage just before dawn. Leo leaned his arse against the edge of the rickety table and pinched the bridge of his nose when he heard the news that someone on their staff was probably in cahoots with their would-be assassin and they'd be leaving for Koroslova the following day.

Or as Felix so eloquently put it, "Well, fuck."

"It's fine, sweetheart," Leo said soothingly, running a hand down his husband's arm in the dim morning light. "Evan will take care of it. He's excellent at ferreting out information." But his creased brow and grim expression told Evan all too clearly that he was more worried than he was saying.

Felix wrapped his arms around Leo's neck and pressed their foreheads together. "You promise?"

"Promise," Leo said, kissing Felix's cheek. "We don't come back until it's safe. I won't risk you for anything."

"It's you I worry about," Felix said. "I don't think I could cope if anything?—"

"Very touching," Evan interrupted from where he was sprawled in the single battered armchair. "Now can we talk about your travel arrangements? I'd like to send a full contingent of guards but that might look suspicious, and of course we suspect that at least one of them can't be trusted, given the existence of the map. I'll have Thomas choose six faithful men and that will have to do."

“Speaking of Thomas, where is he?” Felix asked. “I thought you were working together.” He narrowed his eyes. “You haven’t had a lovers’ tiff already, have you?”

“No, we haven’t had a bloody lovers’ tiff,” Evan snapped. Felix’s comment had his hackles rising for reasons he couldn’t quite define. He suspected it was the implication that Evan was somehow incapable of keeping Thomas happy, which was ridiculous. He was perfectly capable, thank you, and Thomas had been more than satisfied—so happy, in fact, that his normally stoic facade had cracked and his eagerness to return had been written all over his big handsome face even before Evan had asked him to come back. “If you must know, he’s on early patrol. And we are working together. He’s going to keep an ear open around his men to see if anyone lets something slip.”

“Interesting that you didn’t deny you are lovers,” Felix said with a grin.

“We have an arrangement,” Evan hedged, examining the flagstones of the cottage floor.

“Funny,” Leo chimed in. “I thought you didn’t take lovers, but here you are.”

“I don’t—we’re not—” Evan’s mouth shut with a snap, and he blinked—because Leo was right .

Evan didn’t take lovers. Evan had flings. He’d had fun dalliances, very occasionally, that weren’t related to extracting information, but up until now there had never been anything more. The risk was too great.

Except with Thomas, it wasn’t.

Thomas already knew the secret that mattered—that Evan and the Rogue were one and the same—and he didn’t care. In fact, if anything, he was positively enamoured



with the idea. And Evan knew instinctively that he could trust him, and that Thomas would have his back should the need arise. He'd proven that already.

The man was clever and witty and physically imposing in ways that made Evan weak at the knees, and the very idea of ending their arrangement, even though they'd barely started it, made his stomach twist up into knots in a way it hadn't since the first time he'd pushed a man off a bridge.

Oh .

It was possible, he conceded, that he might hold more than just casual affection for his captain. And another thing—when, exactly, had Thomas become his captain?

Fine. They were lovers—or at the very least, lover-adjacent. His stomach did that twisty thing again, but this time it filled him with a warm, pleasant sensation that took him a moment to identify as happiness.

He tucked the jumble of feelings aside to examine later when less lives were at risk. Honestly, this was the worst possible time for his emotions to make themselves known.

Evan ran a hand through his hair and pushed up out of the armchair, brushing the dust off the old cloak he was wearing. “Whether Thomas and I are lovers isn't important right now. What is important is getting you both to Koroslova, then figuring out who wants you dead and killing them first.”

“Were you a violent child, Evan?” Felix asked, wrinkling his nose.

“No,” Evan said.

“Yes, you were,” Leo said. “You pushed me off my throne when we were children.”

Evan rolled his eyes. “Firstly, nobody saw me, so it never happened. Secondly, it wasn’t your throne yet. And thirdly, you were incredibly annoying, and you probably deserved it.”

Felix looked between them and his face split in a wide grin. “I’d believe it. I mean, he’s still annoying.”

“Brat,” Leo muttered, but his expression was fond.

“Your brat,” Felix said, still grinning. “Now, shall we go and make arrangements for our travel?”

As Thomas had predicted, the royal couple’s sudden decision to travel threw the entire castle into chaos, and Evan felt sorry for the army of servants who, upon hearing the news, let out a collective sigh before setting about doing all those necessary things that had to be done in order for the royal couple to travel.

And there were so many things that needed to be done. There were horses to be tended, clothing suitable for Koroslova’s colder climate to be packed, guards to be chosen for the journey and outfitted for the cold, and that was the least of it. Thomas had been right—same-day travel would have been an impossibility.

Quite apart from all that, the last visiting dignitaries needed to be informed that their stay was at an end. Given that the talks were well and truly over and the king and his husband would no longer be in residence, there was no excuse for them to remain.

Evan happily volunteered to deliver the news.

Dressed in a deep purple coat and soft lilac trousers and armed with a glass of red wine and a vague expression, he meandered up to the guest wing. He took a petty glee in waltzing into the bedrooms of any lingering visitors shortly after dawn and

acting shocked to see them still in their beds, saying, “Oh, haven’t you left yet? The king won’t like that. He was determined to see you all gone before luncheon.” It was highly entertaining to see their mouths drop open in shock. He let them gasp out their protests that they hadn’t been told before asking, “Did I not tell you last night?”

He made a show of apologising for forgetting to pass on the king’s request, and the guests all assured him it was fine. They rolled their eyes as they arranged their departure and grumbled under their breath about what a fool he was, but Evan wasn’t bothered by their muttered insults. After all, it was exactly the impression he’d wanted to leave. He made a point of lingering in the area, offering to help pack their bags and generally making a nuisance of himself, and his presence had the desired effect. By late afternoon, the last three visitors had been firmly ejected.

He made sure to flash a bright smile at the ambassador for Falsmark as the man’s luggage was being carried down the stairs. “Such a shame you can’t stay! We could have had more drinks!”

Marchesi’s mouth became a thin line and he stormed down the stairs without bothering to reply. Evan couldn’t help but feel that he was more annoyed than his enforced departure warranted—almost as if he’d had plans that had been thwarted.

He followed the ambassador out into the courtyard and lingered as the man’s trunks were loaded into two coaches, then gave a happy wave as they rumbled through the gates. The ambassador did not return it.

He hurried up to the ambassador’s vacant rooms and searched them thoroughly while the staff were otherwise occupied, but just as he’d suspected there was nothing to find.

There was no dinner in the main dining room that night, with Leo and Felix opting to eat in the kitchen to make Cook’s life easier. Evan joined them, glancing around the

room. Thomas's height made him unmissable, and Evan spotted him easily. He was seated at one of the long tables with his back to Evan, talking with his men.

Just the sight of his broad shoulders and messy blond hair made something in Evan settle. Perhaps it was the knowledge that there was another person keeping their eyes and ears open. Evan was so used to working alone that it was still strange to think that he wasn't carrying the fate of the king solely on his own shoulders.

Strange, but reassuring.

He was tempted to slip out of his seat, wander over and sling his arm around Thomas's shoulders, and invite him upstairs—he was sure word of their affair must have spread after their display at the dinner the other night—but just as he prepared to slide his chair back from the table, Thomas tilted his head back and let out a massive yawn. Evan was reminded that while he might have spent the day making a pest of himself to the guests and hanging around the place, Thomas had been working and training his men all afternoon.

In fact, Evan had taken time out of his pestering to just drink in the sight of Thomas instructing his newer troops in the proper use of a sword. Thomas had worked as hard and sweated as heavily as any of his men as he thrust and parried and taught them how to defend themselves. He was impressive with a blade, and the sight of him shirtless and gleaming with sweat, shoulders flexing as he swung a broadsword, was unfairly arousing. Evan could picture it clearly, and he had no doubt that once he retired for the night, he'd picture it again—this time with a hand wrapped around his cock.

For now, he ate his dinner in relative silence, stealing quick glances over at Thomas in between bites and hoping against hope that his captain would approach him. It was all too easy to imagine him striding across the kitchen, scooping Evan up in those muscular arms and throwing him over one shoulder, then carrying him up the stairs

and tipping him into a bed before ravishing him—preferably twice.

But of course, that was never going to happen. It was one thing for a duke to ignore protocol and dally publicly with the Captain of the Royal Guard but another thing altogether for Thomas to be the one making advances. That would be unheard of.

No, Evan would be going to bed alone tonight.

He sighed and pushed his chair back from the table, affecting a yawn. “Do you know,” he said, “watching everyone rushing about today has me quite exhausted.” He drained the glass of wine he’d been nursing and stood. “Remind me again, what was all the fuss over?”

Felix said, “The king and I are leaving tomorrow, remember?”

Evan let a look of confusion wash over him, aware that the rest of the table was watching, and gave a bright smile. “So you are! To see Vasily’s family in Koro... slova?”

Vasily gave him an encouraging nod from where he was sitting next to Felix.

“I nearly lost my left bollock to the cold there once,” Evan stated. “There was a lovely young man, and a field, and we were too busy to notice when the snow started, and—anyway, make sure you wrap up well.”

Felix did a creditable job of keeping a straight face. “My bollocks?”

“Well, all of you, but your dangly bits especially.” He gave an exaggerated shudder.

Leo burst out laughing. “Never change, Evan.”

“I wasn’t planning on it.” He leaned over and stole a slice of cake from Leo’s plate and strolled out the door and up the stairs to his room.

He had nearly lost his left bollock in Koroslova, but it had been in a knife fight. The blade had come unnervingly close, and he would have much preferred the story about bedding a young man in a snow-covered field to be true. He would also have much preferred to be bedding a certain muscular captain tonight, but clearly that wasn’t going to happen.

When he reached his rooms, he shrugged into a sleep shirt. The lamps were lit and a fire burned low in the hearth, yet when he climbed into bed he still shivered. He told himself it was all the talk of cold weather and snow, but deep inside he knew the truth.

He missed his big, comforting bear of a captain, pure and simple.

He tossed and turned and even climbed out of bed to stoke the fire higher, but it didn’t help, and it was a long time before he fell into a thin, uneasy sleep.

The following day was yet another flurry of activity, but by early afternoon the coaches were loaded and ready to go.

As he crossed the courtyard, Evan caught sight of Thomas leading a contingent of six guards toward the stables. He knew that Thomas would have chosen men who were all handy with a weapon, which reassured him. Not that Evan thought their fighting skills would be needed, but it was good to be prepared, and their presence would give pause to any would-be attackers on the road. Leo was as well protected as he could be—and that was without taking Felix into account.

The prince consort was a skilled fighter in his own right and fiercely protective of his husband. Evan pitied anyone who was foolish enough to threaten the king while Felix

was nearby.

Still, there was an itch at the back of Evan's skull, a voice that whispered he was missing something.

He knew from experience that whatever it was, prodding at it would do no good, so he set his concerns aside to examine later, found himself a glass of wine, and let his feet carry him along the path that led to the stables. When he got there, he found that Leo and Felix were almost ready to depart. He made a show of stumbling over thin air and put out a hand to steady himself on a wooden rail. He squinted up at Leo on horseback and said, "Are you going somewhere?"

Leo rolled his eyes. "I told you yesterday, Evan. We're visiting King Alexei in Koroslova for a while. The cooler weather will make a pleasant change."

"Oh! I suppose I'll stay here until you're back, then. I can look after... things," Evan said, raising his glass in a clumsy gesture at the castle and spilling wine over his hand. He licked it off absently.

Leo raised an eyebrow. "Don't start any wars while we're gone."

"I won't," Evan assured him with a bright smile. "I'm not even sure how that would happen."

"That's less reassuring than you think," Leo said. He looked about and his expression brightened. "Oh, excellent, the guards are ready!"

There was the clatter of hooves as the six mounted guards rode up, and Leo and Felix joined them. The party headed towards the courtyard at the front of the castle where Vasily and Mother Jones were waiting alongside a procession of carriages that contained everything they'd need for their trip.

Evan watched them leave, fighting the urge to mount his horse and follow along. He needed to trust Thomas's choice of guard and that his cousin was in good hands, and concentrate on finding out which of the staff had been sharing the new guard formations and why. It could well have been an innocent mistake—someone making a note for their own reference and dropping the paper—except why, then, had the Viscount of Calthrope kept it? And why did the ambassador for Falsmark have a second copy? Was it so they could let somebody in... or was it so somebody could get out?

Not knowing had him unsettled in ways he couldn't quite define. Evan had been doing this for a long time, so he was confident he could find the source of the information, persuade them to tell him who was behind the whole plot, and eliminate the threat.

He'd rest easier when he had, that was all.

A hand landed on his shoulder, startling him. He whirled to find Thomas standing there. "You move far too quietly for a big man," Evan grumbled as he waited for his heart to stop racing. "I should hear someone your size coming a mile away."

"You're not the only stealthy one," Thomas said, looking far too pleased with himself. He nodded in the direction of the departing coaches, the sound of the wheels rattling over the cobblestones fading as the procession became a speck in the distance before disappearing from view. "I've sent men who I trust are loyal, and they know what they're about in a fight. I don't expect they'll be needed, but it's better to be prepared." He turned to face Evan. "So, this might seem like a stupid question, but how exactly do you intend to catch Marchesi plotting if he's no longer here?"

"That's actually a very clever question," Evan said, and the tension he'd been carrying eased at the reminder that he wasn't doing this alone. "And I don't need to catch him. I'll find whatever lackey did that drawing and terrify them into telling me



what I need to know. And once I'm certain he's behind all this, I'll pay our friend the ambassador a visit."

"I'm sure he'll enjoy that," Thomas said drily.

"I can say with great certainty that he won't remember it at all."

"You know, I don't know how I didn't realise you were a trickster before this," Thomas said. "It's obvious that nobody could be as stupid as you pretend to be."

Evan tensed and glanced around them to see if anyone was listening, but the courtyard was deserted, the staff having scattered with the departure of the royal entourage. "I'm not sure if I should be flattered or insulted by that comment."

"Let's say flattered that you act the part so well," Thomas said, the corners of his mouth tilting up.

Evan was struck with the urge to kiss the smirk off his face, and he wondered briefly if anyone would notice if they disappeared for the remainder of the afternoon. But before he could suggest it, Thomas said loudly, "Cook has made it known that it's a cold supper tonight, Your Grace."

Evan's brow creased in confusion, but a second later he heard the tread of boots on the cobblestones and turned to find two of the younger guards approaching.

"Excuse me, Captain," the younger one—Sam, if Evan remembered correctly—said.

"What is it, Sam?"

Sam fidgeted, tugging at the hem of his shirt. "Only, you know we've all been working all those shifts?"

“If you mean doing extra guard duty to get the hang of it while you’re in training, what about it?” Thomas said, crossing his arms across his solid chest in a way that made his forearms bulge.

Sam bit his lip. “Well, some of us were wondering if we could, um, take a day off tomorrow?”

Evan expected Thomas to deliver a straight no and a bollocking for even daring to ask, but his captain surprised him.

“Tell me why I should give you a day off,” Thomas said, “and I might consider it.”

Sam’s mouth opened and closed and he exchanged an uncertain glance with his companion, but then he squared his shoulders, juttied out his chin, and said, “Well, we’re the Royal Guard. And now that His Majesty and His Highness aren’t here, there’s no royals to guard, is there?”

He looked so young and hopeful that Evan found himself hoping Thomas would agree with Sam.

Thomas hummed under his breath, and after making the young men wait for what seemed an age, he flashed Sam a smile. “You’re right—almost. Because you showed me you can use your brain and gave me a good reason, I’ll allow the guards a day off. But bear in mind that even though the king and his husband aren’t here to be guarded, you did forget that the Duke of Ravenport is also a member of the royal family.”

Sam’s eyes widened and he gave a hurried half bow in Evan’s direction. “Apologies, Your Grace! I didn’t mean to forget you!”

On seeing Sam’s stricken expression, Evan took pity on him and waved a lazy hand. “It’s fine. Everyone forgets about me. Some days even I forget about me.” He didn’t

add that his invisibility was by design. “What will you do with your day off?” he asked, in an effort to reassure Sam that he wasn’t offended.

Sam’s cheeks flushed. “Some of the lads want to go to the tavern in town and, um. Meet new friends.”

Well, that was code for wanting a quick fuck if ever Evan had heard it.

“I’ve heard there’s a place two streets back from the docks that’s very good for finding friends,” Evan said with a raised eyebrow.

“That’s the one, sir.” Sam wrinkled his nose. “There’s one man there who doesn’t like to take no for an answer, though. Darcy and me might stay back here.”

“That’s a wise choice,” Thomas said. “Now go and spread the word that tomorrow is a day off, and that I’ll take care of the duke.”

Sam’s face lit up with a grin that was brighter than a hundred candles. “Yes, Captain! Thank you, Captain!”

And with that he was off running toward the barracks, hand in hand with his companion.

“They’re fucking, aren’t they?” Evan said, watching them depart.

“Sam and Darcy?” Thomas smirked. “If they aren’t, they will be by the end of the week. I’m pretending I haven’t noticed.”

Evan turned and leaned into Thomas’s side. “Speaking of fucking...”

“Yes,” Thomas said before Evan had even had a chance to invite him back to his

rooms.

“You don’t know what I was going to ask.”

Thomas glanced around the now empty courtyard and slipped an arm around Evan’s waist in a way that suggested he wouldn’t be letting go any time soon. He pulled him close and said in a low voice, “You were going to ask if I still wanted to go back to your rooms tonight. The answer’s yes.”

Arousal stirred in Evan’s belly, and since he’d never been shy about asking for what he wanted, he pressed up on his toes and nipped at Thomas’s earlobe before murmuring, “Will you pin me to the bed and take me apart, Captain?”

Thomas replied in a low, dangerous growl that sent a shiver of excitement racing through Evan.

“ Yes .”

### Chapter Twelve

Thomas had thought the afternoon would drag, but in fact it flew by. His guards all sought him out, eager to find out if the rumours about a day off were true, and he was kept busy reassuring his men that yes, it was true and more importantly, that they'd still be paid. He barely noticed the hours passing until his stomach growled, and he was surprised to find that darkness had fallen.

He made his way to the kitchens and ate his meal, and now that he was free of the distraction of work, his nerves jangled in anticipation of the evening ahead and his mind turned to other things.

Specifically, to naked, duke-shaped things.

It didn't help that prior to supper Evan had pulled Thomas aside into a quiet corner and kissed him until he was hard in his trousers, only stopping when Thomas gave a breathless moan, and then sending him on his way with a playful slap to the arse. Thomas had spent most of supper willing his cock to behave.

Evan was now sitting at the other end of the table, making a show out of licking up the length of a cold pork sausage. He caught Thomas watching and shot him a teasing smile before commenting, "You know, the last time I had something this big and salty in my mouth, I wasn't anywhere near the kitchens."

Thomas quickly ducked his head to hide the flush that was creeping up his cheeks. Evan was a menace—a sexy, distracting menace—who had, against all odds, chosen Thomas as his bedmate.

He still wasn't sure how he had gotten so lucky.

When halfway through supper Evan cleared his throat loudly, Thomas glanced up the length of the table and found Evan watching him, one hand casually toying with the lacing at the front of his shirt and tugging it loose so that a dark patch of hair was just visible. Then he stood and shoved his hands through his messy hair and shook it out before prowling toward the door. He paused and ran a hand along his shoulder, pushing the collar of his shirt down an inch to reveal his collarbone. He looked back at Thomas, caught his gaze, and tilted his head in a silent invitation.

Thomas's breathing sped up and his hand clenched tight around the handle of his fork. Visions of running his tongue over the curves and dips of Evan's chest before teasing his nipples and working his way lower filled his head, and his cock throbbed with anticipation.

He was halfway out of his chair when Sam darted over to him and hovered at his elbow, eyes wide. Thomas suppressed a groan. "What is it?"

Sam glanced back over at the table where the other guards were sitting, and Darcy gave him an encouraging nod. "Begging your pardon, Captain, but since there's no royals that need guarding except the duke, and you said you'd take care of him, does that mean there's no overnight shift?"

Thomas hesitated but only for a heartbeat. There really was no need to station the guards overnight. It wasn't like anyone was going to attack the castle.

Besides, if there were no guards on duty, nobody would come seeking him out. The night would be his—his and Evan's.

"Fine," he said. "No overnight shift, just this once."

Sam beamed at him and practically skipped back to his table, confirming Thomas's suspicions that he wasn't the only one with plans for tonight.

Evan had slipped away while Thomas was talking to Sam, so he took his time leaving the kitchen. Once he reached the staircase, though, he jogged up the stairs and was slightly out of breath by the time he reached Evan's bedchamber door.

Habit had him pausing to knock, and Evan let out a low chuckle. "Come in."

Thomas eased the door open and slipped into the room, and he'd barely turned the key in the lock before he found himself being spun around and pressed against the wall as a shirtless Evan kissed him, slow and deep. Thomas let out a low groan and his hands brushed bare flesh as they traced up Evan's spine, then back down again to the curve of his lower back.

Evan's skin was warm and satiny smooth under his rough palms, and he slipped one hand inside the waistband of Evan's trousers. Evan sucked in a sharp breath when Thomas cupped his perfect arse and squeezed, and the next minute Evan was unbuckling Thomas's sword belt and tugging at the lacing of his trousers.

Thomas didn't need any further encouragement.

He kicked his boots off, ignoring the clatter of knives, and shimmied out of his clothes. Evan did the same, the two of them trading messy kisses as they undressed, and when they were naked Thomas didn't hesitate to get his hands under Evan's thighs and lift him up. Evan's face lit up with a delighted grin and he promptly crossed his ankles and clung to Thomas's shoulders. The sensation of their rigid cocks brushing against each other sent shivers down Thomas's spine.

When they reached the bed, Thomas threw Evan onto the mattress in one swift movement and followed him down so that they landed in a messy heap with Evan

pinned beneath him.

Evan stared up at him, wide-eyed and breathless, then gave another delighted grin and surged up, tangling one hand in Thomas's hair and kissing him.

Thomas closed his eyes and let himself get lost in the taste and feel of another man as he explored the inside of Evan's mouth. They spent long minutes just like that, exchanging hungry kisses and hungrier touches, until Thomas's cock was so hard it ached. His hips rolled forward instinctively, and the drag of his shaft over the ridges of Evan's stomach muscles sent waves of pleasure through him that had him tensing in an effort not to spend all over the quilt when they'd barely even started.

He stilled his movements and broke their kiss, breathing hard. Evan blinked up at him as he reached out and dragged a fingertip over Thomas's chest. His mouth curled into a slow, lazy smile and he said, "Tell me, Captain, will you fuck me?"

Thomas's mouth went dry.

He wanted nothing more than to pin Evan down and fuck him senseless, and Evan clearly wanted the same thing, but a lifetime of deference to the crown had him hesitating. Was he really going to put his cock inside the second in line for the throne of Lilleforth? Thomas was a commoner, and his family was hardly what anyone would call respectable. He found himself saying, "Are you sure? It might not be proper."

Evan raised an eyebrow. "If anything we do tonight is proper, I shall be most disappointed."

Thomas cleared his throat. "It's not that I don't want to fuck you. I can't think of anything I want more. But you're a duke, and I serve the crown. I'm beneath you."



“I think you’ll find that I’m the one who’s beneath you,” Evan said, “and that’s the way I like it.” He worked a hand between them and grasped Thomas’s cock. “I don’t give a damn if you’re a guard, or we wouldn’t be here in the first place. Now will you please put this magnificent beast inside me?” He stroked Thomas’s cock, slow and firm, running his thumb over the swollen, aching head, and the heat of his touch was enough to take Thomas’s breath away. His breathing stuttered and his cock throbbed urgently against Evan’s palm.

Then Evan arched his back and pressed their bodies together, his leaking erection leaving a damp trail against Thomas’s skin. It was an effective reminder that what really mattered was that he had a handsome, naked, willing man in bed with him right now who was literally begging to be fucked—and if their social standing didn’t matter to the duke, Thomas decided, then it didn’t matter to him.

He leaned in and kissed up the side of Evan’s throat before murmuring, “Do you have any oil?”

Evan squirmed beneath him for a moment before giving a frustrated huff. Thomas found himself being rolled onto his back and then Evan was straddling him. He leaned over the side of the bed and reappeared a moment later holding up a small flask and flashing a wicked smile. “Shall I get myself ready?” he asked, and without waiting for an answer he drizzled the oil onto his fingertips. Thomas watched, entranced, as Evan raised himself onto his knees and reached behind himself, the curves of his body gleaming in the lamplight.

Evan was gloriously limber, his body lean and tempting, and Thomas couldn’t resist reaching out and running his hands down the contours of Evan’s chest, his thumbs skating over his nipples.

Letting out a soft grunt as he sank his fingers inside, Evan splayed his other hand against Thomas’s chest to steady himself. The room was filled with the wet sounds of

well-oiled fingers sliding in and out of his arse as Evan working himself open at a leisurely pace, letting out soft little moans and gasps. Thomas thought he might actually go mad if he didn't get to fuck Evan soon.

"Let me," he said, voice rough.

Chest heaving, Evan blinked down at him for a moment before rolling off to one side, planting his feet against the mattress, and spreading his knees wide. Thomas knelt in the vee of Evan's thighs and fumbled with the stopper of the flask before managing to pour oil on his own fingers. He slid one inside the soft clutch of Evan's arse and Evan let out a breathy exhale. "Oh, I do love a man with big hands."

Thomas grinned, working his finger in and out until Evan began to squirm with need. "More?"

"Please."

Thomas added a second finger and Evan's mouth dropped open. He let out a low groan as Thomas pumped his fingers in a steady rhythm. When he curled them upward and his fingertips grazed over that sweet spot inside, Evan's hips bucked up and he let out a shout, so Thomas did it again.

"Stop teasing and fuck me." Evan might have meant it as a command, but it came out as more of a plea.

"Soon. You're not ready." Thomas wanted nothing more than to sink into that soft, inviting hole, but it was no boast to say that he was big all over. Experience had taught him that some things couldn't be rushed. He teased at Evan's rim until it softened further under his touch and eased a third finger carefully inside.

Evan sucked in a sharp breath, but Thomas didn't miss the way his cock jerked, and

his voice was tight when he said, “The next thing inside me had better be your cock, Captain.”

Thomas wasn’t going to argue—not with his blood racing hot in his veins and his erection harder than steel.

He pulled his hand back and swiped oily fingers over his length, slotted the head against Evan’s hole, and pressed forward. He sank slowly inside, and his entire world narrowed down to the clutch of Evan’s hot body around his cock. He paused for a moment to allow Evan to get used to his size before he eased back out again, then thrust forward carefully, fighting the urge to fuck Evan hard and fast.

Evan, though, didn’t seem to feel the same need for restraint. “Harder,” he urged, spreading his legs wide. He shot Thomas a wicked smile. “I want to feel you tomorrow.”

Any shred of self-control Thomas might have had disappeared on hearing that. He set his hands on Evan’s waist and snapped his hips forward, setting a rapid pace that quickly reduced Evan to a moaning, panting, and utterly gorgeous wreck.

Evan had one arm thrown wide and the other around his cock, stroking himself, and his head was tipped back. With his eyes closed and his lips slightly parted as he moaned, Evan lost to passion was breathtaking. The sight had the heat in Thomas’s belly gathering like a storm cloud, and he was consumed with the need to claim Evan as his own.

He lowered himself so that he could hook his arms under Evan’s upper body, lifting him up off the bed as he fucked into the hot clench of his arse. The change in angle had Evan moaning loudly as he clung to Thomas, his hand moving in time with his thrusts and his knuckles brushing the skin of Thomas’s belly as Evan started to tug at his cock faster.

When Thomas felt his climax approaching, he pulled Evan close and buried his face in the curve of his neck, his movements becoming choppy and urgent. Evan responded by clenching his arse around Thomas's cock, and the effect was immediate. Thomas's world exploded in heat and pleasure. He gave one final thrust and came, gasping for breath as he fell apart.

It was only seconds before Evan tensed. Wetness splashed against Thomas's stomach and Evan collapsed against his chest, shaking through his own orgasm.

Once Evan was still, Thomas eased his softening cock out of him and lowered him slowly to the mattress, his own limbs shaky from exertion as he lay down alongside him. Evan rolled toward him with a lazy smile.

Thomas grinned back but didn't try to speak, his mind still hazy with sex and pleasure. He did manage to extend an arm and pet clumsily at Evan's toned bicep, though, in what he hoped was a gesture of mutual satisfaction.

Evan's smile widened and he put his arms over his head and stretched with his whole body like a particularly contented cat. He lay there quietly, catching his breath before he spoke. "That," he said, "was rather perfect."

Warmth bloomed in Thomas's chest. He propped himself up on one elbow so he could see Evan better. "It was, wasn't it?"

Evan hummed and his smile widened. "We should do that again."

Thomas gave a soft laugh. "I'd like nothing better, but can we wait until I can feel my legs first?"

"I suppose," Evan said with a put-upon sigh, but he was still smiling—a wicked, tempting thing that looked far too good on him. He moved toward Thomas and

leaned in for what Thomas at first thought was a kiss, but between one moment and the next, Evan made a single swift move and Thomas found himself pinned to the mattress with Evan straddling him—again. Evan’s eyes were bright when he said, “Next time we should do it like this.”

Thomas reached out and caught Evan by the hips. “Yes,” he rasped out. “We should.”

Evan stared down at him, eyes dark, and Thomas wondered for a moment if he might persuade his cock to cooperate after all, but then Evan scrunched up his nose. “My arse is leaking.”

Evan leaned over and grabbed a corner of the bedding, then reached behind himself. After cleaning himself up, he pushed the cum-streaked linen aside and lay down, plastering himself against Thomas’s front and resting his head on his shoulder. Thomas wrapped an arm around Evan’s back, and he was once again struck by the way Evan fitted perfectly against him and by the rightness of it.

He wondered how often they’d do this before Evan inevitably grew tired of him or departed the kingdom on another one of his spying trips, leaving Thomas alone with nothing but his memories.

His chest ached at the thought.

Pushing down the tight ball of loneliness that threatened to spring free at the thought of his time with Evan ending, Thomas pulled him closer.

Evan nuzzled at his throat in response, working his way up in a string of light pecks that ended with him claiming Thomas’s mouth properly. They spent some time like that, trading lazy kisses. It might have led to more if they hadn’t both still been boneless from their last efforts, but instead they ended up with Evan resting his head on Thomas’s chest while Thomas wrapped an arm around him.

Spending time like this, touching and holding Evan even without it going further, was deeply satisfying in a way that Thomas hadn't ever known. When he'd taken lovers in the past, he'd had no desire for it to be anything other than a physical release. He certainly hadn't wanted his lovers to stay and cuddle.

With Evan, though? He found he wanted to spend more of his nights sharing a bed.

Possibly all of them.

He let himself imagine it as he soaked up the heat of Evan's body against his, and they lay in a comfortable silence that was only broken by the crackle of the fireplace. Secure in the knowledge that he didn't have to go back to his own bed, Thomas found his eyelids growing heavy as sleep pulled at him.

He was barely awake when Evan pressed a kiss to his shoulder and murmured, "I rather like you in my bed. I might have to keep you here."

"I'm glad," Thomas mumbled, "because I intend to stay."

And he let himself pretend, just for a moment, that they weren't only talking about tonight.

Thomas woke suddenly, a vague sense of dread creeping up his spine and making the hairs on the back of his neck prickle. He blinked himself awake and extracted himself from Evan's grip, swinging his legs over the side of the bed and sitting up as he tried to make sense of his sudden unease.

The fire had burned down to embers, but there was still enough light to see that everything in the room was as it should be. Evan's breathing was deep and even, and when Thomas checked he found the door still locked. Still, he couldn't shake the feeling that something was amiss.

He ran his hands over his face, stifling a yawn, and considered ignoring his disquiet and crawling back into bed. Evan was right there, naked and warm and tempting. But that itching, prickling sensation of wrongness refused to leave him.

He heaved a sigh. Maybe it was just an instinctive reaction to knowing the castle was unguarded. He hauled himself to his feet. He'd do a patrol of the outside entrances and that would reassure him that he was worrying over nothing.

Then he'd come back to bed and see if Evan couldn't be tempted to another round of fuckery. He didn't think it would take much.

He dressed in silence and slipped out the door, leaving Evan sleeping. There was no reason to wake him, not when Thomas only intended to do a single round of the castle's entry points and check everything was secure. He moved soundlessly down the stairs and headed for the kitchen, where he grabbed a lantern to light his way. From there he made his way to the front courtyard, starting his inspection with the main gates, which were locked up tight.

It was eerily quiet. It was obviously too early for any of the staff to be up and starting their day, and the absence of guards at the gate was jarring. Thomas took a deep breath, rolling his shoulders and reminding himself that even if someone were to break in, there wasn't much harm they could do. It was the reason Evan had sent the king and his husband out of the country.

He made his way back into the castle and worked his way along the passages that led to the exterior, checking every door and gate along the way, even the ones that hardly anybody used.

Everything was as it should be.

Still, he found himself tensing every time he turned a corner. Something was wrong

—he could feel it in the marrow of his bones. He just didn't know what.

He'd made it two-thirds of the way around the perimeter when he found it.

At the end of a short, dust-filled corridor, a door leading to a small courtyard with low walls that hardly anybody used was standing ajar.

He might have thought it had been left open by accident some time in the past, given that the area was barely visited, except he knew for a fact that there had been a guard posted here only yesterday. Thomas's gut clenched as he stepped closer and lifted the lantern to get a better look. Dust motes danced in the air, and the lamplight showed a trail of fresh footprints leading from the courtyard along the passageway toward the main part of the castle.

Thomas lowered the lantern, his brow creasing.

Who was sneaking in a disused door and why? If someone had come to fulfil the threat against the royal family, they weren't very skilled in their craft, given that they were apparently unaware the king and prince consort had left Lilleforth.

Honestly, the pragmatic part of Thomas was offended by the existence of an assassin who was so poorly prepared.

Evan never would have left that door open. And he would have covered his tracks at the very least. There was a reason he'd escaped detection for so long.

That, and nobody would suspect a member of the royal family of being a spy.

Thomas sucked in a sharp breath as his own earlier words to Sam came to mind.

The Duke of Ravenport is also a member of the royal family.



The hairs on the back of Thomas's neck stood on end and waves of hot and cold ran through him, his stomach clenching as realisation hit him like a brick.

Evan was royalty.

Evan was royalty.

Thomas had been blind.

When they'd been told there was a threat against the royal family, they'd all—Evan included—assumed the king was at risk, but what if somebody had worked out that Evan was the Rogue, and he had been the target all along?

And Thomas had just left him, asleep and alone, in an unlocked bedroom in an unguarded castle.

The passageway echoed with the clattering of boots as Thomas ran back toward the main hall at full pelt, his heart beating hard enough that it threatened to leap out of his chest. He skidded around the end of the corridor and raced up the stairs. He surged forward, not slowing—and had there always been this many steps?

He was gasping for breath, the staircase seeming to go on forever, but he forced himself to keep moving until he reached the top.

Taking barely a second to suck in a lungful of air on the landing, he started running toward Evan's chambers, desperate to warn him and keep him safe.

He skidded to a halt outside the bedroom door, blood pounding in his skull, and slammed it open—only to come face to face with Evan. He seemed remarkably composed, considering he was stark naked and the ambassador for Falsmark was standing next to him.

“It’s you!” Thomas gasped out. “The threat’s against you !”

“I’m aware, thank you,” Evan said dryly.

He turned his head slightly, and steel gleamed in the lamplight as the ambassador set the blade he was holding closer to Evan’s throat.

### Chapter Thirteen

Evan was most put out when he woke up alone.

He'd had plans which involved getting thoroughly debauched by his captain again, and now he was going to either have to get dressed and go and find him or wait until he returned.

He stretched, wincing at the ache in his arse. It was a good ache, one that reminded him he'd been well used, just the way he liked. But it also had him deciding that perhaps it would be more sensible to wait here. Surely Thomas and his impressive cock hadn't gone too far. Maybe he'd ducked out to the privy or gone to the kitchen for something to eat.

A half smile played around his lips as he recalled the night before. Thomas had been everything he'd hoped for in a lover and more.

And quite apart from that, he was handsome and clever and good company—in short, everything Evan wanted in a man. He was no longer able to pretend that his feelings began and ended with simple physical attraction. Evan wanted Thomas as more than a lover. He wanted to court him properly.

His smile grew pensive as it occurred to him that Thomas might not feel the same. And even if he did, Evan spent a lot of time away. Would Thomas be prepared to tolerate him disappearing for weeks and months at a time?

Perhaps Thomas could travel with him as his personal guard. It would mean giving

up his role as captain, but?—

Evan stopped that thought in its tracks. He wasn't going to get his hopes up until he'd spoken to Thomas in the cold light of day. As much as he liked to think he was a catch, he couldn't be certain Thomas felt the same way.

This might be a simple case of hero worship. Now that Thomas had fucked the Rogue, it was possible he was no longer interested.

Perhaps that was why he'd left.

A wave of disappointment washed over him, unfamiliar and unwelcome, and his gut churned. Evan wasn't used to rejection, even imagined, and he disliked the sting of it intensely.

Perhaps he would go searching for Thomas after all. He got out of bed and lit one of the lanterns so he could see, and he was just about to pull on his trousers when a noise caught his attention.

The door handle squeaked, moving slowly, and Evan slumped with relief. Thomas hadn't changed his mind after all.

A smile spread across his face as he stepped forward, and the door swung open. "You know, it's bad manners to leave someone without at least a ki?—"

As quickly as it had appeared, his smile vanished when a familiar figure pushed his way inside and slammed the door behind him. "What the hell are you doing here?" Evan demanded.

"I'm here to kill you, obviously," the ambassador for Falsmark said, right before he pulled a knife from his sleeve and pointed it at Evan's throat.

Evan held his breath and went still. Being threatened with a knife wasn't ideal, but it also wasn't new. He could still get out of this. He just needed to distract the ambassador for a moment to get the upper hand.

The door flew open.

Thomas stumbled into the room gasping for breath, beads of sweat rolling off his brow. "It's you! The threat's against you !"

"I'm aware, thank you," Evan said.

The ambassador's gaze flicked from Evan to Thomas, his attention wavering for a split second.

It was enough.

Evan ducked nimbly out of his reach and then surged forward, knocking the knife from the ambassador's hand. While the ambassador was still staring at his empty palm, Evan turned him and slammed him against the wall, pushing the man's arm halfway up his back and rendering him immobile. "Who sent you?" he snapped. "I won't ask twice."

The ambassador tried to break free, but Evan had fought and won too many times for some awkward flailing to have any effect against his iron grip. He pulled the man's arm further up his back, eliciting a squeal of distress, and grunted out, "Talk."

"I know who you are," the man moaned out. "I was sent to get rid of you."

Ah .

That wouldn't do at all.

Evan considered questioning the man further, but the ambassador started struggling anew, with more purpose this time, and he decided that on the whole, he'd prefer to save his skin now and look for answers later. He spun the man back around and looked him in the eye as he wrapped both hands around his skinny neck. "I think we both know how this ends, yes?"

The ambassador's eyes widened like he hadn't considered the possibility that this might go badly for him. His mouth opened and closed but no sound came out, which was for the best, really. Evan didn't gain any pleasure from disposing of his victims, and he preferred to get the whole thing over with quickly. It was so tiresome when they started crying and begging and dragging the process out.

He tightened his grip.

The ambassador tried to push Evan away and when that didn't work, he cried out desperately, "Let me go or I'll tell everyone the truth about you!"

Which was a foolish thing to say because the old adage that dead men tell no tales was nothing if not accurate. Evan debated explaining to the ambassador why his threat made no sense but decided that since he'd be educating a corpse, it would be a waste of everyone's time. He sighed and said, "I do so hate incompetence." Then he adjusted his grip on the ambassador's neck and with one brutal twist, dispatched him to the next life.

The body hit the floor with a thud.

Evan turned to Thomas and opened his mouth to reassure him that he was fine, but before he had a chance, two firm, muscled arms were enveloping him and dragging him forward until his face was pressed against the bulk of Thomas's chest. He took several deep breaths, pressing his ear against the wall of muscle he was currently plastered to and taking comfort in the steady beat of Thomas's heart as he let himself

be held. Truth be told, it was rather nice having someone care about him.

Warmth bloomed in his belly at the knowledge that Thomas had been there to save him.

Not that he'd needed saving exactly, but still. It was the thought that counted.

Thomas let out a shuddery sigh and his voice rumbled deep in his chest as he murmured, "I was afraid I'd be too late. I thought I might lose you."

Evan pulled back and tipped his head up, only to find Thomas gazing down at him, eyes suspiciously shiny.

"Careful," he said quietly, "or I might think you care for me."

Thomas's expression did something complicated, his brows pinching together. "I do care for you, Evan. More than is good for me perhaps." Evan wanted to ask what he meant by that but then Thomas was kissing him, soft and gentle.

Evan leaned into the kiss and let it wash over him like a soothing balm. He drew back, lips still tingling, and cupped Thomas's cheek in one palm. "Your timing is impeccable by the way."

"I'm glad," Thomas said quietly. He pulled Evan close again, and they stayed like that as the minutes ticked by.

When Thomas finally relaxed his hold, he shook his head ruefully. "I can't believe it didn't occur to either of us that you might be the royal family member at risk." He gave Evan a shaky smile. "You've done such a good job of making yourself invisible that even you forgot you were an heir to the throne."

“That was a closer call than I’d like,” Evan admitted. “Nobody’s discovered who I am before now.”

The enormity of the situation started to sink in. Somehow the ambassador had discovered his identity, and Evan had no idea how or when it might have happened. He prided himself on being careful—but apparently, he hadn’t been careful enough.

He settled his head against Thomas’s chest again and sighed when Thomas ran a hand down his bare back.

“Who do you think sent him?” Thomas asked, his broad palm sweeping up and down Evan’s spine in a soothing motion he suspected was for Thomas’s benefit as much as his.

Evan considered the question. The ambassador hadn’t been the only one who was trying to kill him, but it was possible that it had simply been a case of ‘the enemy of my enemy is my friend’—with Evan being the common enemy.

“The thing about people in my line of work,” he said at last, “is that often the left hand makes certain that the right hand doesn’t know what it’s doing. We’re sent out to deal with situations as we see fit. Sometimes that’s passing on information, and sometimes it’s saying nothing and making a problem go away. I think that I was a problem that several someones wanted to make go away, so they joined forces.”

Thomas pulled back from their embrace, brow furrowed. “So you don’t think the King of Falsmark was behind this?”

“I doubt it. He tends not to involve himself in politics if he can help it. I do know that Marchesi and Calthrope were close, so if one of them found out who I was, it wouldn’t surprise me if they came up with a scheme to get rid of me. And I’ve likely thwarted quite a lot of their plans over the years, so it makes sense they’d want me



gone.”

Thomas made a low growling noise in his throat that warmed the very cockles of Evan’s lying, murderous little heart and made him want to drag Thomas to bed and celebrate the fact that he was alive.

Sadly, he had other priorities right now.

He ran a hand through his hair and sighed. He needed to work out how he’d been identified. He was confident he hadn’t let his facade drop—acting the fool was like slipping into a second skin. But clearly he’d made an error in judgment somewhere along the line, and now he had a dead ambassador to deal with.

Thomas was obviously thinking along similar lines. “I think we can still assume that somebody knows who you are,” he said, pacing around the room. He came to a halt in front of the fireplace, his back to Evan as he stared into the embers. “You heard about the threat after you came back for the trade talks, so it must be somebody local. And they’ve sold you out.”

Evan tipped his head back and sighed, closing his eyes. “That would make sense, except I haven’t dealt with anyone outside the castle. Well, nobody worth mentioning.”

“Well, that’s just insulting,” an unfamiliar voice said.

Evan’s eyes snapped open as an arm wrapped around his throat and a hand grasped his naked bollocks tightly enough to be painful.

A desperate whine left him.

Thomas whirled on his heel and his eyes widened. “Ned ?”

Ned? Who the hell was Ned?

Evan turned his head and caught a glimpse of a young man with sandy hair and sharp features. He stopped moving when the hand on his bollocks tightened further, and he shot Thomas a panicked look.

“Ned’s a local. He offered to bed me—quite persistently,” Thomas said.

Something in Evan’s gut twisted, sharp and unfamiliar, and it took him a moment to identify the feeling as jealousy.

“I was most disappointed when the captain turned me down after I so kindly bought him a drink. But he at least has the good manners to remember me,” Ned said. “You don’t, though, do you?”

Evan closed his eyes and thought hard, and a faint memory came to him. He’d been waiting to meet a nameless contact at a nondescript tavern. It was the kind of place where nobody paid attention to who visited or the company they kept, which meant it was perfect for Evan’s purposes. Ned had approached him and offered to keep him company for the evening. Evan had turned him down without a second thought and promptly forgotten about the entire encounter.

But obviously Ned hadn’t—and it seemed he was holding a grudge.

“I—the tavern,” Evan said, flinching at the press of cold steel against his throat. “I remember now.”

“You told me no, rather rudely I might add,” Ned said. “But I’ve often found that when someone says no, with enough persistence it can be turned into a yes. So I followed you home, intending to give you a chance to reconsider. I didn’t expect your home to be the castle, which meant I couldn’t follow you inside, but at least it made it

easy to keep an eye on you. I thought you must work here. And you always use the same two little side gates for your comings and goings, so that helped.”

Evan’s breath rasped as he sucked in air, careful not to move and cut himself on the blade, or worse, get his balls yanked from his body. He had to hand it to Ned—the slippery little bastard had managed to make sure Evan wouldn’t pull out of his grasp. Evan truly was at his mercy. “You’ve been following me?”

“I couldn’t help myself,” Ned confessed, his voice taking on a playful lilt. “You were just so pretty. You can imagine my surprise when you appeared at the gate one day and you weren’t wearing your hooded cloak. No, you were done up to the nines in a silk shirt and stockings and trousers and an emerald green coat that was fit for a king—or a duke.”

He shifted slightly behind Evan, adjusting his grip so the tip of the knife jabbed into Evan’s flesh, and laughed low in his ear. “Well, that was when I realised who you were. And I started asking myself why a member of the royal family would be in a place like that tavern and why he’d be in disguise. And then one night someone mentioned the king’s mysterious spy that nobody had ever seen, and it all fell into place. I followed you for a few more days just to be sure, but all the pieces fit. You’re the Rogue.”

Evan didn’t bother to deny it. “How does the ambassador come into all this?” he asked. It was part curiosity, part stalling tactic. The grip on his balls had loosened as Ned talked, and he was hoping that by some miracle he might be able to slip free without sacrificing them.

“Oh, he overheard the other men at the tavern laughing at me when I said I knew who the Rogue was. He didn’t laugh, though. He was very interested in what I had to say, and when I told him what I suspected, he paid me handsomely to keep my mouth shut about it. He came back a week later and said that there was a new guard roster at the

castle, and he'd pay me if I could get my hands on a copy."

"Who gave it to you?" Thomas demanded with a face like thunder. "Was it one of the guards?"

Ned shook his head. "No, it was one of the kitchen staff. I got him drunk and persuaded him to draw a map for me. I told him it was so I could come and visit him."

Well, that explained the shaky drawing and the extra curve on the shaft.

There was just one piece of the puzzle that Evan couldn't make fit. "What was the ambassador doing at the tavern in the first place?"

"Oh, he always visits me when he's in town. He loves a good buggering." Ned glanced down at the body on the floor. "Well, he did."

"But why are you here now? " Evan persisted. "Surely the ambassador didn't hire you."

"No, but he is given to pillow talk, and he told me his plans last night after I fucked him," Ned said. "I came because I wanted to see you get your comeuppance after turning me down." He frowned at the dead body. "But it looks like I'll just have to kill you myself."

Ten years of espionage, and his secret had been uncovered by a brat who couldn't take no for an answer and was planning to kill him in a fit of pique? It was almost enough to make Evan laugh.

Almost.

Except Ned chose that moment to let go of Evan's bollocks and slide a hand up and over his bare stomach, pulling him close. Evan's gut churned. "You missed out on a good time when you turned me down."

"I don't sleep with rude little gits," Evan snapped, and the petty jealousy that was still coursing through his veins had him adding, "You're probably terrible in bed."

Ned let out an outraged gasp. "Excuse you! I'm bloody fantastic !" He drew his knife sharply back and thrust it forward.

Evan jerked his head to one side, and Ned sliced through air. Evan breathed a sigh of relief at having escaped injury—right before a long line of fire lit up along his ribcage as Ned lunged forward again and the blade split Evan's skin.

Time stopped.

His mouth fell open in a silent scream, all the breath driven from his body by the deep, searing pain, and Evan sagged back against his attacker, clutching at his wound.

Oh, it burned. He blinked away tears.

"Evan! Duck!"

Evan obeyed instinctively, curling his chin against his chest. There was a flash of silver as a knife whistled past his ear, and then something hot and wet splashed against his cheek. A moment later, Ned let out a wet gurgle and collapsed in a heap on the floor, a jet of blood spurting from his throat in a veritable fountain that quickly slowed to a trickle and then ceased.

Evan blinked and ran a hand down the side of his face. It came away red. He blinked again and shock and pain had him sinking to his knees, unable to stand. Next to him

Ned lay unmoving, eyes wide and sightless.

At the rapid clatter of boots, he looked up. Thomas was hurrying toward him, expression grim. Evan had never been so glad to see anyone in his life.

Thomas dropped to his knees next to him and Evan fully expected a hug, but instead the first thing Thomas did was hold two fingers against the side of Ned's throat for a few seconds before nodding to himself. "He's dead." He pulled the stiletto out of the wound in one smooth motion and wiped it on Ned's shirt before slotting the blade back into his boot.

The display of ruthless competence made Evan want to shove Thomas up against the wall and kiss him senseless—except that would have involved standing and moving, and both of those things were quite beyond him.

Still, he stored the image away to reexamine later—when he didn't have a gaping chasm in his side that felt like someone had set his skin alight.

Thomas turned his attention to Evan, brow creased with worry. Gentle fingers grazed over the length of his wound, and Evan gasped as pain bloomed afresh and his world went fuzzy and dark around the edges. "You need the maester," Thomas said, his voice tight.

And then he scooped Evan up in his arms and began to run.

### Chapter Fourteen

Thomas liked to think he was quick on his feet, but right now it felt like he couldn't move fast enough, not with Evan lying limp and bleeding in his arms, having fainted sometime between Thomas lifting him and reaching the stairway. His breath rasping and his heart thundering in his chest, Thomas forced himself to keep running up the flight of stairs that led to the physician's rooms, panic and urgency driving him.

The gash in Evan's flesh was long and ugly, and Thomas had no way of knowing how deep it ran, but he was familiar enough with knife wounds to know that they were unpredictable. The tightness in his chest uncoiled a little when Evan moaned as Thomas reached the landing and stumbled the last few steps along the passageway that led to Maester Owens's door. He kicked at it with his boot, unwilling to let go of Evan.

Guilt churned in his gut. He should have made his move sooner. True, it was important to know who was behind the threat but not as important as Evan.

Nothing was as important as Evan.

Thomas just wondered why it had taken him this long to see it.

He kicked the door again, harder this time.

"What?" the maester snapped, flinging the door open. "Do you know what time—Your Grace!" His eyes widened when he saw Evan, naked and bleeding.

“Please,” Thomas panted out. “He’s been stabbed.”

The maester’s mouth thinned and he pulled the door closed behind himself before hurrying down a seemingly never-ending hallway that led to the infirmary with Thomas hot on his heels. He unlocked the doors and swept inside, indicating a bed in the centre of the room. “Put him there,” he said briskly.

Thomas lowered Evan gently onto the bed. As he did so, Evan’s eyes fluttered open, and Thomas found he could breathe again.

Evan shifted, then froze and let out an agonised moan.

“Stay still,” Maester Owens said, setting a bowl of water and a rag down on a small table next to the bed. “Let me look at you so I can see what I’m dealing with.” Maester Owens ran the cloth down the length of the gash in Evan’s side and Evan gave another low moan that had Thomas’s insides churning. The maester picked up another cloth and pressed it against the wound to stem the bleeding. He continued to hold it in place, the silence thick in the room, and Thomas thought he might burst at the seams with the need to know what was happening. After minutes that lasted hours, the maester lifted the cloth and gave a low hum. “It’s not as bad as it looks. It’s a surface wound, and it’s not deep enough to have affected your vital organs.”

All Thomas’s breath left him in a rush. “So he’ll recover?”

“There’s no reason he won’t be as good as new,” the maester said. “Of course, the duke will need to take some time to rest and not do anything...”

The maester’s mouth snapped shut before he actually used the term ‘foolish’ to describe a member of the royal family, but the word hung unspoken in the air.

“Strenuous?” Thomas offered, taking pity on the man.



“Yes! Strenuous! His Grace must not overextend himself,” Maester Owens said, grasping at the suggestion like a drowning man might grab a rope.

“I can assure you I won’t be leaving my bed.” Evan let out a weak laugh that turned into a whimper.

The maester fetched a small vial from his cabinet and offered it to Evan. “For the pain, Your Grace.”

Evan examined the vial before swallowing the contents in one go. He stuck out his tongue and shuddered, pulling a face. “Ack! That tastes awful.” He continued to open and close his mouth convulsively like he’d swallowed glue.

“You’ll thank me when I’m putting your stitches in,” the maester said.

“When you’re doing what ?”

Maester Owens hesitated for just a moment before saying, “It is quite a sizable wound even though it’s not deep. You need stitches.”

Evan scrunched up his nose. “Stitches?”

“Yes, sir. To hold the edges closed while it heals.”

Evan blinked. “You’re going to sew me up like... a blanket?”

“It’s for the best.”

Evan turned to Thomas, eyes wide. “Did you know they sewed people up, Captain?”

At first Thomas wondered what Evan was playing at, but then he caught up to the fact

that Evan was simply acting like the charming simpleton the maester assumed he was. Now that he knew Evan was anything but a fool, watching other people fall for the pretence made Thomas uncomfortable in ways he couldn't quite define. But Evan was looking at him expectantly, so he took a deep breath and played along.

"Yes. I've had it done myself in the past," Thomas said. "I don't suppose you've ever injured yourself badly enough to warrant it before."

"I can confidently say nobody has tried to stab me before," Evan said. "I try to avoid people who are wielding knives." He glanced down at the gash in his side and grimaced. "I suppose you'd best bring out the needle and thread."

Technically the maester would be using horsehair, but Thomas chose not to mention that. He reminded himself that Evan probably knew anyway. He seemed to know most things.

Maester Owens took a moment to ease Evan over onto his side so he was facing Thomas, then hurried over to his cabinets and came back with a needle and a long strand of thread. "Ready, Your Grace?"

Evan nodded, his jaw set.

Thomas went to take a step back, but Evan's hand shot out and grasped his wrist. "Stay?"

Thomas put his hand in Evan's and perched on the wooden stool that was next to the bed. "Of course."

Maester Owens glanced between them but didn't say anything, instead threading the needle expertly before bending over Evan and pushing the needle through the jagged edges of his skin.

“Ow,” Evan said, his grip tightening and all the colour draining from his face. “Ow, ow, ow.”

Thomas winced in sympathy. He’d had more than one mishap with knives when he was younger that had required stitching, and it never got any easier to bear. He reached out with his free hand and brushed Evan’s hair away from his face. Evan pressed his cheek against Thomas’s palm and gave him the ghost of a smile before tensing and letting out a sharp hiss as the maester continued to work.

The tendons in Evan’s throat stood out in stark relief against the skin as he swallowed down the pain, and Thomas wanted nothing more than to lean in and kiss him, both as a comfort and to reassure himself that Evan really was fine. He resisted the urge—just.

“I want you to know I’m being very brave right now,” Evan said through gritted teeth.

“Incredibly brave, Your Grace,” the maester said, not looking up from where he was putting in the second stitch.

Evan took slow, deep breaths and Thomas held his hand as the maester continued to put him back together. Thomas had no doubt there would be an impressive scar.

To his credit Maester Owens worked quickly, and it wasn’t long before he put the needle aside. Evan let out a shuddery breath that spoke of relief, and his death grip on Thomas’s hand loosened.

Thomas glanced over at the wound. Now that there was a series of neat stitches holding it closed and the bleeding had stopped, it was far less ominous, and the tightness in his chest eased.

The maester smeared a thick, sharp-smelling paste over the injury and bandaged it. Then he straightened up, his spine cracking as he leaned back with his hands on his hips. He stifled a yawn and pulled the bed linen up over Evan's naked body, and that more than anything reassured Thomas that Evan was out of danger.

"You need to rest. I'll check the dressings daily. Will you be staying in the infirmary while you recover?"

Evan rolled onto his back gingerly before shaking his head. "I think my own bed will be more comfortable."

"As you wish, although I'm keeping you here at least until nightfall." The maester looked between Thomas and Evan with undisguised curiosity. "May I enquire as to how you were injured, Your Grace?" he asked. "Should we be concerned about a threat in the castle, or was it... an accident?"

Thomas knew in his bones that if they didn't explain Evan's injury, it would be all around the castle before breakfast that he and Evan were combining sex and knife throwing or something equally outrageous. Still, this was the perfect opportunity to explain away the two dead bodies lying in Evan's chambers. The maester wasn't a gossip as such. He was, however, an efficient distributor of news. Thomas glanced over at Evan and raised one eyebrow expectantly.

Evan was clearly thinking along the same lines. "Actually, there was a threat." He threw one arm theatrically across his forehead and flinched. "Ow. Why does moving still hurt so much?"

"That would be the stitches," Thomas said drily.

"Oh, right. Anyway," Evan said, directing his attention to the maester, "it was very dramatic. A lovers' duel. Two men fought to the death over me."

The maester jolted in surprise. “Goodness!”

Thomas tamped down on the wave of possessiveness that surged through him at the mention of Evan having other lovers and waited to see what ridiculous lie would come out of his mouth next.

But it turned out that Evan kept the lie as close to the truth as possible. “The ambassador for Falsmark broke into my rooms in the small hours of this morning and asked me to partake in certain activities with him. I turned him down, of course, because the man looks like a frog that’s been hit with a shovel. He got very nasty about it.”

“The ambassador? Doesn’t he have a wife and five children?”

“Yes, he does,” Evan said, “which is why it was such a shock when he tried to seduce me. But then, just as he was brandishing a knife, another young man who I’d previously rejected broke into the castle, and he also came to my rooms to proposition me!”

The maester’s eyes went wide and he gave an audible gasp. “Two men came to your rooms on the same night with similar intentions?”

“Well, I’m enormously fuckable but also incredibly choosy,” Evan said blithely. “There are bound to be some hurt feelings along the way.”

Thomas suppressed a snort.

“And they battled... to the death?” The maester’s brow creased as if he couldn’t quite believe what he was hearing.

Evan gave him a bright smile that was slightly strained around the edges. “Well, they

both ended up dead. When young Ned turned up and saw Falsmark threatening me, he went quite insane with rage. He snapped the ambassador's neck like it was no effort at all. It was enormously flattering, truth be told. Of course, then Ned told me he'd been following my every move for weeks and plotting to break in, which was less flattering and more terrifying. And it turned out he was still holding a grudge over the time I rejected him. When I told him I didn't remember him, he was even more insulted, and that's when he held a knife to my throat. I tried to get away and I almost made it, but he gave a lucky jab and managed to slice open my side."

"And how did you escape?" the maester asked, breathless, and Thomas just knew he was storing away every little detail to tell anyone he met.

"Oh, the captain rescued me by throwing a blade across the room and stabbing Ned in the throat. Killed him instantly. It was very impressive."

Thomas couldn't help but admire Evan's ability to weave a plausible tale together using two parts truth and one part sheer bullshit. He also tucked away the knowledge that Evan had been impressed with his skill to examine later, when he had more time to soak in the praise.

The maester looked between them again. "And you were naked because..."

"Ah. Yes," Evan said. "That's because I'd just been quite magnificently bent over and bugged by the captain, and I hadn't quite recovered yet. I'm going to court him."

Thomas froze, unsure if he'd heard correctly.

Evan reached out and took one hand in his, eyes wide. "I'm sorry. I should have asked if you wanted more than a fling first and not assumed, but if you're half as attracted to me as I am to you, we'd be silly to stop what we're doing. Besides, I

might be dead if not for you, and it turns out there's nothing for clarity of thought like a knife to the throat—unless it's two knives to the throat. Anyway, it made me realise that the idea of my life without you in it is quite unbearable. And I don't know if I'm doing this right, because I've never felt like this about anyone before, but I am deeply, deeply enamoured of you. Be my lover, Thomas, and let me court you properly? Please?"

Thomas jolted upright. His heart fluttered in his chest like a flock of doves preparing to take flight as what Evan was saying sank in.

Evan, Duke of Ravenport, also known as the Rogue, had feelings for him. He didn't want a casual arrangement after all. He wanted a courtship.

He wanted Thomas.

This didn't have to end after all.

And Evan was right—it had taken the blade of a knife to drive home exactly how Thomas felt about the duke. When he'd had been running up the stairs carrying Evan's limp body and he'd thought he might lose him, he'd almost buckled under the realisation that he cared far more deeply for Evan than even he'd suspected, and that he might never get to tell him about it.

And now Evan was telling Thomas that those feelings were mutual and asking to court him—and Thomas didn't have to think twice.

The doves in his chest broke free with the rapid beating of his heart and soared skyward. "I care for you far too deeply for this to be a mere dalliance," he said, his mouth curving up into a smile.

Evan's head snapped up and he held Thomas's gaze, naked hope written across his

features. “Are you saying yes?”

“Of course I’m saying yes.”

Evan’s face lit up. He rolled onto his uninjured side and propped himself awkwardly up on one elbow, wincing as he did so. Thomas leaned forward and pressed a single soft kiss to his lips before drawing back.

Evan sighed as their lips parted, and his smile was even wider than before. “Did you hear that, Maester? Thomas has agreed to be courted.”

The maester’s smile was genuine. “Congratulations, Your Grace. The captain certainly sounds like a better choice than either of those other two men.”

“Oh, he definitely is,” Evan said. “He’s only held a knife to my throat once, and that was a misunderstanding.”

Maester Owens paused for a moment, opened his mouth, and closed it again. He wiped his hands clean and walked towards the door. “I’ll leave you to rest and check on your progress later. But please do remember, no strenuous activity.”

Thomas pulled his hand reluctantly from Evan’s grasp and stood. His heart might be soaring, but in Evan’s bedroom bodies were cooling, and he did still have a job to do. “I should leave you to rest as well. I need to take care of the bodies. I don’t want the servants to find them.”

“Oh, you mean the criminals?” Evan asked. “The traitors who threatened the second in line for the throne and met the fate they deserved?”

“Yes,” Thomas said. “Them.”



In truth, he'd forgotten for a moment that Evan was second in line for the throne behind the crown prince and he wondered why Evan was even mentioning it. But then it struck him that Evan's place in the line of succession would prove extremely helpful when it came to explaining why Thomas had killed Ned on the spot instead of restraining him. Of course, the real reason had nothing to do with Evan being royalty. Thomas had simply seen red at someone daring to put their hands on his duke.

Not that he'd known Evan was his duke at the time, but that hadn't seemed to matter. The knife had been flying through the air towards Ned's throat before he'd had time to think about it.

He had no regrets.

Evan reached out and caught his hand again, wide green eyes meeting his. "Stay with me? I'm sure Maester Owens can do... whatever it is they do with dead people. He must deal with them all the time." He glanced over at the maester, brow furrowed. "What do you do with all your dead people exactly?"

Thomas had to give Evan his due. If he hadn't known better, he would have assumed that Evan had never even seen a corpse, let alone produced plenty of his own.

The maester's mouth was a thin line. "Most of my patients do recover, Your Grace. But rest assured, I'm able to make the necessary arrangements."

Evan blinked at him. "For what?"

"For the bodies." There was a trace of fond exasperation in the maester's tone.

"Oh! Of course. You did say that, but I forgot."

"Quite understandable," the maester said more gently. "The pain draught can leave

you addled, and you've been injured. Rest, and leave the deceased to me."

"Thank you. And do make sure you get the blood out of the rug, will you? It was a gift from the king."

"Of course," the maester said, and he hurried away.

Once he was gone, Evan lowered himself carefully to the bed and rolled over onto his back again with a groan. "You know, this is the first time I've been stabbed. I do not recommend it."

Thomas reached out and brushed Evan's hair away from his forehead, wishing he could do more. "You should rest," he said quietly.

"You'll stay with me?"

"I'll always stay with you," Thomas said, fighting back a smile.

"Good," Evan said, his eyes already drifting closed.

Before long, his breathing had turned slow and even, and Thomas was content to stay by his bed and watch him sleep, taking comfort in the steady rise and fall of his chest as Thomas reflected on the fact that Evan really did want to court him.

And Thomas was happy to do whatever Evan wanted—especially since it just so happened that they wanted the very same thing.

### Chapter Fifteen

Evan jerked at the sharp tug in his side as the maester removed another stitch. “Ow! And you’re quite sure I’m healed and my insides won’t come tumbling out?” he asked for the third time.

The maester made a sound suspiciously like a sigh. “Quite sure, Your Grace. The wound is completely closed.”

“If you say so,” Evan said, allowing doubt to linger in his tone. “Are we done?”

The maester pinched the bridge of his nose. “No, sir.”

Evan almost felt bad for tormenting the maester, except he hadn’t quite forgiven the man for telling Thomas that there was to be no ‘messaging about’, as he termed it, until Evan’s stitches were out. Thomas had taken the physician’s orders to heart, fussing over him like a mother hen and steadfastly refusing his advances, no matter how Evan had tried to tempt him.

It had been the longest ten days of Evan’s life.

He jerked again as the maester tugged another stitch out. “Was that the last one?”

Another sigh. “No, Your Grace. Please try and stay still.”

Evan let out a dramatic sigh of his own but did as he was told. As much fun as it was teasing the maester, it would be even more fun teasing Thomas after this. Evan

planned to pin him down in their bed and turn him into a sweaty, begging mess as revenge for making him wait. He was looking forward to it enormously.

When the maester had removed the last stitch, he wiped Evan's side down with a cool liquid and stepped back, giving a nod of satisfaction. "Almost as good as new. The scar will fade in time."

Evan slung his legs off the side of the bed and sat up in one fluid motion. "I'm very grateful," he said, because he wasn't a complete bastard, and the maester had taken excellent care of him.

Maester Owens gave a surprised smile. "You're most welcome, Your Grace."

Once he'd dressed and been assured that yes, he could indeed resume any and all activities, Evan hurried back to his bedchambers. Thomas had promised to meet him there once he'd done his morning patrol.

Warmth filled Evan's chest, and a wide smile split his face when he opened the door to find Thomas already there, naked and propped up against the pillows. The sight of his captain—because he was Evan's now—was still enough to give him butterflies.

He wasted no time in kicking off his boots, peeling out of his shirt and trousers, and joining Thomas on the bed, straddling him and capturing his mouth in a passionate kiss.

It had been a very long ten days.

Thomas's hands were warm as they caressed Evan's bare skin and Evan soaked up the touch eagerly as they kissed. Thomas's fingertips skated over his scar and lingered there just for a moment when Evan shuddered, the new-grown skin still sensitive.

“It’s fine,” Evan murmured against his mouth. “I’m fine.”

To his credit, Thomas took him at his word—or perhaps he was just as pent up and desperate as Evan was. Either way, he grasped Evan by the hips and rolled him gently onto his back before working his way down his body in a series of slow, gentle kisses that had Evan shivering and his cock hard and leaking. Thomas licked and sucked his way across the tender skin of Evan’s belly. Then he lowered his head and took Evan’s erection in his mouth, dragging sounds out of him that Evan hadn’t known he could make.

Thomas glanced up at him from between his thighs, mouth stretched in a wicked grin around his cock, and he laid one muscled forearm over Evan’s stomach, holding him down as he swallowed his length. Heat raced through Evan’s veins and his entire world was reduced to Thomas’s mouth on his cock, hot and wet and perfect. His hips rocked as he tried to thrust up, but Thomas had him firmly pinned in place, and somehow being held down made the want thrumming through his veins sharper, more urgent.

Evan’s heart thundered in his chest and heat pooled in his belly, and when Thomas ran his tongue around the head of Evan’s cock, teasing at the slit, he threw his head back and let out a pitiful whine that he’d deny making later. He reached down and grasped Thomas’s hair and rutted up into his mouth as much as he was able, and when Thomas cradled his balls in one giant hand and gave a gentle squeeze, Evan’s world exploded.

He shuddered and gasped as he came, spilling into Thomas’s warm, willing mouth. Thomas worked him through it, swallowing around his pulsing length, and only pulled off after Evan’s cock gave one weak, final spurt and he collapsed against the mattress.

He wondered briefly what had happened to his plan of making Thomas beg, but he

decided that being at his captain's mercy was equally satisfying. He might even prefer it—some of the time.

The brush of lips against the skin of his belly had him opening his eyes and he smiled lazily down at Thomas, who seemed to be on a mission to kiss every inch of skin he could reach. "Come here," he rasped.

Thomas pressed one last kiss to his hip before he obeyed, his erection swaying as he crawled up the bed and settled on his elbows over Evan. He grinned down at him, his face flushed, and Evan draped one arm across his shoulders and rolled Thomas over easily onto his back. Thomas let out a breathless laugh that turned into a moan when Evan ran his palm over the head of his leaking cock, spreading the slick wetness before wrapping a hand around the shaft and stroking it.

Thomas's hips rocked and he fucked up into Evan's grip in short, desperate strokes. Leaning in, Evan pressed their mouths together in a wet, messy kiss, swallowing all the little gasps and bitten-off moans that Thomas was making, claiming them like a prize.

It took barely any time before Thomas's breathing became ragged, his movements sped up, and he tensed and came in hot, messy spurts that decorated his stomach and chest.

Evan gave one last stroke of Thomas's still-twitching cock, and Thomas sagged against the mattress and let out a contented sigh. With a last gentle kiss, Evan rolled to his own side of the bed. He hissed when the sudden movement tugged at his wound, the area still fresh and tender. Thomas was instantly alert, casting him worried glances.

"It's fine," Evan said quickly.

Thomas made a sound that suggested he wasn't convinced but he didn't argue, and after a moment he lay back down. Evan let out a quiet sigh of relief. The last ten days where he'd been confined to his bed had been a torture of inactivity, and he had no intention of repeating them just because Thomas insisted on fussing over the tiniest twinge of Evan's newly healed wound.

He sat up and stretched—carefully—and used the corner of the sheet to wipe away the sticky mess on his hand and Thomas's belly. Then he settled back down and laid his head on Thomas's chest, one hand tracing the lines of muscle absently and enjoying the feel of Thomas wrapping an arm around him as he floated in a daze of post-orgasmic contentment.

Just as he was drifting off, there was a polite tapping at the door. Evan decided to ignore it.

Thomas was seemingly in agreement. "Tell them to fuck off," he grumbled.

"Fuck off!" Evan said loudly. Thomas stared at him wide-eyed, and then the corners of his mouth curved up into a smile. Evan grinned back at him. There were advantages to having a reputation for improper behaviour.

The knock came again, louder this time.

It was Thomas who called out this time. "He said fuck off!"

Evan beamed at him proudly. He rather enjoyed being a bad influence on his sensible captain.

There was a moment's silence before a fist pounded on the door in a manner that refused to be ignored.

Evan sighed as the warm pool of contentment he'd been basking in dissolved. He threw the blankets aside and marched across the room, heedless of his nakedness. "This had better be important," he snapped as he yanked the door open. "I'm bloody well recovering from an attempt on my life!"

"I know," King Leopold drawled. "Why do you think we're back?"

Oh.

Out of the corner of his eye, Evan saw Thomas freeze in open-mouthed horror. Leopold leaned against the doorframe and glanced between the two of them. "Captain," he said pleasantly. "Good to see you."

Thomas made a wheezing noise and yanked the sheets up to his chin.

"Oh my god, Leo." Felix elbowed his way past the king, taking in the situation at a glance. "That's an impressive scar, Evan. Thomas, would you like us to leave and come back in a few minutes so that you have a chance to find your trousers and the remaining few shreds of your dignity?"

"Please," Thomas mouthed, voice barely a whisper and eyes still as wide as saucers.

Evan let out a huff. "What about my dignity?"

"Please," Felix said. "We all know you have none. I mean, you did answer the door stark-bollocks naked."

He had a point, not that Evan was going to admit it. Instead he said, "Why don't we meet in your office once Thomas and I have made ourselves decent?"

Leo nodded his agreement, and Evan wasted no time bundling them out the door.



Then he hurried back to the bed where Thomas was sitting with the sheets still pulled up and his face the colour of a ripe strawberry. Evan felt a pang of sympathy for him and leaned in and kissed him on the cheek. “I probably should have asked who that was before I opened the door.”

“That would have been a good idea, yes,” Thomas said in a strangled voice.

“Still,” Evan said brightly, “at least they didn’t turn up while you still had my cock in your mouth.”

Thomas stared at him and then burst out laughing, shaking his head. “Life is never going to be dull with you, is it?”

Hearing him say that so casually, as if it was a foregone conclusion that they’d be together—that Thomas might want that with him—had Evan’s vision turning blurry for a moment. He glanced down at the quilt and blinked rapidly to chase the unexpected emotion away. His voice was hoarse when he said, “I’ve been accused of a lot of things, but being dull isn’t one of them. Now, shall we get dressed and go and deal with the king?”

Thomas cupped Evan’s face in his hands and kissed him firmly before letting out a sigh, throwing back the blankets, and standing, looking for all the world like a man about to go into battle. “Lets.”

“I won’t lie, I’m actually a little offended that I wasn’t the target,” Leo said with a frown. “I mean I am the most important man in the kingdom.”

“Yes, of course you are,” Evan said, propping his feet up on Leo’s desk, “but have you never heard the term the power behind the throne? It turns out that certain shadowy figures felt threatened by another shadowy figure who played the game better than they did. It’s me,” he added. “I’m the best shadowy figure.”

Felix placed a hand on Leo's shoulder. "I still think you're the most powerful man in the kingdom."

"Thank you, sweetheart," Leo said before turning his attention back to Evan. "Get your feet off my desk."

Evan complied grudgingly.

"See?" Felix said. "So powerful."

"I only moved them because I felt like it," Evan said.

Thomas was sitting in the chair next to him across from the desk and Evan felt rather than heard his sigh of impatience. He didn't blame him. They'd been taking Leo and Felix through the chain of events that had led to Evan's identity being discovered for an hour now. Evan's side ached, he was hungry, and he very much wanted to go back to bed, taking Thomas with him, and leave the running of the kingdom to the king.

He sat up straight and said, "Anyway, I've done some digging. Ned really did get a copy of the guards' map by getting one of the kitchen boys far too tipsy and convincing him to draw the castle. That's why it was such a woeful drawing. There was no traitor among the guards. And I've confirmed that Calthrope and Falsmark have been in cahoots for years, so it's hardly surprising they conspired to get rid of me once they knew who I was."

Leo raised an eyebrow. "I thought you were confined to bed. How were you possibly able to do some digging?"

Evan gave him a knowing smile. He could have explained to Leo that he had a vast network of informants and that knowledge was easily bought if you knew the right people and paid the right price, but it was better if Leo didn't know the details.

Besides, watching him try and figure it out was much more fun—and Evan had decided that he deserved some fun in his life.

Which was why the next sentence out of his mouth was, “Honestly, I hope you don’t ask your next spy how he does his job, Leo.”

Leo blinked. “What do you mean , my next spy? You’re my spy.”

“Not anymore,” Evan said. “Thomas might have killed Ned, but there’s no guarantee he didn’t tell anyone else who the Rogue is. So I’m retiring.”

“What do you mean, you’re retiring?” Leo asked.

“Stop repeating what I say and try to keep up,” Evan said. “I’m sick of playing the fool, and I’m not prepared to keep doing the things I have been doing to get information out of people.”

Leo’s eyes narrowed as he looked between Evan and Thomas, and then a delighted smile spread over his face. “You’re in love! You don’t want to fuck the secrets out of people anymore because you’ve fallen in love with my captain!”

Evan froze. He opened his mouth to say that Leo was being ridiculous, that he’d know if he was in love—except, would he?

Was it possible that Leo was right?

It would certainly explain the way Evan felt like he’d explode with happiness every time he saw Thomas walking towards him, and his need to spend time with Thomas even when there was no sex involved, and the sudden, inexplicable desire to take care of him. And it would definitely explain the hard, ugly knot that formed in his gut and made his stomach turn whenever he tried to imagine seducing someone who wasn’t

Thomas.

The only person he wanted to seduce was Thomas.

Evan had always prided himself on seeing what other people didn't and knowing exactly what was happening, and yet somehow he'd fallen in love with his captain and managed not to notice. He couldn't even say exactly when it had happened, but he knew in his heart that it was true.

"You're right," he said wonderingly. "I'm in love. And he's my captain."

There was the scrape of wood on stone as Thomas pushed his chair back, scooped Evan up in his arms, and held him against his firmly muscled chest. Thomas's lips pressed against his in a hungry, bruising kiss and when Thomas pulled back, his eyes were bright, and his smile was breathtaking. "I am your captain. And I'm in love with you too," he said, his voice thick. He kissed Evan again.

"Really, Leo? You went about that with all the subtlety of a brick," Felix said, pinching the bridge of his nose. "What if Thomas didn't feel the same?"

"Thomas stabbed a man in the throat," Leo said smugly. "If that's not a declaration of love, I don't know what is."

"That is impressive," Felix admitted. "Why haven't you ever stabbed anyone to prove your devotion to me?"

"I changed the law so that I could marry you, sweetheart. I think that should count for something," Leo said dryly.

Evan ignored them and cupped Thomas's pink-tinged cheek. "I love you," he said in case it had been unclear. Also, he liked how the words sounded coming out of his

mouth.

Thomas set Evan on the ground and gazed down at him, expression serious. “It really doesn’t matter to you that I’m a penniless guard, does it?”

Evan wasn’t sure if he wanted to hold Thomas close and reassure him, or tell him to stop being so bloody ridiculous and that his status didn’t matter in the least.

In the end he just kissed Thomas on the cheek and said, “I really don’t care at all.”

A thought struck him. Maybe it wasn’t the guard part that Thomas had a problem with. Maybe it was the penniless part.

He hummed. “If being a penniless guard worries you, then obviously we have to do something about it. Leo, can you do me a favour?”

“It depends on what it is,” Leo said cautiously.

“Of course he will,” said Felix, earning a glare from his husband.

“I want you to knight Thomas for his service to the crown in saving the Duke of Ravenport from an assassination attempt.”

“Oh, in that case, of course,” Leo said.

“What?” Thomas stared at the king. “You—I— what?”

“Good! We’ll arrange the ceremony for next week. Where would you like your estate, Sir Thomas?” Evan said brightly. This was going swimmingly.

Except, Thomas seemed less than thrilled at the idea. “Estate?” he asked faintly as he

sat down heavily in the chair. “I—I can’t have an estate. I’m not qualified for an estate!”

“Of course you are. A knighthood comes with an estate, and a decent income besides. And this way, in case anybody cares—although I certainly don’t—a knight and a duke make a perfectly respectable pairing.” He paused. “You know, I don’t think I’ve ever been respectable before. Perhaps it’s time I tried it.”

Thomas’s throat convulsed as he swallowed and opened his mouth, but no words came out and he closed it again.

Evan hadn’t ever seen Thomas this shaken, even when he’d discovered Evan standing over a dead body that first time, and he felt a stab of unease.

Evan had never bothered to set up an estate of his own since he was always travelling, and he wasn’t inclined to make a claim now. And he doubted that Thomas had any desire to move into Evan’s rooms at the castle, any more than Evan wanted to move into the captain’s cottage. So to his mind, knighting Thomas and bestowing an estate where they could live in relative peace seemed like the perfect solution.

It just hadn’t occurred to Evan that Thomas wouldn’t want lands and a title.

But taking in his shocked expression, Evan was forced to admit that perhaps he should have broached the subject with a little more finesse.

He sighed and straddled Thomas’s lap and draped his arms around his neck. Thomas rested his head on Evan’s shoulder, his breaths shaky. “I really don’t care that you’re a guard,” Evan said quietly. “This isn’t about that. You’re an excellent captain, and I rather fancy you in uniform if I’m honest. But I would very much like to see you happy and settled, and I’d like to see me happy and settled with you. And I’m not moving into that bloody cottage. Just think, if you had an estate of your own, it would

mean we'd have some privacy. So why not let the king reward you for saving my life?"

"But what would I even do with an estate?" Thomas asked, his voice muffled against Evan's shoulder.

Evan smiled to himself. That wasn't a yes, but it wasn't a no either. "I might raise chickens," he said. "I've always wanted chickens."

"It doesn't have to be a big estate if that's what's worrying you," Felix offered. "I know just the place. It's a smaller holding with a lovely home that would be perfect for you two. It's has a nice set of stables, and it's not far from the castle either, so you'd be able to ride here every day."

Thomas lifted his head at that. "And it's riding distance?"

"Easily," Felix said. "You could take a look and see if it's to your liking. If it's not, we'll find somewhere else suitable for a knight and a duke."

"A smaller estate sounds perfect," Evan said encouragingly. "I could run it."

Evan could see the moment Thomas made his decision. The tension drained from him, and he shrugged and gave Evan one of his wide, gorgeous smiles. "Well, if there are going to be chickens, how can I say no?"

Six months later

“It’s lucky I have no plans for tomorrow,” Evan said from where he was currently collapsed on top of Thomas, “because I’m not sure I shall be able to walk.” He kissed his way along Thomas’s collarbone and gave a contented sigh.

Thomas hummed and ran a hand down Evan’s bare back. “Are you complaining?”

“Not at all. It was my idea, after all. And I do love it when I get to ride you.”

“That makes two of us,” Thomas said. “Now, what do you want to ask me?”

Evan lifted his head and blinked at him with wide, innocent eyes. “What makes you think I want to ask you something?”

“Because you dragged me into bed as soon as I set foot in the door and let me do whatever I wanted,” Thomas said, “so you’re either about to suggest something that you need my cooperation with, you’ve already done it and you think I’ll disapprove, or you’re going to ask me something awkward and this is your way of softening me up first.”

Evan sighed and gave up all pretence. “Well, you’re just so much more agreeable when you’re freshly fucked.”

Thomas laughed. “You know I don’t care what you do, love, but I’ll never say no if you want to take me to bed.”



And it was true. He didn't care what Evan did. And it wasn't like he expected Evan to share his secrets with him—once a spy, always a spy, after all. When Evan had started hanging around the training yards and watching his guards carefully, for example, he hadn't asked any questions. And he had continued to not ask any questions when Evan had started disappearing into the woods with Sam and Darcy and a handful of knives for half a day at a time, or when the king had told him with studied casualness to take both of them off the duty roster.

There were some things he didn't want, or need, to know.

As it was, Evan's transition to not technically being a spy had gone remarkably smoothly. One of the best things, as far as Thomas was concerned, had been watching Evan slowly shed his addlepated persona over the months. He'd gradually transformed into the clever, charming man he'd always been underneath until it was generally accepted by the staff and occupants of the castle that he'd been prone to the foolishness of youth, but had now left that behind him.

Or, as Mother Jones had said to Thomas at the pub one night after they'd both had several stiff drinks, "It looks like you've finally fucked some sense into him."

Evan propped himself up on his elbows, eased off Thomas's still-softening cock with a hiss, and rolled over onto his side. "As it happens, I do want to ask you something."

"Let me guess," Thomas said. "You want to try keeping chickens again."

"Oh lord, no. Who knew they were so messy and vicious or that they smelled so bad?"

"Everybody who's ever kept chickens," Thomas said, smiling at the memory of Evan's outraged expression when he'd discovered that chickens pecked hard, and even renowned spies weren't safe from an attack to the ankles. The birds had been sent to join the castle flock the following day, and Thomas had teased him about it for

weeks.

“Anyway, it’s not chickens,” Evan said, and something in his tone caught Thomas’s attention.

He pulled himself up into a sitting position. “What is it then?”

Evan sat up as well, fiddling with the edge of the bedding. “Well, I was just wondering. It’s been half a year. Is there a reason I’ve never met your family? Have you had a falling out?”

Oh. This.

Thomas had been hoping Evan might just sort of... not notice that Thomas never talked about his parents, but he should have known better. Evan noticed everything.

He ran a hand down his jaw. “No,” he said. “No falling out.”

“Oh good. So can I meet them?”

Thomas blew out a long breath. “Yes?”

Evan raised an eyebrow at that. “That was a no dressed up as a yes if ever I heard one. Sweetheart, do you not want me to meet your parents?”

Warmth bloomed in Thomas’s chest at the pet name, followed by a wave of guilt that Evan might think Thomas didn’t want to introduce him to his family. Of course he wanted them to meet. He just hadn’t found a way to tell Evan about his unconventional upbringing yet. “No! I mean, yes, you can meet them. I mean, they travel a lot, that’s all. It’s hard to know exactly where they are at any given time.”

Evan’s eyes grew bright with interest. “Thomas, who are your parents exactly, and

what do they do? Wait, are they spies ?”

Thomas shook his head. “Not spies, no.” He reminded himself that Evan loved him, and he wouldn’t care who his parents were or what they did, even if it was a little out of the ordinary. He took a deep breath. “They’re sort of… players.”

Evan’s face lit up with excitement, which was not the reaction Thomas had expected. “Really? I love travelling players! Do they sing and dance or are they part of an acting troupe? There’s one act with a couple that throws knives. Their aim is impeccable. They’re my favourites.”

Of course they were.

“Yes,” Thomas said. “That’s them.”

Thomas could see the moment Evan put the pieces together, and his jaw dropped. “Wait. Your parents are The Throwing Malones? Bullseye Bess and Four-Fingered Jack?”

“Well, my mother’s aim was slightly less impeccable when they were younger,” Thomas said drily. “She started out as Best Guess Bess.”

Evan let out a startled laugh. Then he tilted his head to one side and said, “Suddenly, your skill with a blade makes so much more sense.”

“I learned at my mother’s knee. Cut my teeth on a knife blade—literally,” Thomas said. “The stiletto in my boot was a gift from my father when I joined the guards. He said it might save my neck one day.”

“Well, in that case I definitely need to meet them and thank them,” Evan said, “because it certainly saved mine.”

Thomas regarded him steadily. “Why the sudden interest?”

Evan gave him another wide-eyed, innocent look that Thomas didn’t buy for a minute. He waited silently, one eyebrow raised, and Evan sighed. “Fine. If you must know, I believe in doing things the correct way.”

“No, you don’t. You do what you want, and protocol be buggered,” Thomas said.

“I’m particular about certain things,” Evan amended. He reached out and took Thomas’s hand. “If I intended to marry someone, for example, I’d want to invite his parents to the wedding personally.”

Thomas’s breath caught in his throat.

Marriage?

Thomas had thought about it—of course he had. He’d been on the verge of dropping on one knee and proposing more than once. But the part of him that was always aware that Evan was royalty couldn’t help wondering if it was his place to ask. Even though he was now Sir Thomas—something he was still getting used to—his courage had so far deserted him whenever it came time to ask.

But apparently Evan had had the same thoughts about marriage as Thomas and obviously he was the braver of them, because here he was, proposing.

He was proposing, wasn’t he?

Evan was watching him carefully, and he must have taken too long to respond to the unasked question. Evan’s smile faded. “You don’t have to say yes,” he said. “I know it’s probably too soon. Only I don’t see the point in waiting, and I really do love you.”

Thomas fought back a smile. “Perhaps you could try actually asking.”

Evan blinked at Thomas’s words, his brow creasing, and then he gave a soft laugh, shaking his head at his own foolishness. “Right. Of course.” He cleared his throat. “Tell me, Captain, would you consider marrying me?”

Thomas couldn’t hold back the smile this time. “If I remember rightly, my parents will be in Ravenport in three weeks’ time for the Blessing of the Fleet. You can meet them then. Don’t let my father talk you into a wager, don’t get into a drinking contest with my mother, and whatever you do, if she offers to give you a knife throwing demonstration, say no.”

“Is this you saying yes?” Evan asked, his eyes bright.

“This is me saying yes.”

A surge of exhilaration raced through Thomas as he leaned in and kissed his future husband. Evan was handsome and clever and capricious and nothing like Thomas had first expected. But it turned out he was everything that Thomas needed. And Thomas was going to make sure Evan knew it.

He planned to pin him to the bed, kiss every inch of bare flesh he could reach, and whisper words of love against his skin until they sank into Evan’s very bones. Because Thomas wasn’t sure what he’d done to deserve this level of happiness, but he did know one thing.

Evan Devere, Duke of Ravenport, was quite perfect after all.