

Inexorable

Chapter 1

Toes together. Shift them apart, put them back together, feel the gravel roll beneath your leather soles. Head bowed, William stands hunched, staring at his shoes. His straight auburn hair hangs forward like a veil.

“William!” A hand slaps the back of his head.

He mouths the word “ow” as his hand reflectively raises to cover the now tender part of his scalp.

“Stand up straight,” his father lectures.

There is no going back now. Not as if he could have before either. You have no choice in Wyverna. You are marked with an Insignia of your career and that is it, your life has been assigned to you. Unlike all the other professions in this kingdom, guards and those in the Winged Cavalry are stripped of one more freedom. Freedom to choose where you are working. These are the two careers you are assigned your locations after a trial at the end of your training.

He absent-mindedly rubs his guard insignia, lines swirling around the length of a sword. He never felt like a “guard” in the conventional sense.

To serve and protect. That is what a guard is for.

Inexorable

He's been through six years of training and it still has never grown on him. Don't get him wrong, they always said he "exceeds expectations". In his own words, he's pretty good at his job. His score on his evaluations was the best in his family, his parents have never been more proud, but it wasn't him that took the test. It was William Ingle. It was his father's son. The real William was daydreaming about what it would be like to be one of the noble ladies. Strolling the castle grounds in beautiful gowns and spending their afternoons lounging in the solars sipping sage water.

He is sixteen and a bag of his belongings lies in a heap beside his feet. His parents love him, he knows that, despite their lack of affection. That is the way of a guard household, there is no time to be coddled. The world won't coddle you when you are an adult so why should they when you are a child? He knows they love him by the gleam in his parent's eyes when they talk about his scores and how he was selected to be a castle guard.

From here on out he will be living in the barracks in the outer bailey and will walk the walls and corridors of the castle.

For the rest of his life.

There is only one way out of the barracks and it's to marry and begin a family. Your wages will increase and with your spouse's income, you will be able to afford a home. He takes that back, there are two ways. If somehow you are able to save enough money to move out on your own you can, there is no rule keeping you in the barracks. It's practically financially impossible though. They keep your wages low while you live in the barracks to compensate for the room and board.

At the rate of his very unsuccessful dating scene, he will be living there until he dies of old age.

His parents have set him up with daughters of family friends and he never disliked any of them. He thought they were all friendly enough girls and that he would not mind marrying any of them. They all thought differently of him though. After spending some time with him, stating they enjoy his company and consider him a friend but they still call off the relationship. Some will say they don't feel *that way* emotionally toward him. While others claim he wasn't manly enough despite being a guard.

He has two questions that were never answered. What do they mean by "feel that way"? What are you supposed to feel? They enjoyed spending time together, does that not make them compatible? Is that not what marriage is about? To find someone you don't mind being around so you can produce more guards for the kingdom?

His second question is what do they mean by "manlier"? Sure he isn't the tallest guy but he isn't short, and yes he is on the thinner side, but he is toned and lean from all the training. He finds it impossible to build muscle beyond that.

"Are you going to stare at the road all day or are you going to use it?" William's father crosses his arms.

"Good luck, William." his mother appears on his other side and pats his arm. "You made us very proud. Visit soon."

With that as their farewells, his parents disappear into their home that is smashed between the others in the dense city of Lumierna.

Inexorable

Alone on the crowded and narrow road, William takes up his pack and begins his march toward the always looming castle above them.

Chapter 2

Voices over voices over voices. Too many men are housed in a small amount of space, all trying to talk over one another as they spend their off time in the communal space of the barracks which is an open room filled with tables and benches, a kitchen in the corner for their meals to be prepared, and the larder taking up a corner.

So many people William thinks as he squeezes through the narrow tables. *It's like a tavern in here.* Accidentally grazing a man with poorly cropped hair's shoulder, William is granted a side eye and a raised lip. William's dark green eyes quickly find their way to everyone's shoes, *oh no, one of these people is my roommate.*

Head tilted down, his eyes barely lift to take another glance around the room at the men he will be working with from here on out.

Boots caked with mud sit propped up on the same table people are eating at.

Nope.

Inexorable

A man not much older than William with a full beard already grown in uses a knife to pick at the grime beneath his fingernails.

Please no.

A few of the other men are rough housing in the corner. They laugh as one gets the other in a headlock.

Help me.

William scrunches his nose as the man he squeezed by lets out a rumbling belch. Avoiding all eye contact, he is able to avoid any social engagement and successfully reaches the stairs unscathed. He climbs the stairs but stops halfway to observe the room from a higher view point. It's a worse sight from up here being able to see everyone at the same time.

He frowns, *this is going to be rough. Maybe I should try harder at the whole getting married thing.*

Adjusting the bag on his back he continues up the stairs and passes door after door that are too close together to be able to fit a shared room behind. Reading each number on the door he stops at one of the last doors labeled seventeen.

"Here it goes." Turning the key, William clumsily pushes into the room as he struggles to keep his bag on his shoulder.

The leather soles of his shoes nail themselves to the floorboards only a step past the threshold. William's torso sways forward with the sudden stop in momentum. The room before him has two beds on opposing walls with one person's width between. At each end of the hastily nailed together beds with canvas stretched taught across are personal trunks to hold their gear and meager possessions.

A boy with raven hair that sticks up as if he had recently pushed it back from his forehead lounges on his cot with his sleeping head and torso leaning back against the wall. Gravity reaches up and snags William's bag from his shoulder and drops it to the floor with a thud.

Dark eyelashes flutter open and amber brown eyes peer up at William. A crooked smile with one deep set dimple graces his face, "Guess you're my roommate." He sits up properly and extends out his hand, "Robert."

Ba-dump Was that his heart? How nervous is he to start this new life?

With a clammy hand, William takes Robert's proffered hand in his. *Ba-dump*. "W-William."

"It's nice to meet you, William." Robert drops his hand back to his lap. William's fingers curl in around the lingering warmth from the contact as he pulls it back to himself. "You're already better than my last roommate."

"What do you mean?" William crosses his arms unsure what to do with them.

"Should I take you on a tour downstairs?" Robert inclines his head.

"Oh." William catches up, "Um, you seem like the better option too." Heat rises to his face as he over thinks if that sounded dumb. Distracting himself from saying more awkward sentences, William nudges his bag over to his trunk with his foot. He doesn't know why he feels flustered around Robert. He's met plenty of new people in his life and he's never been this tripped up. He's having some pretty extreme first day nerves.

William coughs, "I'm just going to unpack."

"Alright." Robert throws his arms behind his head and leans back against the wall, "I've already been here a year, my last roommate wed and ditched out. I was grateful. He

Inexorable

never washed—well anything. Yet, some poor woman will now have to sleep next to that.

Kneeling beside his open trunk, William listens to Robert's rambling. He doesn't know why but hearing the constant chatter is quelling his rampaging nerves. Maybe it's because he can focus on something besides his own thoughts.

He peaks over the lid of the trunk to Robert who is still talking.

All he knows from this small interaction is that maybe it won't be so bad here after all.

Chapter 3

William's eyes open to the barracks day shift bells. It's his first day on post. The previous night Robert had found topics to tell him about until the sun went down. William found out that unlike his own father who was a patrol guard in the upper part of Lumierna, Robert's family has always been castle guards. He learned that during his father's time in the barracks there weren't separate rooms. The second floor was one open space with cots stretching across like the tables downstairs. The lack of privacy led to constant fights amongst the young men housed there. Their solution was the closet sized rooms with two roommates.

William's straight hair reaches for the ceiling as he sits up in bed with a stretch. Mid-yawn he clamps his mouth shut and turns away to the wall, "Sorry."

"Sorry?" Robert raises a single eyebrow. He stands at the foot of his bed in nothing but his braies. He observes his bare chest, "This? How else are we going to change, which you need to start doing if you want time to eat breakfast before heading out to your spot."

Inexorable

Swallowing, William forces himself to find Robert's light colored eyes and holds them. What is wrong with him? They are both men and men are allowed to be seen shirtless, but he is in his undergarments and that is not normal. Except they are now roommates, they are not granted the luxury of full privacy

"Yeah, get dressed. Right." William slides out of bed and opens his trunk. He freezes. He's going to have to dress down first.

"What's your assignment?"

"Huh!" William startles, "What?"

"Where are you assigned to work?"

He is still in his braies and is making casual talk with me. William focuses on pulling out his uniform, "Front Gate."

"I've done that. It's boring. Mostly standing around—but I guess that's our job at any post."

Please get dressed, William skips changing his tights and slips on his blue padded chausses.

"I got the inner bailey. Well for now. I'm trying to work my way into the corridors. You know? You'll get to walk inside the actual castle." Robert hops as he pulls up his tights.

Finally, William sighs as he slips into his gambeson.

"Were you not in a hurry to get food?"

"I grab and go. I don't ever sit with those guys." Robert ties the tops of his chausses.

With a grunt, William throws his chainmail over his head and shimmies to get it to fall into place. "I guess I'll see you later." William ties his scabbard and bags around his waist.

"Yeah, see you."

He can feel each drop. Williams struggles to ignore the sweat running down his back. They have no summer uniform. There is no lighter version than the soft armor he is already wearing. He can only thank the fact he doesn't have to wear full plate armor.

The heat in the gambeson is something he should be used to by now. It is not as if it gets terribly cold during the winter. He's never seen snow before. He's heard the mountains at the north side of the kingdom get some snow, but never down here.

He tugs at his collar, desperate for air flow.

"Aw, pretty boy can't handle man's work?" The guard, Jerrad who is several years older, stands leaning against the wall on the other side of the open entrance gate.

"We're standing around in the heat. Wouldn't really call that *man's* work," William replies.

"Oh?" Jerrad cocks his head. He wasn't expecting the new boy to reply. "I'm sure you know how to work a man."

"What?" William turns to him confused, "What does that even mean?"

"Ohhh. You know what I mean." Jerrad huffs. "I can't believe they let someone like you into the guards."

"Seriously. What are you talking about?" What is he implying? Is it because he is short? He really isn't that much shorter than the average male. He tested to be here, same as everyone else.

Jerrad keeps ranting as if he hadn't heard William, "God save your roommate unless he's that desperate. Then you're both going to hell."

"My roommate? Hell? What?" William is growing more lost each time Jerrad opens his mouth. William shakes his head, *he's crazy, the heat has gotten to his head and he's gone crazy.*

Inexorable

Keeping his eyes forward on the bridge connecting the city to the gate, Jerrad grumbles, "I'm requesting a new partner. I can't be seen speaking with someone like you."

William rolls his eyes and doesn't ask any further questions. He conducts his job properly and stares forward waiting for his relief to take over the post. *Is being large and muscular really something that important around here?*

Watching the daily life of the outer bailey, William is lost in his thoughts and not watching where he is walking as he follows behind Jerrad who is conversing with several other guards who were posted at the top of the gate. The sun is setting and their shift is over. Not included in the other guard's conversation, William's eyes crawl up the wall of the inner bailey to the men standing on top. He halts his gaze immediately locking on one of them sitting at the wall laughing. Robert.

"Oomph." William's face knocks into hard shoulder blades beneath heavy chainmail. He is allotted time to apologize before the more experienced guard, Jerrad, has spun around and his leather gloved hand is making contact with William's cheekbone.

William staggers back several steps but remains on his feet. He puts his fits up in a fighting stance and this time he sees it coming. Stepping to the side, William dodges the incoming attack and closes the space between them landing a perfectly placed jab to the bridge of Jerrad's nose.

Blood flows from his nose and into his mouth as he curses. He spits red across the dry ground between them.

“AHHH!” Jerrad throws himself at William. With his shoulder driving into William’s hip, Jerrad tackles him to the ground.

As his back hits the dirt, William wraps his legs around Jerrad’s shoulder, trapping his head behind William’s calf as he wrenches his arm up his body. William raises his hips putting pressure on Jerrad’s elbow. “I’ll break it!” he threatens.

“Alright. Alright. Give it up.” Their Sergeant grabs Jerrad by the collar of his gambeson and yanks him from William letting Jerrad tumble to the ground beside him. The Sergeant sighs, “Why is it always you? What, can’t find someone you can win against so you choose someone smaller,” He squats down to Jerrad’s eye level with a joking smile, “and still lose?” Laughing he stands up and waves them off, “Go on boys, go get something to drink and relax. The heat is getting to you.” Straightening himself out, he stands over William, “Nice fighting kid.”

“Uh, thanks,” William replies as his sergeant steps around him without another word and heads toward the front gates.

With Jerrad already storming away with a slew of curse words, William finds himself searching the top of the bailey wall.

Robert is no longer there.

Letting out his breath, William lays his head back on the dusty ground and watches the clouds passing overhead.

No longer in his guard attire, William lays in the small space between the beds with his face pressed to the

Inexorable

ground. The skin below his eye and around his cheekbone is growing darker with each tick of the setting sun.

"Hey," William says from the corner of his mouth at the sound of the opening door.

"Headache?"

"Yep." William can hear and feel Robert's chainmail fall to a pile as he shrugs it off, "That didn't help."

"Sorry." Robert grimaces. "That was a nice strike though," he says as he starts removing his gambeson.

Groaning, William peels his face from the floorboards and props himself up on his elbows, "You saw that?"

"Oh! Jeeze!" Robert startles at William's swelling face. William scowls. "You uh—" he coughs, "you look—fine." Clearing his throat Robert continues focusing on changing out of his uniform.

"Thanks." William's voice is thick with sarcasm as he sits up cross legged, "Do I look tough?"

"Winning that fight made you look like someone you don't want to mess with." Robert grins. "Word spreads fast around here and Jerrad won't be able to hide that broken nose."

"I broke it?"

"Definitely."

William nods proudly of himself.

Fully dressed down into his white night tunic and long braies to sleep in, Robert sits on his bed, "What was that about anyways?"

William shrugs, "I don't know, I bumped into him, that's it."

"That's it?" Robert raises an eyebrow then shrugs it off, "It is Jerrad. He gets mad if the wind blows in the wrong direction." His face turns serious, "but, there are

plenty of guys like him around.” His gaze shifts from William’s injury down to his own wringing hands, “Maybe it's best if we stick together?”

“Together?” His heart flips. He’s excited he is making a friend, that is the reason.

Robert’s smile is small and shy, hiding is dimple when he meets William’s eyes, “Together.”

Chapter4

William doesn't open his eyes right away to the sound of the morning bells. Is this going to be the rest of his life? Every morning, or night if they switch his shift, waking up to bells living an assigned schedule. Wake, eat, work, eat, sleep, wake, repeat.

His muscles ache from standing in place for hours in the hot sun while wearing half his weight in gear and he can only hope getting punched in the face is not a daily occurrence.

He can feel the pressure of a single finger nudging his shoulder. Confused he blinks away, squinting at the bright light streaming through their small window. His view comes into focus and he startles at the close proximity of Robert's face as he squats beside the bed.

"Morning."

William pulls back from the edge of the bed,
"Morning?"

"Your eye looks worse."

Covering it with his hand, William sits up with a frown, "Thanks. Don't you have a post to get to."

"I'm making sure my new direct partner gets up."

"What?" William drops his hand.

"We're partnered up."

"Me?"

"Yep."

"Why?"

"Because, you were in need of a new partner and I was looking to switch. Simple solution. We're partners now."

William takes a moment to ponder it over. Robert hadn't even asked him if he wanted to switch, but does that mean? "I'm not on gates?"

"Nope. Inner Bailey. I mostly walk the wall."

Better than the front gate "How?"

"I'm related to the right people." Robert stands up and puts his hands on his hips, "Now, get dressed. We've got work."

Staring more at the center of Robert's broad shoulders than at his surroundings, William trails behind him as he learns his new post. He follows him like a duckling follows their mother that morning and the rest of the week. Each morning he is woken by Robert who always wakes when the crows do while William struggles to keep his eyes open. Either Robert is naturally a morning bird or he has been conditioned over the previous year to get up early.

Shooting up in panic, William breathes heavily as he glances around the room but Robert is nowhere in the small, impossible to hide, space. From the light in the room William knows it's late into the morning.

He rips the blanket off in a fret, he had missed the morning bells. Robert always wakes him for them but this

Inexorable

time he didn't. He didn't wake him and he left without him. Some friend he is.

Leaping out of bed to get dressed and desperately hoping he won't be demoted from castle guard to city guard because of one tarty, the door to their room opens.

William pauses standing between the two beds slack jaw.

"You're up." Robert is wearing a rusty red long tunic over black tights. He tosses a berry filled sweet roll in William's direction.

Fumbling to catch it, William manages to not squish it, "What's this?"

"Breakfast."

"Don't we have work?"

"Nope, we're going into town. Get dressed—civilian clothes, not guard." Robert sits on his trunk to wait.

Setting the roll down on his bed, William opens his trunk and pulls out a cream colored tunic and green hoses, "Why?"

"Why are you so full of questions?"

"Because you're terrible at explaining things, which leads to questions."

"Point." Robert nods in agreement, "It's our once a week free day. We do get those you know. So, why not get off the castle grounds."

William tugs his tunic down into place, "Just us?"

"Well yeah, unless you want to invite someone."

Robert's face settles into a neutral expression.

Swallowing hard, William's voice cracks when he shakes his head and says, "No—just us is fine." Feeling embarrassed he grabs his sweet roll and shoves half of it into his mouth.

He's been with Robert twenty four hours of the day everyday for the past week. When will he finally get over the new person jitters. Robert is not a stranger anymore, he is his friend. Currently his only friend. He steals a glance at Robert sitting on his trunk. He had leaned against the wall with one foot still on the ground and the other propped up on the lid.

It's normal garb, William chastises himself. Robert is wearing mundane clothing but he can't help himself from staring at the definition of biceps beneath the fabric.

"Ready?" Robert breaks William's trance.

Jumping, William's face burns as he answers, "Y-yeah, let me slip my shoes on."

Robert leans to peak out the window, "I saw rain clouds in the distance when I was getting breakfast. I hope it doesn't rain."

"I like summer rain showers, they're refreshing."

"Until you're stuck outside during a downpour."

"That's the best part."

"You're crazy."

"Am I?"

"Yes. Let's go."

Chapter 5

Despite working in the castle, being a bachelor guard doesn't provide an income that allows them to splurge on the fineries of the upper class shops. Most of their wages are taken out to pay for their room and board but they can still enjoy the middle class if they spend their coin wisely.

William walks half a step behind Robert as they stroll the market streets, "Is there something you want specific from here?" He picks up his speed to catch up to Robert's longer stride.

"Yeah, to see anything that isn't the barracks or the inner bailey," Robert points at a turn in the road. "This way"

"So, there *is* a destination." William leans forward into Robert's sight.

"Not really." He downplays as their side street spits them out into a town square.

"I'm confused."

People of all ages stand crowded around a stage with two hand puppets interacting. At a joke William couldn't hear, the crowd erupts into laughter. Several vendors sell trinkets and food while, what appears to be bards, sit at a

table with their instruments waiting for their turn to tell a story.

William hasn't been to a town square for a showing since he was a child. His mom used to take him and his younger brother as a reward for working hard in training at home. When he turned ten and began official guard training there were no more rewards. His reward was graduating and placing well.

"I almost forgot about this." William's eyes are wide as they take it all in.

Robert blinks taken aback, "What? How? I've been coming here every week since I could walk."

"Time gets away from you, I guess." William puts his hands up.

"You're not going to tell me because it's childish and real men go to the tavern?"

William cocks his head, "I don't think it's childish to want to have a good laugh after a week of work. It's probably healthier for your soul."

"Well." Robert throws his arm around William's shoulders who sucks in a breath, "As my newest and currently only companion, I'm going to be dragging you here all the time."

"I wouldn't mind that." William bites his lower lip holding back a grin.

Forgetting about the summer heat, William finds himself leaning into Robert. With the animated audience and people pushing to get by he finds serenity in their close contact knowing they won't get separated.

"I hoped you would say that," Robert says as he guides them through the crowd.

"Why is that?"

Inexorable

Robert removes his arm as they join the audience watching the puppet show, "I'll tell you after. Let's enjoy the act."

His shoulders feeling suddenly empty, William nods and turns his focus to jokes being told on a stage that can hide a single person behind it.

The two hand puppets bow and the audience claps, all of them grinning from the high of the communal laughter. Many of the families with children begin to disperse allowing those who want to listen to bards in the next show to move forward.

William nudges Robert with his elbow, "So? Why did you hope I would enjoy coming here?"

He rubs the back of his neck, "It's nothing really. It's just because I always come here alone. I want a friend to enjoy the ballads with but everyone laughs at me saying it's for kids and girls. Real men go to the tavern."

"Huh." William places his hands on his hips, "What I heard is that you are the smart one."

"Why is that?"

"Men go to the tavern, but like they said, the women are here." William motions to the crowd where it is five to one. "Who's dumb now?"

"I like your way of thinking." Robert's eyes lock on something past William. He grins madly, "Speaking of women. I know that one."

"Know?" William's frame turns, following Robert as he slides past him and taps the shoulder of a girl with hair the same shade as mud that is mostly tucked into a white coif.

William watches as the girl's face changes from confusion to glee as she sees the face of the person who is trying to grab her attention.

“Robert!” She squeals and throws her arms around his neck.

Robert laughs, pulling her in tight, “What a surprise to see you again.”

The corners of William’s lips dip into a frown until Robert steps back from the girl and motions to William who throws a smile back onto his face and waves awkwardly. William can see Robert talking and can guess he must be telling her who he is. Robert motions for William to come over. Reluctant, not wanting to meet a new person, William obeys and steps the short distance through the crowd taking his place beside Robert.

“Leanna, this is my friend William. William, this is Leanna, we grew up together. Her father is a guard with mine, but she got her mother’s trade, armorsmith.” Robert puts his arm around her shoulders and gives her a little shake. “I’ve never seen anyone link chainmail faster than her.”

William stares at his arm around her and recalls the sensation so recent it is still lingering on him. He dips his chin and speaks through his tawny bangs, “Hello.”

Her smile is bright, “It’s a pleasure to meet one of Robert’s friends. I haven’t seen him since he left for the castle. I’m happy to see he’s not moping around alone.”

“Uh, yeah.”

She turns to Robert dismissing William’s shyness, “Did you know that our parents are still talking about us?”

“No, seriously? They haven’t dropped the idea?”

“Yeah, I can’t believe it either.” She tucks one of her loose strands behind her ear.

William blinks lost, “May I ask what you’re talking about?”

Inexorable

Robert shifts suddenly uncomfortably, "They want us to get married."

"Married? You're engaged?" William's head pops up.

"Well not yet," Leanna pokes Robert's side, "Our parents said we have until we are eighteen to find our own suitors or they're arranging us. Crazy right?"

Robert's voice is flat, "Yeah. Crazy." He side glances at William's stoic face then changes the topic, "Did you come alone?"

"Uh uh." She shakes her head, "I'm watching my brother and sister, they wanted to come here." She pauses and looks around, "Which is who I need to now find."

"Do you need help?" Robert offers.

"Nah, they are most likely standing in the front still. It was good to see you again." She runs her hand down his sleeve, "Stop by for supper some time, the family hasn't seen you in over a year." She opens her arms in a gesture asking for another hug.

Robert wraps his arms around her, "It was good to see you again, I'll try and make it home more often."

Pulling back from Robert, Leanna turns to William, "It was nice to meet you. Please take good care of Robert for me, I might be needing him in a year."

William doesn't return his smile as he replies, "Sure."

Waiting until the girl is out ear shot and disappeared into the crowd, William purses his lips, "In a year your parents are going to arrange your marriage?"

"Minor details." Robert waves his hand dismissing the severity of it, "It's an empty threat. They don't like their image when they tell people their children are single, as if saying that implies their children are defective or something." Robert nods his head in the direction he wants them to start walking in, "What about you? I

haven't asked, do you have a girl waiting for you so you can move out of the barracks?"

"It's been a week and you're already trying to get rid of me?"

"Precisely, I want my own room again." Robert says with a cheeky grin.

"Except you know they'll end up moving someone in who leaves their sweat drenched tights to dry on your bed." A sly toothless smile slides across William's face. "Wha—" His jaw drops in surprise as Robert pulls him around. Two strong hands grip his shoulders forcing him to face Robert's impeccably light brown eyes that are lowered to his height.

"You wouldn't do that to me right? You're the best roommate I've had. Way better than any of my brothers because you don't put me in a headlock or leave your dirty braies around."

Warm, his hands are so warm, William's mind drifts for a moment as his senses spiral out of control. Eyes are peering into his, with lips so close. *Why did I look at his lips?* The only thing separating his hands from his skin is a thin layer of linen. As if Robert's hands were burning a hole through his tunic, William shrugs him off.

Shaking away his deviating thoughts, William puts himself back on track, "Only if—" His voice is unsteady, he coughs covering it up and starts again. "Only if you promise not to do that to me too."

Robert holds his hand out with a wide smile, "Roommates till the end?"

Light eyelashes blink as William observes the handheld out to him. He wants to take it, he doesn't want to touch him. He wants to hold it, he's scared to touch him. His

Inexorable

mind telling him conflicting actions, making his heart pick up speed

What's wrong with you, shake his hand. William scolds himself. He puts his hand into Robert's and feels an instant ease flood over him, "Partners."

A drop of water lands on their clasped hands. Hands still together they tilt their heads back in unison and peer up at the sky. With only a few drops as a warning, the clouds open their lids and turn over their buckets dowsing the land in a sudden downpour.

In an instant their hair and shoulders are soaked, the water now working its way down their clothing.

With hair that normally defies gravity and is pushed back from his face, now falling flat to Robert's forehead. He pulls on William's hand to drag him to the closest shop awning that is already crowded with other market goers also escaping the rain.

William lets his hand slip away from Robert's as he holds his face up to the clouds taking in the rain.

"You're crazy!" Robert calls out to him from his over capacitated shelter.

"Am I?" William turns his gaze to Robert, his wet hair matted to his forehead and over his eyes.

"Yes," Robert confirms, "You're the one that's getting drenched."

William sloshes through the overly saturated dirt and quickly expanding puddles to stop a step outside of the cover. The rain continues to beat down on the world around him

"Am I crazy because I like something different than everyone else?"

Robert pauses and stares at the boy behind the wall of water cutting down between them. His lips press into a

firm line before he reaches out and grabs William by the sleeve. "You're going to get sick." He tugs on William's arm pulling him under the awning, "We need to get you a warm meal."

As William squeezes into the huddled crowd beside Robert, Robert drops his hand. For a brief moment, the backs of their knuckles brush. With a sharp inhale and an internal shock William retracts his hand and hides it by crossing his arms.

Robert's eyes fall to his hanging hand then up to the face of the boy beside him. Wet russet hair stuck to his face and his green eyes so dark you can mistake them for brown are locked intently on the rain.

He curls his own fingers into his side, "Looks like it's starting to let up. Food?"

William replies with a single nod and lets his hands fall back loosely to his sides.

Chapter 6

Teeth chattering, William shivers in his damp clothes. He spoons another bowl of a yellow colored pottage into his mouth.

"I told you, it'll make you sick." Robert points at William with his spoon.

With a mouthful of food William replies, "Worth it." Any joking expression William was wearing on his face disappears.

Robert's eyebrows knit together as he watches William's eyes focus on something behind him. He hunches his shoulders as an arm is thrown loosely around them. Jerrad leans down speaking next to Robert's face, his breath wreaking of ale plagues Robert's nostrils. His nose and eyes are a mixture of yellow and purple from when William had struck him a week ago.

"I get why you are here, Robert, but didn't anyone tell that one that taverns are for men?" he slurs.

"Then you admit you've lost a fight to a woman? Women are guards you know."

"You think you are so smart, don't you?"

Robert cocks a one sided grin, "They say I should have been a scribe."

Snarling, Jerrad aggressively shoves Robert forward as he releases him. Robert's palms slap the table as he catches himself from hitting his chin. People in the vicinity around them all turn.

William is up in a blink slamming his hands onto the table, "You want to lose again?" His eyes shift counting Jerrad's three friends appearing beside him.

"William." Robert shakes his head, "It's fine. You don't have to do this—" He pauses to put on a cock eyed grin, "alone." Robert drives his elbow back and hears the confirmative "oof" as the point of his arm forces its way into Jerrad's stomach.

Furious hands ensnare Robert's hair, yanking him backward off the bench before Jerrad has even finished doubling over. Jerrad's friend throws Robert to the ground as William leaps up onto the table. The surrounding bystanders scramble to back away creating an open circle where they can watch safely from the side lines. A grappling hand swipes at William's ankle but misses as he lifts it in time, but William is unable to evade the second incoming attack as his supporting leg is snatched out from under him.

William lets out a grunt as his back hits the table then uses his free foot to kick out hitting Jerrad in his still bruised face. In his peripheral vision, William sees Robert regain himself after subduing his attacker with a choke hold rendering him unconscious and barrels into the next opponent.

With Jerrad blinking away the tears welling up in his eyes from the kick his third friend lunges around him to overtake William, but he is too late. William, light on his

Inexorable

feet, is up again and launches himself off the table. He flies over the man's shoulder and as he comes down the otherside his arms wrap around the man's waist. Twisting his body as he falls, William uses the momentum to yank the man off his feet and topple to the ground, his feet flailing in the air as they sail over his own head. The man now disoriented, William rolls him over and pins him to the ground.

"GET OUT OF MY TAVERN!" The owner howls as he presses through the wall of men watching. "OR I'M CALLING THE GUARDS!"

Still sitting on the man's back, William's tunnel vision opens and he finally sees his audience. *Oops.*

Breathing heavy and his knee pressed into the shoulder blade of his second opponent, Robert speaks over Jerrad's grumbling complaints about his nose being broken...again. "We are the guards." He pulls up his sleeve revealing his insignia.

The owner pales at the sight of it and stammers, "Well-uh-just-uh-take your business outside-if you don't mind."

Robert stands, brushing off his clothes, "We were leaving anyway."

Holding his nose, Jerrad steps in front of Robert. "I'm not done."

Robert pats Jerrad's shoulder with a silent chuckle, "Give up buddy. It's two for two for William and I've lost count for myself. Maybe you should be the one moving into the female barracks, but I've seen them fight. You'll still lose. See you around, Jerrad."

Slipping around Jerrad's large frame, Robert motions to William to follow him out. William gladly hops to his feet to join Robert.

Outside the tavern in the still cloudy and humid day, William begins to laugh.

"What is so funny?" Robert asks as they walk the road.

William wipes the tears from his eyes, "It's well, I used to make fun of the men who solve everything with fists but here I am."

"No, this time you solved it with the sole of your slipper and a very impressive take down. Bavo, nicely done." Robert small claps joining in on the laughter. William playfully shoves Robert. "I definitely would rather have you as my partner than my opponent. That I know for sure." Robert smiles and pushes back.

William bats at his hand, "And I definitely prefer the town square shows than the tavern."

"We have an agreement there." Robert smiles down at William whose fine tawny hair is shifting in the breeze as they walk, "Good thing were stuck together." Those dark green eyes find his own bright ones and Robert doesn't need to see the corners of William's lips turn up because his eyes have already given his happiness away.

Chapter 7

The sun and moon sped across the sky and seasons come and go as the next year flew by. Time was obsolete when your day was the same routine. There was one constant they didn't mind and everyone grew accustomed to it. There was no Robert without a William by his side and no one had met William that wasn't attached to Robert.

In the shade of a tower wall, Robert and William sit leaning against the stone as they hide from the sun. Their shoulders are only one deep breath away from touching as Robert takes a sip from his costrel and hands it to William.

The sky pink with the rising sun, William walks a step behind Robert across the castle grounds to their post. William matches his pace and kicks his foot under Robert's lifting it up. Robert stumbles forward caught off guard. He spins around and snatches William in a playful headlock. They both laugh as Robert messes with William's hair.

The communal room is filled with dayshift guards eating dinner. Sitting beside Robert, William plucks a roasted carrot from Robert's plate as if it was his own during their conversation with the men across from them. Without reacting to the stolen carrot, Robert pulls a chunk of William's dinner roll and dips it into the sauce on his pewter plate before eating it.

A fellow guard who has had too much ale on his day off gets in Robert's face as he and William walk the perimeter of the barracks enjoying the chilled night air. The man they know who lives across the hall from them jabs his finger into Robert's chest accusing him of slamming their door at late hours of the night. Robert uses one hand to shove the man back exclaiming it's not from their room. Aggravated at the possibility he is wrong the man focuses on the physical dismissal of Robert shoving him and rears his hand back to strike.

William's shoulder slams into the man's pelvis as he tackles him to the ground.

Laughter fills the air and arms string around the other's shoulders as they drunkenly support their staggering friend. Stopping at their door, Robert's hand grips the frame as he holds William up who almost falls over to the side at the, in his inebriated mind, sudden stop.

"I got this, liiii got thiiiss." William's words slur as he fumbles with the key. Still held steady by Robert, he sticks his tongue out to the side as he focuses on unlocking the door.

Chuckling at William's obvious failure and his facial expressions, Robert hugs William in closer and drops his

Inexorable

hand to cover William's with the key. William's body making decisions on its own while his mind is fogged leans back into Robert, his soft straight hair pressing into Robert's defined jaw. Swaying on their feet Robert presses his cheek into the top of William's head and helps guide the key into the hole and unlock the door. They stumble forward into the room and William breaks away, his attention fully on the welcomeness of his canvas cot.

William trips over his own foot and falls face down onto his bed with his legs hanging halfway off. Wavering in place on his unsteady feet, Robert's gaze lingers on William with an unreadable expression. He sighs and shuffles to William's bed. He can steady himself long enough to pull off William's slippers and place his feet properly on his bed.

"Good night," he tells him as he tucks William in.

With the beds close, Robert only needs to take a step back before his calves hit his bed and he lays down. Facing sleeping William, Robert pulls his blanket up to his shoulders smiling. He blinks slowly as his face falls and he rolls over turning away.

Chapter 8

William has come to terms that he would rather follow Robert off a cliff than watch him go alone. They are partners after all. He has had friends and he has had girlfriends, but never in his life has there been a person he cares this deeply for.

Someone he would give his life for without hesitation, not because he is instructed to but because his heart tells him to. He lay awake one night trying to understand why his mind is telling him that he would step in front of a blade to save Robert. In the end he came up with the reason is because Robert is the best part of this relentless world and he will do anything to make sure no one cuts him out of it.

Chapter 9

A parchment with the Winged Cavalry's emblem is held out in front of Robert's face. "Here," their Sergeant says. "Before your shift is over I need you two to verbally deliver this message to—" His mind draws a blank, he opens the parchment and rescans the message, "to whomever the occupant is—oh—this Giles Bakere." He closes the parchment and extends it back out to Robert who takes it.

"Sir, we appreciate the honor to run this message, but may I ask why you chose us?"

Their Sergeant shrugs, "Because you two are the first I saw after receiving it. Now get going. I've got a gate to oversee." Turning on his heel he leaves.

"What does it say?" William's eyes are wide as he presses into Robert trying to read the neatly printed script as Robert unrolls it.

Robert's eyes scan the message, "Rough."

"What? Let me see." William plucks the parchment from Robert's hands and reads it over. William raises an eyebrow, "Is that the boy they were searching for yesterday?"

"Yeah," Robert takes the paper back and rolls it up.
"This isn't going to be fun."

William says somberly, "He was a year younger than me. What was he thinking?"

With a heavy sigh Robert nudges William, "Let's get this over with."

Market shoppers eye the young guards in uniform as they stand idly in front of the baker's shop. Some of them had witnessed the curly-haired boy leave yesterday and had heard from their neighbors about the overnight search. Now seeing the two guards standing uneasy, they can confirm nothing good had resulted from yesterday's unusual events.

Not paying any mind to the nosy citizens, Robert and William turn to each other and hit their fists to their palms as they say "Fire. Plant. Water."

"Water beats fire." Robert covers his hand over William's snuffing out his flames.

Cursing, William throws down his hand and steps up to the bakery door and gives it a knock that is missing authoritativeness.

Please don't answer, please don't answer, please don't answer, please don't answer. CRAP!

"Hello?" The door to the bakery opens and a man in his mid thirties stands staring at him

William fumbles over his words, "Yes, hi, is this the household of Giles Bakere?"

The scruffy man raises an eyebrow, "This is. How may I help you today?"

Coughing into his hand, William clears his throat desperately wishing he didn't have to say the news he was

Inexorable

about to hit this poor man with, "I have been sent to inform you, that your son, Stirling Bakere, has died."

The words are the heavy blow William predicted they would be. The baker's arm shoots out catching himself on the door frame as he turns ashen. William already hates himself but he has to continue on, "The Winged Cavalry found his body at the bottom of a cliff in the mountains. It appears he had fallen by accident. The report states he had perished before the Winged Cavalry was able to render aid. The Winged Cavalry and the city of Lumierna send their condolences."

William shifts on his feet waiting for the man, Giles Bakere, to speak. He hopes he doesn't. William doesn't want to answer any more questions on the topic. It's not like he knows any more information than he had already giving. Any of his answers would only be professionally worded deflections, or fancy ways to say, *I don't know*.

William hops down a step as Giles Bakere falls to his knees. *Oh no, uh, uh. What do I do?*

The owner of the bakery and the father of the son who will never return home buries his face into his hands and begins to scream.

"Come on, William" Robert reaches up and curls his fingers around William's wrist. "We passed the message. It's time to go." He tugs his stunned friend down the last of the steps and guides him down the market street while the baker's mournful howls ring through their ears.

Away from the bakery and away from the sounds of the now broken man, William wraps his arms around himself. They are nearing the castle gates but the sounds of the man crying is still echoing inside his head. That agony was because of him, indirectly, but still him. Words

that came from his mouth brought the most anguish he has ever witness in another human being. He caused an innocent person to break apart and he did nothing to help him. He did nothing but leave him to weep on his bakery steps, why, because he was ordered to.

He is despicable, deplorable, you can't do that to someone and still call yourself human.

"I don't want dinner."

Robert's fingers twitch with the need to reach out to him, to comfort his friend, but not here. Not out here where everyone can see.

The sun is already setting by the time they reach the barracks. William didn't speak the rest of their walk home and Robert didn't press him. They push through the door and William slips his way across the crowded room without lifting his head.

"What's up with him?" A guard stops Robert as he passes.

"Nothing," Robert deflects and follows the now disappeared William up the stairs.

The door to their room is left ajar and using his fingertips Robert pushes it open letting it swing into the room. Robert stands in the doorway cracking. He is curing ceramic and the pressure of the room is destroying him.

William stands in the center of the room between their beds with one arm around his middle and the other raised to his face that is already blotchy and glistening with tears. His wet eyes land on Robert for a moment before jumping away as he turns his head to hide.

"Will." Robert closes the door and is across the room in a single stride and before he can over think what he is going to do. Reaching for his best friend he pulls

Inexorable

William into him and cradles his head to rest on his shoulder. William shudders as a new wave of tears wreck him.

“It’s okay, let it out.” Robert whispers soothingly as he rocks them both. William’s hands wrap around him and dig into his chainmail as if to keep Robert from leaving him. “Do you want to talk about it?”

William nods against his shoulder.

“Do you want to get out of our armor first?”

William nods again and steps back while wiping the tears from his eyes with the back of his hands. They shrug of their heavy chainmail and gambesons dressing down to their undershirts and tights.

Robert touches William’s shoulder, “Let’s sit.”

Sniffing William sits beside Robert with a gap between them and without his touch the fresh memory of the breaking father begins to retake over William’s mind. Holding back his tears he tenderly scoots over closer until their shoulders bump. Robert supportively throws his arm around William who shifts one more time closing the gap so the entirety of their sides press together, from their shoulders to their thighs.

Even over his fevered emotions, William becomes keenly aware of the warmth transferring through the thin fabric of his tights where their legs are touching. Neither of them know about the blush forming on William’s cheeks beneath the already rose colored emotional stains.

“It’s okay if you cry.” Robert starts, his fingers curl around the fabric on William’s arm as he holds him tighter to his side. “It’s the day that you stop that you should worry.”

William stares at his hands curled in his lap, “Have you, you know, cried here?” He can’t bring his eyes up to

meet Robert's and Robert can't bring his down from staring at the line where the ceiling meets the wall.

He waits a few breaths before answering with pain in his voice, "Yeah." He swallows and his mouth gapes open as he searches for the words to describe a memory he never wanted to bring up, but for William, he would suffer far worst to help him. "About five months into my first year I was sent to assist in the arrest of—of someone—a grocer practicing tailoring."

William turns to Robert with a silent "Oh."

Robert blinks back the liquid forming in his eyes, "There was a daughter—maybe six years old—kept asking me where her papa was going and when he will be back." He bites his lip as if that would stop him from saying the words that still haunt his memories, "I told her he's not." His grip tightens on William's arm and he drops his head, "I could have lied to her, but it didn't feel right to only delay her pain so I wouldn't have to see it. With those two words, I destroyed that little girl."

A shift on the bed and suddenly arms are around him. Robert's breath catches as he is engulfed by William. William's thin yet strong arms are holding him together. He was supposed to be comforting William, how have they switched roles.

With a sigh of relief, Robert wraps his arms around the one person he's learned will never turn his back on him. Someone he can tell his darkest secrets to and never think lesser of him.

But maybe not all of his secrets.

They tip over on his bed, each now exhausted with salt burned eyes.

"Can we stay like this?" William asks with uncertainty, his voice thick with the tears he's shed for

Inexorable

the baker, for the little girl, for Robert, and for himself.

“Just for a moment.”

“Of course.” Robert’s smile wavers, fighting against his emotions, “What are friends for.”

The candle wick has burned to nothing, leaving their barrack room to be lit by the pale light of the half moon.

Robert wakes to find William asleep in his arms. A smile as soft as the moonlight around them shows on Robert’s face as he brushes back the long bangs hanging over William’s face. He lets them go and watches as the fine strands, silken to the touch, fall back into place.

Chapter 10

At morning bells, William awakes confused to a backward room. He is lying on his left side but instead of waking to the view of the room he is face to face with the wall. He rolls over and they're in his own bed, Robert lies still asleep on his back.

He watches the rise and fall of Robert's chest matching the soft sounds of his breathing. Had he fallen asleep in Robert's bed? He remembers lying down, his eyes burning with exhaustion then nothing.

Wait. William's face grows hot. He remembers not lying down alone.

What are friends for is what he had said. Friends, friends comforting each other in a time of emotional distress. *That's all it was. Yep, that was it. Friends can hug. Friends.*

Then why, why oh why, does part of him want to crawl into his bed and curl up against—*no*—his friend, his best friend. He flushes at the memory of Robert's arms around him as they laid together—*no*—he's a guy. The warmth of him—*stop*—he's your friend and he is a man.

"Morning," Robert says calmly as if last night

Inexorable

never happened.

William jumps, his thoughts are as unchoreographed as his sputtering heart at the sight of Robert sitting up with bed head. He stutters out, “M-morning.”

Throwing his legs over the side of the bed Robert leans forward resting his arms on his knees and asks, “Are you feeling better?”

“Mhm”

“Hopefully today will be easier.” Robert gets up and begins picking up his disregarded soft armor and chainmail.

It was nothing, see? Nothing. He’s acting like it was nothing. So why am I getting so flustered. Why do I want to—Stop it—Get dressed.

William takes the thoughts he’s had stored in the back of his mind since he had first laid eyes on Robert and crumples them up. They didn’t stay hidden where they belonged and now he needs to bury them deeper. He’ll shove them to the bottom of his trunk and lock the lid.

They are roommates, best friends, Robert had said as much. William shakes his head as he gathers his armor off the ground. Tying on his gambeson and slipping into his shoes, William’s mind doesn’t stop. He gathers his chainmail into his arms. Maybe he should start talking to girls, and stop spending every moment of every day with Robert,

Except—.

William heaves his chainmail over his head and lets it fall into place.

Except—.

He grabs his belt and scabbard and just like every day for the past year, he follows Robert out of the room.

Except he doesn’t want to.

Robert never brings up that night so neither does William as they fall back into routine. They fill their days with laughter and knowing that they will be suffering their duties together is the only reason they get out of bed each day.

But soon enough those thoughts William had sealed away began to tap at the lid to his locked trunk. He threw out the key to keep himself from letting them out but the tapping turned to knocking and the knocking turned to pounding.

There are moments when they go into a frenzy that William fears they are going to break out. It's when Robert stands a little too close and their hands bump and he always stands too close. It's the way he says good morning and the way he tells him good night. It's when they sit watching the clouds and say nothing at all but they don't need to. There is no need to fill the space between them with aimless conversation.

They always know what the other is thinking and can sense what the other is feeling.

Well, not everything.

Robert's father had stopped by. Robert is engaged, he is eighteen now and still singled. They kept to their word and have arranged him to wed Leanna. The girl he had grown up with. The girl he was always told he would marry if he could not court a girl on his own. A girl who also had the same deal but to marry Robert, coincidentally never got into a relationship.

While his father told him the news, Robert had stood there with his face revealing nothing. No frown, no smile, not a movement in his eyebrows. He barely even blinked. The only inclination of his thought process was when his

Inexorable

eyes shifted over to William, but for the first time, William couldn't interpret what the fear in them meant.

That was in the middle of their work week, now they are on their usual outing to the market square but this time they aren't there for the shows. William kicks at the pebbles on the dirt road. Of course in reality their promise to be roommates to the end of their career could never be fulfilled. It was inevitable, they are two bachelors having fun, but one day they would both marry and move into a house to make room for the next rookie guards. They are to start a family and create new guards for Lumierna, that is their purpose in life. Like a bee to gather pollen or an ant to bring back food, they are born to serve their majesty.

Williams bites his lip. He thought he accepted this fact when his parents set him up with their friends' daughters, so why does the idea of Robert no longer being the last thing he sees at night and the first thing in the morning cause him so much pain. Why does his chest tighten at the image of his bed empty? It is not as if he will never see him again, they will still be partners at work.

They walk the line of the shops. This time they are here in the market to find a gift for *Leanna*. The girl with hair the color of mud.

"I don't know what to get her. I barely know her anymore." Robert stops and picks up a yellow coif. "She was wearing one of these. What about this?"

"Sure."

"You're no help." Robert drops the coif back onto the table.

William shrugs, "None of my relationships lasted long. Maybe I was a poor gift giver."

"I never understood that." Robert's voice is low and his eyes remain on the fabric covered display table, "Anyone

would be lucky to be with you.”

William is on a galloping horse. A horse speeding down his lane until he is struck by another lance in the chest. It's these moments he was referring to when William wants to open that lid and revisit those thoughts. He doesn't even understand what they are and why they happen. He only knows he can't have them, he shouldn't be having them.

“Tell that to all the girls who rejected me,” William mumbles as he pokes at a pointed hat. He sighs dropping his hand, “She is an armorsmith, maybe tools or a new leather apron.”

Purely out of uncontrolled excitement, Robert grabs William by the shoulders—“You're a genius.” and plants a kiss on William's forehead before tasseling his hair and pointing in the direction of the shop, “This way!”

Redder than any of the fabric around them, William lowers his head hoping no one sees and reads into it as he follows Robert. It takes several minutes of trailing behind Robert for the heat in William's cheeks to subside. He finally lifts his gaze to stare at the back of Robert's burgundy tunic and the strong muscles beneath showing through. This time he doesn't have the strength to push down the emotions as they rampage through him. Biting his lip, he reaches up and touches his forehead where Robert had kissed him.

How much longer can he keep lying to himself?

Chapter 11

Dressed down in their civilian tunics and tights, Robert and William stand waiting at the castle gates. It has been a month since Robert has become engaged and after that day off shopping for a gift he has spent each of their off days visiting Leanna and their families to prepare for the wedding and life after.

This day is only slightly different. Instead of Robert going to her, Leanna is on her way to so Robert can give her a tour of the castle grounds.

Despite William's reluctance, Robert convinced him to join. He played the best friend card and wants them to get to know each other. He wants to show her where he works and who he spends his time with.

His best friend.

Best. Friend.

Friend.

William sighs. He has stopped locking away his thoughts of Robert. They became too much to close the lid on, the sheer volume was impossible to contain. He still doesn't understand why he has them but he's accepted

there is no getting rid of them. So here he is standing close as they normally do.

Too close.

Close enough that the smallest movement will make the back of their hands touch. They are close enough that if William wants to he can hook his fingers into Robert's and no one will notice.

He can have these small moments, William intentionally adjusts his feet so their fingers touch.

"Leanna!" The hand is gone and Robert is waving

Someone who must be her father is escorting her.

They pause on the other side of the bridge and he gives her a hug. From her excessive nodding and her eagerness to step away, he must be telling her what hour he is picking her up. She finally gets away from her father and waves to Robert as she starts across the bridge.

Maybe a board will break and she will fall through. William purses his lips as he imagines it, but it won't do any good because it's no more than an inconvenient ditch and she will only sprain an ankle. Then Robert will have to carry her out. Her arms will be around his neck as he holds her. William frowns as his daydreams turns on him.

He blinks and she is here.

"Sorry about my father. He wanted to make sure I got here safely." She tucks a loose strand of hair that had fallen from her coif behind her ear.

"He cares about you. He won't have to worry much longer when we move in down the way." Robert opens his arms offering a hug and she accepts.

Stab. William's jaw is slack as his chest begins to bleed. There is no staunching the wound as he watches Robert pull back and give Leanna peck on the cheek. His memory reminding him what it felt like to have Robert's lips

Inexorable

pressed to his own skin. Agony. This short moment is the worst pain he has ever been in because he wants it to be him. Why does he want it to be him? He shouldn't want it to be him. It'll never be him. I can never be him. Oh, he wishes it was him.

"Good to see you again, William. Thank you for taking care of Robert for me." Her smile is lovely and genuinely sweet and it makes William nauseous to look at.

He doesn't return the smile. He drops his gaze and grumbles, "You're welcome."

"Don't be shy." Robert squeezes William's shoulder.

William can't meet his eye, he is already telling himself not to read into the touch. Not to overthink everything Robert says and does.

Robert's hand slides down William's arm sending goosebumps across William's skin, "Let's begin the tour." He motions to the wall, "As you can tell, this is the front gate."

"Oh. Wow." Leanna exaggerates as she links her hand in the crook of Robert's arm. "Impressive.

He begins guiding her inside, "Wait until I show you the inner bailey's gate."

That is how the day continues. Robert takes Leanna around to all their posts and anything significant as she asks him questions about what it's like living in the barracks. What are the nobles like? Has he met the king? Now and then the questions will be directed at William who manages to keep all his answers to below three words.

Tucked away in the shade of a buttress, Robert unpacks a small packed lunch for the three of them on a spread out sheet.

Leanna turns to William still fighting to get an actual conversation out of him, "All Robert does is talk about you. I'll try to be asking him what the main course should be at the celebration and he tells me about how you'll eat all the vegetables so he doesn't have to."

"Oh." William twists the edge of the sheet in his fingers. He can't let either of them see what that means to him.

"As much as he told me, he hasn't mentioned if you were seeing anyone though. Does this cute guard have a lucky lady?"

William shrinks as he shakes his head, "No."

"I guess you are as busy as Robert. For me, I'm just awkward. If it wasn't for Robert, I might have just died single."

"I doubt that," Robert chimes in. "You're beautiful."

"And you've always been handsome, yet here we are. Arranged. I guess it could have been worse, it could have been someone who wasn't my childhood crush."

William's fingers clench, gripping the corner of the fabric he was playing with as Robert chokes out a laugh, "Wait, really?"

Leanna laughs embarrassed, "Yes, really. Honest truth is I always hoped it would be you, but I knew you didn't like me that way. That was obvious."

The tips of Robert's ears turn pink, "Sorry."

"It's not your fault, you don't choose who you fall in love with." She smiles and misses Robert's eyes flick to William. "How about you William."

"What?"

"Is there anyone who has caught your eye."

A chill of dread freezes William as it runs from his head to his toes. The only part of him that moves is his dark green eyes that immediately find Robert's cognac brown

Inexorable

ones already watching him. They widen as the two sets lock.

"No." William shakes his head. "No one." Robert drops his gaze to the space between them, then his sights shoot back up as William stands. "I'm not feeling well. I'm heading back."

"Will." Robert starts to get up but William stops him.

"Enjoy your lunch. I'll see you at dinner." William forces a smile.

Robert slumps back onto the sheet beside Leanna and watches his best friend disappear around the stone.

Laying on his back on his cot, William drags his hands down his face. *We are friends. We are friends. We are just friends.* William repeats to himself.

What is wrong with him? He shouldn't be this jealous of Leanna. Even girls who he enjoyed dating, when they left him and started a relationship with someone new he had never felt this strongly about it. He lays his hand over his chest. When Robert marries Leanna, he will no longer be his roommate but they won't cease being friends.

William rolls over and faces Robert's empty bed and tries to picture someone else lying there. Is that what is driving his emotions? The fear of a new roommate? The fear of losing the safe familiarity of Robert? Maybe separation will be a good thing. Maybe it will help clear up his mind.

His eyelids shut and *that night* seeps back into his thoughts. He curls up imagining lying there with Robert's arms around him. Their breaths falling into sync as they drift off to sleep. Cursing, William rolls back to stare at the ceiling.

This is a new territory of emotions he has never dealt with. He's in love with Robert isn't he? He has been, for a long time.

"William?" Robert pushes open the door holding a meat pie. "William? Do you want dinner?" He stops in the front of the room between the two storage trunks.

William is asleep on his back with one hand resting on his stomach. His chest rises and falls with the sounds of his breathing that are not yet a snore. Setting the food on top of William's trunk, Robert grabs the blanket kicked into a bundle at the end of the bed and pulls it over William.

Robert's eyes linger on William's slightly parted lips, "Good night, Will." Then with hunched shoulders Robert lies alone on his bed.

Chapter 12

William snuggles the blanket up to his chin. He had fallen asleep without it and he knows without a doubt it was Robert who pulled it over him. Not just because he is the only other one in the room, but because that is the type of person Robert is. It is not the first time he has done this for him. William has lost count of how many times he has crashed on his cot with his slippers on to find them set neatly beside his bed and his blanket tucked around him.

His head rolls to the side and Robert is where he is supposed to be. He is two arm lengths away asleep on his side facing the wall. How many more mornings like this will he get? Does he want to know the dwindling number or will it only hurt more? William pulls the blanket up and over his head.

They stand on top of the inner bailey wall watching the nobles carrying about their days inside their protected world. With two barriers separating them from the rest of the Lumierna's people they walk without a care because they don't have to stress about making enough coin to feed their children tomorrow or if they are going to face

the wrong side of a sword today. They will never be portrayed as the bad guy because they send others to do their dirty work. They aren't petrified that saying the words *I love you* will end up being the one and only time they will say it.

I love you.

Robert spins around from leaning on the parapet and sits up on the low wall snug between the battlements, "You're quiet today. Was it Leanna?"

"What does she have to do with anything?" William leans his elbows on the next spot over.

"I don't know," Robert shrugs, "I guess because of what she said." A muscle twitches in William's jaw. "Do you want to talk about it? You got up pretty fast after that. Will, we can find you someone."

"I'm fine," William bites.

"What's going on? I thought we could talk about anything, because if we can't talk to each other then who do we have?"

"Leanna."

"No. She won't understand, not everything. She will never understand—what it's like—some of the things we have to do."

At least he will have this, he will be the one person Robert can tell everything to. William is the only person Robert has told about what haunts his dreams and William is the only person who has seen him break. They will always have that night when they held each other. Two people breaking apart hoping that holding the other person's pieces in place will keep themselves from falling apart.

"William?"

Inexorable

Realizing he's been staring off into the distance and not replying, William bites his lip, unable to answer. He won't tell him. He can't tell him, but he needs to know.

"Do you think you'll ever love her?"

"Why?"

"You mentioned you didn't reciprocate her feelings for you when you were younger. Do you think that will change when you start living together?"

"No."

William is stunned by the answer, "No? Not even a maybe?"

"I have known her my entire life. I think something like that would have blossomed years ago. You can be arranged married to someone but that doesn't mean you will learn to love them." Robert stares forward at the battlements across the way.

"I was convinced people married someone they didn't mind living with. I never understood there was more. I never understood what it was like to be in love with someone."

Leaning forward, Robert tries to see William whose face remains obscured by the stone battlement, "You've never been in love?"

William pulls back, keeping himself out of view, "I don't know, maybe. I'm not sure. You?"

"Once." Robert tilts his head back.

Almost dreading the answer William asks, "When?"

"A long time ago. We were in the same guard class, but I knew they didn't feel the same way."

"Did you ever tell them?"

Robert drops his chin and hunches forward, "No."

William leans back from the wall and finally faces Robert, “Then how did you know they didn’t reciprocate the feeling?”

“They liked someone else, those two are married now. It would never have worked out anyways. We—we were just too different.”

Turning around in place, William leans back against the parapet and watches the swallows flit about the castle arches. Finally, he speaks up, “Robert.”

“Yeah?”

The words lodge in his throat. Where would he even begin? How can he explain something he barely understands. He closes his mouth. What he does know is he can’t jeopardize everything they have. Jeopardize his life. Instead he asks, “Did it ever stop hurting? Watching the person you love be with someone else?”

Robert releases a deep breath, “Eventually.”

There is an eventually in his future. William closes his eyes. Does it only stop because that person stopped being around, or because you can move on? How does eventually arrive when you are always together? When will the constricting of the chest and heart ache finally stop? Will it stop? Will it ever go away when you have no one to move on to. Is there a girl out there he will fall for? Can he return to a life where he isn’t lying to everyone including himself about what he thinks about when he looks at Robert.

A life where he isn’t in love with someone he can never be with.

Chapter 13

It's their day off and like the past two months Robert is at his family's home making the final preparations on the wedding and his marriage. At the castle, William is wandering the grounds alone, *again*.

He should start getting used to this. Soon Robert will be moving out. He will move out then he will start having children and any free moment of his life will be consumed, but William will always have work with Robert. That is the one thing he knows will never change.

"Thanks, but no thanks." He hears a girl say from around the corner of one of the southeast towers.

He slows to a stop before rounding the corner. He pokes his head around and sees he's near the Winged Cavalry's personal gate that leads to their base camp.

"Come on, Amiria. Let me show you around." A tall broad shouldered man with brown hair and eyes lighter than the sky is walking backward in front of the average height girl.

"Is this how it's going to be for the rest of my career?"

"No, just until you finally accept my offer."

"I'd rather be killed by a bandit." She walks around him, "Please leave me alone. I need to go unpack my room." Turning the corner with her arms crossed and head down she doesn't even acknowledge the boy with rustic hair.

The taller, very handsome man, slows to a stop at the corner of the tower beside William. William, being slightly below the average height, cranes his neck back to peer up at the man whose symmetrical face is not one that gets rejected often.

The pale eyes remove themselves from their hooks on the girl and flick down to him, "Oh, hello there."

With a mouth full of cotton, William becomes flustered as he replies, "H-hello."

Putting his forearm against the cool stone, Calix leans in as he eyes William, "What are you?"

"Castle guard sir."

"So, you saw that?" Calix nods his chin in the direction of where he was speaking to Amiria.

"Sorry."

"No need for apologies. We are out in public are we not?"

"I guess. Um." William fumbles with the ties of his tunic, "Can I ask you for some advice?"

Calix raises an eyebrow, "You witness my rejection then want to ask me for advice?" He smirks, "So there's a girl and she's out of your league?"

"Y-yeah, I guess you can say that."

"Alright, little guard. What is your girl problem?"

Calix relaxes and leans his entire back against the wall with his heel propped up on it.

"I saw that girl doesn't appear interested, but you are asking anyways."

Inexorable

Stiffening, Calix's eyes grow colder than the castle walls that never feel the sunlight, "What is your question exactly?"

"W-what makes you keep trying?"

"Oh? So, you've been rejected?" Calix softens.

William can't look at the man and how he makes leaning against a wall look impressive, "They are engaged to someone."

"But have you told her you like her?"

"No, not exactly."

"So, no?"

"Correct."

Calix holds his hand out confused, "So tell her."

"What about their engagement?" William's eyes go wide.

"Engaged, not married. So, tell her." Calix brushes off the details.

William crosses his arms with uncertainty. Huffing, Calix pushes off the wall and throws his arm around William's shoulders. William can feel the power and strength behind the Winged Rider even when he isn't trying to use it, but even with the handsome man's arm around him William feels nothing as he stiffens at the stranger's sudden embrace. He does not feel flutters in his heart from the warmth and comfort that only Robert's touch provides as if everything will okay as long as they remain like this.

"Man to—" Calix pauses and inspects William, "man. As a guard you are like me. Well sort of. You're like a child version of me, but in our line of work we never know if we have a tomorrow. So why wait and live with what ifs? Does that help?"

William nods, "Yeah, it does."

Removing his arm from around William, Calix slaps him on the back, "Now, go get her." William stumbles forward a step at the impact. "Good luck."

"Thank you, sir, and--um, you too, with that girl."

Calix flashes a dimpled smile, "I appreciate that."

Chapter 14

With space on either side of him, William sits alone in the communal room of the barracks numbly stirring his barley soup. Sir Calix was right and wrong at the same time. His life can end short as a guard so he shouldn't wait for tomorrows but what he wants to admit is something that will make his tomorrows cease to exist.

"So sad and lost without your boyfriend."

The words are a hundred iced nails driving through him. William knows Jerrad is only trying to make fun of William as he has since day one, but he doesn't know how right he is.

"Go away Jerrad. I'm not in the mood."

"Aw, did I hit a tender spot? Sorry, Robert moved on to a real woman." Jerrad rests his hand on William's shoulder who shoves it off immediately.

William opens his mouth to retort but it turns into a silent scream as he is yanked back off the bench by his hair.

It's later than he planned as Robert opens the door to his room. He wanted to be home for dinner with

William but his parents insisted he should stay and prepared a special meal. He didn't want roast duck. He wanted to eat stale bread with the few remaining nights he has in the barracks with William. Except, same as he has his whole life, he was unable to deny his parents' request.

Half a step into the room Robert halts.

William is lying on the ground between their cots with a battered face pressed to the floorboards. "Hey," he says without lifting his head.

"Will." Robert is across the room and kneeling beside him before he can take a breath, "What happened?"

"Jerrad's first win. He got me by surprise and had me outnumbered." William rolls to his side and props himself up on his elbow.

"Oh William." Robert gently takes William's chin in his hand to examine the bruising and split lip.

Closing his eyes, William relishes the touch. A tingling sensation from Robert brushing back his auburn bangs sends a shiver running down William's spine. Then Robert gasps as William shoves him away.

Scooting until his back is against Robert's bed, William brings his knees in tight to his chest with his arms wrapped around them.

"What is wrong with you?" Robert asks, shocked.

"You can't do stuff like that." William's words are thick with oncoming tears

"Like what?" Robert presses.

"Like that." William motions to nothing, "Touch me like that."

Robert sits back against William's bed directly across from him. The space between them so miniscule,

Inexorable

sitting cross legged Robert's toes almost touch William's, "I don't know what you are talking about?"

"You know damn well what I am talking about. It's not the first time." William is struggling to hold back his emotions.

A muscle feathers in Robert's jaw, "Fine. Tell me, William. Tell me why I can't?"

"Because!"

"Because why?" His face is set but his heart is racing.

"BECAUSE I'M IN LOVE WITH YOU!"

Robert's eyes widen as he stills. Silence looms between them before he is able to get out, "You're what?"

Tears are beginning to stream down William's face. There is no going back, everything is over. He repeats himself softer, "I'm in love with you."

"No."

"No?" William's face twists.

Robert is shaking his head, "No, no you don't. You can't"

William holds onto his knees tighter wishing he could fold into himself until there was nothing left. It hurts. His chest is constricting so hard, he wants to vomit. He has never felt this level of agony before. Chainmail can stop a blade from slashing you open but it will not stop the javelin from piercing straight through your heart.

He is bleeding to death before Robert. He has been run through the back with a spear and the tip is jammed into the small space between them.

"I-I. It wasn't—I didn't mean it." William tries to backpedal as if cleaning up the blood spilled from his broken heart will be as if it never happened.

He is going to die, not figuratively as he did when Robert said the word *no*, but literally. He can only pray to

the god who will no longer see him as one of his children that Robert will forget about this moment and no one else overheard his declaration. Maybe dying is the better option than having to face Robert after this day. Not like he's going to want to talk to him ever again anyways.

With his entire body trembling, William uses the bed to help him rise to his unsteady feet.

"Will." Robert is up onto his knees but William can't look at him. "William." He grabs William by the wrist to stop him as he takes a step towards the door. "It's—it's—" He can't find the words. All that comes out is a jagged breath. His eyes are brimming with red as he blinks back the tears forming. "William." He tries again.

Mustering all the strength he can, William barely turns enough to see Robert's pleading eyes. Hope rises in William's chest. Maybe he misinterpreted what Robert was saying, maybe he is going to ask him to stay.

"Will. We can't"

William pulls his hand away, "I need some air."

Then he is gone, and Robert doesn't follow. He can't follow him and bring the words that were said inside *their* four walls outside. It can kill them. It would kill them and it would be by the hands of someone like Jerrad in front of an audience who would cheer as they burned.

Grinding his teeth, Robert slams the side of his fist into the closest trunk. He can't cry out like he wants because someone will hear. Holding his stomach, he hunches over and presses his forehead to the floor as his body shudders and his heart shatters.

Chapter 15

His eyes burn from the salt when Robert wakes up on the floor the next morning to the bells. Sitting up his chest aches when he sees William's empty bed. He never came back. He doesn't have to move far to open William's trunk and see that his armor is still inside.

He throws on his gear and rushes to his post with hope William will already be there.

It doesn't take long for his spirits to drop when there isn't a fine copper haired boy with a bright smile at the inner bailey gate. A smile he watches double in size whenever he smiles back, a smile gifted only to him.

"Captain Mannering," Robert calls out to the new young Captain of his guard.

"Yes, Boheca." The sixteen year old Captain raises an eyebrow.

"William. I mean Ingle, has he reported to duty? I'm his roommate and he never came back which is unusual."

"Calm down, Boheca. I sent Ingle to the infirmary. I found him this morning sleeping outside with his face battered."

“So, he’s okay?”

“Yes yes. He’ll be fine, appears he got himself into a scuffle last night. Seems to be something you guards do. Now get to post.”

“Uh yes. Sir.”

How can he face Robert? There was pity in his eyes last night. Robert will not do anything to harm him, but he did feel sorry for him. It was written all over his face. Before William dreaded the day Robert was moving out, now it can’t come soon enough. He needs a roommate he hates so this doesn’t happen again. He has got himself confused because he enjoys Robert’s company and they spend every moment together. There is no possible way he actually *loves* Robert.

A man can’t fall in love with a man. It’s impossible—well he was told it was impossible. A man and woman fall in love to produce offspring. Why would two men fall in love? What kind of outcome does society gain from it?

Unless it’s not about society, but about the two in love and what they can provide each other?

He never knew a person could make his heart palpitate irregularly with a simple smile, or temporarily quash all of his worries with an embrace. They are something warm when the days turn cold. They are a hand to hold when the path gets rocky. They are a shoulder to lean on when you can’t walk on your own.

He used to think it what absurd that anyone would break that law. How hard could it be to marry someone who isn’t illegal instead?

Now he knows. Now he knows how impossible it is to alter your mind once it makes its choice.

Inexorable

Being only friends with Robert is slowly destroying him. It is hollowing him out every time he watches Robert hold Leanna's hand because he knows that will never be him. He wants that to be him. Why can't it be him.

William lays his head back on the pillow. Why is he back to this thought process? Who is he kidding? Not himself. He must be honest with at least himself, he is in love with Robert Boheca, his best friend. Only the truth was thrown out into the open last night. There is no denying it, especially not when he's had thoughts of Robert he has never had about a girl.

His mind wanders to Robert changing and how his eyes follow the lines down Robert's toned stomach and disappear beneath his pant line.

He throws his arm over his face and groans.

What did Robert mean when he changed *you can't* to *we can't*? The way he held his face with concern in his eyes or how he tenderly brushed his hair back from his face.

We can't. We can't. We. We. He said *we. We can't.* Not *you can't. We. We.* As in them. As in them what? Why did he leave? Why couldn't he face Robert and ask him what he meant. Why why why?

Because he's a coward.

He rolls over and curls into a ball, no he won't be a coward. He will face this fear and he will go clear things up with Robert. He will try to correct what had happened and spin a new lie. He loves him like family, maybe he will believe that.

He can still fix this.

Please don't be in there, please don't be in there. But I need to talk to him, but maybe tomorrow. No, I need to get this over with.

William is standing outside their door in his guard attire. He was unable to fake illness to remain in the infirmary the entire day and was sent to finish a post in the outer bailey. With a deep breath of encouragement he pushes open the door.

Robert, still in his uniform, is sitting hunched over on his bed with his face in his hands. William's face goes blank with fright and begins to close the door.

"Don't go!" Robert is on his feet with his hand outstretched.

The door now obscuring his view of Robert, William stops in the threshold, the only part of the room he can see is Robert's storage trunk.

The voice on the other side of the wood board is soft and broken, "Please. Don't go."

It is a guide rope pulling William back. It slowly controls him to swing the door open and helps him find his footing stepping completely into the room. Closing the door he tentatively turns around to face Robert only two steps away. His ribs are going to break with how heavy his heart is beating.

William's hands ring the bottom of his chainmaille and he can't lift his eyes from Robert's boots. "I didn't mean it."

"Will."

"What I said last night. I didn't mean it."

"Will."

"You know, in that way."

"Will. Look at me." Robert takes a step closer.

Inexorable

William continues to trip through his words. His eyes nailed down like the floorboards. "I had a rough night. I didn't know what I was saying."

"Will." Robert's voice is barely above a whisper but with their toes almost touching that single breathy word almost destroys William.

Hands that aren't his own, cup William's face and gently lift it up. William barely manages a gasp before Robert's mouth is on his. His hands hang in midair not knowing what to do. Robert's bottom lip is parting his own and he is spinning. His eyelids fall close and his hands find their place on Robert's back to hold his dizzy mind steady.

He has kissed girls in the past but those kisses didn't feel like *this*. They felt like a task, a chore he needed to check off his list of being a boyfriend. This, THIS, these chapped lips moving against his own makes his heart flip, skip and jump. So, this is what it's like to be with someone you love.

Robert pulls back only enough to break off the kiss but their noses are still close enough to brush. William is leaning forward pressing his chest into Robert's with his lips tingling and his heart in his throat. He now despises this small gap of air between them until Robert's lips are pressed to his forehead.

"I've loved you for so long," he confesses, his voice low enough for only them to hear.

This can't be real. How can one feel so alive yet dead at the same time? Maybe he did fall ill from sleeping outside and this is some sort of fever dream. A cruel reminder of what he can never have.

But he can feel the cool rings of Robert's chainmail as he runs his hands down his back below his arms then up his solid chest. William's fingers find themselves laced

behind Robert's neck and he is banishing that pocket of air between them and kisses Robert. He would rather starve than to stop this moment. Robert's hands drop from William's face and his fingers clutch the metal ringed hauberk pressing their bodies together.

They are two halves desperately trying to put themselves back together.

Catching their breath, Robert hugs William close with no seam to be seen. He has dreamed and longed for this moment. He is holding him, finally truly holding him. Not putting his arm around his friend or providing a comforting hug, but as if William is his. As if they could be something *more*.

William fits perfectly in his arms and he is never letting go again. William. His best friend, the boy he loves, is holding him in return as if these four walls are going to fall and reveal them. He is holding him as if the gallows are on the other side of their door. Robert nuzzles his face into William's hair as if this is the only chance he will ever get.

Rocking them, Robert sends a message no words can summarize in the same amount of time as he kisses William's hair line then presses his forehead against his. It says I am here. I will always be here, because I will love you forever and for always. It also means even outside this room where I cannot hold you, how I feel for you will never change.

William shudders as his emotions release and the tear dam opens. Robert leans back only enough to view William's face. Careful of William's bruising, Robert uses his thumb to brush back a few of the tears dampening William's face then leans down to kiss him so brief it felt like a whispered secret you almost missed.

"Lay with me?" Robert asks.

Inexorable

Chainmail falls in heavy heaps and gambesons are cast to the floor then Robert's hand around William's is guiding him down to his bed. Hesitant William follows Robert's lead and lies down against him with his head on his chest.

He closes his eyes temporarily consumed by the warmth of him running down the entire length of his body as it presses against Robert's. *Tha dump*. William listens to the steady beating of Robert's heart and the sounds of him breathing. The vital proof he is real, *this* is real.

Without disturbing William, Robert takes the blanket shoved to the side of his bed and throws it over them both. He runs his fingers down the length of William's arm laid across his chest.

"For how long?" William asks still listening to the rhythmic heartbeats that can lull him to sleep like a lullaby.

"In general, or for you?"

"Both."

Robert inhales through his nose and exhales out his mouth, "You remember that day you stood out there in the downpour?" William's eyes open and flick up to Robert's. "That was the day I started falling for you."

"So, your first love was..." William trails off.

"His name was Tristan. He's a guard in a neighboring town now. I've known since I was a kid that I was different. At first I thought I could just tell my mind that it was wrong and pick someone else to like. But—" Robert runs his hand through William's hair, "You know it doesn't work that way. There is no changing who you are. Only lies."

"I'm not sure but I think it might have been the first time I saw you." William turns his face in the rough linen of Robert's tunic. "It just took me awhile to realize it."

"You didn't know?"

William shakes his head, “There have been girls I thought were pretty but I never felt anything more than that. I believed that’s all there was to it. You find someone you don’t mind being around, you marry them, and reproduce. I never understood, I never knew there was more. Then I saw you and I had no explanation for what I was feeling. All I knew was something was telling me I wanted to be close to you. At first I thought I just wanted to be your friend. But—that ended up not being true. I realized it that night you held me and kept the nightmares away.”

Rolling to his side, Robert hugs William to him, “Like this?”

William smiles, “Yeah, like this.” Grabbing onto Robert’s tunic, William snuggles into the curve of Robert’s body. “How did you handle it? Knowing how you felt but not doing anything about it?”

Bringing his face down, Robert breathes in the scent of William, “It killed me every day, but at least I still had you in my life.”

Keeping his face hidden, William asks, “Do you still have to marry her?”

Robert tenses and William can hear the skip of his heart, “Yes.”

William’s grip tightens on the fabric, “Can we have this for now?”

“Yes.”

Chapter 16

Morning bells ring through the barracks. William opens his eyes to an empty bed. His bed. His bed is the empty one because he is in Robert's bed. He is in, Robert's bed. Robert's.

There is a shift behind him then an arm is strung over him. The muscled arm pulls William back against Robert and he snuggles the arm like a child with their blanket with his cheek resting in Robert's hand. William's breathing falls in sync with Robert's chest pressed against his shoulder blades. Ignoring the first set of bells they lay their tucked together.

William wishes every morning from now on would be like this, except he knows it still will never happen. Nowhere in this kingdom are they are the allowed to lie like this.

Kissing Robert's palm, William finally turns over to a sleepy eyed Robert.

"Good morning."

"Good morning."

Robert runs the back of his index finger down the side of William's cheek, his eyes flitting around taking in all

the features of William's face with admiration, "You're beautiful."

"Beautiful?" William tilts his head back with a raised eyebrow.

"Yeah. Absolutely stunning." Robert smiles then leans in and kisses him.

William wishes he could lie here forever with Robert because he knows once they open that door they have to return to how they were, best friends, and now knowing what Robert's lips feel like how will he be able to go all day without wanting them. Plus, each morning is a step closer to the end even though they've barely begun. Barely had a chance to experience what it is like to be in love.

Not wanting to ask the dreadful question William rips out the thorn, "How much longer do we have?"

"A week."

Cold flashes through Williams veins. A week. They have a week to be together like this, then they will return to hiding who they are. Holding back his tears, William doesn't want to leave Robert's arms, but the bells have stopped and they are going to have to skip a sit down breakfast to make it in time. "We need to get ready."

William pulls back from Robert and sits up on the edge of the bed, he turns over his shoulder as a hand grasps his wrist. Robert, propped up on his elbow, is staring up at him, his eyes bright from the morning light, "It doesn't change the fact that I'm in love with you, William Ingle."

"I—" Why is it still hard to say? He's already blurted it out, but that was different. He wasn't thinking when he confessed. "I—" William's face is on fire as meets Robert's eyes, "I love you, Robert Boheca."

Inexorable

Robert takes William by the back of his neck and brings himself up into a kiss. He pulls back but doesn't let go of William, "Remember, even when we're out there and I don't act like it, I love *you*. Not Leanna, not any other girl. It's you and will always be *you*." Robert brushes a tear from William's cheek.

Turning away, William wipes his face, "It might be easier if we continue as friends inside this room too."

"Wait—Will."

"Why start if it has to end?"

"I..." Robert hangs his head, "I'm sorry."

William turns back wide-eyed, "For what?"

Robert breathes in deep through his nostrils and lets it slowly release, "Everything."

Torture this a new form of torture

Shoulders touching, William stares down at his and Robert's leathered gloved hands only a fingernail's width apart as they both lean forward on the parapet of the inner bailey wall. Robert shifts his weight causing his pinky to overlap William's.

Their gazes rise from the castle grounds to each other, Robert's sight drops from William's dark green eyes turning emerald in the sunlight, down to his slightly parted lips. Dropping his head, William faces back to the grounds and curls his fingers in so they are no longer touch Robert's.

"Men."

As if there is swords at their backs, Robert and William spin around to face Captain Mannering who is standing stoic with his arms folded behind his back.

Clyde's eyes narrow on the startled guards, "You're not paid to sight see. Continue your rounds, *now* gentlemen."

"Yes sir," they say in unison. William turns faster than Robert and bumps into him as Robert struggles to remember which way they were patrolling. Turning Robert and pointing, William directs him south and they walk stiffly in silence until they are out of ear shot.

"We're barely paid at all," William gripes.

Robert steps too close in the narrow walkway making their knuckles brush.

Torture William thinks keeping his hand at his side as if the contact didn't send warmth rushing through him, *This is worse than before*. He believed seeing Robert with Leanna had driven a stake in his heart, but as long it wasn't removed he won't bleed out. He was going to learn to survive with it, but now knowing his feelings are reciprocated the stake has been hammered all the way through leaving behind a gaping hole.

In a week's time Robert will move out and all they will have are these small moments when their hands accidentally brush, but that is all they will *ever* have. Their fingers will never be allowed to intertwine. There will never be a time they can enjoy the warmth as they embrace on a chilly day. Never will it be accepted for William to get down on one knee and ask for Robert's hand.

William crosses his arms so there is no more mishaps. He must lift his chin and carry on knowing him and Robert will always be best friends. He will have at least that. Robert will still always be in his life, but maybe some distance will help quell these emotions. At least bring them back to before.

Robert notices Williams arms crossed and frowns, "Will?" William smiles up at him with his lips closed.

Chapter 17

Dressed down to their braies, Robert stands in the center of the room as William crawls into his bed.

"You don't want to?" Robert motions to his bed where they slept in each other's arms the night before.

William silently shakes his head, "Like I said this morning, it'll be easier."

Robert's face breaks as William turns, "I guess you're right." Sullen he slips under his covers alone.

Twisting, William turns over his shoulder, "Robert?"

"Yeah?" He perks up.

William opens his mouth but only silence is heard. All the words he wants to say are caught in his throat. *Stay here, stay with me. Even if it's confined to these four walls, choose me. Choose us.* But he can't say any of it.

"Good night," is all he says before rolling back to face the wall.

"Good night." Robert's face falls as he lays on his side speaking to William's back. He shouldn't have kissed him, but how could he have let William continue to think he was all alone, that there was something wrong with him?

Even knowing they will never be together, Robert would never let William spiral alone, especially not when he had fallen for him in return.

He almost misses the days they were ignorant of the other's feelings. The days where you kept your feelings repressed should not be the happier times.

Robert reaches out over the empty space between them. *Please*. His hand drops and hangs limply off the side of his bed. *Please, don't turn away from me*. Wiping liquid from the corner of his eye, Robert pulls the blanket over his head and curls up.

The sun still rising in the soft blue sky, Robert steps up to Captain Mannering who is holding the roll call sheet.

"Bocheca." He barely acknowledges Robert as he checks off his name.

"Sir, has Ingle checked in?"

Clyde raises and eye brown, "He arrived early, requesting the outer wall. He didn't mention both of you wanting to switch."

The outer wall Robert's chest aches, "I don't Sir. Only wondering."

"Okay," Captain Mannering says disinterested and marks off the name of the next guard approaching him.

Plate in hand, Robert pushes open the door to have his dinner in his room. The room is empty, William isn't in here either. With a sigh Robert sits on his bed and leans against the wall like the first day William had walked through the door.

William pushes open the door and tip toes into the room. Closing the door without making a sound, William

Inexorable

turns to Robert leaning against the wall asleep. Unlike their first encounter, Robert does not wake and open his eyes.

"I'm sorry," William whispers to the sleeping boy. He removes his outer garments and stands awkwardly between the two beds.

He knows he is going about this the wrong way. What he should be doing is talking to Robert, but he has always found it difficult to discuss what he is feeling. Where does one begin? He had blurted out his internal thoughts that night but that was unintentional. His past girlfriends would express their concerns with their relationship and he would just nod and listen, but that was one of their concerns. He was bad at reciprocating, he wouldn't open up to the extent they desired. Why did they need to know his thoughts? How would that make a difference in their day?

Even before he understood how he felt, there was only one person who made him want to open his mind, heart, and soul to. William frowns as he sees Robert shiver. Grabbing the blanket bunched by Robert's feet, William pulls it up to his shoulders tucking it around him.

Sitting down on his bed, William takes off his shoes and lays down.

How can he ask Robert to throw away everything, to risk his life, so they can stay in this closet sized room, when he can't open his mouth without his heart lodging in his throat. How does he tell him that no one has ever made him feel like he was home like he does.

In a few days he will be married to Leanna and William won't have to see him during all hours of the day and it will be easier. The distance will make it easier.

He will stay here, alone.

William closes his eyes with the last thing he had seen being Robert sleeping against the wall.

Chapter 18

A gentle hand touches Robert's arm as she laughs at a joke her father makes across the table. With the world muted around him Robert fakes a laugh but doesn't meet anyone's gaze.

He sits beside Leanna at a dinner table crowded with her family. Her parents and three younger sibling's tell stories about their day as they eat carp purchased from the Fishweirers by the river this morning.

In two days this will be his life. He will sit at tables with her family, his family, then eventually a table filled with children of their own. Every day will be pretend happiness and false smiles. He will be a kind husband and a good father, but his heart will never be in it. The thing beating in his chest will always belong to the person back in room seventeen in the barracks.

He will never love Leanna and that isn't her fault. She has done nothing wrong and she deserves better. She deserves a husband that will love her back, it's just not him. How long will he be able to keep up this facade before he decides the gallows are the better option.

William strong heartedly believes pulling away will hurt less in the long run. Does William honestly think marrying Leanna will be able to turn his feelings off for him? Even if the city tore in two and he never saw William again, he will never stop loving him.

He thinks of William's hair shining like copper in the sunlight as they stroll across the dead grass of the outer bailey.

With William on his mind Robert smiles at something Leanna says. From the snippets he caught while dazing off she is telling her family a story about when they were younger. Maybe it's about the time they were hopping rocks by the river and he fell in, or it was one of the times they were catching frogs. There is definitely a river in the story.

Robert laughs when Leanna does but his mind drifts back to William. What is he doing right now? Is he safe eating his dinner in the common room or is he sitting alone in their quarters? Robert's plastered smile falters at the pang in chest. He doesn't want to be at this table, he should be next to William stealing his bread and giving him his carrots. What he wants is to be with him. He wants to be tagged in when other guards want to fight not talking about future children and which job will they inherit.

Granted a weeks leave for his wedding and to settle into his new home Robert will return to his childhood house after dinner and spend the next two nights with his parents. In two mornings it will be his wedding day. He will be married, he will be stuck—trapped—in a life he doesn't want.

What is William doing tomorrow? It's their day off. Traditionally they would go into the city together to watch the shows.

Inexorable

“Right Robert?” Leanna leans into him giggling.

“Huh? Oh, right.” Robert fibs.

“I knew it.” She puts her hand in his, giving it a light squeeze.

Robert thinks of all the time his and William’s hands have brushed. Every time William offered his hand to help Robert stand after sitting in the shade of the buttresses. How his hand felt when he lead him to his bed. Their warmth when they cupped the back of his neck and pressed against his chest.

It’s William’s hand he wants to hold. It’s William’s lips he wants to kiss. It’s William he wants to hug when he falls asleep. It’s William Ingle who he wants above all else.

“To the happy couple.” The words tear away Robert’s thoughts like a storm ripping the roof from a house. It’s Leanna’s father, he holds up a pewter cup.

Robert scans the joyous table then lands on Leanna who clings onto his arm and raises her cup with a bright smile. His fingers curl around the cool pewter.

Happy? He raises his cup but this time he finds it impossible to smile.

William lies on his back staring at the cracked ceiling.

They can’t be together. They can’t be together. They can’t be together. They legally can’t be together. This is easier, this is safer. It is no longer only his life on the line but Robert’s as well and because he couldn’t keep how he felt to himself about Robert he has ruined everything. Now he is even ruining their friendship.

Stupid heart controlling his actions, why can’t it go back to being dormant.

He should have suffered in silence and they would have never have known how the other felt and maybe they would be happier. Blissful ignorance that there was never a chance.

There still isn't a chance.

He can never be a beautiful bride at the altar. He can never be the lovely lady on Robert's arm. He can't be the fairest in a flowing gown as he's being spun by Robert beneath the moonlight.

But Robert had called him beautiful. Not cute, not handsome.

Beautiful.

William bites his lip, holding back a grin. He touches his face and rolls over to his side to Robert's bed. Robert thinks he is beautiful. William's face falls, his gushing short lived as his heart tears at the sight of Robert's empty bed.

A bed he will never be sleeping in again. He left before their last week was over. They weren't even granted those final days.

William slips out of his bed and into Robert's. Pulling the blankets that smell like Robert over his head William curls up and lets emotional exhaustion take over.

His old bed creaks beneath him as Robert shifts. He lies in the dark of the room he used to share with his brothers. The youngest of them, the last remaining child in the house, snores on the other side of the room.

Robert closes his eyes unable to sleep on the recently stuffed mattress. The room isn't right, the sounds aren't right.

Hoping it will help him sleep, Robert begins to daydream. The bright sun is creating a glowing haze

Inexorable

around them while he is standing at the alter smiling down at his soon to be spouse. His dark green eyes, more beautiful than the mountains around them, smiling up at him. Robert pushes back the thin auburn strands of hair from his face then tilt his chin up and make the two of them official with a kiss.

His eyes open to the dark ceiling above him.

Chapter 19

"It's going to rain," William says to no one in particular as he tilts his head back to the grey ceiling.

"Probably."

William jumps to the familiar voice. The man he wants for the rest of his days has materialized from the nameless people around him watching the show in the town square.

Dropping his gaze to the random tunics around them, William can't look at Robert, "You showed up."

They stand with their shoulders only a fist apart. Robert keeps his eyes on the small stage too far for them to hear all of the dialogue being spoken, "I wouldn't miss it for the world."

William crosses his arms, "It's just a puppet show."

There's a pause before Robert answers, "It's not the puppet show I love."

Feeling the beating in his chest grow, William struggles to keep his eyes forward, "Where is Leanna?"

"I don't know. At her home I guess."

"Why aren't you together?"

Inexorable

“Because she never wants to talk to me again.”

Robert shrugs. William spins to face Robert, his face slack with shock. “Apparently girls don’t like it when you call it off the day before the wedding.”

William’s eyelids disappear as they widen with surprise, “Y-you can’t.

Raising an eyebrow, Robert asks, “Why? Aren’t you happy you aren’t losing your roommate?”

Shaking his head in disbelief William stutters out, “Wh-what about your parents?”

Robert scratches the back of his neck, “Wallowing in their embarrassment that their son will be a bachelor forever and never produce grandchildren.”

“Bachelor.” William repeats.

“Yeah.” Robert’s voice deepens with sincerity, “We’ll be *bachelors, together.*”

Bachelors. Together. Bachelors together. A raindrop lands on William’s forehead and drips down his eyebrow.

Drop by drop the pace of the rain quickly picks up as the storm clouds move over Lumierna. With the rest of the crowd William and Robert move to the closest awning as the light shower turns into a downpour.

Waterlogged hair dripping over his eyes, William notices Robert isn’t under the shelter with him. He turns around and he sees Robert there, standing two arm lengths away, with his head tilted back letting the water cleanse him.

“Now you’re the crazy one!” William hollers out to him over the roar of water pelting down on the wooden roof above him.

“Am I?” Robert smiles.

"Yes, you are." William confirms with the cross of his arms.

Not a word needs to be said as Robert offers out his hand with the subtlest of smiles. William eyes the people around then shifts back to the hand extending out to him.

A woman in her forties shakes her head, "You'll get sick, the both of you."

"He's—" William searches for the word. What is Robert? What are *they*? "My best friend. We fight everything together."

"Boys." The woman rolls her eyes.

Reaching through the curtain of water, William clasps his hand in Robert's and lets himself be pulled into the rain. Robert spins William through the quickly building puddles unable to contain a burst of laughter.

That is exactly what people see as the two of them play in the rain, friends, colleagues, boys being boys.

Robert throws his arm around William's neck in a headlock, trapping him in his restraint and rubbing his knuckles in William's hair. Straightening out his arm, William pushes Robert's face away and back. William's knee placed behind Robert's, Robert is unable to catch himself as he's sent backward and flops onto his stomach in the mud.

Losing his footing in the slippery terrain, William lands on his back beside Robert. They turn their heads to each other as the rain continues to pour down on them.

"I love you." Robert mouths.

William's parted mouth closes and the corners of his lips turn up.

Inexorable

Rain still drenches the world outside as the door to their barracks room closes with a significant click.

William stands in the center of the room and turns around to Robert by the door, "Do you want to explain what happened to your wedding?"

Crossing the room, Robert curls his fingers into the wet fabric of William's cream colored tunic and pulls him in, "Later."

Robert mashes his lips to William's as someone who believed he would never have the chance to feel William again. William's fingers interlace behind Robert's neck as he deepens their kiss. Directed backward by Robert, the back of William's calves touch the wooden frame of Robert's bed. With Robert's hands securely around William, he helps lower them both to the bed.

Lying on his back William's fingers dig into Robert's shoulder blades as he hovers above him, afraid to put his weight on him as if he will hurt him. Robert lowers himself down to his elbows, his hips resting on William's.

He strokes William's cheek with his thumb, "I will never get over how beautiful you are."

William pulls Robert's full weight down onto himself to feel the crushing comfort of his body and to have their hearts beating against each other. Pale hands run through dark hair as they press their faces together.

"I love you." William whispers, their lips barely touching.

"I love—" A knock on the door interrupts Robert. He hangs his head defeated. He kisses William on the cheek then yells over his shoulder. "What!"

"Robert! You are back! Thought you were getting married." A voice shouts through the closed door.

Robert rolls to the side relieving his weight from William as he calls back, "Not anymore."

William rolls to face Robert and slips his hand under Robert's shirt feeling the muscles beneath.

"What happened?" The voice asks.

"Dumped."

"Sorry man, you want to get some ale?"

"No." Robert's eyes turn to William who leans over and kisses his jawline. "I just want to be alone right now."

"Offer still stands if you change your mind."

"Thanks." Robert lowers his voice and whispers to William, "You can still change your mind, you know, if you don't want to live half your life in hiding."

William reaches up and plays with Robert's hair, "It's live a life lying to everyone, or live a life lying to myself."

"We can be hung for this."

Dropping his hand William stares into Robert's eyes. That has haunted his thoughts since he realized how he felt. William smiles, "Then let's not get caught."

Grabbing Robert by the collar of his tunic, William pulls him back on top of him.

Chapter 20

The candles snuffed out and the clouds covering the moon, William lies awake in the dark. Robert is always able to fall asleep faster than him. Lying naked and spooned against Robert, William kisses a mole between Robert's shoulder blades.

Two years. It has been two years since they first said *I love you*.

Two years of everyone still believing they are inseparable best friends that are still single because girls are put off by how they always pay attention to their friend more. People are correct, they are best friends, but there is also much more.

William presses his face into Robert's back breathing in his scent.

They are in love. They are together. They are boyfriends.

Robert's muscles flex as he pulls the blanket closer to his chin.

It doesn't matter that no one is there to witness their *I love yous*. The words aren't any less true because there aren't any other ears to hear. They don't need

strangers to confirm their feelings for each other. Not with the way Robert looks at him or the way they say good morning. It's there when Robert's arms circle around him and his thumb brushes his cheek. It's in the words good night and in the air when they fall asleep in each other's arms.

How many people are living completely different lives behind closed doors. How many other *best friends* are like Robert and him?

William thinks of the two coal maker women who his parents bought from. His mother and father would refer to them as old maids and how sad it is no man married them and what a tragedy god hasn't blessed them with children.

Were they— William's thoughts are cut off by horns blaring across the castle grounds. Feeling like nails being driven into his skull William's hands shoot up to his ears in a panic.

Robert sits up in a gasp and spins around to William curling in on himself with his hands gripping his ears in pain. "Will!" Robert grabs William's shoulder.

Loud, loud, too loud. Make it stop. Make it stop. William doesn't hear Robert calling his name over his thoughts and the ever persistent alarms. He can see each blare of the horn as bursts of lights on the back of his eyelids.

A hand finds its way under William's head and another on top covering his hands over his ears to help muffle the blaring sounds. He feels the warmth of Robert's forehead press against his own to let him know he is there, to remind him where he is.

Holding his hands over William's ears Robert strains his eyes to see the sky outside their small window.

Inexorable

He recognizes this alarm, it's a Winged Cavalry alarm for—for wild dragons? He desperately wants to get up and see what the commotion is but he will never let go of William when he needs him. He will stay here holding him until the alarms stop.

Orange light flashes across the room like a burst of lightning.

Fear running through his veins Robert pulls William into him, he hugs one side of William's head to his chest while still covering his other ear with his hand. Robert doesn't know what is happening in the skies above Lumierna but nothing good comes from the Winged Cavalry being set loose like rabid dogs in the sky.

"You really think that was an illegal rider last night?" William asks as he slips on his tights.

"I think so." Standing in his braies, Robert opens his storage trunk, "but I'm only guessing. I couldn't really see out the window."

"I'm sorry." William hangs his head.

"No." Robert points his finger, "I've told you before, it's nothing to apologize for."

"But."

"No."

"But."

"No."

William opens his mouth to protest but closes it as Robert glances at him. William smiles, "What about—"

Robert playfully lunges at William, who skillfully leaps over his trunk on to the bed he never uses anymore. Grabbing a discarded undershirt, Robert hurls it at William laughing. "Let's get breakfast, maybe there's news about last night."

There is an uproar in the common room when Robert and William make it downstairs.

“What is going on?” William grabs the nearest man’s shoulder.

The guard around the same age turns to William, “You didn’t hear the alarms last night?”

“I did.”

“Illegal dragon rider.”

“Illegal dragon...” William’s voice trails off. Robert’s guess was right.

Robert steps in, “Who was it? Was he caught?”

The man nods, “Shot down by the Cavalry. Body is gone to the ocean so they’ve got no identification.”

“How?” William asks in disbelief.

“How what? They shoot him down?”

“No, how did he fly a dragon?”

“That’s the mystery. The word on the street is the dragon looked different too, had four legs and feathered wings.”

Robert crosses his arms, “Now you are just making things up.”

“Believe me or don’t, it’s just what I heard.” The man puts up his hands in defense.

“Listen up!” A Sergeant announces over the men whose volume only cuts in half, “**AYE! SHUT YOUR MOUTHS!**”

In a single breath the room as silent as if no one was talking to begin with.

“I know how much you all run your mouths so you’ve already heard the rumors about last night. The rumors are true.” The Sergeant lays out. Murmurs begin amongst the men, “**AYE!**” He eyes them as they all fall

Inexorable

back to silence. The Sergeant continues, "Because of that King Dietrich believes the citizens need to be kept under a tighter surveillance. There's new policies men, the number of guards sent to the lower districts will increase. The new shift rotations have already been set—" He holds up a parchment, "Not only will all of you have a turn walking the markets, your hours have also been extended so your shifts bleed together twice a day for extra security."

Groans ripple across the room

"Some of you might like this next addition. Guards have been granted permission to enter any citizen's place of work or home without approval of the owner. This is to ensure all citizens are following the laws and keeping to their assigned trades."

William involuntarily leans into Robert pale but no one is paying attention to them, "We shouldn't be allowed to do that."

Shaking his head in disbelief Robert desperately wishes he could put his arm around William as fear pumps through him. If the kingdom can obliterate people's ability to have privacy in their own homes overnight, what is stopping them from doing the same to them in the barracks.

They don't own their barracks, King Dietrich does. How long until locks are forbidden on any door.

Voices bounce around the room.

"No way. This is going to be fun."

"Finally, I'll get to arrest someone."

"We already work half the day, now longer?"

"I'm going to that girl's house first."

"I'm a castle guard, not a city guard."

They don't understand. They don't see where this is heading. Robert can't fathom it. How does no one else see the slippery slope they are sliding down?

The walls radiate a soft white light as Robert and William lie on the starch white canvas bed that stretches across the entire room. The middle of the bed sags rolling them together into each other's arms.

Bare legs tangle beneath the thin blanket and hands roam across skin.

"Be mine forever," Robert whispers into William's ear.

The natural glow of the room is snuffed out at the sound of a lock turning. The clunking sound of metal moving ricochets across the room and through their skulls. Robert protectively hugs William to his chest as the door creaks open.

Jerrad's mad grin comes into view like a slow reveal, "Gotcha."

William gasps awake. His vision comes to focus on the dark room with their door still securely locked.

His thumping heart starts to slow as his soul returns to his body and feels the warmth of Robert's back pressed to his.

Follow the orders. You were born to follow orders, not question them. Guilt riddled fear chills his veins.

How far will he go using the scapegoat of *I'm only following orders*. How long until those following orders are instructed to turn on themselves.

Chapter 21

“Ball?” William raises his eyebrows at the assignment posted to the wall in the common room. Robert crosses his arms with a frown. “A week ago they shot a boy down from the sky, people lost the right to privacy in their homes and the nobles, they are going to a ball.”

“Yep.”

William throws his head back, “I don’t want to deal with drunk nobles.”

“At least it’s not the city. Maybe we will even get to eat the leftovers.” Robert shrugs knowing despite their jokes and complaints they are lucky. He won’t have to worry about arresting anyone at the ball. No one will have terror in their eyes when they see him in uniform.

“I will happily eat it all of it with discontent.” William huffs.

Music fills the space around William.

Standing like decor against the wall, he blows a strand of hair that has fallen over his eye. There is only so long someone can watch people laugh in conversations he

can't join, eat food he can't touch, and women dancing in gowns he'll never get to wear.

He tilts his head peering through the mingling people to where Robert is standing. As if he could feel William's gaze, Robert turns his bright eyes to him with a smile.

"Let me go!"

William's head snaps to attention scanning the room. He knows he heard someone shout but it was barely noticeable over the music and chatter. It was words of distress, not a frivolous comment amongst friends and couples.

Standing on his tip toes, he cranes his neck. *Damn.* He's too short. He can barely see to the center of the room.

His searching ears grab the phrase as its shouted, "I said let go!"

There is a gasp from the crowd sending William in the direction he needs. He shoves his way through the useless spectators and as he nears the front row of watchers, he sees a large drunken man gripping a girl in a gold and purple taffeta gown by the arm. The man aggressively yanks the girl who is half his weight forward.

"Hey you! Stop!" William demands pushing his way through the last of the people. "Unhand her!" He orders to the man who ignores him.

"I said let go!" The young woman hollers. William skids to a stop as the dark haired girl drives the heel of her hand in the man's nose.

Nice.

"OH!" The man's friends shout in unison, "She hit him!" Amiria hurriedly backs away from the incident as Robert appears behind her.

Blood running from his nose, the man is encircled by his drunken posy. "You wench!" he spits

Inexorable

“Hands behind your back!” William orders reaching for his arm.

The drunk and bleeding man swats at William’s outstretched hand who instinctively snatches the man by the wrist and keeping the arm as straight as a board and with a step to the side and back William throws the man to the ground.

“Woah! Hey!” The entourage shouts as they watch their friend get taken down. The audience gasps all trying to get a better view.

Robert seizes Amiria by the arm as William puts his knee into the man’s back, the arm still in William’s control. Breathing heavy at the adrenaline rush, William cocks his head at the girl. *Is that?*

“Don’t touch me!” The girl shouts pulling away from Robert.

William watches the recognition in Robert’s eyes as it they realize who she is. A Winged Rider. Amiria Rey, next in line to be Field Marshal. She lives here in the castle. They’ve seen her leaving the grounds once a week like clockwork for the past several years.

“None of you have the authority to touch me!” She sways drunkenly.

William can see the subtle movements of her arm curling to herself and the slight bend to her spine as her body wants to curl in on itself, to hide, but she must portray authority.

Regaining himself, Robert clears his throat, “Ms. Rey. I’m going to need you to vacate the hall.”

“Best thing I’ve heard all night.” Amiria Rey sighs with a slump of her shoulders.

Weird. William thinks as the young Winged Rider disappears through the crowd who gladly steps out of her way giving her a straight path to the exit.

“Are you going to get off me? Or are you taking a break on my back?” The man beneath William gripes, reminding William he was still there. “Did you hear me? Robert kneels beside the man and takes hold of his free arm. “Hey! I was the one who was assaulted!” He protests as Robert passes the hand over to William who places shackles on the man.

Robert and William each take an arm and hoist the man to his feet.

Smirking, Robert states, “What we saw was you laid your hands on a Winged Riders without her consent.”

The man pales until the only color left on his face is the blood from his nose.

William adds, “You’re lucky a broken nose is *all* you got.”

With the main act over the audience loses interest in the guard’s escorting the man across the room. They shrug and return to their activities and pointless conversations. William guides the three of them to a small door tucked into the back of the room almost hidden by a tapestry.

As they push through the door the man speaks up again, “We’re out of sight. You can cut the act and take these cuffs off me.” He scowls, “How much do I owe?”

William bites his tongue as their job is undermined. They really are just for show in the castle, nobles don’t get arrested for what they deem “petty stuff.” People down in the city can be killed for adventuring into a new hobby or—his eyes flick to Robert— be killed for being in love. But, those who live here in the castle are only out a few coins.

Inexorable

Knowing how the rules work, Robert grinds his teeth, "What do you got?"

"Well..." The man draws out the word, "I'm in my best dress. I didn't exactly bring my purse to a ball. How about an I owe you?"

William's face falls as flat as his words, "We don't do I owe you."

The man throws his head back with a groan, "Come on, man to man. Didn't I already pay with my face?"

Robert holds up his hand, "No. You paid Amiria Rey that. You haven't paid *us* anything."

"Can't you give me some slack? None of my friends are going to let me live this down."

Pulling on the restraints, William's eyes narrow, "You aren't in the position to be negotiating."

The man's head turns back and forth as he eyes both of them, "Are you two serious?"

Keeping his face stoic Robert answers, "Completely."

"Being a guard doesn't pay well." William shrugs.

Growling, the man hunches his shoulders giving in, "Fine take the ring from my thumb, it's silver."

Robert and William turn the man to face the wall. With William keeping a firm grip on the man Robert removes the offered ring plus two more.

"Hey! I said one!" The man tries to turn around but William presses his forearm into the man's back pinning him to the wall.

Pocketing the rings in a bag on his belt Robert answers, "One was to pay the fine for your crime. One is to pay for the removal of the cuffs. Then the last is a tax because you are holding us up from our posts."

"You guards get drunk off power don't you? I bet it gets you off at night."

Robert and William hold their expressions neutral. William's voice is monotone as he unlocks the shackles, "Completely."

Rubbing his wrists the man turns toward the door leading back to the ball but Robert steps in front of him blocking his path, "I'm sorry sir, but you are not permitted in the ball room at this time." Robert smiles.

The man scowls and spins away grumbling, "I hope the worst for you two."

"Take care." William waves.

The man turns around the corner and is gone, William leans against the wall with a slump and slides down to the floor, "I hate doing that."

Robert shrugs, "he deserves more than losing a few rings."

"I don't like being the bad guy." William crosses his arms.

"Is this about us having to start raiding people's homes?" Robert squats down, sitting on his haunches.

"I'm afraid of where we're heading."

Robert reaches out and places his hand on William's arm, his eyes full of dread, "Me too."

Chapter 22

Resting his head on his arms, William watches lazily from the top of the inner bailey as people mill about their day in the inner grounds of the castle. “It’s been almost a month and we haven’t been assigned to the city yet. How do we keep getting lucky?”

Robert leans his lower back against the parapet, “Captain Mannering even grabbed extras to go into town with him. It’s never a good sign if the captain goes. I—I don’t know if I can.”

Picking his head up at the break in Robert’s voice, William peers up at him, “You’re not going to.” William won’t let him. If he can prevent it, he won’t let anything else haunt his mind even if he has to take on that weight. Except he doesn’t want to see the devastation on anyone’s face because of him like he saw on that baker. How long. How long until they have been consumed from the inside out by this job.

Robert drops his gaze then slowly casts it out over the wall. His body follows turning to face the castle grounds with a sigh. How long can they keep being *lucky*? A maroon cloak catches his eye, “William look.”

William strains his neck to see without standing up Amiria Rey slipping out of the inner bailey, "I wonder where she goes?"

"I don't know, she never wears anything Cavalry."

William purses his lips thinking, "I guess everyone has their secrets."

Trying to only step on Robert's shadow, William follows behind as they travel along the outer bailey wall back to the barracks.

"Oof. Sorry." William says as he runs into Robert's back who has stopped in his tracks.

"Is that blood?"

"Blood?" William peaks around to see they have crossed paths with Jerrad, who had moved out of the barracks a year ago, walking with Captain Mannering and two other guards.

"Yeah." Jerrad gloats. "One tried to get away. It's a lot easier to dispose of them in the street instead of taking the time to hang them."

"Di-dispose?" William's eyes widen at the understanding.

"Right, you two have been stuck on bailey duty and going to *dances*. That's fine, let the men handle the real work."

"That's enough Adder." Captain Mannering instructs, "Go clean your weapon before it rusts."

"Yes, Sir." Jerrad inclines his head toward the younger captain with respect. As he walks past Robert and William he throws out, "Then I'll head home to my *wife*."

"You two." Clyde directs his focus to the two guards.

"Yes, Sir." they answer in unison.

Inexorable

"I'm assigning you a new post until further notice."

"New post sir?" Robert asks.

"Those are the words I used, did I not Boheca?"

Robert shrinks, "Uh you did, sir."

Clyde nods, "New post starting tomorrow. Cages inside the outer bailey wall." Robert and William's eyes widen at the prospect of having to face the people who have been carted in. "It's a two-man post. I need a pair that works well together—alone." A brief smile crosses Clyde's face. "I will forewarn you, the convicted have nothing better to do than get under guard's skin. I need levelheaded people. My last pair failed at that."

"Y-yes Sir." Robert musters out through his stiffening body.

Clyde eyes the paling guard then locks eyes with the shorter one who appears almost itching with something that Clyde isn't sure of. The dark green eyes shift eagerly back and forth between him and Guard Boheca.

William relaxes after Captain Mannering turns on his heel without a word and departs in the direction of his quarters in the inner bailey.

Running his fingers through his short hair, Robert grips it at the roots, "No—"

William's chest constricts at the sight of Robert. He desperately wants to remove the hand tearing at his scalp and hold it, but he can't. Not out here, not until they are alone.

Alone

What did Captain Mannering mean when he said *alone*.?

The putrid smell invades their senses before they finish opening the door to the keep hidden in the far corner of the outer bailey, or what the guards refer to as the cages. That is essentially what is inside this space, metal cages with straw covered ground as if designed for animals.

These faces behind the rusting bars are not animals. They are the broken souls of humans, people that once were your neighbor, your friend, your family.

Those who broke the law in Lumierna have always been kept in here, but there rarely has been more than one person at a time and never longer than a single night before they were brought to the stocks, pillory, or gallows.

Now with the excess influx from the recent surge of arrests, the people are left waiting days for their time to debut on stage and wear the noose.

Bile climbs up Robert's throat. He slaps his hand to his mouth barely able to catch it in time. The liquid that managed to escape past his lips before he swallowed it back down leaks through the fingers of his leather gloves.

Hollowed faces watch with expressions as if they were the ones looking out at the people who have committed unspeakable crimes. Their still breathing bodies huddle together for warmth and a small sense of security.

Robert turns and stumbles out of the keep and slides down the wall to the side of the door to his haunches with his face in hands. The little girl's face staring up at him as she asks him where he is taking her dad is a stain on his subconscious. He begins to shake his head as if he could wipe her face clean from his mind, but she is here to stay. Her questioning expression was behind each of the faces he saw in there. How many more like her

Inexorable

watched as their parent was taken away to never to return.

Children screaming as the person who had given them life is dragged out of the door. Mother's crying out to their child who have barely made it into adulthood and will never grow any older. Wives and husbands being ripped from each other's arms.

This could be him. This could be William.

No please not William, not William, not William.

"Robert!" William is squatted beside Robert shaking his knee.

Unable to hear William over his own screaming thoughts, Robert continues to rock and mutter to himself. William doesn't care who is able to see, he throws his arms around Robert and cradles his head to his shoulder protectively.

"Will." The word comes out in a broken breath.

Resting his cheek on Robert's head, he rubs his back, "I'm here. I'm right here."

Slowly Robert begins to unravel, his body going slack and sitting down on the ground exhausted. His rapid breathing finally settling into a steady pace.

"Will." Robert's eyes find William's

William strokes Robert's cheek, "I'm right here. I'll always be right here."

Lifting his hand Robert takes William's and slips his fingers around his then rests his head back with a sigh.

Feeling the presence of an audience, William checks to his side and realizes he is knelt in front of the open door. Every set of eyes behind the bars are watching him.

A woman closest to the bars raises her lip in disgust, "You should be in here not us. We simply broke an absurd law, but you are an abomination."

William internally shatters, "I know." His hands fall to the ground as he hunches over.

His whole body out of view of the sentenced, Robert's hand comes into sight and rests on top of William's. William peers through his overhanging auburn bangs to Robert's reassuring eyes. Brown eyes that can express *I love you* better than any string of words.

"Disgusting." A man blanches.

"Hey—" Another man calls out as an order to stop.

"What? I'm getting hung for baking bread, but they are allowed to commit sin on the king's soil?"

"Just like us, they know they will be killed if they are caught, but what made us make the choice to continue. Huh? Huh! Anyone?" He looks around but everyone remains silent. "The answer is because you were following your heart and you believed it was worth it. They didn't choose to be guards; they didn't choose to be at this post. At least let them choose who they want to love. Give them at least that freedom."

The room is silent. Then one woman speaks up, "Our crime is not a sin."

"God is dead, your sins are void. Let them have some form of happiness in this cruel world."

No one else speaks up.

One sitting inside the keep and the other outside, Robert and William lean their backs against the wall. Their hands intertwined in the threshold. It has been about three weeks since Captain Mannering assigned them this

Inexorable

post and other than at night when they are relieved, they have not set foot anywhere else.

William blinks at a new set of faces, the original people he met here— the man who stood up for them—are gone. Twice every week eighteen are taken. He swallows hard and closes his eyes. One hundred and eight, he has seen one hundred and eight people come through here including the nameless that sit before him now. He has counted each person who has come and gone. This will be a number he wants to remember forever. He wants to at least remember how many people he watched during their final days without even asking their names. Except for Toby. The man from the first day. William had overheard his name and he vowed to never forget it.

“Captain Mannering!” Robert releases William’s hand and leaps to his feet.

Out of view from the arriving Captain, William is slower to rise and steps out into the daylight.

“Bocheca, Ingle.”

Every several days, Robert and William stand by as guards led by Clyde tie the next to be sentenced together and lead the unlucky group to the gallows.

Jerrad isn’t with the group this time as the guards flood around Robert and William to the cage door.

“Congratulations.” Clyde stands before a confused Robert and William, “Today you’re leaving the keep. I want you two to walk up front beside me.”

“Us sir?”

“Why do you always question my choices? I *am* your captain.”

“Apologies Sir.”

“I’ve had enough people always volunteering to walk that I haven’t needed you two, but you can’t sit over here on break forever. Your turn is up.”

Robert pales and swallows a lump in his throat.

Chapter 23

There is only one thing keeping William together as they march through the city streets. William can't see Robert on the other side of Captain Mannering's horse, but knowing Robert is less than 10 feet away from him needing him gives him the ability to hold strong.

If he breaks, if he lets himself shatter into useless pieces that no longer resemble a guard, he won't be here for his partner, there will be nothing to keep Robert intact. William stumbles as a rock rolls under his foot. Composing himself, William doesn't need to check to know Captain Mannering's eyes are on him. How much longer can his fraying strands hold both him and Robert together.

He can hear their feet, the shuffling steps of the condemned, only several steps behind him. Their presence lurking outside his peripheral like the shadow in the corner of your room after you wake from a nightmare.

Who have they become? *What* have they become? They are marching people to their deaths and aren't doing anything about it. They aren't saying anything about it. They can't. They won't. Call them selfish, but it's the only way to survive. To hide in plain sight. So, he will hold his

face flat and curl his fingers in to hide the trembling. He will play the part as the monsters who lurk the city streets.

Because— William closes his eyes. Because— He opens them and searches for a glimpse of Robert but is only able to see his shoes past the horse's legs.

Who are they to be walking these people during their final moments of life? Their crime? Making choices to express who they are inside? To better their lives? To live a dream? To experience freedom?

William bites his lip. He has been committing not only a crime punishable by death, but a sin in the eyes of their god. Where will they go when they are finally caught? He tilts his head back seeking the clouds sliding through the sky without restraint.

No one here is a criminal, so why are we seen as such?

It does not hurt other people for someone to seek out happiness and fulfillment in their life. It does not harm other people to be in love with someone they disapprove of. Why must we try and control how others live?

There at the end of the road in the town square is the emerging gallows. The swinging ropes hang dauntingly over everyone's head.

William swallows hard at the sight as he struggles to breathe through his closing throat. He sucks in breaths with each step. His vision beginning to pulse each time his heart slams against his chest.

It's not for us. It's not for us. It's not for us. William repeats in his mind to keep himself marching forward. *It's not for Robert. It's not for me. It's not for us.*

With his mind faltering his feet stay in step. After a lifetime of training, he doesn't miss a beat. They walk because they are commanded to, he walks because he is

Inexorable

commanded to. He likes to tell himself he wouldn't march off a cliff if he is ordered to, but his feet moving to someone else's accord bringing them toward death, makes him start to think otherwise.

Quiet. It's so quiet. William notices after coming out of the deepest parts of his mind.

A shiver runs down his spine. He would rather everyone be screaming in protest than this, this heavy silence weighted down with all the words unsaid.

William keeps his eyes forward, unable to even seek out Robert's in fear of seeing the scrutinizing faces around him. Their lips don't move but their eyes jam the phrase into his soul. They are all calling him a despicable monster as if he was the one who sentenced their loved ones to death.

They need a face to blame and it's not the royals' faces they see marching the men and women down the streets they once lived in.

He is the bad guy. Not the villain but something worse, he is the puppet that does the villain's bidding without question. He is disposable, a tool, and he knows what he is doing is wrong but he is choosing his own neck—Robert's neck over theirs.

William finally scans the first faces of the crowd since he had started walking from the castle. Nobles and members of the Winged Cavalry sit on raised seats as if they are here to watch a theater show.

All of them appeared bored but one, Amiria Rey. She wears the face every one of them should have. Horror and disgust are slapped across her face. Her eyes worry as if she will be next.

William climbs the stairs to the stage leading the main act. At the top Robert stands pale and sweating

desperate for the one thing that will always bring him comfort and security.

Using the excuse of limited space, Robert steps close enough for his fingers to brush William's. William's fingers extend instinctively to take Robert's hand in his but pulls back in time and curls them into his palm before they betray him.

Green eyes check back up to Amiria. His heart turns to stone in his chest as he sees her watching him. As if spooked she turns away pretending she didn't notice, her face quietly revealing she has her own secrets.

William cocks his head. *Are you hiding something Amiria Rey?* Her hand is being held, he follows the man's arm up to Calix Gautier's face. Persistence worked out for him after all, but he will never know the advice he gave him two years ago also worked.

Turning a shade of grey Robert steps to the side with William as the executioners take over but their faces are obscured. They are not the faces the people here today will be remembering.

The ropes are raised above the condemneds' heads. He can't watch this. How can anyone watch this.

He turns his head finding the safety net in Robert's chainmail, but he can't help but flinch when the floorboards drop. Bile climbs his throat as he hears the bodies removed and the next group is forced into place.

William, his mind and soul shattering, drifts his gaze up to Robert's face. Jaw locked and eyes distant Robert stares at the roof tops.

Chapter 24

Their breakfast coats the spot on the back wall of the barracks where Robert hunches over with his forearm pressed into the molding wood. William stands beside him soothingly rubbing his back.

Robert wretches, clenching his stomach as he heaves. He barely made it back to the barracks before giving in. He had floated the entire walk back with the help of William's guidance. He blanked out. He remembers the nooses being raised then his mind slipped away as if he was no longer in his body. The father he had taken all those years ago appeared in his vision, this is where he had sent him. That man dropped before everyone watching because of Robert. He can only hope the little girl was not out there watching like these people are now. He took her father and now he can't count on his digits the lives he helped end.

He was unable to return to his body until the barracks were in view. The visual sight of his haven, the window to room seventeen, and the loving touch of William's hand on his back.

Everything came crashing in and then out of him as he began to throw up on the pathway.

Observing his surroundings, William checks to his right and left before moving his hand from Robert's back up to the bottom of his hair, sliding his fingers through the dark short strands. This small gesture is breaking the boundaries of what he is allowed to do outside their barracks room, but his best friend needs him.

"Hey!"

William snatches his hand back and spins to face the side of the building where the voice had come from.

Peeking around the corner of the barracks is one of the newer guards. In three years, Robert and William have been housed here long enough to watch a new wave of men come as the older ones leave. Often marrying female guards to finally move out of the barracks.

"Is he okay?" The new guard asks genuinely concerned.

The thumping in his chest slows as William lies, "Yeah, just don't eat the breaded egg at Wingtip Tavern."

"Good to know." and he disappears.

Robert coughs, his stomach dry heaving the emptied contents. No one else around, William returns to rubbing the space between Robert's shoulder blades, but he is struggling to keep himself together. He has made it through the hanging, and he's held on tight while Robert let loose. He is now leaking at the seams as they strain to hold the shape of a guard.

"Let's get out of here." William says through a clenched jaw.

Green in the face, Robert wipes his mouth with the back of his sleeve, "To our room?"

Inexorable

William shakes his head and squeezes his eyes shut, “No. I need away from *here*.”

Through the back gate of the castle leading to the Winged Cavalry’s base, Robert and William with their chainmail disregarded behind the barracks escape into the mountains.

William unties his gambeson as they pass through the ribbons of light casting down from the needle canopy stories above them. They have lost visual of Lumierna, the castle, and any other person. Their knuckles bump as they move in the narrow space between two trees. Turning their heads they subconsciously search behind him then afraid to be caught. There is nothing but the golden trees lit by the late afternoon sun and the songs of the birds.

Pulling their eyes away from the falling leaves travelling with the breeze they face each other.

Shedding every hardship they’ve encountered, tears stream down their faces. William reaches out and slips his hand into Robert’s opened gambeson and curls his fingers into the linen fabric of his tunic.

Fighting the mental restraints to not touch William while outside their room Robert cups the back of William’s head and with a widespread hand on his back Robert pulls William into him. William fitting perfectly in the curvature of his neck.

He is holding William outside. They are outside the confines of their room in each other’s arms. The sun is on their skin and fresh air in their lungs and the boy they love is holding onto them. There is no better moment than this.

Together they weep as they come unglued without the societal pressure forcing them to hold it together.

Robert kisses the top of William's autumn hair. "I love you," he chokes out. "I'll love you till the day I die."

William brings his face up from the tear-soaked fabric and kisses the underside of Robert's jaw. He lowers his mouth to William's tasting him for a brief kiss. Robert brushes his face to William's breathing in his existence. His lips find William's sending warmth through their bodies. William's hands crawl up Robert's chest to his collar and pulls on the fabric intensifying the kiss into a hungry desire.

Pulling away William takes the open sides of Robert's gambeson and tugs them outwards. Robert smirks and helps William shrug the thick fabric off and forsaken it falls to the forest floor. Eager fingers find their way under Robert's tunic and trace the defined lines of his stomach as their lips reconnect.

Grinning madly through their kissing Robert grabs the back of his tunic and pulls it up over his head and throws it to the ground with the forgotten gambeson. With the streaming sunlight bright on his bare tanned skin, Robert crashes back into William. His mouth connecting with the smaller boy's as he yanks the soft armor top off William. Nibble fingers find the hem of William's shirt and pull it over his head, their mouths only separating long enough for the fabric to pass.

Lips to lips. Wandering hands. Each touch, each taste. Their desire for each other only grows stronger.

William cups his hand around the back of Robert's neck and guides him down to the soft moss-covered ground. His body begging to feel the weight of Robert on top of him.

Robert's narrow hips fit between William's thighs and melds his body to the only thing he loves in the world. A

Inexorable

small moan escapes William as he feels the hardness of Robert press into him.

With affection and adoration, Robert kisses William down the neck to his collar bone. William tilts his head back in pleasure, exposing more of the sensitive skin with a gasp. William's pale fingers grab the sides of Robert's head and moves him back up so their faces are levelled. Hanging suspended in the moment above William, Robert is struck by the whimsical glow of William's green eyes and auburn hair against the forest floor as if mother nature and God aligned when creating him.

Holding himself propped up on his elbows, Robert brushes a tear away as it escapes the corner of William's eye. They both let out a single breathy laugh as they take each other in, then dotingly Robert lowers his lips to William's.

Coming down from the high the mountain, Robert and William emerge from the forest back to the grounds outside the castle walls. Robert chuckles and he picks a leaf from William's hair.

"Hey!" A Winged Rider in his leather armor yells, "What are you two doing!" As if snagged by the forest roots, Robert and William halt in place. "Civilians are not permitted in there!"

"We uh we were," Robert stammers. He needs to think of something, anything, but what? For what reason would two people legally be in the forest?

Robert's heart is pounding with such intensity William can feel each beat. Even if the Winged Rider guesses incorrectly about why they were out there it wouldn't matter. The Rider can make up any incriminating reason that will give them the same fate as the people

they helped kill today. It's their word against someone of authority.

"They were under my orders."

The Rider spins to Clyde standing beside the exit. Seeing the navy blue of Captain Mannering's uniform the Rider asks, "And what were these orders, Captain?" The last word comes out as an insult.

"I told them to take a walk to clear their heads." Clyde's face remains firm and professional. "I need my men focused while on patrol. I don't want anything getting by."

The Rider scrunches his face, "Whatever." Shaking his head as he begins following the path to the base he mumbles, "Didn't know the guards are run so soft."

"Captain—" Robert start but Clyde cuts him off.

"I don't want apologies, excuses, or thank yous." Captain Mannering dismisses. "You two are to return to the barracks. You're back on wall patrol starting tomorrow." Robert and William stand blinking blankly at him. "Now guardsmen!"

"Yes sir!" They jump. Dipping his chin William grabs Robert by the wrist and tugs him along.

Chapter 25

(6 months later)

The warm summer sun bears down on their chainmail and thick gambesons creating a humid atmosphere over their skin. With a bead of sweat dripping down the side of his face William sticks out his tongue as he focuses. He pinches his bangs growing past his brow and cuts at them with his dagger.

"Stop that." Robert places his hand on William's and pushes the blade down and away.

William shakes his head swooping his hair out of his eyes, "I need a haircut."

"I like it."

"I don't know." William pushes his hair back and holds it away from his face. "Maybe I should cut it like yours."

"Not with that forehead. Put your hair back down, you're scaring the nobles." Robert struggles to hold back his laugh.

Dropping his hair William hits Robert on the shoulder who bursts into laughter as he playfully recoils. His laughter abruptly stops as he catches sight of something past William.

William raises an eyebrow, "What?"

Grabbing the top of William's head, Robert turns him to see two wyverns landing near the stables.

"There is someone with a bag on their head," Robert points out.

"A bag?" William squints as if to improve his vision.

"Yeah."

"Do you think the baker kid was alive and they caught him."

"I don't think so, this person looks small like a girl."

"Ingle! Boheca!" Captain Mannering hollers into the common room of the barracks.

Everyone with a mouthful of breakfast oats turns to the two guards sitting wide eyed at the far side of the room.

"You two!" Captain Mannering points at them then uses his thumb to signal outside, "Come with me."

Leaping up from the bench they leave their bowls where they are and refuse to make eye contact with any of the accusatory smirks. There is only one reason a Captain will be demanding to see them this early. They're in trouble.

Captain Mannering doesn't speak for several paces as he leads them away from prying ears. He spins on his heels and faces them with a grin, "Exciting news."

"So..." William drags out the word, "We're not in trouble?"

"No. Of course not. Wait. Why? What did you do?"

"Nothing." William clams up.

"It was the tone of your voice." Robert fills in.

Captain Mannering eyes them both, "Actually, it's the opposite." Robert and William share a glance. "I've been

Inexorable

selected to oversee a special detail and I need some assistance.”

The two guards blink simultaneously and continue to stare at their Captain.

“It’s you two. I’ve chosen you two. Now I’m regretting my decision.” Captain Mannering says annoyed.

Robert speaks up, “Can I ask why we’ve been provided this privilege, Sir?”

“I’ve been your Captain for two years. I know you are excellent guards.” Clyde’s voice drops, “but I chose you because I know you can keep a secret.”

Robert and William’s blood turns cold as their Captain’s eyes burrow into them. Robert wants to reach out and grab William’s hand. What does it matter? Their Captain knows, he knows and he’s using it as leverage. One slip up and they’re dead.

A smile spreads across Clyde’s face, “That confirms it.”

“Please.” Robert’s voice breaks. Please spare William. He will work servitude to their Captain if he let William go.

Clyde scoffs, “Oh, don’t look at me like I’m holding the rope.” William involuntarily gulps. “Now, there is more information before you make your decision. If you accept this proposal you two will be leaving the barracks and moving into my apartment in the inner bailey. Your work will be taking place in the castle and it will lessen the chances of people asking you questions if you don’t have to deal with them,” Clyde waves his hand signifying all the men in the common room.

“How did you know?” Robert doesn’t clarify about what.

“Let’s just say.” Clyde’s eyes drop to their shoes. He pauses taking several breaths. He lifts his gaze, “I understand. So do you accept?”

With everything they own, including their gear, in a sack on their backs Robert and William stand staring up at a four story building with small individual living spaces opening up to the balcony. Each space occupied by a Sergeant or higher that doesn't live off the castle grounds with their families.

"Come on." Clyde pushes past them. "Third floor." He begins climbing the stairs without checking that they were following. He speaks over his shoulder, "Your assignment starts tonight. I need to get you up to date with the details."

"What did we agree to." William utters under his breath.

"Your room is the one to the right." Clyde stands in the center of his quaint home. The front door opens to a small room with a tiny hearth that vents out the back of the building. The room fits a square table with a single stool at it and several empty storage shelves. "Set your stuff down in the room." He glances down to the single stool. "I need to get more seats."

Pushing open the door Robert and William enter the small bedroom with a single bed big enough for two people.

Clyde speaks up from behind them, "I hope you don't mind sharing. It came with the place."

Robert raises an eyebrow, "Two beds but only one stool?"

Leaning against the table Clyde answers, "I prefer a pad on the ground." At the motion of Robert and William

Inexorable

setting down their bags Clyde begins, "Alright gentlemen, are you aware of the Winged Rider by the name of Amiria Rey?" Clyde uses his foot to push the stool in their direction.

William silently asks Robert if he wants the seat. Robert shakes his head and sits on the floor allowing William the stool.

Situated on the ground Robert answers, "She was the next in line Field Marshal but she went missing months ago."

"She *was* missing. She has been recovered and is being held in the main keep for her crimes."

"Crimes, Sir?"

"She is being held on treason against Wyverna. Mutiny against the Winged Cavalry and desertion."

Robert and William's mouths hang open. One person alone can manage all of that? Desertion they understand, she ran away, but the other two? Treason and Mutiny? What could one girl possibly do to result in that?

"What? How?" Robert asks.

"Let's see. Lied about the whereabouts of a fugitive for years. Helped the Fugitive escape. Provided misleading evidence. Ran away while on deployment and found with the fugitive baker."

"He wasn't killed?" William cocks his head.

"Correct."

"The king lied about that?" Robert adds.

"Correct."

"And they are keeping her in the main keep?"

"Correct."

"Not hanging her?"

"Correct."

Robert leans forward, "Why? People have been hanged for sewing, but she commits mutiny and is only locked away?"

Frowning Clyde admits, "I was not provided that information. Our assignment is to watch over her and assure she remains alive, but with what our job is tonight. I can only guess whatever is planned for her, she probably wishes she was dead."

William's face turns grim, "What are we going to do to her?"

"Strip her of her Insignia."

Robert is on his feet as William grows pale, "Where going to do what! How!"

"Branding." Clyde clicks his tongue against his teeth, "Serves her right though."

"How could you say that." Robert says aghast.

Clyde turns his head to the hearth, "I was in her class." He pauses unable to dive further into it. "Neither of us are riders anymore."

His posture falling, Robert questions, "You were a Winged Rider?" He had heard rumors, but he took it as people not believing someone his age could jump to Captain off his evaluation scores alone. He wasn't promoted he was—

Shrugging off his gambeson, Clyde stands in a short sleeve undershirt. His right arm exposed to the first people since his insignia was taken from him. A rectangular burn scar where his original Winger Rider insignia was and replaced with a deformed version of the guard insignia over the webbed tissue.

"Now we'll match." Clyde runs his thumb down the length of his scar.

Inexorable

William stands grabbing Robert's hand, "That's torture. You want us to help torture someone?"

His face still tilted down to his arm Clyde asks, "Do you want to go back to the barracks and wait for them to get rid of the doors?" His eyes flick up to them.

Robert and William swallow.

"I thought not. It's a cruel world and we do what we must to survive."

Distraught, William finds Robert's face in search of comfort. Robert closes his eyes and sighs heavy enough for the both of them, "So tonight?"

Chapter 26

William's parents always wanted him to become an interior castle guard. They would be proud to see him here, standing outside the Main Keep. He is working on a special detail for King Dietrich, every guard dreams of an opportunity like this, but he never has. He stands beside Robert now with their hands figuratively tied behind their backs.

Peering through the view window, Clyde addresses Robert and William, "Don't underestimate her. She might be weakened but she is still a Winged Rider. They only stop fighting when they are dead."

"Oh boy." William groans.

"Grab her and get her strapped into the chair as quickly as possible."

"That's our only instructions?" Robert asks nervously.

Clyde speaks over his shoulder, "Don't let her get the upper hand."

"Thanks." Robert says grimly.

Pushing into the Keep Clyde fiddles with the keys in his hand watching the bronze glint in the fire light as it

Inexorable

shifts through his fingers. He has the keys. He *has* the keys. For the first time in his life, he has something she doesn't. His feet stop in front of the cold metal bars as he observes the ragged girl sleeping.

He spent his life jealous of her.

Talent, looks, Field Marshal, freedom to court who she wants, not like she talked to any men anyways. She took it all for granted and threw it away. His dream life was garbage to her.

He would have given anything to trade places with her, to be *her*, because then it would only be social class that separates him from the boy he fancies. That is something he could work around. Something manageable. Something he doesn't have to hide. But no, life would never be that easy.

Remaining behind Clyde, William and Robert quickly squeeze each other's hand. They have never truly met Amiria Rey, not counting their brief encounter at the ball. This frail *thing* curled up on the drab and dreary floor does not resemble the girl they always watched leaving the castle grounds.

Night clothing more brown than white hang loosely around her bony figure, hair matted into a nest, flops over her face stealing away any resemblance of any human traits.

William remembers the horrified face she was wearing at the hanging. Has she been wishing for change all this time?

Is that why she threw everything away? A lavish life, a promising career, power. Was it for the baker? For herself? For the both of them? He pushes back the sympathy rising. If it was for the baker, William would have done the same thing for Robert. He would do

whatever it takes to protect him, he's the only person he is comfortable being around.

The two young guards take their position flanking each side of Clyde as he turns the key. The heavy lock makes an audible clunk as the mechanism turns and releases the seal.

The girl on the ground startles awake, her stiff muscles slow to move as she squints up at them, "Clyde?"

"Hello Amiria. It's good to see you again."

Focusing his breathing, William anticipates his captain's command like a loyal dog. No questions, only obey.

She doesn't respond back to Clyde's greeting as she evaluates Robert and William. *Typical Rider*, Clyde thinks. Always excavate your surroundings and read your situation before moving forward. "I didn't mean to be rude. Let me introduce my men. This is Robert and William. If you care to remember, I was demoted from the Cavalry to lead Lumierna's guards. So they work for me personally and are here in case you put up a fight."

"Fight?" The girl finally speaks, her voice cautious, "Against what?"

Here we go William takes in a breath and holds it in.

"This."

With a lifetime of training and years of partnership Robert and William are across the room in a flash of silver chainmail. They grab Amiria by her biceps and lift her from the floor. William mentally deflates as Amiria digs her heels into the floor. He doesn't want to fight, especially not a Winged Rider. She is acting in self-defense. He is the attacker. She is in the right. He is in the wrong.

Inexorable

Peering over Amiria to Robert, his partner who can hear him with no words spoken, William suggests changing tactics. Robert's eyes say back that this is going to get messy and together they snatch up one of Amiria's legs before she can react and suspend her in the air between them. She barely weighs more than the gear they are wearing as they easily carry her out of the cell.

Clyde lifts onto the balls of feet as if he has been eagerly waiting all his life for this moment. He falls back onto his heels as he watches Amiria begin to thrash in his guard's hands.

Even with leather gloves on, William's hand begins to slip as her legs kick about throwing her body around in the air. Her leg now free from his grip, her heel batters into his knee. Feeling his knee bend in the wrong direction, William clamps his hand over his mouth and bites back the yelp of pain as he begins to stagger to the ground. He releases Amiria and catches himself in a kneel, his knee already throbbing, leaving Robert to handle her alone.

Biting his lip in pain William lifts his head to see the oncoming foot ram into the side of his face. His vision flashes white as his body follows the direction of his head and is thrown to the ground. William cups his cheekbone and groans. His aching head pressed to the cold floor that has unfortunately become too familiar. He fights against the restraints of dizziness and pushes himself up as Clyde yanks Amiria from Robert's diminishing hold by the roots of her hair and drags her to the chair.

Amiria, as they all predicted, resists being sat in the chair. Her head is forced back by Clyde while Robert uses his knee to pin her hips back in place. Moving his jaw while massaging it William joins Robert and snags her flailing arm and slaps it down to the armrest and straps it in.

After her other arm is retrained Robert and William quickly attach the lap belt and lock her legs to the chair.

Their throats stinging with their heavy breaths they quickly back away from the girl they've bound to a rotting wooden chair to be tortured. Unable to witness the fate they put her in, Robert turns his attention to William. He cups the uninjured side of his face and examines the bruising beginning to come through.

They will only focus on each other. They can't think about the words "I'm going to enjoy this" coming from their captain's mouth or her pleas asking, "Clyde, what are you going to do?"

Robert wants to hug William to his chest, less to comfort William and more to help himself. Instead, he puts his arm across William's chest and guides him several more steps back as Clyde backs up to the forge.

They aren't removing the branding iron from the forge, but they are equally as guilty for what is about to happen.

"It's best if you try and remain still." Clyde tells her the only advice he was provided when it was his arm strapped down and his mark seared from his skin. His identity, who he had lived his life as, burned away and replaced because someone else said so. The skin on his forearm begins to itch, he now must act as if the memory doesn't still linger.

Amiria cries out in terror, "Clyde! What are you going to do? Clyde!"

His heels touch the stone of the forge. He can already feel the heat seeping through the back of his maille and gambeson. Spinning around the heat hits him in the face like standing next to a dragon spewing fire. There is a roar in his ears as heart begins to elevate. He picks up the iron rod and inspects the glowing X at the end. He tilts his head to the left and to the right.

Inexorable

Again, she has it easier. This is smaller than the rectangle they used to blot out his entire insignia. King Dietrich requested the X, for some undisclosed reason he still wants visual evidence of her status as a Winged Rider.

“Clyde! Clyde! Don’t do this!”

Captain Mannerling inhales through his nose, steadying his breathing. He knows what she is doing by repeating his name. It’s a tactic to remind him of his humanity. They are both people, but humans are animals too and the animal kingdom is ruled by the strongest. Like the Winged Rider he was trained to be, Clyde accesses the part of his brain and turns off empathy. Not as if they had much to begin with.

Robert buries his face into William’s fire lit hair. He can’t see what is happening but there will never be anything that can block the animalistic wail that tears from the girl’s throat and punctures his ears. Robert can feel as William gags on the scent of cooking flesh burning their nostrils. They take a breath as the screaming stops, but they still won’t look.

Clyde squats down in front of the doubled over Amiria and sucks his teeth, “Tsk, Amiria Rey, Winged Cavalry Prodigy. King Dietrich’s pet. What has become of her? Aww.” He draws out. “Oh, how the mighty fall.” He pushes back her sweat-soaked hair and lifts her head by her chin. He wants to look her in the eye. She needs to know he is no longer at the bottom.

But with her flushed and half-lidded face exposed he finds it impossible to meet the broken girl’s eye. He speaks through his teeth, “You peaked too early. Now it’s my turn to shine.”

His expression gives in for a moment as he is taken by surprise when Amiria speaks. The words tumble out of her

mouth, "I'd rather rot in this seat than live as a subservient puppet to a merciless kingdom."

The boy who was once Amiria's classmate frowns. Even in this position she still speaks down to him. *She* is the criminal, yet she talks to him as the roles are reversed and he is. He has spent his entire life trying to be someone he is not, all for his devoted loyalty to Wyverna. Yet she spits words at him as if she is the virtuous one, the righteous one. *She* is the criminal not *him*. Not him. Not him.

Clyde releases her chin letting her head sag to her legs as he straightens up, "People who disobey the laws don't deserve mercy anyways."

He turns away no longer able to watch her as her body quakes with pain he inflicted. He can't face her because he doesn't even believe the last words he said. His eyes jump to Robert and William. He truly doesn't believe what he said.

Pointing with his chin he commands, "Lock her back up."

Robert's hand slides down William's arm and drops to his side. The girl heaped over in the chair needs aide, not to be put back into a cell that hasn't been cleaned since the day it was built. Noticing William favoring one of his legs, Robert steps over to Amiria alone and undoes the restraints. There is no fight left in her as her body continues to sag as if everything she had was expelled in her howl of agony.

Not wanting to hurt her further, Robert takes Amiria's uninjured arm and hoists her up and out of the chair. Amiria inhales sharply but makes no other sound as Robert gently guides her back to the cell. He stops at the

Inexorable

threshold and let's go of the girl watching her carry herself to the center.

Exhausted from what he has done, Clyde leans against the wall beside the door. Shock pulses through him as he notices too late Amiria has turned around and catches his eye. Suddenly he is the one strapped down while the red-hot bar is being pressed to his insignia erasing who he thought he was.

"You're wrong Clyde. You're wrong."

Even though he isn't anymore, he was raised as a Winged Rider, so he holds his composure as the phantom pain of melting flesh heats his forearm underneath the sleeve of his gambeson. His fingers crawl up and grip his ruined insignia.

The sound of the lock clicking into place snaps Clyde back. He blinks over to Robert sliding William's arm around his neck and helping him limp toward the exit. Releasing his forearm Clyde opens the door for the two guards to pass through. His eyes start to tiptoe back across the room to observe the raven he had clipped the wings from. Shaking his head, he closes the door.

In the hall Robert rubs William's back as he struggles to keep down their dinner. With his hand clamped over his mouth William diverts his eyes revolted by the sight of Clyde.

After a heavy sigh the three of them begin down the corridor, Robert and William taking the lead eagerly want to leave this night behind.

Leaning into Robert for support and an excuse to have contact in public, William touches his tender cheekbone, "Why is it always *my* face?"

Walking the length of two adults behind Robert and William, Clyde follows them back to his apartment in

silence. The two guards don't check if their Captain is behind them, they keep their eyes trained forward and their thoughts away, unable to stomach him after what they were made to do. How will they even be able to look at themselves by the end of this.

Chapter 27

Dark bags hang below Clyde's eyes. He is up before the morning bells. It's not as if he slept last night anyways. He stands leaning on the table, palms flat against the wood and sleeves rolled up exposing his scar and insignia.

His stomach churns with the smell of burning flesh still in his nose.

Unable to handle the sight any longer, Clyde grabs the linen and yanks down the sleeve of his tunic. He runs his fingers through his hair pushing it back then drags his hand down his tired face. He is only twenty years old but his soul feels ancient and heavy.

Inhaling sharply at a knock on the front door, Clyde tenses. Eyes widening at the number of taps he quickly grooms his hair and straightens his tunic. Breathing in and out with deliberately steadies his nerves.

His heart rate spikes as the door to Robert and William's room begins to open. Clyde jumps to the door slamming it closed.

"Hey!" William calls out in alarm.

"Hush," Clyde whispers harshly.

He pushes off and composes himself as he crosses the short room and answers the door.

"Breakfast as scheduled." A male servant around Clyde's age says holding up a basket of biscuits and jam.

Clyde's eyes shift to check the third floor balcony that everyone's front door opens up to then says, "Yes—come set it down on the table." Once inside, the door slowly swings shut as if by accident.

The servant quickly asks, "You took longer than normal to answer."

Swallowing hard, Clyde stares at the ground as he replies, "Long night. Extra duties." Warmth fills Clyde's aching body as the servant takes his hand.

"Are you okay?" Finnian asks.

"I'm fine," Clyde responds, not even convincing himself.

Finnian's eyes sadden, "It's not good to bottle things up. You should talk about it."

"I said, I'm fine."

Finnian dips his chin shying away.

His body sighing, Clyde adds, "It's classified."

"I see." Finnian lifts Clyde's hand to his lips and kisses his knuckles. Clyde's hand drops to his side as Finnian heads towards the door.

"Finnian."

He turns around.

Clyde rings his hands, "For dinner, can you bring enough for four. I have two roommates now."

"Yes, sir." Finnian nods with a smile.

At the sound of the front door closing Robert and William pop their heads out of their room.

Clyde pinches the brim of his nose then points at them before they can speak, "Get dressed. You have posts

Inexorable

you need to get to.” Turning to his bedroom door he pauses and speaks over his shoulder, “Don’t forget to bring food and water to the prisoner tonight—every night.”

The sun shows every freckle on William’s face as he tilts his head up to its warmth with his eyes closed. Robert watches as the fine strands of William’s copper hair flutter about his head in the warm breeze.

When William’s eyelids open, Robert can see the dark green is wet with tears.

“There’s no going back is there,” he says.

Robert’s gaze falls to the gritty dirt in the bailey below them and shakes his head.

Walking the inner bailey, Clyde catches a glimpse of Finnian helping transfer water to the apartments. Clyde’s face remains professional, a Captain observing his area, as his eyes wander Finnian’s toned physique from a lifetime of manual labor but thin from a lifetime of servitude. Finnian will never be able to work himself into a better life. No matter what he does or how hard he tries he will never lay a better road for his future children to walk on. The most he can do is try and marry someone who isn’t a servant and hope the kingdom doesn’t assign his children to that occupation for more hard laborers, but how often does someone want to risk marrying a servant for that exact reason?

There will never be a road they will walk on together. Sliding across the ground and up the bailey wall to where Robert and William are standing beside each other. Not even a road in secret. Finnian can stay for meals with him. There is nothing illegal against two people being

friends and the fact he works for Clyde's apartments brings them the excuse of how they've become acquainted. At the end of dinner Finnian will always have to leave. Social class is not what keeps them apart in the end.

Feeling eyes on him, Clyde turns back to find Finnian staring. Finnian offers a small smile and Clyde returns it.

Sitting in the main room of Clyde's apartment, Robert moves his marble across the playing mat. William pouts his lips as Robert leans back with a gloating toothless grin.

William mutters under his breath, "This game is stupid anyways."

A knock on the door snaps their heads to attention.

"Stay," Clyde commands Robert and William as he emerges from his room dressed down to a long tunic and tights. "Don't look scared. It's only dinner."

Clyde opens the door to Finnian holding a cloth covered wooden tray and an empty layered cart beside him from delivering the other meals.

"Delivery."

"Come in. Come in." Clyde steps to the side granting him access.

Finnian stops one step past the threshold. Two unknown faces sit at the table blinking back at him. Clearing his throat Finnian asks Clyde, "Your roommates?"

"Yes." Clyde touches Finnian's elbow, "You can relax. They—understand."

Shocked eyes jump back and forth between Robert and William. Then in disbelief they return to Clyde but Clyde is focused on the couple

Inexorable

“Well, you going to make him hold this all night? Clear the table.” Clyde demands.

Rushing, Robert and William’s hands bump and smack as they scoop up the marbles and roll up the mat. Several of the marbles slip from William’s hold. Clyde watches through his lashes as they roll across the floor. His lips disappear into a line while Finnian giggles at their clumsiness yet in sync movements.

Finnian bumps his shoulder into Clyde’s, “Clyde, you don’t have to scare them.”

“First name?” Robert utters with a raised eyebrow.

“I didn’t even know his first name.” William adds picking up the marbles he dropped.

Stoic Clyde uses a flick of his eyes to direct Robert and William to their room. Following their captain’s orders they vanish from sight securely shutting the door.

“You sent them away without food?” Finnian sets the tray down.

“I don’t care.” Clyde turns Finnian around and smashes their lips together.

Chapter 28

William's mouth opens in a long yawn. Holding the basket with the food and water for Amiria in one hand Robert holds his hand bladed and jokingly puts it in William's mouth.

"Bleh." William pulls his head back leaving his tongue out, "You taste like dirt."

"Well, then control your yawning." Robert elbows him.

"I'm sleepy. It's not fair. Captain Mannering gets to have dinner with Finnian then go to bed at night, but we have to take care of his prisoner."

Robert shrugs but agrees, "The king's prisoner. Mannering is our captain, sadly we must do what he says. We had agreed to this. At least we have a safe place to sleep."

"We barely get to sleep. I'm tired of doing this every night." William complains.

"It hasn't even been a week yet." Robert points out.

William sags, dragging his feet, "An incredibly long week."

Inexorable

Robert sighs, "It's been a long year." Ever since the baker flew into the clouds and people were beginning to be hung, everyday has felt as if they might be next. Life like this begins to take a toll."

The candlelight in the hall wavers as a heavy presence weighs down the air. Slowing to a stop under the immense pressure they turn inward facing each other. They pause breathing in the air between them before continuing to find Calix at their heels. His pale eyes glow in the shadows of his eyebrows from the torch's light.

"Ss-ir Gautier," Robert stutters, nearly dropping the basket. "Is there something we could assist you with?"

Calix's eyes disappear into the shadows of their sockets as his lips curl upwards, "I'll take the provisions to the girl. I have words from King Dietrich to pass on to her. So, it won't be any bother to me."

William and Robert exchange glances. The food is still delivered and they can head home early. They had seen Amiria and Calix together a lot before she deserted her kingdom. Robert doesn't remove the basket from under his arm, for some reason there's a glint in Calix's eye that is making him hesitate.

Calix continues, "You two can run along and do whatever it is you guards do."

"Y-yes sir," Robert manages, feeling intimidated by the older Winged Rider.

Calix's fingers curl around the rim of the basket and he leans in closer with a ghostly voice, "Go."

Nope. Robert steps away from the man letting go of the basket. Weaving his fingers through William's he pulls him back with him and down the hall desperately trying to remove themselves from Calix's vision.

Turning a corner they breathe a sigh of relief, hands still interlocked. Against their wishes they release their grip of the other's hand.

"He's spooky," William whispers as if Calix will reach around the corner and grab him.

"I thought the two of them were friends but—" Robert shakes his head, "There was something in his tone."

William crosses his arms, "I don't know, let's go home. It's not as if we could refuse the orders of a Winged Rider anyways."

"Yeah. I guess we can walk back slowly. I doubt Clyde will let us inside yet."

"Moonlight walk?"

"Moonlight walk."

Chapter 29

A group of starling birds sing as they flit about an apple tree in the inner bailey. Clyde stands in the shade of a buttress overseeing them. Zoning out, the small pretty birds blur as they move about. His vision snaps back as a servant's door near the tree slams open. The flock of birds flee to freedom over the castle walls.

Two young men are thrown out of the dark servant's tunnel and skid across the dry dirt.

"Hey!" Captain Mannering hollers running over as three guards emerge from the door. "Adder, what is going on he—" His mouth never finishes the word as one of the men props up on his elbows revealing his face.

Finnian. Clyde is a shield and realization is a warhammer pummeling down on him. Pleading eyes tug at Clyde's heart.

"Captain Mannering." Jerrad stoops down and yanks the roots of the second servant forcing him to face the captain whose expression hardens into stone.

Clyde recalls seeing this man working around the castle but has no name to call him by.

Jerrad continues, "They were caught *together* in a storage room. Disgusting." He lets go with a throw. The young man's head snapping as he catches himself from tasting the dirt.

"Together?" Captain Mannering plays naive, his exterior a calm mountain casting a shadow over the young man at his feet. Underneath his layers of rock a pressure is building.

"Yes, Captain." Jerrad's face creases as if he smelled something foul, "*Together.*"

Captain Mannering releases a sharp breath through his nose, "I see." He avoids Finnian's begging expression that is clawing at his defenses. Swallowing hard he tilts his head back keeping his eyes riveted to the castle roof to keep any liquid from escaping. Every word slices through his core as he speaks them, "Take them both to the keep for sentencing."

"NO!" Finnian screams as his arms are yanked behind his back and the guard knee pins his head to the ground. "Please! Please don't do this!"

Ignoring the people watching and whispering Captain Mannering turns his back to the two servants with their wrists being bound.

"Clyde!" Finnian cries.

The world stops.

The guard hoists Finnian up to his feet by his tied arms, "How does he know your first name?"

Without turning around Captain Mannering replies, "Servants never mind their business."

"Please! No!" Finnian wails.

Jaw quivering, Clyde marches on.

Inexorable

The wood stool splinters as it is thrown into the wall, the seat coming detached from the fracturing legs. Clyde beats the wall repeatedly breaking the legs apart leaving behind gouges.

“AHHH!” He grabs the lip of the table and flips it. It lands with an echoing slam. Continuing to release his emotions he screams and punches the wall splitting open his knuckles. Again, again, again he strikes, blood staining the wood. He kicks a piece of broken wood, it skids across the floor to the opening front door hitting the entering Robert’s foot.

“Captain?”

William grabs Robert by the shoulder forcing him to duck, dodging an incoming stool leg.

“Stay out of my sight!” Clyde flings open his bedroom door and slams it closed behind him.

Seething, he kicks over one of the two storage crates in his room. The remnants of who he was in his past spills out across before him. He grabs a leather winged rider bracer and hurls it.

“AHHH!” He cries out as the only way express his pain. He falls to his knees gripping his arms, his entire body quaking.

He opens his mouth to scream again, but only sobs come out as tears stream down his face.

Hundreds of faces crowd the market square. How many hangings as Clyde been to? How many has he overseen? He didn’t know those people. After bringing them to the keep he never remember their names. Remaining separated was easy when they were another nameless face he can forget about.

Today he stands in the back monitoring the crowd.
He never knew any of the condemned until today.

Now he knows.

Clyde bites his bottom lip, using the pain to keep back the intruding tears. The taste of iron fills his mouth. It's impossible, he can't watch this. The same as why he was demoted from the Winged Riders, he isn't strong enough.

Finnian follows in line across the stage and takes his place at the noose.

The heart in Clyde's chest picks up speed as the rope is moved around Finnian's head and placed around his neck. The blood in his veins runs cold as Finnian's eyes grab him from across the crowd.

The stare turns his cold blood to ice, freezing him in place, stuck staring at the only person he's been intimate with's eyes.

A person, Clyde has never admitted the truth about how deeply he truly feels about, now stands wearing a braided rope because he was caught sharing what he thought they had with another man. That could have been them, that could have been Clyde. But it wasn't.

Clyde couldn't have protected him. No matter what he did the result would always be the same. Both of them would have been hanging today.

There was nothing I could have done. Clyde convinces himself.

With the executioner's hand on the lever, Clyde shuts his eyes, his whole body flinching at the sound of the falling floorboard. He keeps his eyes on the backs of the crowd with his fists clenched. He failed Finnian even in his last moments.

Inexorable

A man pushes through the crowd away from the gallows.

A slight suspicion trickles across Clyde's mind but the excuse to distract himself drives him to leap down from his post to confront the man.

"Hey!" Clyde shouts to the unknown man leaning against the wall with his face obscured. "You can't be shoving people like that!"

Grabbing the man by the shoulder, Clyde whips him around to face him. The green hood of his cloak slips off his head and blonde curls spring to life.

Blonde curls. Hazel eyes. That is not uncommon. There is more than one citizen with those features. But—

Clyde grabs the young man's arm and eagerly pushes up the right sleeve. His grip tightens as he stares at the ruined baker's insignia. *No—it can't be.* His eyes soften as they try to understand the impossible and flick up to the terrified hazel irises.

The young man cornered against a wall only sees death trapping him there. That is how everyone sees him. He is the embodiment of death walking amongst them. He is the reaper harvesting their loved ones. In the end, even Finnian saw him for what he really is.

Feeling the trembling begin to shake his own arm, Clyde drops who he is guessing is the infamous Stirling Bakere's hand. How? How has he been alive this whole time? How has he survived? Where had he been hiding? Did he truly escape and start anew in a different kingdom where Amiria was dragged back from—and he came back? For her?

Clyde clenches his jaw. Could he ever become that man for someone? He wasn't for Finnian.

The scared boy flinches and sucks in a sharp breath as Clyde reaches forward.

He thinks I'm going to kill him. Clyde frowns. Sighing he takes the hood and pulls it over the suspected Stirling's head. The blonde boy's face relaxes but his body remains rigid against the wall.

"You better watch where you are going or you might end up in the main keep." Clyde informs him in a hushed tone.

Stirling doesn't respond. He gapes in confusion at still being alive.

Unable to tolerate the presence of Stirling any longer and before he changes his mind, Clyde grabs Stirling's arm and shoves him in the right direction. "Go on, get."

The young man holds himself back from running as he quickly disappears down the market road never looking back.

Clyde's eyes cloud as he blinks back the tears. He won't cry. Blinking up at the clouds he pulls the tears back. Not out here where witnesses are. He needs to hold it together.

The mark might have been burned from his skin, but the Winged Rider blood still runs through his veins and Riders don't cry. His eye lids shut. Riders also die early saving others.

Spinning around he heads toward the castle, his line of sight jumping from person to person. None of them meet his gaze. Why would they? He's never saved a life. He's only killed their loved ones.

Eyes burning with unwept tears Clyde stands at Amiria's cell watching her sleep.

Inexorable

He hates her. He hates everything she is and everything he is not. What has he done to be cursed with a life such as this. A lie, a falsehood of who you are. He hopes she remains in this cage for the rest of her life so she can feel as trapped as he is. The constant threat of stepping outside the boundaries will get you killed.

“Amiria,” Clyde announces. She doesn’t move.

“Amiria,” he says louder. “You still alive?”

He watches the corpse of a girl pry her eyes open. They roll in their sockets to him. Her bony shoulders twitch in what he guesses is a shrug.

“Perhaps. This could be the underworld for all I know and you are the devil.” Shielding her festering arm she rolls onto her left side with a grunt.

Clyde scowls, “You always have something to say, don’t you?”

“Yes.” Amiria scoots her frail body back to the wall and leans against it. “You don’t have your helpers this time.”

Crossing his arms, Clyde evaluates Amiria. Her olive skin has turned a sickly grey and heavy bags hang above her sunken cheeks. She’s been whittled down to nothing. All that training, now she can barely stand. “I don’t need them.”

“Ha!” She barks at him. “You’re as wimpy as ever. Only willing to face me alone when you think I am too weak to stand.”

He isn’t incompetent. He knows the differences in their capabilities. A long time ago he came to terms with the fact that he will never be able to beat her on equal ground. “I’m not afraid of you.” He’s not. He’s not the weak boy from her class anymore. He is a captain of the

guards. Not someone rotting in a cage. "I'm the stronger one now."

"You want to bet?"

Heart rate spiking Clyde jumps back as the creature behind the bars lunges for him. Her small frame rattles the metal as she slams into it. Her hand clawing the air for him. Clyde's heart is pounding in his ears and he is aware of each bead of sweat dripping down the back of his neck. Her nails almost clip the buckles of his navy blue gambeson. Face still pressed to the bars, Amiria drops her hand and lets out a frenzied laugh.

Laughing? Clyde is stunned unable to comprehend.

Amiria's teeth clack together cutting off her laughter. "You're not strong. You only prey on the weak to make yourself feel big."

No, he *is* strong. He has made it this far because he has held strong and refused to break. He does everything he needs to do to survive. The reason he isn't dead yet by their hands or his own is because he *is* strong. He is—isn't he?

Feeling the tears invading the corners of his red rimmed eyes he hides his shaking hands behind his back and grips his old insignia, "At least I'm not the one fighting alone in a battle I already lost. Give it up Amiria, you look pathetic."

"At least I'm fighting. Pathetic is someone who continues to follow orders to keep his own life comfortable at the cost of others." A wad of spit follows her words and lands on the ground between his feet.

Finnian's hands on him.

Finnian's lips to his.

Finnian's eyes pleading for help.

Finnian's neck, snapping.

Inexorable

Clyde can taste the sour of stomach acid as bile climbs up his throat. There was no way to save him. It was impossible. He would have hung too. There was no way to successfully keep both of them alive. What would William have done if it was Robert? What Amiria has done for the baker. What the baker is trying to do for her.

He watches out the small window.

He protected himself.

He is a captain.

He has the keys.

He has—no one.

“Is it true?”

“What?”

Is that what you do for people you care about? Has he *loved* anyone in his life? “The rumors.” Clyde turns to her. His voice falling soft, “About you and the fugitive?”

Amiria’s lips disappearing as she holds her tongue is all the answer he needs.

She truly had turned her back on everything she was given all for him. Is that what it means to be strong? Is he still beneath her?

“I see.” Clyde backs up several steps. He did one thing correct today and it was letting the curly haired boy go.

Barely holding himself together, he turns about face and leaves Amiria.

Standing in the empty hall Clyde breaks. His hand clamps over his mouth to hide the sobs that wrack his body as he collapses against the wall.

Chapter 30

A paper sits on the table when Robert and William exit the bedroom after morning bells. Robert picks it up, scanning the messy print containing their assignment for the night.

William stares at their captain's door, "He never comes out anymore."

Robert shrugs, "It's not as if we are friends anyways. We only work for him."

"Do you think he's okay?" William asks unable to remove himself from worrying about the person behind the door.

Blinking up from the paper, Robert states bluntly, "Why would he be?"

William hugs himself. He has thought about what he would do if Robert was taken from him approximately one thousand three hundred times. In every scenario he would fight to the death to stay by his side. Many would see this as ludicrous, but they aren't risking the death sentence while they search for someone new to fall in love with. Fate put them in that same barracks room, friendship brought them closer, and love bloomed their dedication.

Before Robert, William was never interested in making friends. There weren't any days he would spend his free time with his classmates. The girls his parents

Inexorable

made him court were the closest thing he could call friends. He didn't mind their time together, but he wasn't interested in opening up to them and would have been content on spending that time alone. His parents still believe he is alone unable to find a wife solely based on the fact that he is reserved.

There is only one person he prefers to be around than being alone. He barely wants to be around Captain Mannering, but they have been provided a safe housing here as long as they follow his orders. It is for his benefit and not because he cares.

Sighing, Robert crumples up the note.

"What'd it say?" William asks.

"We're moving her."

Struggling to keep his face neutral, William knows he is the villain in Amiria's story. He is the person in chainmail who shows up in the middle of the night to feed her and provide water with minimal conversation. He doesn't even give her enough provisions to make her healthy. She is withering away before them.

Now in her weakened state they are dragging Amiria Rey, the Winged Rider who was born to take over as field marshal of the Cavalry, through the servants' tunnels. She didn't even put up a fight. They waltzed into her cell and picked her up without physical resistance which frightens him more than having to fight her.

He doesn't want to add her to be one hundred and twenty seven on the list of people he brought to their death.

"If I ever get free, you two are the first on my list." Amiria threatens, her voice a grated whisper.

William can't blame her. He would feel the same if the roles were reversed. The faces in the streets say it all, he is on a lot of people's lists.

Robert blows air through his nostrils, "Yeah. You tell us that every time."

The Winged Rider growls, "Just making sure you don't forget." Then she adds, "You know what? I'm feeling generous. I'll kill you both at the same time since you can't be without each other."

Only William's eyes flicker with the cold spike running through his veins. Her comment has hit dead on but they have not shown any evidence for her to come to any true conclusion. She is only saying that since they *are* always together. She doesn't know. She can't know.

"Thanks." William mumbles, at least she will leave them with that mercy if she holds true to her word.

Amiria cocks her head, "Say Robert, where's the ex-rider Clyde? You two are trusted to transport me alone?"

Ever since the branding, they've always been dealing with the Rey girl alone. They give their status report to Captain Mannering who then relays it to King Dietrich. Robert's mind wanders back to, not their Captain, but the boy younger than he is, shut away in his room after the kingdom has taken another thing from him. Maybe that is why he doesn't assist them at night. Not because he doesn't want to do the extra work, but because he is unable to face his internal conflicts.

"We've got someone higher up over seeing the transport."

Her words slowly dying under the strain, Amiria utters, "Must be a slow night."

William misses slow nights. Nights where he got to sleep the entire way through. Together Robert and William

Inexorable

hold onto Amiria as they push open a small wooden door and step out into the inner bailey.

Amiria jerks in their grasp but it barely effects their hold. The Field Marshal of the Winged Cavalry stands beside the oubliette with a torch lighting half of his face. This man is her father, yet he stands here lighting the way for his daughter to be thrown into a cage underground.

William thought growing up with his parents was stressful, trying to surpass their expectations and become a castle guard. He was willing to take a chance with every girl they arranged him with. He was provided the endorphins to keep pressing hard in his training because they always expressed how proud they were at his scores. They would never stand idly by as he was dumped like waste behind the castle—well the version they remember him being and not the William who lays beside Robert.

“In here gentleman.” The Field Marshal instructs.

Swallowing hard, William clenches his jaw. No pressure, just putting the Field Marshal’s only daughter into an oubliette with him supervising. It’s just a normal night in Lumierna.

The oubliette is a black chasm in the small space lit orange by the torches as if God forgot to paint it. They stop at the edge of the yawning abyss and nervous under the scrutinizing gaze of the Field Marshal, Robert and William release Amiria’s arms forgetting she is unable to stand on her own.

Time slows as William watches Amiria fall then slide headfirst to the oubliette. He reaches out snatching the scruff of her fraying night shirt saving her from falling to her death. If he directly caused the death of an innocent person he would never be able to look at himself. He wouldn’t be able to face Robert without seeing or hearing

their last minutes. All he can do is hope he never receives those orders.

Recovering from their mistake Robert and William take Amiria by the arms and sit her up. Robert scoops up a bundle of rope lying beside them and loops it around her stomach, around each armpit, then ties it off between her shoulder blades.

Biting his lip, Robert hates himself for what he is about to do. Then like the trained guard he is, Robert nudges Amiria's legs into the hole letting them fall freely. Both stare into the night as they pretend there isn't the weight of a body at the end of the rope they are lowering to the bottom of a pit.

The rope slackens signaling to them she has reached the bottom two stories below. The braided rope lays across Williams palms as Robert starts to slide the metal grate over the top of the oubliette.

"Will." Robert says as the lid is halfway closed.

With the rope already tied to the inside of the grate, William lets the rope fall from his hands and disappear into the darkness.

Field Marshal Rey who hasn't said a word since he instructed their location opens his mouth. The words come out dry, "Well done, boys. You are dismissed."

The two young guards nod their understanding and the father of the girl they dumped into her grave to be forgotten vanishes into the night.

"Work!" They hear echoing up the shadows.

Robert grabs the numb William and begins dragging him away as they hear, "Taika, help me!" being screamed with desperation.

A Winged Rider calling for help.

Inexorable

They turn around but the phenomenon doesn't happen a second time.

They could be the first people in history to hear the words *help me* come out of a Rider's mouth and they are the ones that brought it out.

"Come on." Robert whispers gently to William, who's eyes are riveted to the oubliette. He hooks his hand on to William's elbow and tugs, "Let's go."

Chapter 31

Never in their lives have they seen this many Winged Riders in Lumierna, not even during their yearly exams. Robert and William watch as what they believe is the entire Cavalry enter the coat of arms.

“Captain Mannering!” Robert calls as Clyde comes into view also observing the Riders being herded by.

His eyes dart around as if he is in search of someone then leap over to Robert and William. Childish worry sharpens into the hard spikes of a mace at the sight of them. Clyde searches the flow of riders once more then with a pop of his jaw he traverses over to the two guards.

“What is it, Boheca?”

“Sir, what is going on?”

“An assembly.” Captain Mannering answers flat.

“May I ask for what topic?” Robert says already knowing it must be some form of meeting if they are all gathering in the coat of arms.

“To eat their own.” Captain Mannering’s eyes flick to the crowd. There is a flash of recognition across his face and a nod at someone Robert can’t see.

Inexorable

William crosses his arms to keep himself from grabbing Robert's hand. They are finally here. They reached the moment where it's been officially enacted that *no one* is safe.

Clyde can't help but try and find out which of their own they are here to devour. The city is infected and they were unable to quarantine it by cutting those with symptoms out of the equation. The virus of free thought has found its way into those who dedicated their life to keep it contained.

It doesn't matter how well you train a monster. Everyone is food when it grows large enough.

Today the Cavalry are being hung. Tomorrow there are nobles who spoke ill against the king, complaining about the growing cemeteries and a guard will be hung because she tried to protect a woman from being discovered. She had cleared a stack of crates then her partner rechecked revealing the woman.

Clyde can hear the Field Marshal projecting his commands to the condemned as he approaches the entrance.

Peeking inside, Clyde's stomach drops. Nellie, his friend Nellie, the girl who used to cheer him up after their instructor tore into him. The girl who tried to help him catch up with the rest of the class by practicing with him. One of the few people who called him their friend stands on the stage with a noose around her neck.

Unlike with Finnian, this time Clyde doesn't look away when the floorboard drops.

After the Winged Cavalry finished filing into the coat of arms Robert and William were provided new

instructions on how they will patrol the inner bailey. No one has ever been a fan of guards before this past year but now they are being avoided like social pariahs as if walking too close will make them the next target for the noose.

The nobles who reside in the vicinity of the castle carry about their days as if life is normal, but on the inside everyone is on edge. They keep their voices low and their pathways distant from the patrolling guards. Trust is as common as a rainbow at night. Everyone believes the other is a shark in the water.

William scuffs the dry dirt with the toe of his boot, digging a shallow hole. He's supposed to be listening to everyone's conversations and keeping an eye on nobles and other guards. Everyone is enemies now. No one can trust their friends, not knowing who might turn you in.

Robert reaches up and fixes the collar of William's gambeson.

"Thanks." William puts on a weak smile. That's a lie, some people can be trusted. He will always put all his trust in Robert.

Robert nudges him, concerned, "Are you doing alright?"

"Well." He stops himself. With skittish eyes, he checks their surroundings. They stand off to the side of the bailey near one of the wall's buttresses. Keeping his hands tensed at his side he nods motioning to the corner shadow. Discreetly. they step backward until they are hidden from sight.

William's voice is barely audible, "What they did today, to, to, to the Cavalry. There's a guard being walked tomorrow with several upper class citizens. We're out here spying on nobles." He hugs himself as if he is suddenly cold

Inexorable

in the warm, sunny weather, “What we’ve done to Amiria Rey.” He thinks about how they strapped her to that chair. How they watched as she shrieked in pain. They dropped her down a hole in the ground and give her water once a day, all due to orders from the King. How much longer can he keep committing these horrendous acts under the safety blanket of ‘only following orders’.

Robert clamps his hand over William’s mouth, “What I’m getting at is you’re just exhausted and need a night off, am I right?” He lifts his eyebrows insinuating the protective lie.

Nodding, William drops his gaze as the hand falls free from his mouth, “Yeah, that’s what it is. I’m just in need of a good night's rest to perform my duties efficiently.”

“Good, now let's get back to work.” He shakes William’s shoulder with encouragement. William’s body moves loosely under Robert’s grasp

“Just as assigned?” His voice somber. Keep following orders to stay alive. Help others die to stay alive. What is this life?

Robert’s eyes drop to William’s neck. He watches the pulse of his beating heart through the thin skin. He gulps, his own neck bobbing, he can already feel the noose tightening, “Exactly as ordered.”

He redirects William to the castle grounds and gives him a nudge forward, “Come on, let’s get out of this corner before people start talking.”

“They already do.” William utters under his breath.

The two guards wipe the residual emotions from their faces and put back on their masks to pretend they are the

guards Lumierna wants them to be. With a deep breath they step out into the light.

Chapter 32

Entering the apartment they stop at the sight of Clyde sitting at the table dressed down in his civilian attire. The liquid in his wooden cup sloshes and spills over the rim as his shaking hand brings it to his lips.

“Are you okay?” William asks.

His face creasing, Clyde’s grip tightens around the cup, “You really *are* bad at reading people.” He downs the rest of the drink. “No wonder why Robert is the only one who talks to you.”

“Hey,” Robert interjects. “What’s your problem? He just asked a normal question.”

Clyde’s nostrils flare as Robert talks back to him. Furious, Clyde throws the cup down onto the table with enough force it bounces off and clatters across the floor. Tears are beginning to form in the corners of his eyes as he leaps up, hands clenched and teeth grinding. Robert steps protectively in front of William.

Out of the three people in this room Clyde is the youngest, but he is not some low guard. He is a captain. He is *their* captain. There is no opening up to them, no relating to them. They aren’t friends. How would they ever

understand? As guards they were allowed to be children, to play. They still *are* children. They take orders. They don't make detrimental decisions that affect the lives of others. They can still pass the blame under the protective shield that they were commanded to. They were commanded by *him*.

At the end of the day when all Clyde has is holding all the blame for the lives that have been lost and he goes to bed alone, they have each other.

Clyde's hands release from their fists. Shoulders slumping he steps around the table. Pausing he admits, "I can't do this much longer"

Walking into his room, Clyde closes the door.

In their room lit by the orange glow of a single candle, Robert rubs the sleeping William's back. Leaning against the wall he has one hand on the warmth of his love and his eyes on the candle watching it slowly melt counting the hour when it reaches the marked lines.

It has been an entire month since either of them have slept the night through together. There was no more time off. The Rey girl needs to be checked on every night.

Robert's eyes start to slide shut but with a sharp intake of breath he opens them and straightens up. He wants to sleep. He wants to contour his body to William's and breathe in sync with him as he enters his dreams. Tearing his eyes away from the candle, he strokes William's beautiful face.

Without Captain Mannering's knowledge, they've recruited the help of a servant. That way one of them can get a night off at a time. Tonight is William's turn to go. Robert will wake him when the candle melts to the third

Inexorable

marker. Deep purple blooms beneath William's eyes that isn't from bruising.

William stirs awake, his crusted eyes barely opening, "Is it time?"

"No." Robert says, the flame sitting at the marker, "It's your day off. Go back to sleep."

"Liar," William mumbles as he falls back to sleep.

Leaning over Robert kisses William on top of his head, "Yeah. You got me." Robert strokes William's straight hair and runs his finger down his cheek. "I love you."

Robert slides off the bed without waking William and slips into his guard attire. Dressed he steps out of the room but pauses to stare at Clyde's door. He sets his jaw with a shake of his head and is off.

Waiting at the entrance of the servants' door is a strawberry haired man. "Sir." He nods as Robert appears torch in hand.

Mid yawn Robert spooks and squints past his light to the man about twenty years his senior. "You servants and your night vision. Do you ever use a light?"

Henry shrugs, "Sometimes. But when you grow up in these tunnels, you memorize every turn."

"I guess," Robert says unsure.

"Follow me." Henry opens the door and they both dive into the dark cramped hall.

Robert follows behind Henry as they traverse from one side of the castle to other using the servants' tunnels in secrecy. The two men walk in silence, the scuff of their shoes and the rattling of Robert's chainmail feel as loud as an entire battle of knights.

The strawberry blonde man speaks over his shoulder, "Guard?"

Closing his eyes, Robert internally sighs. He doesn't want to socialize. He wants to get this over with, every one of these nights, so he can eventually pretend this part of his life never happened. There isn't anyone he wants to get to know, not when they could be gone the next day.

"Servant," Robert replies unenthusiased.

"If this is your assignment and that's why I can't tell anyone, then why am I doing it in the first place?" The older man asks.

Robert's heart rate spikes, "You haven't told anyone right!" He cannot have this getting back to Captain Mannering.

The servant puts up his hands in defense, "No, no of course not. I'm a servant, who would listen?"

His nerves calming, Robert can't keep the worry out of his voice when he replies, "Good." Every choice, even something as simple as waking up in the morning, has them walking on the edge of the gallows. Everyone in this kingdom is skating that line.

"Of course, sir." Henry pushes open a small door leading out to the courtyard in the back of the castle where the oubliette is.

Ducking through the short doorway hidden behind bales of hay, Robert groans, "Alright let's get this over with." He is ready to be done with it and go lay back down beside William and possibly get a chance to sleep beside him before morning bells.

Henry steps up to a wooden cart deliberately parked over the metal lid hiding the oubliette. Heaving, he curls his fingers through the grate and lifts. The heavy metal

Inexorable

makes a scraping sound that echoes in the courtyard as he slides it to the side.

Planting his feet in dugout grooves, he hand over hand pulls the girl that weighs less than the lid up from the unseeable depths. Seeing her come into view, Robert reaches down, snagging the back of her tunic, and lifts the limp girl out of the hole. With her legs still dangling he gently sets her rag doll body to the dust and straw.

Pinching her face between his fingers, Robert shakes her head, "Hey, you alive?" His eyebrow lifts with concern. He doesn't know how much longer she can last like this. "Damn, we might have to have to pour the water in her mouth again. Get her propped up."

Henry scoops his arms under Amiria, cradling her. He gently lifts her head and shoulders to lean against his chest. He leans down whispering in her ear, "You'll be alright." Tilting his head up, Henry's face is directed at Robert but his eyes are focusing past him.

"What?" Robert squints at the servant then with a sharp pain on the back of his head his vision flashes white before he falls over unconscious.

"Robert!" William's voice cracks as he slides across the gritty earth tearing holes in his tights. He hovers over Robert's unconscious body, "Please no, oh god, no." Swallowing the lump of his worst fear, William's quivering hand lowers to Robert's neck.

William had awoken at twilight to discover the bed beside him was still empty and cold. With his mind running through all the worst scenarios, William barely put clothes

on before he sprinted out the door. He doesn't care if the door slamming woke up Clyde, he hopes it did.

Struggling to control his breathing, William is unable to press his fingers to find out if there is a pulse or not. His chest is suffocating him. His ribs are caving and puncturing his lungs, his heart. Biting his hand to keep back, tears, his voice, or vomit he doesn't know which, William touches Robert's neck.

Ba-dump.

Relief is dumped over, William. He's choking back a happy cry and scoops Robert's head and torso into his arms. Feeling something sticky on his hand, William checks his fingers to see red as dark as night coating them. William sharply inhales and tilts Robert's head forward revealing a small laceration on his skull.

"Robert," William panics. "Robert!" He shakes the taller guard, "Robert! Please!" He cries, "Wake up! Please wake up."

Sluggish eyelids open, Robert squints trying to focus his vision, "Will?"

"Oh!" William exclaims, his tears wetting Robert's hair as he clutches him to his chest. Robert's groan is muffled by William's tunic. "I was so scared." He weeps. "I was so afraid you were gone."

Robert's voice is a slur, "I won't leave you."

"That's not a promise you can keep here." William whispers, wishing it wasn't the truth.

Chapter 33

The bandage tied around Robert's head is stained red where blood from his gash has seeped through. His eyes move behind his lids as he lies asleep with his head on William's lap. Sitting on their bed with his back against the wall, William startles awake when their door flies open. Clyde stomps in and sits on the edge of their bed with a huff.

"Captain?" William raises an eyebrow.

Clyde side eyes William, turning back to the wall he asks, "How is he?"

William's light skinned fingers play with the dark strand of Robert's hair that sticks up free from the bandage. "Alive."

"Amiria is gone."

"We know."

Silence.

Silence.

William asks, "Do you want us to leave?"

Shaking his head, Clyde drops his gaze to his lap, "No." His shoulders sag with the weight of everything.

"William?"

"Yes?"

Clyde fiddles with his hands, "You guys... I have no one else."

"No one else what? To work for you?"

Clyde shakes his head again but he can't bring his head up. The auburn haired boy doesn't peel his eyes away from his captain, a boy a year younger than himself. William's face softens as he realizes what Clyde is saying. He has *no one*. William has never considered Captain Mannering as a friend before, only his superior, but the person who is sitting on the edge of his bed is not a captain. There is a boy who is also lost and scared.

Clearing his throat Clyde says, "I came to ask you, hypothetically, if the opportunity to," His voice drops to a whisper as if the walls could hear him, "to overthrow the king, would you take it?"

William stiffens, his throat already closing as if there was a rope tightening. Struggling to swallow, he grabs Robert's hand.

"I'm only speaking in what ifs." Clyde finally moves his sights to them.

"What ifs still get you killed."

"So does that." Clyde nods to Robert asleep in William's lap. William's hand tightens around Robert's. Clyde continues, "What if I told you, all you would have to do is help clear the path for someone else to do it?"

"What do you mean? Who is mad enough to do that?"

"Someone the king wanted broken. You see, their mind has cracked but they've just been set free."

The morning chill still sits in the outer bailey before the hot summer air pushes it away. Clyde Mannering stands checking in his first watch guards, assigning them to their posts.

"Killian"

"Yes, sir."

Inexorable

"I have some additional information about your post."
Clyde hands the parchment over. Above the list of guards reads:

Coup?

Killian sucks in a sharp intake of air but remains neutral.

Clyde's face is unchanged as if he is bored of the topic, "Why do we always have to work the balls but never get to dance? Would you want a party?"

"I would, sir. Where would it be held?"

Pretending to think on it Clyde answers, "There's space near the outer wall keep."

"When?"

"When you hear the tune across the sky." Clyde holds out his hand taking the parchment back, "Your assignment clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Get to work."

"How do you know who to trust?" Robert asks Clyde.

Clyde squats before the hearth in his apartment and throws the parchment into the flames. Watching the blazing energy consume the evidence Clyde responds, "You don't think I know my men? I knew about you two didn't I?"

Robert clamps his mouth shut.

"I thought so."

William speaks up from the table he and Robert are sitting at. "What happens if someone tells."

"They have no evidence. My word against theirs. They have no one to back their claim without criminalizing themselves."

"I guess..." William trails off.

Robert touches the bandage around his head, "Do you really think Amiria Rey will be coming back. Wouldn't she be long gone by now?"

Clyde pokes the fire then stands spinning to face them, "Because she's a Winged Rider. All they know is how to fight. They can't comprehend freedom."

The two guards stare from the table.

"There's a reason Riders die young."

"What—how are we going to know?" Robert asks.

"I need you two to keep an eye out for anything out of the ordinary."

"Isn't that our normal job."

"No. I mean start looking up."

Brown and green eyes blink up to the sky through the ceiling above them.

"Then what?" William nervously asks.

"At the sound of the alarms we will storm the castle locking people into their rooms and cut down anyone fighting against us. Our goal is to assist Amiria by lessening her opponents and providing her a clear path to the king."

William swallows, "What happens if she loses?"

Clyde sighs, "Blend in. Tell those who were locked in their room it was for their protection. Those who fought, we thought they were attacking the castle." Clyde smiles, "It's not as if they can tell *us* guards apart anyways."

It has been a few weeks of the same routine patrol. They walk their path worn into the stone on top of the inner bailey wall, the bags beneath their eyes finally dissipated now that there are no extra late night assignments.

William turns his head up to the mountain peaks.

Inexorable

No sign of the Rey girl yet. He can't decide which idea he fears more. That she escaped and they are all doomed to continue living this life of fear, or that she is lying in wait, regaining her energy and will be back to throw their lives into chaos.

The only difference between these two options is one will end their life at the end of a noose and the other a blade. *Maybe the noose will be quicker*, he thinks.

"What the—" Robert stops dead in his tracks.

Lost in his thoughts, William runs into the back of Robert with an *oof*. He rubs his nose, "What are you doing?"

Leaning back into William, who can barely see over his shoulder, Robert asks from the corner of his mouth, "What is that?"

William's fingers pinch the chainmaille on the back of Robert's elbow as he follows the pointing finger up to the castle rooftops. Squinting against the bright sun, William sees a crisp white dragon clinging to the side of the steep roof of a tower. Above the dragon is a girl dressed in pink spinning around the spire.

Raising an eyebrow, William questions, "Is there a girl dancing up there or have I lost my mind?"

Robert drops his hand in relief, "I'm glad you see it too." So the hit to his head several nights ago did not start hallucinations.

Captain Mannering with his fingers laced behind his back approaches the two gawking guards, "That thing you are looking at is Kinsey Gautier."

A shiver runs down Robert and William's spine at the Gautier name. The gleam in Calix Gautier's eye when they met him in the hall. The way he lurks through the halls even now. Amiria was his betrothed, the girl he had sought

after for years. What has he broken since finding out she has vanished leaving him behind?

Clyde continues, "You haven't lost your mind but she has. In her defense losing your mind runs in the Gautier family."

All three young men pause and watch the girl play dangerously close to death's door. Maybe she will slip and let gravity take one of their future obstacles out before Amiria arrives.

"Alright." Clyde claps his hands together, "You two need to talk less and patrol more. Go on back to work." He steps off to the side to allow them room to pass. "Oh by the way," he lowers his voice, "Do keep an eye on what she is doing."

"Yes sir," they answer in unison.

Chapter 34

The late summer sun beats down on Lumierna, the humid air is still thinner than the tension coating the castle grounds. People who can barely breathe through it keep their heads down as they move about. Everyone is afraid to cough and be seen as traitorous.

Robert and William's chainmaille clings as they bound down the steps of the inner bailey wall. They refrain from sprinting and hold themselves back to a brisk walk. The girl in pink had halted her dancing and spinning on top of the spire to change into pink and silver armor. With a hollow pit in their stomach they make a straight line for their captain.

"Captain!" Robert calls.

Clyde turns to them, "Boheca?"

"Uh..." Robert trails, his eyes wandering around the area until they land on the girl in armor on the roof tops.

Clyde tenses, "When did she change?"

"Just now," Robert informs.

Clenching and unclenching his hands, Clyde scans the area then returns to the girl thinking. He tells Robert and William, "You two are relieved. I need you to rest for night watch."

Swallowing hard William asks, "You think tonight?"
Clyde nods, "I know, because—" his eyes flick to
Kinsey, "she knows."

Dust particles float across the room lit by the small
amount of daylight leaking in through the cracked shutters
of the bedroom window.

"Robert?" William asks lying on his back.

Close to falling asleep on his side Robert doesn't
open his eyes when he says, "Huh?"

"Do you think she is really coming back to fight?"

Robert shrugs, "Don't really know her."

"Clyde seems so certain."

"I guess."

"What if she does?"

Robert rolls over and faces William, "You're
overthinking it."

William turns onto his side so they are face to face,
"But—" he whispers as if saying the words too loud will
make it true, "what if she does?"

Robert blinks, then lowers his gaze, "I don't know."

"What if we don't fight? What happens if we hide
instead?"

"Then our lives continue as is, always hiding."

"I don't want to fight."

"Neither do I."

"Then why do we have to?"

"Because it is a chance for change."

"I'm scared." William admits, tears coming to his
eyes.

Robert's arms curl around William pulling him into
him, "Me too."

Chapter 35

Shoulder to shoulder, Robert and William lean against the parapet on the inner bailey wall beside an eastern-facing bastion. Propped up by the other, they keep each other from tipping over as they sit against the short wall sound asleep. Robert's cheek is squished as it lays on top of William's head resting on Robert's shoulder.

Unable to sleep during the break Captain Mannering had provided them, they returned to their post at twilight to find the Winged Rider was still spending most of her time dancing and performing acrobatic stunts dangerously close to the edge. Growing bored of hoping she would fall, Robert and William fell asleep, slumping into each other as their unconscious bodies forgot they could be seen.

Alarms stationed in the bastion beside them are knives in their ear drums. Ripped from his sleep, Robert leaps to his feet overwrought with fright and the bump still on his head now throbbing. His head and heart pounding to the beat of the alarms, Robert draws his sword ready to defend.

Feeling as his eardrums are about to rupture William curls up covering them with his gloved hands. *Too loud. Too loud. Too loud.*

Robert turns to search the sky, the alarms continuing to ring in his skull. As he comes to face the eastern mountains, the broadsword slips from his stunned fingers. William, lying on his side, stares up apprehensively at his friend's unnerved expression.

It's happening. It can't actually be happening.
William frets. *She can't really be here.*

Prolongedly, William gives into the inevitable. Still covering his ears, he sits up and faces the parapet he was leaning against. He rises onto his knees and peaks over the lower section between the two raised defense walls. His eyes widen. Never in his life did he believe he would see such a sight. An impending storm cloud of beating wings is heading in their direction.

Robert's hands slide over William's, helping him block the noise. He mumbles his realization but barely comprehends as the alarms rattle his thoughts, "She's here, she's actually here. SHE'S HERE!"

William's wide eyes turn up to him. *They can't, they can't, they can't.*

Robert snags William by the back of his gambeson and yanks him to his feet, "WE HAVE TO FOLLOW THROUGH!"

Robert's hands return to help cover William's ears as they take off down the spiraling stairs inside the bastion where the alarm vibrates their bones.

As they start sprinting across the bailey, Robert drops his hands so they can run in a full sprint. William

Inexorable

talks between his huffing breaths, "What happens if this doesn't work? It was only a gamble she would show up at all."

Robert keeps his eyes focused on the castle, his sprint never slowing, "Then we die."

"I don't want to die."

Chaos has erupted around them as they sprint to the rendezvous point by the old keep. Guards are running in every direction like a startled litter of cats, but as if following a downhill slope many flow toward the keep.

Skidding around the dilapidated structures that hide the keep's entrance from view of the castle, Robert and William slide to a stop. There must be majority of the men and women's barracks already here with more pouring in from the city.

Molten light fills the air above them.

With frightened exhales, everyone ducks as a battle ensues overhead. William clings onto Robert's arm as they witness a war of clashing scales and armor. Teeth, talons, fire, and swords. This is the Winged Cavalry. They are not the stories and fables told in the town square. They are the embodiment of nightmares.

"AYE!" Captain Mannering roars over the mayhem. Their surroundings periodically lit up in orange like they are in the heart of a hearth, the smell of ozone in the air. "Aye, listen up! We've got one try. Lock all the nobles in their rooms, assure servants stay hidden, don't need innocent lives caught between us. Anyone with a blade

who opposes you, cut them down. We are to clear the path for the invader. She is to focus on the king only.”

“What about—” The female guard is cut off as a breath of fire aimed low startles the crowd. The heat from the blast still warm on their maille. She continues, “What about them? What about Riders?”

Heads fall back, everyone watching the titans clash and tear at each other. Which ones are the beasts, the creature with wings or one controlling it with murder in its eye?

Captain Mannering’s face flashes orange from the light above deepening the shadows under his brow turning his eyes into black pits, “I think they will handle themselves. Everyone head out! Play the rest by ear. Trust your judgment.”

A company of men and women throw their fists into the air with a single cheer and rush toward the castle. Standing off to the side, Robert and William stand fingers touching as the stampede of blue gambesons surges by.

After the last guard passes, Clyde strolls in their wake. His feet growing heavy they plant themselves in front of the two guards he has been living with.

“You two.” He pauses, “Don’t die. I—” He struggles getting out the rest of the words, “Can’t lose anyone else.” Unable to meet their eyes Captain Mannering scrunches his face as he swallows it all down then takes off sprinting to guide his men and women.

“Are we friends with Captain Mannering?” William asks.

Inexorable

Stunned by the interaction, Robert shrugs, “I honestly thought he hated us.”

Chapter 36

It is as if the world is ending. God has turned on their creation and is smiting the kingdom. A five year old girl in a silk knight shirt wails as she squeezes her small frame behind a ceramic vase. Outside the slitted windows monsters roar in the sky, some of them with breath that cast shadows into the torch lit hall. Guards in rattling armor and booming voices have stormed the corridor she lives in. She's not in the city. The guards aren't supposed to be running in her hall.

"Hey, it's okay." William squats to her eye level. "What room is yours?" Through snot and sobs, the young girl points down the hall. William gives her a friendly smile and offers his hand, "I'll be your personal guard and escort you."

Wiping her face with the back of her arm the little girl asks, "What's happening?"

"Wild dragons," William answers half truthful. Standing them both up William begins escorting her down the hall as guards further down work on locking doors.

"What are the guards doing?" She is almost turned all the way around as they walk.

Inexorable

"Making sure everyone is safe in their room. This your door?" William stops in front of an open door with several small faces blinking up at him.

The little girl nods and disappears inside with her siblings. William gives them a light wave as he closes the door. Pulling a rope from his belt he begins to tie the door handle to the closet wall torch.

"What are you guards doing!" A woman shouts from the door across the hall.

"Get back to your room!" Robert commands.

The woman jumps startled, "Wh-what's going on?"

Robert stops at her door, "I said return to your room!"

Aghast at Robert's words and tone she tells him, "You can't talk to me like that."

No longer caring what mark is on these people's arms Robert responds, "Sure I can." There is no longer anyone to stop him, tonight might even be his last, so Robert reaches out putting his palm to the woman's forehead and shoves her back into her quarters. The woman yelps exaggeratedly and calls out to her husband in the room about the insubordinate guard. Robert yanks the door shut and begins tying it closed before the husband can respond.

The scene around Clyde is played out like a choreographed show. He gave his actors their prompt and they have brought it to life perfectly. A leader is nothing without anyone to lead. They are what makes the leader shine, not how loud he can yell, how many people he is commanding, or how shiny his pins are. It's them choosing to follow and perform well.

Drumming his insignia behind his back, Clyde strolls down the hall toward Robert who finishes tying off his

knot and spins around to William across the way. Clyde comes to a halt in between them.

"You two are in charge of this corridor." He motions to the royal quarters, "I'm leading the rest of the group to the throne room."

To the throne room where Amiria Rey will either die and so will all of them, or King Dietrich's blood spilling will cleanse this kingdom of its tyrannical ways.

"And after?" William wonders.

"That all depends on the outcome," Clyde tells them.

Either the guards manning the throne room follow his command and block the doors or they will return to what this world has ingrained into their minds and protect the king who would use them as planks to keep his feet dry in a puddle.

Amiria, talented as she may be, still has her limits. Unless her dragon turns the throne room into an inferno, she won't be able to fight every guard and Winged Rider who shows up. Especially not with Calix Gautier standing beside the king. He alone is equally matched with her. But Amiria won't take the easy route of setting the room ablaze. This is personal to her; she will want to be up close when the king breathes his last breath.

Captain Mannering lifts his chin, if tonight ends up being his last he will have died being a leader for the first time in his life. Continuing down the hall Captain Mannering, waves for the other guards to follow him.

The door Robert had tied closed opens barely a finger width before the rope stops it, "Hey!" a man hollers through. "Untie this! Declare your names. You'll be hung for this! HUNG FOR THIS!"

Inexorable

William watches the door forcibly rattle as the nobles inside panic, presumably for the first time in their lives.

Shouts could be heard calling for help behind the doors lining the hall. The castle has falling to calamity of their doing—Amiria's doing—they are only assisting in the downfall but that doesn't mean their hands aren't dirty too. Theirs are only cleaner because they are using her to dig the trench alone while they secure the walls around her to make sure no one stops her.

Are they still the bad guys? Is that all they will ever be? Pawns in someone else's game?

"Will, you have to try and block it out." Robert cups William's face bringing his eyes down to his level. "We've got to check the other halls to make sure they are all locked down."

A clash of metal reverberates in the stone hall from around the corner startling the two young men.

"Drop your weapons!"

"Surrender!"

Clang of metal striking.

Clamoring of booted feet.

Chiming of rustling chainmaille.

"Traitors!"

A group of men are shouting at each other.

William grips Robert's hand at the sound of the final voice. A guard staggers back into the hall in view of Robert and William, deflecting Jerrad's broadsword. Jerrad bats the man's blade to the side and slices across the now open space. With a wet cough, the guard's hand shoots to his neck as crimson spurts through his fingers.

Horried, Robert and William watch as the man gargles, unable to speak as he stumbles backward. A snaking trail of blood follows him back until he hits the

wall and slides down. Empty eyes stare as his hand drops to his side.

Jerrad raises his lip at the sight of William's hand in Robert's. "I knew it," he spits.

Several of the other fighting duets begin to seep into the hall. Robert and William release their hold on the other and draw their swords.

"Finally. I get to free this world of you two *abominations*," Jerrad snarls.

Behind him a female guard spears the tip of her broadsword through one of Jerrad's compatriots. Retracting the blade, blood splatters in arche around as she whips it toward Jerrad. He spins, stepping out of reach of the sharpened edge.

Robert sprints forward blocking a sword chopping down at the girl from a guard emerging from the second hall, blood already coating his blade and chainmaille. Metal to metal, Robert holds the other man still as he glimpses half a dozen bodies littered across the floor. With Robert distracted the guard rushes Robert's space and throws his head forward attempting to headbutt Robert's nose. Robert turns his head, catching the man's forehead on his cheekbone.

The girl, no older than Robert, holds her own against Jerrad. She is as tall as Robert but uses a swift style of fighting instead of strength. In quick secession she pokes and prods at the weak points of Jerrad's armor.

He's been in fights before. He can do this. William's sword shakes in his sweaty grip. For years he has fought and won against Jerrad, this is no different. William winces as Jerrad and the girl's swords clang together. This is *very* different. *Very very* different.

Inexorable

Jerrad steps forward, throwing his blade down on the girl like an axe. Holding her blade flat above her, Jerrad's sword strike holds it in place weighing down on her.

Gulping, William takes the opportunity to bolt forward with his broadsword swinging. Jerrad sees the flash of movement from the corner of his eye and kicks the girl in the stomach sending her away then deflects William's incoming attack. Using his mass and William's momentum, Jerrad shoves William back several steps.

"You should have been hung years ago," Jerrad declares.

Regaining herself, the female guard slices her blade at Jerrad. He turns to her, knocking the blade off course and punches his gloved fist into her jaw. The girl's head cracks to the side, her body following its spinning direction to the cold and bloodied floor.

"Ah!" Jerrad yells as he topples over.

Parrying his attack, Robert watches as William grapples Jerrad's legs tackling him to the ground. The two men pause their fight to pay attention to the three battling several steps away. Female guard with her broken jaw hanging offset, crawls up to a stand. With the tip of her sword pointing down she raises it as Jerrad gains control of the match with William and rolls him over so he has him pinned to the ground. Grinning with his now upper hand in the grapple, Jerrad doesn't see the blade preparing to puncture through his back.

Everything happens within a breath, but it feels as if it last for hours. Robert's opponent sets his sights on the girl ready to kill his teammate. Delayed, Robert is half a step behind the perpetrator as he throws himself at the female guard.

Eyes widen in shock. The girl's pupils dance around as she attempts to make sense of the situation and the burning hot pain in her stomach. Her grip loosens releasing her sword letting it clatter to the stone at her feet. Dripping turns to a steady stream of blood running down her armor to join the sword. A long blade penetrates through the chainmaille and into the side of her stomach.

Before the man can celebrate his win, Robert hacks down at the man lodging the edge of his sword into the man's collar bone. The other guard begins to scream in agony and his arm goes limp. Robert gags as he fails to pull his sword free, the man's bones grating against the metal. Panicking, Robert yanks the other guard back who trips falling into him. They tumble over as the girl, still standing as she slowly bleeds out, pulls a dagger from her belt and with a dying step joins the two men as they fall to the ground. Her dagger imbedding into the base of the man's throat.

William and Jerrad continue to ground fight. Left leg, then right leg, William can free himself from being pinned between Jerrad's knees then wraps his legs around Jerrad's waist and pulls his head down to his chest trapping him.

Unable to get any strikes in with the overly close proximity, Jerrad rolls his larger body putting William on top. He grabs a fist full of auburn hair and with a surge of adrenaline rips the smaller guard from him throwing him to the ground.

"Will!" Robert watches as William's head hits the floor and his body lays in a heap. He thrashes, fighting the weight of armored bodies pinning his hips down. "Will!" Robert's voice cracks with desperation.

Inexorable

Rising, Jerrad kicks William in the stomach, who curls in with a pained groan, "I'll finish you off, but first." Jerrad locks eyes with the trapped Robert.

Jerrad steps over the bodies and sits on Robert's chest. Robert flails his hands and throws fists as Jerrad catches Robert's wrists and pins his arms down with his legs. "What a waste. You were a good man. Until you spent too much time with that *thing*. You let him turn you." Jerrad encases his hands around Robert's throat. "And now you've betrayed your kingdom as well as God. There's evil within you and I will do the justice of expelling it."

Jerrad squeezes.

Robert writhes beneath Jerrad. All of his limbs trapped he is unable to move more than his shoulders and head but Jerrad's grip only tightens. Air. Air. Air he needs air. The pressure in his head is building. First red then purple Robert's face begins to change color. He can't move. He can't breathe. Jerrad's face devoid of emotion above him will be the last thing he sees as black rings line his vision.

"We're not the bad guys," a strained voice from behind him says.

Jerrad lifts his head to see who had spoken. With a lunging step William uses his entire body to swing heavy metal shackles. The metal hits Jerrad's temple with a sickening crack, knocking him over to the side and off Robert. William scurries to help push the other two bodies off Robert's legs as he frees himself from his imprisonment then scampers to his feet.

Wheezing and touching his tender and bruised neck, Robert reaches for William and pulls him to him needing to feel the solidity of him to know they are still alive. William's dark green eyes are fixated on the ground. Wishing he didn't, Robert follows William's line of sight.

Jerrad lays with his muscles constricting to such a degree his body is making small jerking movements. His blown pupils stare glassy eyed.

"I did that." William's voice is a ghostly exhale.

Robert's blood covered glove clamps over William's eyes trapping him to his chest. "You had to." He swallows hard, his neck bobbing beneath the purple. He scans the carnage around them, "We had to."

Leaving their weapons behind, unable to stomach picking them up, Robert backs the two of them away from the scene. "Let's get out of here."

His eyes still covered William says, "We have to watch the hall."

"Forget this hallway."

Facing William away and to the empty corridor, Robert removes his hand and it slips into William's. With a deep breath they take off sprinting.

Chapter 37

Apprehended for trying to seize control of the doors to the throne room and protect the king, several guards sit with their wrist and ankles bound. Captain Mannering hums to himself as he walks past them and stops at the massive entry door of carved and painted wood.

“Good job.” Captain Mannering nods his chin at the arrested guards. Stepping in between the guards standing in front of the door, Clyde leans forward listening. Muffled voices could be heard on the other side. “Is she in there?”

“She had arrived through the window, sir.”

Clyde raises his brow, “Huh. Makes sense.”

He presses his ear to the crack of the two doors to hear the high pitch of a person whistling and the sound of clashing blades.

Removing his broadsword Clyde slides it through the door handles, snapping he points telling the guard to do the same but through the opposite way locking it. “Just in case.” Clyde states. Turning to his men, Captain Mannering declares, “No one goes in or out until I say so.”

“Yes, Sir.”

A smile touches Captain Mannering's lips as he realizes a new possible outcome. With all these guards standing here at his order even if Amiria failed, they could overpower King Dietrich and still claim it was Amiria. She had dealt the killing blow before she succumbed to her own injuries.

Men forget the smaller the cage you try to shove your pet in the more likely they are to bite. Even your most obedient dog at your heel with will turn on you when mistreated.

People should not fear their king. Clyde smirks knowing King Dietrich is trapped in the throne room with his broken doll. The King should fear his people. Especially when he was the one who turned her into the monster.

Overwrought with emotions, William chokes on his tears as Robert and he sprint through the many courtyards of the castle. William coughs struggling to breathe. He yanks his hand free from Robert's as he fails to keep up. Sucking in a ragged breath, William drags his hands down his red stained face. The breath sputters as he releases it. Crying William hugs himself and stumbles back against the castle wall.

Robert spins around to see William curling into himself as if he could hide in the cracks of the stone, "Hey. I know, but we got to go. Who knows who is still out here?"

Throat filled with mucus, William coughs, desperate to gasp in the air around him.

"Look at me." Robert holds William's face between his hands, "Look at me."

With sputtering breaths thick with tears, William meets Robert's eyes. Eyes that have life still behind them

Inexorable

because he had to—William’s gaze drops down to the bruises on Robert’s neck—remove the threat. He squeezes his eyes shut, as the cracking sound of the shackles striking Jerrad’s skull echoes in his mind.

“Shh.” Robert soothes as he pulls William to him and cradles the back of his head. “You had to.”

Robert wants to cry with William. Tonight they did not stand by as someone else pulled the lever at the gallows. It was his hand, his blade that chopped into another human being. It is not *his* blood that stains his chausses.

Rocking William below a sky of raging winged beasts Robert reminds him, “You saved my life.”

William clings to Robert, the chainmaille pressing into his cheek, but he needs to feel Robert’s solid living body against him. How many more times do they have to almost lose the other? When he saw Jerrad strangling Robert he thought this was finally the last time. Their luck has run dry, they have dodged their noose one too many times. William’s body reacted before his mind could. The weighted metal was in his hand and he was swinging it.

The two guards duck sheltering into each other as two massive creatures tumble out of the open throne room window twenty paces away. An orange dragon with four legs and feathered wings rolls across the courtyard smashing a bench along the walkway. Frills fanned out, the wyvern colored of speckled castle stone hisses as it pursues the orange dragon. It’s heavy body tearing up the garden bed as it recloses the distance.

Using its hind legs, the feathered dragon kicks out as the wyvern leaps onto it. It strikes the wyvern in the chest knocking it back and avoiding its snapping jaws. Robert huddles protectively over William as they watch

the odd dragon scamper up and try to flee the wyvern. The Wyvern leaps tackling the other dragon. The roaring beasts crash through the wood of a gazebo shattering it into pieces as if it was no more than twigs.

Sending a blast of fire, the orange dragon sprays the infernal heat into the wyvern's face. The Wyvern whips its head away, momentarily taking its eyes off the orange dragon who runs and leaps into the air.

William peers around Robert's shoulder to watch as the orange dragon hides behind a fleet of wyverns.

"Where..." William searches the wyverns above him, "Where are the Winged Riders?"

The two young guards turn to the throne room window. Robert shakes his head, "I'd rather not know." He slips his hand into William's, "Let's keep going."

"Captain Mannering."

Clyde snaps to attention as Derek Rey approaches, his Winged Riders in tow. "Field Marshal." Clyde struggles to hide the quiver in his voice. This encounter can go two ways and the burn on his arm is a reminder he can't hold his own against these people.

There is no indication of the Field Marshal's opinion on the disastrous state of the castle when he asks, "Can you explain what it is you have instructed your guards to do?"

Swallowing hard, Clyde doesn't know how to answer. He can lie and get killed later, or tell the truth and die here with his blood splattered across the throne room's door. Feeling the sweat drip down the collar of his gambeson Clyde searches for any evidence on the Winged Riders of what side they are on. Anything that will help him guess the outcome when he opens his mouth and

Inexorable

admits the truth. There is a surging tide but are they standing against it or helping it rush?

The sound of ringing metal from Derek Rey's daughter fighting is heard over Clyde's pounding heart. The daughter this father had to stand by and allow the king to torture.

Clyde knows his answer, "We have locked down the castle and secured the throne room, restricting access while Amiria fights King Dietrich."

"And why aren't you and your guards assisting?"

Clyde's eyes jump from Derek to the Winged Riders then slowly come back, "Incase the Winged Cavalry showed up—I wanted to keep my men out of their sight as much as possible. Work safely behind the scenes."

"I see." Amiria's father listens to the ensuing battle, "And what if she loses?"

"If there was no other witnesses beside my men, we would finish off the king but claim Amiria Rey had succeeded."

"To protect their names?"

"Yes, sir."

One corner of Derek Rey's lips curl up, "You play the game well, Mannering. You play well."

Red creeps up Clyde's neck as he flushes, but he holds his chin up, "Thank you, sir."

Both men's heads snap to the throne room door. No metal, no shouting, only silence past the decorative wood. The guards blocking the door part as the Field Marshal steps up and leans his ear close to the center crack.

"Don't go to sleep, Stirling. Please don't go to sleep." Amiria's voice says.

“Undo the lock.” Derek commands. The guards pull the swords from the door handle. With a crack of his neck Derek Rey says, “Let’s see the state of our dear majesty.”

Two Winged Riders flank Derek Rey on each side and with matching steps, they kick the double doors open. The wood flings open into the throne room hitting the wall inside with a significant *BOOM!*

Castle guards march into the throne room filing into perfect formation. The girl in black armor leaps up dagger in hand and stands protectively over a boy in a guard’s gambeson bleeding out on the floor. The men and women who have followed Captain Mannering as their leader split in the middle. Clyde strolls down the center with his hands interlaced behind his back. He cocks his head at the gruesome scene displayed before him; a decapitated king, a dying boy, a pool of blood from an unknown body, an orange dragon laying beside the boy, and Amiria Rey ready to keep fighting until her last breath.

Coming to the front of the pack Clyde takes a single step to the side and Derek Rey walks past. His footsteps echo across the room while he takes in the carnage in silence.

He stares unflinchingly down at the headless king. “What a pity.” He will never feel sorry for this man, the man who thought he could cage and own his daughter.

This is the fate he deserved. Cut down by his own prized possession. People are not meant to be owned. People need to be free, physically and mentally. God had given humans freewill, so why have humans taken it away?

Derek studies his daughter’s fleeting expression. His daughter is—*scared*? Is she scared of him or because she

Inexorable

has yet to understand what she has done? Is she scared for the boy dying at her feet? Derek has never been scared for his own safety but he has felt fear. He felt it when he read the letter stating Amiria's desertion. When King Dietrich announced her sentence to be his servant, and when he commanded his own men and women to walk to their deaths.

Amiria was swept up in her own revenge. She never saw how many people were caught up in her tidal wave. These guardsmen stand here loyal to *her*. Winged Riders of the Cavalry converted to fight alongside her and not against her. She believes she stands here alone but she is far from it.

"They are at your command." Derek tests his daughter.

"What?" She replies breathy and wiping at her face leaving behind streaks of blood.

"They are at your command, Amiria Rey." Derek Rey tells his daughter who stares at him dumbfounded. His stern eyes burrow into her, "What are your orders?"

"I-I can't—" Amiria starts. She glances around the room then down to the paling boy whose dull eyes stare up at her as if nothing else in the room matters, "He—. He needs aide."

Derek Rey dips his chin holding his gaze on his daughter, he knows he has taught her better than that. They will stand here unmoving until she has composed herself. These men are at her control now.

"R-render—" Her voice shakes.

Tapping his scarred arm, Clyde watches Amiria who had beheaded a king, stumble on something as simple as

words. Maybe all that time in the keep really did break her mind. This is not the Amiria he remembers. His eyes fall to the young man with blonde curls. The same person he let walk free not too long ago. There was a trail left behind. A new path in life for Clyde to take. After what he has been through, he has still been able to hold himself together for the sake of his men and women and lead them through this night. All she must do now is finish what he started. Maybe she was not meant for this after all.

Lifting her head, Amiria faces the guards and barks, "Render aide to Stirling Bakere. His survival is your top priority! Those who are not rendering aide will take post outside the royal family chambers. No one is to leave or enter until further notice. Do not inform the nobles in the castle what has conspired. They will be informed when the time comes. Guards and Winged Riders still loyal to the King shall not be killed. Use verbal tactics to get them to stand down."

There's the Amiria I know. Clyde thinks. But too late Amiria, blood has already been spilt in these halls.

"If they continue to refuse, apprehend them. I repeat do not kill. Result only to deadly force if your life is on the line. Finally take Calix—" Her words die on her lips. There is a pool of blood where Calix's body must have laid, "Find Calix Gautier! I repeat do not kill. Find and arrest, Calix Gautier!"

Clyde faces his men, "You heard Rey's orders. You three render aide. You five check the royal chambers. Guards should already be stationed outside the rooms. The rest of you join the Winged Cavalry in pursuing those who stand loyal to King Dietrich, make finding Calix Gautier your top priority."

Inexorable

Taking a step back out of formation, the guards remove themselves from the throne room in a clattering jog. Clyde spins back around to see Amiria had collapsed, now sitting on the side of her hip. His eyes flick over to the field marshal who is given directives to his Winged Riders to scour the skies for any Gautier fleeing and others to begin collecting the dead to be identified in the coat of arms.

Clyde watches as she takes Stirling's hand pulling it into her lap. Clenching his jaw, Clyde knows too well what it's like to watch someone you love die. He begins his track over to the person, he held up high on a pedestal even when she was beaten down in a cage, sit there crumbling into unrepairable pieces with each of the boy's fading breaths.

"It's okay," Amiria whispers as she brushes Stirling's curls, wet with his cold sweat, back from his forehead. She brings her hand back up and wipes at her face.

Is she crying? Clyde realizes. He pauses a few steps away not wanting to intrude.

"Amiria." Stirling's voice is sluggish.

"Don't close your eyes. Stirling please don't go to sleep," she pleads, her words catching in her throat. She strokes his cheek with her thumb.

Swallowing hard, Clyde waves the guards forward and they surround her ready to help.

"So tired." Stirling's lips don't even move as he slowly falls asleep.

"Stirling please—" She presses the back of his hand to her cheek, choking back her tears, "Please don't fall asleep, I love you."

A war hammer to his ribcage. Clyde blinks back any liquid forming in his eyes. The boy's heavy eyelids close and don't open.

"Please! NO!" Amiria cries out.

"Compose yourself," Clyde says standing over her shoulder, "You're a leader."

"I don't want to be." Her voice is hollow

"Grab a tapestry! Get him to the castle surgeon!" Captain Mannering points at two guards. Who hustle to rip down the closet hanging fabric. Clyde's fingers twitch knowing the right thing to do in this situation is to place his hand on Amiria's shoulder but he can't find it in him to do so. He puts his hands behind his back. "We will do our best to save him."

The two guards lay the tapestry beside Stirling as the orange dragon moves back out of their way. Amiria doesn't budge as she watches them grab Stirling by the arms and legs and move his limp body onto the tapestry. "I caused all of this. Its my fault he is going to die. I killed him."

Using a dagger they cut open Stirling's gambeson and tie a bundle of fabric over the gash to help put pressure on the wound. Clyde watches fissures form across Amiria's soul as the guards pick up the corners of the tapestry and carry the boy out of the throne room leaving behind a trail of red footprints.

Clyde grabs Amiria by the bicep and hoists her to her feet and with a nudge says, "Go make sure they are doing their job."

Inexorable

Biting her lip, hands coated in blood Amiria seeks out the eyes of the orange dragon as if they can communicate. The odd dragon lowers its head as if it was heartbroken and Amiria takes off following Stirling.

Clyde runs his hand through his hair and scans the gruesome mess of the throne room and stops at the headless body of King Dietrich. He used to fear this man. He used to fear that he would have him strung up by his neck one day. The corner of Clyde's mouth twitches at the irony. "Bring the body to the coat of arms to be sorted with the rest of them." Captain Mannering says to no one in particular. "He is not above anyone anymore and should not be treated as such." Clyde mutters.

Chapter 37

The night has become eerily empty without the war overhead. Distant shouting could be heard. About what? They don't know. Exhausted, Robert and William have slowed to a steady pace on their way back to the apartment.

Succeeded or failed, they didn't stay around to find out. Maybe if they can make it back to bed they can pretend this night never happened. Robert rests his hand on William's back. It's best they forget.

The sound of plated metal behind them has them whipping around.

"Oh!" Robert gasps yanking William closer to him. Calix Gautier with blood running down his chest plate from a wound hiding beneath bundled fabric pressed to his face stares back at them with one single blue eye. "Sir Gautier."

Calix's one good eye squints, "The high keep guards?"

"Yes."

The Winged Rider's face softens, "Please, help me. I was attacked."

William shifts forward, his training commanding his body to obey the Rider's orders but Robert holds him back.

Inexorable

“By whom?” Robert asks.

“Amiria Rey. I was standing my assigned post. She came out of nowhere—” He breaks off tears forming in his eye, “She—” He heaves, “was my betrothed. I love her even still. If she had just stopped to speak to me. I would have helped her.”

“You didn’t tell her that as you fought?”

The moonlight glints off the liquid lining his eye, “You’ve met her. She didn’t listen to me. She had snapped. I was barely able to get away. If she didn’t see King Dietrich while she was standing over me blade raised. She would have—she would have—She was going to kill me.”

Robert’s suspicions slide away at the sight of the tear slipping down Calix’s cheek to join the blood now pooling at his feet.

The grieving eye of Calix lands on William, “I remember when you asked for advice. Is this them?” His eye flicks to Robert. William tenses. Calix smiles and continues, “I’m happy for you. The person I love did this to me.” Calix drops his hand revealing the slash down the left side of this face, “and I need help bandaging it.”

“Woah!” William yelps.

Robert swallows hard, “We can take you to the infirmary.”

“No!” Calix composes himself, “They must be overloaded with injured. I need help now, your help. Please.”

“We won’t get in trouble?”

“By what king?”

Calix’s words turn Robert and William’s blood cold. Amiria had succeeded. The Rider holds out

the bloodied tapestry and kneels before them. Robert accepts it and tears it into strips they can work with. Working together the two guards hold several strips length ways along the gash while they wrap strands around Calix's head to tie it down as tight as they could while still leaving his one good eye and mouth free.

"Tss," Calix hisses as Robert ties the final knot.

"That's the best we can think of," Robert says as they step back from the bloodied man who, if he wanted to, can kill them without breaking a sweat.

Gauntlet hands touch the soiled fabric wrapped around his face, "Thank you." Calix breathes, "You two really saved me."

"You're welcome." William answers.

With the clang of metal Calix rises to his full height. "I'll remember what you've done for me." His lips pull back, oozing blood from under his tapestry wrapping.

Robert swallows hard, "Oh its um, no problem. Get that checked by a professional though. You don't want it getting infected."

"Yes. Of course."

Robert and William watch as Calix Gautier passes them and disappears into the night.

William whispers, "I don't think he will."

"Same."

"I think we made a mistake."

"Yeah."

Chapter 39

One month. It has been one month since the alarms rang out drastically altering people's lives for a second time. This time it had changed it for the better but better doesn't mean best.

No longer do they live in a world where they will be hung for pursuing a hobby but they will still have to choose one trade and can't change without being fined. There is one major law that has not changed and probably never will.

It is still punishable by death for the same sex to be in a relationship.

Even with Amiria Rey as general, some people are still overlooked. Does she even know people like them exist? Has the possibility ever crossed her mind? Too bad Clyde didn't win the majority vote and become Field Marshal, but how would he present the idea without incriminating himself or exposing all of them to the hatred many still feel at their core.

They still work personally for Clyde or should they say Colonel Mannering. Clyde has not just changed his career but has transferred from being their captain to their friend, the only people he now sees as family. Clyde has

moved his residence into the castle leaving them the apartment to themselves. A place they can call theirs and feel safe to be together in, but even with a lock on their home, it doesn't stop the nightmares from getting in.

Every knock on their door William's heart rate spikes believing Jerrad has come back for them. Jerrad was still alive when the clean up crew found him. He plus many others were rushed to the infirmary, but he never made it to the morning.

One hundred and twenty six people he had walked to their death and one person died by his hand.

William reminds himself every day that Jerrad fell asleep and never woke up. It will never be him again, except there are other Jerrads out there. Probably more of them than not.

Calix figured it out, was it at that moment or was it long before that night? They will never know, because unbeknownst to them at the time, Calix was on the run. He wasn't the victim he claimed to be. If he didn't need their help, would he have killed them on spot or still let them go?

That is a secret they will take to their grave, hopefully later than sooner.

"Are you ready?" Robert asks William who is lost in thought.

William finishes tying close the top of of his long tunic over tights, "Yeah, yeah I'm ready."

Robert cups the side of William's face and strokes his cheek with his thumb, "What's on your mind?"

"Everything, all the time."

Robert frowns then softly kisses William's forehead, "We're off today. We're going to hang out with Clyde, drink good mead and eat fancy food. So, relax."

Inexorable

William slowly releases his breath, "Yeah. Okay."

In the hall housing the brass, Clyde opens his door to the only two people he truly trusts. Noone else knows the real him, seen who he is when he isn't wearing the navy blue gambeson. Clyde steps to the side allowing his friends entry into his home. He never thought he would miss sharing living space with other people, but after the experience of constant company, this large room echoes with loneliness.

"Velvet," William swoons as he grabs a soft blanket and swaddles up on the day bed.

"Take it all," Clyde says as he pours a mug of mead for each of them.

"Will do." William's face is barely visible through the gap in the blanket.

Robert with his and William's mug in hand, plops down beside him, "You're going to have to free your hands."

William groans and sits up, one hand snaking out of the blankets and accepting the mug.

"To finally relaxing." Clyde holds up his mug, the other two men raising theirs in response.

"Well the best we can under circumstances," Robert adds.

"To trying to relax despite living in this awful place," Clyde reiterates.

"Cheers to that." William pops his head out of the blanket and joins in as they all tip back their mugs and take a drink.

Faces flushed from the mead the three young men laugh. Clyde takes another sip, "I can't believe your parents were going to arrange your marriage."

"Yeah, they still haven't forgiven me yet. Said I've embarrassed them for choosing to stay single."

"If only they new the truth." William still wrapped in his blankets nuzzles his face on Robert's shoulder.

"You guys make me sick." Clyde rolls his eyes while Robert throws his arm around William pulling him into him. "I need another drink."

Clyde heaves up from the chair and takes two steps away from Robert and William who have interlocked lips and toward the table near the door when it flings open.

"Clyde," Amiria announces with her eyes down reading a parchment, "These need to reviewed by tomo—"

No one in the room moves. Amiria stares at two men in a very provocative position who stare back with all the whites of their eyes showing. Clyde leaps from Amiria to his friends then back to Amiria who is turning an unnatural shade of red.

"I should go." She breathes and grabs the door handle to close it as she leaves.

"Amiria! Wait!" Clyde grabs the door stopping her, but her dodgy eyes refuse to meet his, "Let me explain."

Letting go of the door, Amiria's authoritative voice rolls out, "I am to be on my way Colonel."

Amiria turns to leave but Clyde reaches out to stop her, as soon as his fingertips touch her sleeve she spins on him, slapping his hand away.

"Don't." She warns.

Clyde closes his eyes and begs, "Please. Let me explain."

Inexorable

Crossing her arms, Amiria fidgets anxiously,
“Then explain.”

Clyde breathes a sigh of relief and steps out of the threshold of the door and back to the safety of the room. Amiria eyes the two other guards then follow Clyde in closing the door behind her.

Uneasy, Clyde rummages through all the ways he can explain, but any excuse is that, an excuse, a lie that she will see through.

“So?”

Swallowing hard Clyde tells her, “They are together.”

“Together?”

Clyde answers her by meeting her eyes, “*Together.*” Amiria raises an eyebrow. “If you tell anyone about them, they will be hung.”

Amiria breaks their eye contact, “Then why are they?”

“Why did you?” Clyde presses.

Amiria doesn’t answer.

Closing his eyes, Clyde confesses for the first time in his life to someone on the outside, “I’m the same as them.”

Dark eyes come back to Clyde, “What do you mean?”

“I loved someone once, but *he’s* gone now.” Clyde clenches his jaw then admits, “He was hung.”

Confusion and realization battle across Amiria’s face as she makes sense of what Clyde has told her, “I didn’t know that was possible.”

“There’s a lot to life you don’t know.”

“You’re right.” Amiria backs up to the door and rests her hand on the handle.

Clyde’s words stop her from opening it, “You know what it’s like to have to hide.”

Amiria bites her lip and dips her chin to her shoulder, "You're right." She whispers and vanishes from the room as quiet as a blown out candle.

Turning back to the room Clyde keeps his expression neutral as he sees William with his face in his hands and Robert consoling him. Not them. He's lost everyone else in his life and even though they will never feel the same kinship towards him, he will protect them or swing with them. But it was Amiria, she committed mutiny and regicide to protect what she believed was right, to protect the baker.

Clyde's lips disappear into a thin line and his brows furrow, he releases his tense muscles with a sigh and tells Robert and William, "Everything is going to be okay."

"How do you know?" Robert asks.

"I don't, but I know Amiria."

Standing on a connecting bridge, Clyde leans on a railing overlooking Lumierna. He is a colonel. King Dietrich took everything from him and he is slowly taking it back, but there is one thing he can never have. He cannot fall in love again and risk another person's life.

"Stirling left you know." Amiria appears and rests her arms on the railing beside him.

"When?" Clyde keeps his sights out over Lumierna.

Ring her hands she answers, "A few days ago."

"You didn't want to go with him?"

Amiria shakes her head, her teeth grinding as if she is holding back tears. The word comes out breathy, "No."

Clyde scoffs puzzled, "Why do you keep choosing this place?" He waves his hand out to the decrepit buildings. The girl he grew up beside doesn't answer, but he

Inexorable

understood. "Once a Winged Rider, always a Winged Rider."

"You were one too."

"Born, but never graduated. I'm a lonesome guard according to my insignia."

"Colonel now."

"And General."

The last two still alive from their class of five stare out over the city in silence. The city that only knows how to take. Even when it gives, its creaking claws are waiting to snatch it back.

Amiria breaks the silence and grips the railing, "I know a place."

"What?" Clyde shifts to try and meet her face but she keeps her eyes on the courtyard below them.

She expands, "There's a kingdom where you can be—" She checks for ears before whispering, "yourself."

"What are you getting at?"

"Kingdom of Tillfalya. We have recently established a trading route with them. It's southeast past Uviktiland. There's the first ship leaving in eight days." Clyde turns to Amiria as she continues to speak, "If you and they are up for it. Documents signed by the general can grant you passage on that ship."

"Why would you do that for the people who held you captive."

"It wasn't you guys who imprisoned me."

"I branded you." Clyde says with disgust at himself.

Amiria pulls her arm to her chest and closes her eyes, "Do you want the papers or not?"

"Eight days?"

"It's a weeks ride to get there."

"We'll start packing."

Amiria lets out a shaky breath and finally meets Clyde's eye, "Pack tradable items. Their currency differs from ours."

"Thank you." Clyde pushes back from the railing and begins walking away.

"Clyde."

He stops and turns halfway around.

"You're the better leader."

"I don't know about that," He smiles "but I hope I'll see you again."

Chapter 40

Salt, fish, and tide, reeks in the coastal air as William, Robert, and Clyde emerge from the city of Kitlsbo where their cart had dropped them off and they took in their first sights of the ocean. Walking onto weather worn planks of wood the reality sets in. They stand over the banks of Wyverna and within twenty more paces they will have stepped off her for good.

They spent the last week traveling across Wyverna learning most of the land was flat and rolling hills until they reached the northern side with towering peaks topped with snow. William breathes in a sharp intake of breath as one of the boards shifts under his foot with a groan.

He has never been outside of Lumierna and here he now stands the furthest one person can be while still being in the kingdom. He takes another step. He wants to run to the boat, he wants to go home. The unknown is scary, the unknown is safe. Home is familiar, home is dangerous.

Robert squeezes William's shoulder with a reassuring smile. They will venture into this new and terrifying world together.

Weighed down with their lives condensed into bags, Robert, William, and Clyde stop at the bottom of the gangway

A man with wind burned skin and stained clothing puts his hand up halting them, “Can I help you.”

“Colonel Mannering. My two guards and I are to take passage on this vessel to the Kingdom of Tillfalya on official council business per General Rey.” Clyde pulls a scroll from a lining in his surcoat and hands it over to the seamen.

The man with flaking skin scans the parchment, “Alright, hope you city boys don’t get sea sick.”

William peers over the edge of the dock to the murky waters lapping at the wooden pillar disappearing into the blue. He raises his lip to the furry texture of what must be plant life growing off it. He turns back to the jagged peaks of Wyverna, his known world went from the size of a city to the size of a kingdom in one week. In two weeks he will be—he can’t even fathom *where* he will be. How big is the world?

“Will.”

Dark green eyes flip back from the mountains to the boat. Robert stands halfway up the gangway with Clyde stepping inside the ship.

With one last glance at Wyverna, William steps unsteady onto the board they call a ramp and officially leaves the Isles of Wyverna.

“Will.” Robert leaps to his feet letting the green tinted boy with auburn hair slump sickly to the side without the support of Robert. “We’re here!”

“Finally,” William says, nauseated.

Inexorable

A gust of wind pulls at Robert's clothing and pushes the sails as they enter Sporra bay. Across the shimmering waters sprawls a massive city with red roof buildings all stacked up on each other as they climb the dwarfed mountain.

Robert breathes out in astonishment, "It's incredible."

Running down the ramp, William falls to his knees and throws up over the edge of the dock. "I hate the ocean." William groans.

The trading dock is packed with people and their merchandise coming, going, and being sold. Several people shake their head at the poor boy throwing up over the edge but carry on with their business.

Robert sets down their bags and kneels beside William and rubs his back, "We never have to go on a boat again."

Hiccupping, William brings his head up pale, "Thank you."

"Come on get up." Clyde hovers over them, "We've got to job hunt and find a place to live. So, we need to barter some of these items if we want food and a roof tonight."

"Not hungry." William covers his mouth.

"You should be after two weeks of heaving everything back up." Robert tenderly pushes back William's sweaty strands of hair.

"Oh my, is your boyfriend, okay?" A rich voice asks. The three young men stiffen.

Clyde protectively steps between his friends and the tall stranger. His heart lurches as he takes in the man

with gold jewelry that sits strikingly against his dark skin. "They-they aren't" Clyde stutters.

The man puts up his hand, his bangles chiming, "Oh, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have assumed." Robert, William, and Clyde stare at the man in terrified silence. "Well." The word rolls off his tongue, "Since they aren't they should be, it's obvious they love each other." The man in flowing cloth says. His dark eyes skip to each of the young men before him, "What?"

Clyde swallows and asks the question, "Would they not be hung for that?"

"Oh honey, where would you get an idea like that?" he says, putting his hand to his mouth.

Robert helps William to his feet and keeps his arm around him holding him close, "You mean we can be an *us*?"

The man raises an eyebrow as confused as they are, "Yeah. Where you guys from? Wait, you know who you sound like. Stirling of Patu."

Clyde's eyebrows lift at Stirling's name. What are the odds they run into someone who knows him right after they step off the ship?

With a shuddering breath William fails to hold back his tears as he turns to Robert. Amber brown eyes are magnetic to the emerald green blinking up to them. Robert chokes on his emotions and cups William's cheek. With a gasp William buries himself into Robert who holds onto him as if they could be ripped apart from their first public embrace.

"See, I knew it." The man grins.

Clyde eyes the other people crowding the trading ships, but no one even bats an eye at the two young men holding

Inexorable

each other. He returns to the man and extends his hand out, "Clyde, and that is Robert and William."

Brilliantly white teeth shine as the man happily grins, shaking Clyde's hand, "Tobias and welcome to Leucasia."