

LOVE IS AN OPEN ROAD



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**THE FIVE
BROTHERS
OF EVERAN**
Victoria Zagar

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

THE FIVE BROTHERS OF EVERAN

By Victoria Zagar

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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THE FIVE BROTHERS OF EVERAN

By Victoria Zagar

Photo Description

A mage with long black hair stands holding a book. He wears dark robes and a green cloak, along with a belt and a jade sash. He appears thoughtful and determined, as if pondering a greater fate. His hand is clutched around the book, as though he is perfectly capable of unleashing its power at any moment.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

This handsome prince is me, one of five brothers. We were all adopted at the age of two after the council objected to their king marrying another man. Father sometimes says they might have overdone it with so many, but he'd been really invested in sticking it to the councilmen. We're a bit of a grab-bag set, but we're as close as if we'd been brothers in blood, and I wouldn't give any of them up for the world.

But that's old news. The current scandal is that my fathers have said that they will officially announce their heir at the Summer Festival. The council has been pushing for it, but for my part I wouldn't mind waiting another decade or two. I don't think I even want to be king, but I've been caught up with my brothers in competing and posturing—I swear we're worse than an ostentation of peacocks. Between that, the outside pressure, and the usual chaos that accompanies the Summer Festival, I barely have time to think, let alone cause trouble. Which is why it's such a terrible time for me to realize I have feelings for one of my brothers. Not that any time would really be good for that, but this is particularly awful.

So basically, my life's a mess, and I really need someone to help walk me through it to the happy ending.

Please no BDSM or anything hardcore or heavy.

Sincerely,

A handsome prince

Story Info

Genre: fantasy

Tags: royalty, mage/sorcerer, sweet/no sex, adopted brothers, disabilities, pseudo-incest

Word Count: 18,037

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THE FIVE BROTHERS OF EVERAN

By Victoria Zagar

Chapter One

“Askavian!” A loud voice penetrated my sleep, and I woke from my light slumber to find myself draped over a magic book. I wiped the drool from my chin and looked at my visitor with bleary eyes.

It was Saveroy, the oldest of my four brothers at twenty-one and nine months, and by far the most responsible. He strode into my room, blue cloak fastened around his shoulders, his chainmail clinking awkwardly as he stepped through the silk curtain into my domain. Brown hair hung down his back in an elegant ponytail. His breastplate was adorned with the family crest, as well as the shield strapped to his back. He was ready for battle all the time, as if Everan would be attacked imminently—the irony being that Everan has always been at peace, surrounded as it is on all sides by allies that have long needed to barter for our natural resources. Gods know Saveroy would have invented some threat to justify his obsession with military might. He would have been better born into a family of knights than adopted into princehood.

“Askavian, please tell me you are ready for the Summer Festival,” Saveroy said, his tone one of exasperation.

“Saveroy, the Festival doesn’t begin for another two days,” I said, lounging back on a silk pillow. I was dressed in my usual mage’s robes: black trimmed with gold, with a jade sash proving my rank as a High Mage. One more level and I would be a Master, fit to train pupils in the Art. As far as I was concerned, magic was far more useful in peacetime than any sword. However, I supposed Saveroy had little else going for him. Not the sharpest tool in the shed, I must say, but I could understand why Father might Choose him to lead the realm; “stay the course” was practically Saveroy’s life motto. If Father wanted stability, Saveroy would be the obvious choice...

But I was letting my mind wander again. I couldn’t help it; everything seemed to lead back to the Choosing. Knowing that Father was about to announce his successor at the Summer Festival had all five of us brothers in fierce competition whether we wanted the Crown or not.

How did we come to this? My brothers and I were adopted at the age of two, to settle the succession crisis caused by Father marrying another man instead of taking a bride who could produce heirs to the throne. The Council had not been pleased by Father’s outrageous marriage proposal and the

conundrum it placed them in; they feared a power vacuum might lead to the first war in Everan's history. They outlawed the marriage and demanded that Father marry a princess from the neighbouring realm of Vindora. But the princess vehemently opposed the match, in love as she was with the princess of Ashvalaria, and so she and the King composed a plot: she would find for him five children from noble families around the Five Realms and convince their families to place them up for adoption. The Council accepted this plan, since they believed there was little chance five noble families could be found who would part with their male offspring. But the princess completed her task, and the Council had no choice but to either accept the King's marriage, or risk damaged relations with both Vindora and Ashvalaria. It had been a brilliant idea, if a little poorly planned in hindsight. Now, with five sons, there was a succession crisis of another sort. In our own way, we all wanted to be King, but there was only one throne.

"Do you really think standing at the podium before the Festival even starts will put you in Father's good graces? Why, he might even mistake you for a statue," I jibed. Saveroy was so easy to tease; his stiff demeanour and overwrought self-seriousness was all too easy to mock.

"I am certain he will appreciate my steadfast dedication over your childish laziness," Saveroy said. "What kind of King would you make? I suspect you were last on Father's mind when he considered all his sons."

"If you think he's already made his decision, why are you so eager to be early for the Festival?" I asked, poking holes in his logic. I knew it was hardly a fair contest, but I needed to take my tension out on someone. I'm slightly ashamed to admit he was an easy target.

"Leave him be, Askavian." The curtain to my room was swept aside once more, revealing Eskil. With short, dark brown hair and brown eyes, he was the plainest among us. He stuck to Saveroy's side like glue, always eager to please his older brother. If Saveroy had told him to crawl across the floor like a dog, he would have done it. Thankfully, Saveroy was kind enough not to abuse the privilege of having a devoted follower, even if Eskil's constant presence seemed to irk him at times.

"Saveroy, your shadow is here," I joked. "What'll you do if Father Chooses you, eh, Eskil? I can see it now. You'll immediately abdicate—right after you Choose Saveroy as your successor." I picked up my book and pretended to lose myself in its pages, enjoying Eskil's indignant expression from the corner of my eye.

“Who says I don’t wish to be King?” Eskil said, backing away from Saveroy. “I have ambitions in my own right, Askavian—and a better chance at the throne than you, at any rate.”

“Is that so?” I placed the book gently down on a table, extricating myself from the silken pillows with a flourish as the curtain parted again and Talos wandered in. Youthful eyes belied his age—he was actually older than me by a few months—and his small stature hid a fierce, yet untamed strength. As the most balanced of all of us, in many ways, Talos was best suited to be King. He excelled in all his lessons from swordplay to etiquette. That’s why he was so utterly boring, in my opinion. A man with no room for improvement makes little effort. Talos would glide through his days as King, and while it would likely be a successful reign, it would not be a memorable one. He would certainly marry some humdrum princess and produce the expected children, leaving Father’s bold legacy as a blip on the radar as far as the Council was concerned. If the succession was up to them, Talos would have been a shoo-in. As far as I was concerned, only Saveroy was a more boring choice. Even Eskil might find his balls when confronted with the responsibility of ruling a kingdom.

I waited for the curtain to open one more time, but to my disappointment, it did not. My brothers continued to argue amongst themselves as I tucked my magic tome into my armpit and strode out. They were interrupting my quiet time, and I had much to think about before the matter of succession was settled once and for all.

On the grounds of Everan Castle sat a lake that was always still due to some magic laid a long time ago by the First King, Andoris. No storm could draw it into a frenzy. Even magic died there, the stillness so absolute that nothing could disturb it. No creature could live within its waters, a side effect that Andoris had not discovered until one morning he went to swim in his creation and found himself dragged into the murky depths by water so heavy that it sucked any life down into its still, deadly depths.

It was there that I went, seeking solace in the peace of the silent, dark water. The coming Festival and the announcement of Father’s succession choice weighed heavily on my shoulders. Of course I stood no chance. I had always been one of the black sheep among us, the prickly one who used his sense of humour to wound his enemies and his intelligence to memorise magic tricks and spells he had little use for.

“Here again? It’s not like you to brood, Askavian.” The voice that emerged from the trees was sweet and songful; my heart lifted to hear it, my eyes looking around to catch a glimpse of the familiar man who sang to me. A flash of white hair revealed my final brother, Lastimus, leaning up against a tree. A songbird sat on his shoulder, tweeting away contentedly. Piercing blue eyes stood out from a fair, beautiful face that wouldn’t have been out of place on a maiden. The front of his platinum hair was in two braids that tied together at the back, the rest allowed to hang loose over his shoulders. Green robes tumbled about him, covering the shape of his body and the mangled leg that drew stares from all quarters and forced him to walk with a limp. Out of all of us, he was the most unwanted by his birth family; as a babe, his white hair had led to accusations of a curse and he had been left in the woods to die a ritual death in the snow. A wolf was in the process of savaging his leg by the time Father had learned of the child’s fate and sent men to rescue him. Lastimus’s noble family had been humiliated when the barbaric affair had come to light. Father’s desire to adopt Lastimus, despite his disability, was seen as an act of mercy and compassion. This deed further endeared the then-new King of Everan and his husband, Prince Consort Conrad, to the common people.

“I know I should not, but I feel like the Choosing is a personal rejection, the picking of favourites by two men who claimed to have none. We all know Father and Conrad will not Choose me as the heir. I might as well revoke my claim right here and now,” I said, the shield of humour slipping away and my true melancholy surfacing.

Lastimus sat down beside me on the soft grass. The bird on his shoulder fluttered away into the trees. “Our brothers only say such things because they know you are the real competition, Askavian. We all know Father values knowledge and wit over physical strength.”

“Then he should Choose you,” I said.

“That will never happen, and you know it. This leg has sealed my fate. A leader must command respect, not pity. It does not matter how skilled I am in the art of strategy. Father can never Choose me. I am weak, and a weak man cannot become King.”

“It’s not right.” I threw my book down and it fell open to the bookmarked page, a tattered explanation on love charms I’d read a thousand times. “Of all of us, you are the kindest, most knowledgeable, most compassionate—”

“A king cannot hobble to his throne. I have accepted this fact, brother. I wish you would do the same.” Lastimus smiled, a warm upturn of the lips that made my stomach backflip.

“It’s not fair!” I yelled like a petulant child. I wanted to rail at the world and all its cruelties, especially this Choosing, which sought only to elevate one brother and leave the others resentful and jealous. Our relationship would never be the same again. It had already been irrevocably divided; the Choosing had shattered the fragile bonds that had drawn us together as brothers when no blood was shared between us. I longed for the simple days when we had been five young boys playing at war with wooden swords as our fathers watched on with pride. But it had always been I who had caught Lastimus when he had lost his balance. In some ways, he was my Eskil, only with a mind as sharp as mine. We had become natural allies, outwitting our brothers in games both small and large.

I didn’t want to be King. That was true, but only part of the story. I didn’t want to sit on that throne by myself.

I wanted to sit on it next to Lastimus.

Chapter Two

Later that same day, I wandered through the empty stalls that would soon be alive with decorations and food for the Summer Festival. Women and men alike were hard at work turning the empty wooden frames into floats, stands, and displays for the biggest event on Everan's social calendar.

It was hard to believe, as I stood in the normal hustle and bustle of Festival preparation, that my life was about to change forever. It seemed like just yesterday when my brothers and I had attended the Festival as mere guests, five teenagers dancing with the common folk and eyeing Festival prizes with greedy gazes. Now, the commoners turned their eyes down to the ground in a show of respect as I passed, addressing me as "my lord" and "your grace". The years seemed to take me further from everyone I had ever known.

A jolt of fear ran through my veins. What if time took me from Lastimus? It was not the first time I had experienced that particular worry, nor would it be the last. The Festival, specifically the Choosing, held the power to create a rift between us. For Lastimus had spoken truly when he had stated Father's respect for intelligence and magic, and I was forced to acknowledge a cruel and simple truth: what if I was the one Father chose as his heir? How would Lastimus feel, knowing that I held everything that would be his if he hadn't been cursed with wicked birth parents? I had never known him to hold a grudge, but I knew resentment could grow slowly in a man, poisoning relationships with its slightest touch, corrupting a soul over time. How would he feel as we grew older and I took the crown? If I wed a husband or a wife and started a family, while he remained alone, scouring the library for maps like a ghost of times long past, unfulfilled and left behind?

Maybe I should do as I had joked Eskil would: hand over my crown to Lastimus. Yet Lastimus had been right when he said the people would not respect a king with a limp. As kind as the people of Everan could be, even a kingdom at peace needed a warrior in charge, someone to lead the military and defend the realm should the worst come to pass. How I wished it wasn't so. How I wanted to trade places with Lastimus and take his impediment upon myself. The lame leg would not have hindered me at all, for truth be told, I didn't want the crown in the slightest. But Lastimus did, despite his words to the contrary. I knew that, beneath the surface, he longed for the intellectual challenge of governing a kingdom, something to bring purpose into his life.

Crueller still, I knew he would be good at it. He was the best of all of us. I cursed his birth parents for the sixth time that day and almost bumped into a young boy carrying a huge embroidered flag in his arms. He fell to one knee and stammered an apology, his eyes wide with terror.

“At ease, young one,” I said, ruffling his short black hair. “It was I who bumped into you, and for that, I apologise.”

“You are very kind, my prince. I hope you are the one Chosen.” The boy blushed, biting the tongue that had obviously said too much in his opinion. “I mean, not that your brothers aren’t equally worthy—but you have always been my favourite, if you don’t mind me saying...”

“Tomlin!” The boy’s scandalised mother flew over from where she had been hanging a banner, horror plastered across her face. I might have found the scene comical at another time, but all it did at that moment was remind me that there was now an impenetrable barrier between the common folk and me. I was no longer an equal, but someone of higher station to be feared, as if I might bring the wrath of the Gods down on an innocent boy for speaking so candidly of his teenage crush on me.

I watched as the mother dragged the youth away by his ear, threatening to withhold dinner privileges. A quip died in my throat, and all I could do was stand there dumbly as the honest youth was dragged away for a good earbashing.

Is this how it would feel to be King? I wanted it even less, if that was the case. I suddenly found myself with a deeper respect for the isolation of Father’s position. Thank the Gods he had Conrad at his side, for it occurred to me in that moment that a king needs love perhaps more than any other person alive.

I returned to my rooms slightly downbeat. I was anxious to avoid my brothers along the way, skirting around the courtyard where Eskil and Saveroy were sparring in full armour with dull training blades. Lastimus was nowhere to be seen, and I was both grateful for that and disappointed at the same time. I liked Lastimus’s company, but lately my feelings for him had grown confusing. The last thing I needed was additional complications in my life. I was determined to get through the Choosing before considering my future. The grim dread and sick excitement that curdled my guts needed to pass so that I might ponder the future with a clear head.

I rounded a corner and stopped dead in my tracks when I heard angry voices. Pressing myself up against the cold stone wall, I recognised the voices engaged in heated conversation: my second father, Prince Conrad, and Councillor Forwell, the current leader of the High Council. There was no love lost between those two.

“It’s unacceptable!” Forwell protested. “We made our reasons clear for enforcing the Choosing this summer. The King needs a clear heir to avoid a succession war.”

“I don’t see your concern, Forwell. I can assure you my husband has no intention of dying anytime soon. Unless you know something that I do not?” Conrad smiled, showing just enough teeth to imply a threat beneath layers of charm.

“I resent your accusation, Prince Consort, and I tire of you. We have made enough concessions for the King’s continual breach of tradition, and yet you still treat the Council as if we are your enemies. Without us, you would still be a lowly commoner. Remember you are here only because the King thinks so fondly of you. Husband, indeed. The King should have taken a wife or concubine, and had true-born heirs. Everan’s bloodline has been permanently sullied because of you.”

“I know. You’ve never let me forget it for a moment. Should I bow and kiss your shoes now or later for so graciously allowing me to marry the man I love? The man who commands you, might I add?” I smirked at Conrad’s attitude. He’d never cared for the Council, nor tradition, nor the status that marrying into the royal family had afforded him. The latter he seemed to endure like a tiresome relative, and with the Council always snapping at his heels, I understood why.

“Tell the King that the Council finds his solution wholly unacceptable. We shall expect his choice for heir presented at the Festival.” Forwell turned on his heel, his gold-embroidered robes swirling about him. The chains of his office rattled as he strode away. Conrad waited until he was out of sight to visibly deflate, leaning against the wall.

“Told you this wasn’t going to work, sweetheart,” Conrad muttered under his breath. “Unless... maybe your original idea was the best one after all...” He snapped his fingers, then walked away with purpose in his step, his cloak whipping behind him in the cool breeze that whistled through the castle’s corridors.

At the time, I had no idea of the significance of the conversation I'd witnessed. Later on, I would look back on that moment with a smile.

One thing was for certain: everything was about to change.

It was a short walk to the castle library, where I found Lastimus poring over old maps. He loved to revisit ancient battles and analyse the strategies of foreign heroes and commanders. Our brothers had always mocked him since our kingdom had never seen a war and probably never would. They didn't seem to understand that the tactics Lastimus learned applied to far more than just war. He was learning to rule, even if he would never stand as more than an advisor. I had to admire the ease at which he took second place without the outward bitterness I would have expected from anyone else in his place.

"Ah, Askavian. Perfect timing. Could you come here for a moment?" Lastimus asked. I leaned over the huge oak table, looking at the section of the map where Lastimus's slender finger rested.

"How can I help, brother?"

"I keep coming back to this battle. I don't understand why Ulrich of Ester placed his troops here. It would have been far easier to assault Barak from the East, surely?"

"Are you certain he did not? This seems like a small host for the Esterian army. Weren't their soldiers all conscripted?"

"There's no record of any other attack party. Ulrich lost and was ultimately killed. It was nothing less than suicide to march against the greatest military power in history with a host this small. Why do it?"

"Perhaps he intended to test Barak's strength before forming another strategy. Or perhaps he simply miscalculated. Even the greatest military minds make mistakes sometimes." My arm accidentally brushed against Lastimus's and his robes caressed my skin, sending electricity down my spine. I pulled away quickly, smothering my troublesome thoughts before they could light a fire in my groin. One day. One more day and the Choosing would be over. Then I could concentrate on the meddlesome feelings I was having for my brother, that foolish and embarrassing infatuation that would surely doom me if it came to light. There may have been no blood shared between us, but we had grown up as brothers, shared childhood friends and dreams, bedrooms and brawls. It simply would not do to grow attracted to Lastimus. We could never

be together in any meaningful way, especially if I was to become King. The Council had barely tolerated Father's choice of marriage. A same-sex marriage between two men who had grown up as brothers? Unthinkable.

"Askavian!"

"Uh... pardon?" I asked, snapping back to the moment.

"I have asked you three times if you have eaten yet today. You look pale, and you're clearly distracted." Lastimus smiled. "If this madness is the effect the Choosing has on others, I am truly glad I am not in contention for the Crown."

"I am sorry," I said. I watched as Lastimus rolled up the parchment map, tying a ribbon around it before returning it to a chest where dozens of similar scrolls lay. "To answer your question, no, I haven't yet eaten today. My appetite has been delicate lately."

"Oh, my little prince. Whatever will I do with you?" Lastimus's eyes bored into my soul, and I honestly couldn't make sense of whether he was joking or not. If those words had come from my mouth, they would have been dripping with sarcasm, but the way he said them seemed almost intimate. Lastimus was hardly known for his sense of humour.

"Who's little? I'm both older and taller than you. Slightly." I responded in the only way I knew how: with a reflexive quip. The tension in the air dissipated, and I felt myself exhale the breath I'd been holding.

"Now then," Lastimus said. "It's time for us to dine. Let us have a feast fit for a King."

Yes, I was going to be relieved when the Choosing was over. If my heart didn't give out before then. By the Gods, the prospect of surviving the coming day seemed slimmer by the hour. I spared a thought for Ulrich and his ill-fated army, for we were both lambs to the proverbial slaughter.

Chapter Three

I wasn't sure whether to be relieved or annoyed when we reached the dining hall to find the rest of our family assembled at the high table. Tensions were thick in the air, and it took all my strength not to turn on my heel and walk back outside. Even Conrad, usually so jovial, sat with a grim expression on his face, scratching his red beard as he picked at his plate.

"It's good to see you," Father said. "All my sons, together again. This is probably our last chance before the Choosing."

"As if we needed a reminder," Saveroy snapped. "Why can't we just do this now? Why do we have to wait until the Festival?" Eskil nodded, and even Talos joined in. Our father looked older in that moment than he ever had, and his mortality struck me like a blow to the gut. It seemed foolish to be torn up in jealousy over the Crown. I felt like my brothers, save Lastimus, had no idea what the succession really meant. It meant someday Father would die. By the aged look on his face and the increasingly snowy brush of beard that adorned his chin, that day might come sooner rather than later. A sick dread gripped me. How did any of us expect to stand in Father's shoes? He had been a strong, compassionate, benevolent King: the kind of man the common people respected and admired. We were only children yet, as surely as we had been when we were delivered to the castle at two years of age. Babes battling it out over a crown without any understanding of what it took to rule a kingdom.

By the twinkling of wisdom in Lastimus's beautiful sapphire eyes, he had already experienced this particular revelation. I wondered how it felt to be the man most fit to rule, and yet be practically disqualified on a technicality. I started to wonder if Lastimus was not bitter enough about his predicament, given that a bad succession choice could spell the downfall of Everan. I truly saw our other brothers as enemies in that moment, acknowledging the threat their selfishness represented to the kingdom.

I had to trust in our fathers. They would Choose wisely. They had to. Perhaps they just needed a little push. If I spoke with them privately, perhaps—

"Ahem." The sound of Father clearing his throat echoed throughout the chamber. The eyes of my other brothers bored into me, daring me to say something either in their defence or against them. I said nothing and summoned a servant over with a gesture to refill my goblet, dreading the strained dinner conversation that was coming.

“So, Askavian, your brothers have had their say. Have you anything to add?” Father asked. “Any thoughts on the Choosing whatsoever?”

“I haven’t given it much thought, Father,” I lied, wanting to avoid the subject. Conrad let forth a derisive *tut-tutting* sound, and I knew he didn’t believe me for a second.

“He wants Lastimus,” Talos said. “That much is pretty clear to me. He’d rather have a cripple on the throne, so he can pull the strings behind the curtain.”

I stood up without thinking, the blood rushing to my face. “He would make a better ruler than any of you children! You quarrel over the Crown as if it’s a precious trinket, without any understanding of the heavy burden Father carries!” But it was Talos’s first words that had me in the real frenzy, the room spinning about me as my blood pressure suddenly rose. *He wants Lastimus*. He couldn’t have known about my private feelings, I reassured myself, but the thought that he might somehow have guessed nagged at me. What if I had become a cruel joke amongst my brothers? What if I had worn my heart on my sleeve the whole time, and Lastimus had been humouring me with pity and embarrassment? I was fit to die of shame.

“I am here, you know,” Lastimus said firmly, shooting a displeased look across the table at Talos, who wilted in his chair like a shrinking violet. “If you are to speak of me and my savaged leg, and how that makes me an unfit King, I would rather you be kind enough to at least acknowledge my presence.”

My mouth fell open. In all the years, I had never been lost for words like I was in that moment. Lastimus must have taken a thousand jokes and jibes from commoners and brothers alike about his mangled leg and foot, and each and every time he had nodded, smiled, and moved on. Finally, Talos had become the straw to break the camel’s back. I sat down in my chair before I could fall, quickly stuffing a piece of steak in my mouth to stifle any ill-considered words I might feel like adding to the conversation. It wasn’t my place to speak. The lamb had grown teeth for himself, and how savage and gleaming they were in the low-lit dining hall. Fierce pride swelled up inside me as Talos reddened like a beetroot. I wanted to pin a first place ribbon on him like a prize vegetable at the Festival.

“Of course, brother. I am sorry,” Talos mumbled. I could have sworn I saw Conrad smirk a little, and we shared a conspiratorial glance across the table.

Talos started to backpedal. “I didn’t mean to infer that you were unfit to rule, simply that you have an impediment that needs to be taken into consideration.”

“At least I do not have the impediment of a mouth that flaps uncontrollably without thinking,” Lastimus said. “Why, with you as King, we’d be at war in a fortnight.”

I liked this new Lastimus. A lot. Talos shrivelled further into his seat, looking like he would rather be anywhere else. Saveroy and Eskil, for their parts, looked embarrassed to be seated next to him, as if they were tainted by association now that favour had turned on their brother.

“Enough!” Father bellowed, slamming his fist down on the table so hard that his mead spilled on the tablecloth. “Don’t you understand that this foolish bickering is exactly what the Council wants?”

I had never seen Father so enraged. Even Conrad seemed shocked, and as he put a hand on Father’s shoulder, Father shrugged it off in a manner so uncharacteristic that it felt almost as if he had been replaced by an impostor. I whispered a Charm of Revelation under my breath, but no illusion wore away. The strain of the Choosing had simply revealed new sides of all of us.

But Father was not finished. “I have watched these past weeks as my beloved sons have become strangers, torn apart by a gold headpiece and the illusion of power. I thought we had raised you to be better men than that. I see that Conrad and I have failed in our life’s work. Be that as it may, I was going to Choose all of you. I was going to let you share this kingdom as you saw fit, imagining that you might come together as brothers and rule this land by consensus instead of solitary decree, whether that meant you each took a territory to govern or formed a Council of your own to outwit the pithy politicians that sit in the House and oppose all that I seek to achieve. How sad to find that I was mistaken, that that fool Forwell was right after all—that such a decision could only lead to civil war.”

Shame flooded through my veins. I didn’t have to look at my brothers’ faces to know they felt it as well. Father’s displeasure was a crippling blow, the revelation of his plan—now in tatters—a larger one still. We might have collaborated to govern the kingdom, like we had shared meals and chores as children, working together to achieve a common goal. Our strengths and weaknesses would have been compensated for by the others. It had been a perfect plan, so wise and wonderful, so brilliant, in fact, that even Lastimus had not considered it.

Now it could never happen, and we only had ourselves to blame. Father looked fit to burst, and I could hardly stand to look at him, as embarrassed as I felt. Any jokes I might have made about the Choosing died on my lips, my mind as still as the lake as I despaired at what we had given up with our pointless bickering. I longed to take back every derisive word I had thrown at Saveroy about his stiffness, Eskil about his devotion, and Talos about his excellence. They had all contributed to the loss of the greatest rulers Everan would never see.

Yet still a more damning blow was to come as I looked over at Lastimus to see tears welling in his eyes. The only chance he'd had to obtain a stake in the kingship had been cruelly stripped from him. The man who'd had nothing to lose had gained and lost it all in a second. His pretence at not wanting the Crown had been revealed in the most damning way possible, and now it was impossibly out of his reach forever. I wanted to go to him, to tell him I was sorry, but it was if a wall had come up between us, an invisible barrier spell that I could not penetrate. We were competitors now, and he was fated to lose just as Ulrich had been: that tiny man and his few soldiers charging at the gates of the mighty Barak Empire. I understood his stratagem at last—he'd fought because it was fight and die, or surrender and die, for Barak took no prisoners. He'd chosen his own terms of defeat, and died attempting the impossible so that he might leave this world with his honour and dignity intact. It had never been about winning.

I curled my hands into fists of self-loathing and forced myself to eat the food on my plate. Every mouthful tasted like ashes. I didn't want to look at my brothers, and yet my eyes strayed to them regardless. We were all on the same page once again, all losers in the game of kingdoms and politics. So that was the plan Forwell had been so ardently protesting. Now he would get what he wanted—a singular heir. A safe bet he could marry off to a foreign princess, obtaining heirs with predictable traits and politically benefiting from the whole affair.

It wasn't like Father to just let the Council win, though. Had we truly driven him to his wits' end?

Father excused himself from the table. Conrad left shortly thereafter, his exhaustion and disappointment apparent in the way he walked. I expected the room to erupt into conversation the moment he left, but the silence only grew more oppressive until it seemed more like a contest as to who would break first. Even now, after all that had happened, we were still competing, perhaps more fiercely than ever.

Lastimus broke first. He laid down his knife and fork with intricate precision, but I could tell his hands were trembling. He stood, pushing the chair out and muttering an apology as he fled the hall. I moved to stand but caught myself. If the others truly did think Lastimus and I were closer than brothers, I didn't want to confirm their suspicions by rushing off to comfort him.

Chapter Four

“Well?” Talos prompted. “Askavian, won’t you follow Lastimus? Someone needs to catch him before he trips over his own robe.” I thought it an insult, but Talos’s expression remained grave and I realised he was being sincere.

“You clearly want to go, brother, so go,” Saveroy chimed in. “There’s little point remaining at this funereal dinner.”

Were they giving me their support? I stood, confused. Eskil nodded to me as I left. I put their intentions aside and set on chasing Lastimus, who couldn’t have gotten far with his limp. Yet he was nowhere to be found. I climbed stairwells and asked servants who shook their heads in apology that they couldn’t help me find my brother. I scoured the castle high and low until well after dark, when the moons’ light was all there was to see by. I was about to give up for the day when I spotted a figure standing in one of the smaller courtyards, leaning on a fountain. He looked ethereal in the light of the moons, their blue hue making him seem enchanted and mystical. His white hair seemed to catch the light, almost glowing in the dim night. The sight of him was enough to take my breath away.

As I stepped closer, I could hear the hitched breaths of a crying man, and my heart squeezed in my chest, constricted by some great force. I paused, wondering if it was right to intrude on his privacy when he obviously wished to be alone. What could I offer him except my own confusion and despair? I was about to leave him in peace when he turned to face me. The moonlight caught a tear on his face, which sparkled. I took another step forward, captivated, followed by another and another until I was face to face with him. My hands gripped his arms below the shoulders, steadying him and offering tactile comfort simultaneously.

Lastimus shook his head. “I never knew I wanted to be King until tonight. I’ve been deceiving myself all this time... I’m such a fool!”

“You are no such thing,” I said. “While we bickered and carried on, you stood back with dignity and watched your brothers fight it out for the crown. It couldn’t have been easy for you.”

“Wanting to rule in my condition... Only a fool would harbour such a dream, Askavian. Kingship is for whole men, not deformed cripples like me. The children would scream and flee at the sight of my leg, and no spouse would

ever be able to look upon me in the bedroom, knowing that mangled appendage lies beneath these robes.”

“Self-pity doesn’t suit you, Lastimus,” I said softly. “You are a great and noble man, handsome to look upon, with a mind so bright even the sun must be jealous.”

Lastimus smiled. He wiped his tears on the sleeve of his robe. I thought he broke out in fresh sobs, but when he lowered the sleeve of his robe, it was to reveal great fits of laughter. Humiliated as I was, I couldn’t help but smile.

“You are as absurd as a heartsick maiden in first love, brother. The sun, jealous? Oh, that might be your best joke yet!” He gripped the stone of the fountain as great guffaws rocked his body, and I couldn’t help but laugh along with him. It was absurd; Lastimus had nailed it as always. Truly foolish. My best joke yet, indeed. But I couldn’t hold onto my indignation when Lastimus laughed so heartily, his sorrow and self-pity forgotten in a heartbeat. We embraced in a bear hug, giggling until our pent up energy was spent and all thoughts of thrones and crowns and losing were as insignificant as drops of water in the ocean.

We let go of each other and sat down on the ground to recover our breath, leaning against the fountain for support.

“Oh, Lastimus, what are we going to do?” I asked. “Father is right. We’ve let the Choosing come between us—all of us. We have to fix it.”

“Father won’t change his mind,” Lastimus said.

“I know,” I said. “This isn’t about the Choosing or the Crown anymore. This is about something far more important—our family.”

“What do you propose we do? The succession crisis hasn’t eased—if anything, it will only grow more intense until the Choosing.”

“We need to show our brothers that we’re not enemies, but allies. That we’ll support whoever Father Chooses to be his heir without jealousy or recrimination.”

“That’s easier said than done with so many emotions in the air,” Lastimus explained. “I can’t just let go of my desire to be King, and neither can you.”

“We’re assuming that remaining princes will extricate us from the kingdom’s affairs. That doesn’t have to be true. If we can promise each other positions at court, maybe the others won’t feel as excluded. They just want to

feel like they're a part of Everan's future. This is our home, after all. None of our brothers should be made to feel like they're not welcome here."

"That's true. But the Council makes things difficult. They will want their own men in power. The nobles of Everan have a large stake here. There will be much disappointment if their needs are not met. Perhaps even a revolt or a civil war. The Council was created to give the lords more say over the affairs of the territories after some threatened to secede and become independent nations. Even Father wasn't stupid enough to think about dismissing them entirely, though he stood against them and married Conrad."

"I see. Promising our brothers places at court might anger the Council. But they're princes. They have more say than petty lords, surely?" I asked.

"Not necessarily. Our brothers are young and inexperienced at court politics, even though they desire power. The Council would outmanoeuvre them at every turn. The common folk may even turn on us, if we're seen to be favouring our own brothers at the expense of wiser, older, well-liked lords." Lastimus sighed. "It is a complicated web we weave, for certain. It would be easier to take lands of our own and live quietly, should we lose the Choosing. There would be no shame in it."

"Saveroy and Eskil might be content with that, but Talos? He's too skilled to lower himself to becoming a prince in title alone. His ambitions are too great to lead a quiet life."

"There are other things one can promise."

"I'm all ears, Lastimus."

"With a good marriage match, he could have an heir of his own. If whoever is Chosen remains childless, that heir would inherit this kingdom upon his death."

"That's a lot to ask! Do you really think Saveroy or Eskil would abstain simply to keep a promise like that?"

"Not them, no. But if you or I were to take the throne—"

"You're making a lot of assumptions. How do you know I don't desire a spouse, or children of my own?" I asked.

Lastimus raised an eyebrow. "You've never expressed an interest in such things. I had no idea you were hoping to make a marriage match. I apologise."

"I mean, I'm not thinking about it right now, but you never know what might happen." I shrugged, trying to dismiss the thoughts swirling around in

my head, the whisper in my ear that suggested the adoptive brother sitting right next to me might make an ideal match. “Besides, neither of us will be King. You know it will be Talos. It has to be Talos.” I wasn’t sure if that was a bet or a wish. Talos taking the reins of the kingdom did seem the least complicated option. It would sate his ambition, and the others would get over their disappointment in time. Saveroy and Eskil would be happy to make good matches with noble women, and Lastimus’s brilliant mind could always be put to use in an advisory position. That just left one loose end—me. Would I really accept an arranged marriage and a stretch of land, be content to live out my life quietly? Or would I stay at court as a Master Mage, teaching pupils the Art so that I might stay at Lastimus’s side? What if he made a match? Would I spend my days in jealousy as a wife bore him children as handsome and smart as he was? Just the thought of it made me dig my fingernails into the stone slab beneath me.

“Askavian?” Lastimus broke into my thoughts, the slightly higher pitch of his voice warning me of unpleasant words to come.

“Yes?”

“After the Choosing is over, I think it might be best if I took my leave of the capital.” Lastimus looked down at his hands as if they were stained by dirt he couldn’t erase, even though they were as impeccable as always, each nail filed into a perfect curve.

My heart squeezed again, my eyes widening. “Why? We have plenty of happy years left to us here. Father and Conrad will live for a long time yet, and we won’t have to worry about the succession at all.”

“You won’t. But I will. Tonight, I saw myself for the very first time. I am a man with poison in his heart; staying here will only make the seeds of resentment grow. I know Father won’t Choose me. He cannot. But I am not sure I can stand to watch us tear one another apart as one son is groomed for ruling. Perhaps you and the others will be able to deal with your feelings, but I cannot. Tonight proved that beyond a shadow of a doubt.”

“We’ll face this together, brother. There’s nothing we can’t do as a team.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” Lastimus said, getting to his feet with the support of the fountain. He didn’t even look at me as he walked away. I wanted to rush after him, to yell something, but all words stuck in my throat, unable to form themselves into coherent sentences. There was so much I wanted to say, but I had no way to express myself. I had no choice but to let him go.

Only one day remained until the Festival and the Choosing. I had thirty-six hours to come up with a plan before Lastimus walked out of my life forever.

Chapter Five

I retired to my rooms and settled into an exhausted, dreamless slumber. It was Eskil, of all people, who woke me before the dawn. His weight on the end of my bed startled me awake, and I sat up with a jolt.

“It’s me,” Eskil said, before I could jump at the shadow shrouded in darkness. The familiar timbre of his voice identified him at once. He sounded troubled and sombre, and my own sorrows quickly came to revisit me.

“What can I help you with, Eskil?” I asked. “It’s early. I have a lot of things to do before the Festival.”

“I know,” Eskil said, “but this can’t wait any longer. I wanted to hold off until after the Choosing, but...” He shook his head. “You’re the only one I can ask...”

“You’re not making any sense, Eskil. You’d best start at the beginning,” I urged.

“I have... feelings for Saveroy. Not brotherly ones. More than that. I think I’m in love with him.”

“Oh,” I said, unable to hide my surprise. Eskil took my reaction as displeasure.

“That’s what I thought. It’s wrong, isn’t it? Even if we’re not actually related by blood, we’re still brothers. I can’t have these feelings for a man who might become heir to the throne.” Eskil sighed, burying his head in his hands. “I need to find a bride. I can’t stay by Saveroy’s side any longer, hoping he’ll see me as more than a brother...”

“It’s not wrong,” I blurted out. “If it is, we’re both wrong.”

Eskil lifted his head to look at me. “So you do have feelings for Lastimus. I wanted to hope, but I wondered if I just had a bad case of wishful thinking.”

“Does Saveroy know?”

“Does Lastimus?”

We both shook our heads no.

“So what now?” I asked. “If you came to me looking for advice, I’m afraid you’re out of luck. I’m as hopelessly lost about all this as you are. Lastimus

says he wants to leave after the Choosing. I'm running out of time to tell him how I feel... but I'm wondering if he'll lead a happier life if I simply let him go. He'll make some prince or princess a fine husband."

"I've wondered the same thing about Saveroy. It's not like he can't have anything he wants. Why would he ever Choose me? I'm just setting myself up to lose, especially if he does become heir to the throne. The Council won't stand for another round of insolence from our family. They barely tolerated Father's marriage to Conrad. The nobles would revolt if we started marrying amongst ourselves."

"Would they? I'm not so sure. Yes, they had plenty to say about Father, but they cannot argue against the success of his rule. This kingdom has prospered under his guidance. Maybe marrying amongst ourselves would only strengthen the kingdom, not weaken it."

"If Father had kept his plan, yes, but now?" Eskil shook his head. "I don't want the crown, Askavian. I wish it didn't exist. I dread the Choosing not because I stand to lose my shot at the crown, but because Saveroy might become the heir. If that happens..." He trailed off.

"We have to come up with a plan," I said, suddenly feeling bold. "We have to at least tell our brothers how we feel. If we are rejected, we can gracefully take our leave after the Choosing. I suspect Talos will become the heir anyway."

"Talos? Do you really think so?" Eskil looked conflicted yet hopeful. "That would solve a lot of problems, but Father is rarely so straightforward." He stood, pacing my chamber. "Your comment yesterday really struck a nerve, you know. I wasn't aware that I trailed Saveroy so closely. Is it true that I've become nothing except for his shadow? Who will I become if he rejects me? Will I really be content to lay my hat thousands of miles from here, seeing Saveroy only at Festival time?"

"I've asked myself the same questions," I said. "There are no easy answers. But we have to give Saveroy and Lastimus the chance to reciprocate. It would be a waste to live half a life based on a misunderstanding."

"What of the consequences? Of the Council?"

"Damn the consequences, Eskil. If Saveroy told you he loved you, wouldn't you move the moons out of their orbit and challenge the Gods themselves if it meant you could be with him?"

“Of course I would.”

“Then that simplifies matters considerably. Neither of us care about the Crown. All we care about are the men we love. Our brothers. The first night of the Festival, after the dance but before the Choosing—we must come clean then. We can give one another strength, make sure we don’t back out. We have to tell the truth, before the Choosing can complicate things. This is our only chance, Eskil. Once we know who the heir is, it’ll be too late. We’ll either be accused of courting the heir for his power or accepting the loser as some sort of consolation prize.”

“Right.” Eskil nodded. “I can’t believe we’re really going to do this.”

“We still have one full day until the Festival begins. We need to act normally and not arouse suspicion. With our brothers so tense about the Crown, any collaboration on our part could be viewed as a plot against them. We must tread carefully.”

“Yes, you’re right.” Eskil scratched his soft beard thoughtfully. “I can’t believe I’m seriously considering this. It’s madness, Askavian. I came here so that you might talk me out of it.”

I laughed, my voice sounding flat in the heavily furnished room. “I don’t talk people out of rash, reckless decisions, Eskil. I encourage them.” I flashed him a smile, and the heavy weight that sagged his shoulders seemed to lighten as Eskil sat up straight. “What do we have to lose, brother? Neither of us wants the burden of the crown. The worst that happens is that we take lands and spouses. I wish the Choosing could be held off another ten years and we could spend the rest of these days together as a family. But those times have passed. The Choosing will send us all our separate ways. The heir will be groomed for the throne, while the rest of us shall have to be content to retreat and lick our wounds.”

“If we’re lucky, we won’t be alone in that venture, at least,” Eskil said. “But what if... what if Saveroy is chosen? Or Lastimus? Or you, or I? What then?”

“Then we make the most of it,” I said, shrugging. “Father managed to take a husband in the most conservative land in the Five Realms. If he can do it, there’s nothing we can’t achieve.”

Eskil nodded. “Yes... Yes. It might actually be possible. Thank you, Askavian. I had lost hope. I was ready to keep my silence and ride off into the sunset alone.” Eskil stood. “I shall see you later.” He hurried from the room just

as the first shards of light pierced my red, silken curtains, bathing the room in a vibrant splash of colour. Giving up on sleep, I forced myself from the comfort of my sheets and shuffled over to the washbasin, where a servant had placed a pitcher of steadily cooling water sometime before Eskil's visit. I undressed and bathed, enjoying the cool water on my hot skin before selecting robes to wear for the day. Some of my brothers preferred to have the servants wash them, but that seemed a little too extravagant for my tastes. I wasn't used to company so early in the morning. It had been enough to see Eskil before the dawn, and he could be excused on the virtue of being my brother.

I sat down at my desk and pulled out a dusty magic tome. It had been a while since I had seriously studied for the Master Mage examination. To take it, I would have to leave Everan and cross the sea to Vestil, where the Mages' Tower oversaw all magic in the Western Kingdoms. I had always been loath to put any distance between myself and my brothers, but if Lastimus rejected me, I would want to get away from Everan for a while. Even if Lastimus himself left immediately as he claimed, the halls would seem empty without him, each and every moment a constant reminder of my loss. I needed a backup plan, and finalising my mastery in the Art was a good path. It would ensure my talents were always needed somewhere, and guarantee that there was always a place at court for me, even if I chose to marry and relocate.

Master Mages seldom married, however, and I wonder if that was on my mind as well. There was no rule against it, only that the amount of travelling mages undertook was seldom compatible with family life. Few who mastered the Art chose to sit at home and use it to light the hearth. Such power was a gift that yearned to be used, and Master Mages were in high demand all over the world. It would keep my mind off Lastimus—and my commitments away from others—for a lifetime.

I loved the Art, but I also knew I would throw it all away for Lastimus—quell my flames, forget my runes, cease to utter the arcane language. I doubted I would ever feel that way about anybody else. Either way I had come to a turning point in my life where I would have to make a commitment. There was no holding it back any longer.

Crown, Magic, or Lastimus? Which would it be?

“Your Highness.” A servant's voice pulled me back to reality, and I looked up from a page I'd read a thousand times, never really absorbing the runes detailed there. I snapped the book shut with a decisive thud and placed it back on the shelf while the young man waited for me to respond with patience.

“Can I help you?” I asked.

“His Royal Majesty the King and Prince Consort Conrad request your immediate presence in the Blue Room,” the servant murmured. He led me through the hallways as I wondered what they might want at this hour. Something to do with the Festival, surely, though it seemed to be the last thing on my mind as I excused the messenger and opened the door to the Blue Room. I was the last of my brothers to arrive in the small hall, named for its blue curtains and melancholy stained glass windows depicting Ulrich’s widow in mourning after his suicidal charge. The room had once been used as a chapel, but the One God Ulrich had known was long gone, replaced by the pantheon we knew now only as the Gods. Their temple was vast, needing space for the many statues that depicted their myriad forms. I took a seat on a wooden bench, my eyes straying to Lastimus as we waited for our father to speak. His silver hair was uncharacteristically tied back, his face harder and more businesslike than I had previously recalled it. Only the way his hands were clasped together in his lap seemed familiar to me. He didn’t look at me as I admired him from afar, wondering if he was already cutting the cords that would sever him from his family and allow him to make a speedy departure after the Choosing.

Conrad cleared his throat. “As you all know, the Festival begins tomorrow and we have a lot of dignitaries arriving. Usually, we have servants to assist them, but as potential future royalty, we’re going to be assigning you each a family to take care of and get settled in. You will be expected to show them around and extend all the correct courtesies without prompting from anyone else. Do your own research in the library if you’re unsure of the protocol of certain territories. Act as befitting princes of Everan.”

“Only one of us will be King,” Saveroy said. “You must have already made your decision, so close to the Festival. Why all these games?”

“Whether you are Chosen or not, you will still remain princes of Everan, wherever you go in the world. You are our ambassadors. Show us what you’ve learned from your tutors and mentors. You’re adults, now. It’s time to start acting like—” Conrad turned in alarm as the King exploded into a fit of coughing, and the truth dawned on me suddenly. I turned to my brothers, but they were picking their fingernails and whispering amongst themselves, oblivious to the tiny speck of blood at the corner of Father’s mouth, and the quick flick of a finger Conrad used to wipe it away as Father recovered. That’s why the Choosing had become so urgent a matter. Father was ill, desperately so, it seemed, and he needed to Choose an heir sooner rather than later.

My heart sank. All this time, I'd been thinking about myself and my future as Father's candle waxed and waned. I'd noticed Conrad had been the one speaking more often than not but paid it no mind—he always was more eloquent, anyway, and Father had never minded Conrad talking for him. After all these years, they seemed like two facets of one person, often reaching for the same goblet at the same time or finishing one another's sentences.

Just like Lastimus and I, really.

I bit down on my unruly emotions and tried to steady myself in my seat as Conrad assigned us each visitors from a noble house. My family consisted of Lord and Lady Virmire, along with their twin children Ash and Sybil, both younger than I, in their late teens. I didn't recall having met them previously, but I had always been terrible with names. We met so many dignitaries as princes that it was hard to keep them all in mind. I zoned out until Lastimus received his assignment: the Lady Estelle. That was a name I did know. She was rumoured to be beautiful but sad, the daughter of a shamed Earl from some kingdom in the West. Jealousy instantly flooded my veins. Conrad had to have set them up as a potential marriage match. If Lastimus had gone to him and told him he was leaving after the Festival and wanted to take a wife, what better time to make an introduction? They both had something in common, with their grim family histories. What if they decided that misery made good company?

I chewed my lip. Lastimus said nothing to me as we were dismissed. I thought about chasing him down, but I wasn't sure I could compose a polite sentence at that point. I had no desire to mar our last few days together with jealous accusations. I had to hope Estelle was nothing more than a duty to him, as cruel a thing as that may have been to wish upon someone I loved.

Chapter Six

The sea air caressed my face as the ship carrying Lord and Lady Virmire slowly meandered into port. My mind was a million miles away from them, however. Even the fresh salty breeze couldn't stop my thoughts from straying back to Lastimus. Perhaps I had waited too long to tell him my feelings, and now it was too late. But I owed it to Eskil to remain patient until the night of the Festival. Barring love at first sight, Lastimus shouldn't be so overwhelmingly besotted with Lady Estelle by that time that he would deny any feelings for me, right?

Realising I didn't want to answer my own question, I focused on the myriad ships docked at the port. Banners and flags of all colours made the usually bland port seem like an international trade hub. Only the Festival made the dock this busy. People moved aside for me, recognising my status from my robes. A thousand skin colours and styles of clothing mixed together, the Festival a great melting pot of cultures and ideas from all over the world.

I thought about simpler times as I stood alone at the end of the pier. As a boy, I had come down to the docks to play hide and seek with my brothers. I had the brilliant idea of hiding in the hold of a ship—only I concealed myself so well that the ship left port before I was found. Embarrassed and afraid, I had to confess who I was to the Captain. Luckily, the friendly old trader returned to port and the crew doted on me, wet and reeking of fish. Lastimus stood at the pier waiting for me, worry etched across his boyish features.

“I knew you'd come out sometime,” he said, embracing me in a bear hug. “The others went home, so I guess that means I found you.” We only avoided a thrashing that night because Conrad pleaded with Father that “boys will be boys”.

The clipper bearing the Virmire house crest on blue moored at the dock, and I reluctantly turned my attention to it as a wide gangplank was rolled out. Lord and Lady Virmire stepped off the ship with no fanfare. Their plain green robes and black hair made them seem austere in comparison to the other noble families disembarking at the dock. A small staff stood behind them, and their equally plain children, non-identical twins of about fifteen years, stood at their side. In truth, I appreciated their austerity. I had feared being lumbered with some of the peacocks that inhabited the Five Realms, the earls and lords who lived in finery while their harvests failed and people starved. Father had

clamped down on some of them, but he had no power over foreign lords, many of whom Father couldn't afford to enrage by declining invitation to the Festival. I was grateful not to have to entertain criminals.

"I humbly welcome you to Everan," I said. "I am Prince Askavian, and I'm pleased to meet you."

"I believe we've met," Lady Virmire said with a disarming smile. "You may not remember. You were very young, as I recall."

"I apologise, for I cannot place you," I said.

"It is of no consequence," Lord Virmire said, extending a bow. "It is good to make your acquaintance now, Your Majesty." The family stepped into stride beside me, and we wove through the docks, leaving the servants behind to bring ashore the food and gifts that the Virmire family had no doubt brought to bestow upon Father at the Festival, as custom dictated. Once the Festival was over, such gifts were always distributed to Everan's poorest citizens who had far more need of them than any of us at the castle. It had not always been that way, but Father and Conrad had instilled their generosity into the customs and traditions of our small but respected nation. Long after they were gone, the changes they had made to benefit Everan's most needy would continue to ease the suffering of the impoverished and desperate.

My thoughts turned back to Father's cough, and I almost bumped into a nobleman as we left the dock. Lord Virmire's polite conversation had drifted over my head, and I apologised swiftly, feeling inadequate in the art of diplomacy. Lastimus would be at ease here, but Lastimus had his own duties. I thought of Lady Estelle with a dagger in my gut, my heart spilling all over the cobbled stones of the dock as I imagined Lastimus announcing his betrothal to rounds of applause at the Festival.

"Are you well, Your Majesty?" Lady Virmire asked, assessing me with motherly eyes. I forced a gracious smile.

"The crowds sometimes overwhelm me," I said, needing to evade Lady Virmire's penetrating gaze. I felt as though she could see entirely too much, my heart exposed for her to see. I needed to pull myself together. I had a job to do. What happened to Lastimus was out of my control. All I could do was pray to the Gods that he made no rash decisions before I could confess my true feelings to him. All of a sudden, the long day before the Festival seemed like an eternity to wait, and I wondered how I would bear it.

I breathed a sigh of relief as I closed the door to the Virmire family suite. Darkness had already fallen by the time I had given them the grand tour of the castle and sat with them for dinner. I headed out into the courtyard to think, the light of the moons illuminating my way through the shadows.

Sweet, girlish laughter met my ears. It mingled with mirth of a lower timbre, Lastimus's soft voice chuckling in concert. I pressed myself up against a stone pillar and peered about like a common spy. Lastimus and Estelle stood at the fountain, arm in arm, laughing together. Jealousy coiled in my gut like a snake, ready to spring into action. I had to fight the urge to step out and interrupt their moment, knowing that I didn't own Lastimus's laughter, had never made any claim on him except being his brother. I didn't have the right to intrude on his happiness.

Estelle was indeed as beautiful as the bards sang of her. Hair like spun gold with a dress and furs to match, she seemed oddly dressed for the season, like a snow queen dragged into the sun. Yet she even melted with dignity and grace, perfect white teeth reflecting the moons' light as she laughed. She could capture any man's heart away. Lastimus would be lucky to have her as a wife, and I knew it. He might finally overcome the self-loathing that had dogged him for a lifetime, his inner sense that his crippled foot made him somehow less of a man. It was something I had never been able to do, no matter how much I told him it didn't matter to me. Maybe Estelle could persevere where I had failed.

Perhaps letting Lastimus go was the kindest, most loving thing I could do for him. I concealed myself behind the pillar again, my breaths coming shallow and fast as a heavy weight pressed down on my chest. I had never truly believed I would lose Lastimus from my life until that moment, and now I was overwhelmed by the despair that he might already be gone.

I slunk out of the courtyard, leaving Lastimus and Estelle to their moonlit courtship. I thought of Lastimus, mocking my flowery expression of affection when we had sat by the fountain, and the hopes I had held onto for so long seemed to slip away into the night.

"Giving up hope, brother?" Eskil startled me in the dark corridor, and I spun around to find him leaning against a wall, admiring the view of Lastimus and Estelle from the window. "They seem quite friendly. What are you going to do?"

"I don't know," I admitted. I felt a sudden urge to change the subject. "Did you hear Father's cough today, when Conrad gave us our assignments?"

“It’s a cough. What of it?” Eskil shrugged.

“There was blood at the corner of his mouth. Conrad wiped it away quickly, but...”

Eskil looked at me, his face pale and chestnut eyes wide with horror. “Have you spoken with Conrad about it?”

“No,” I said. “I’ve been busy escorting Lord and Lady Virmire around the castle. Why Conrad couldn’t organise servants to deal with his busy work is beyond me.”

Eskil sighed. “He may still be in his office, despite the late hour.” He started to walk, and I followed, content to be concerned about someone other than Lastimus for five minutes. Eskil stopped outside Conrad’s office and knocked.

“Come in,” Conrad said, his voice heavy and tired. We entered his office like two children about to be chastised, closing the heavy wooden door behind us. Conrad sat behind his desk, signing a stack of papers half-heartedly. He didn’t even look up to greet us.

“What’s going on with Father?” I asked in an accusatory tone. “I saw blood at the corner of his mouth when he coughed. Are you hiding something from us?”

“It is not as bad as you fear.” Conrad smiled wanly. “But his illness has been a stark reminder of why the Choosing is necessary. I had wanted to hold off longer, to allow you to enjoy your youth for as long as possible, but there are no guarantees in life. You are old enough to rule should it be needed, thus the heir must be chosen. I know it’s been hard, especially for you two, with the confusing feelings you’ve been having for your brothers.”

“You know?” Eskil looked ready to die of fright, his face paler than I’d ever seen it.

“Fathers see these things.” Conrad chuckled. “Don’t look so frightened. If you were truly blood-related, we might have a problem, but you’re only brothers in name. It’s perfectly natural that you might have feelings for one another. In fact, the King predicted this might happen.”

“He did?” I can’t help but admit I felt a little betrayed. Father and Conrad had witnessed our silent struggle. They had the tools to help ease our awkwardness and suffering, and yet they had let us struggle through the long, lonely nights of wondering if we were wrong.

“I’m sure you’re thinking we should have intervened before now. It’s not our place to decide your feelings. In fact, it would be simpler for us if you chose not to pursue relationships amongst yourselves. It will certainly make things complicated with the Council. But we will support you, no matter what you decide.”

“It’s not up to us,” I said with a sigh. “Tell me one thing: if you knew of my feelings, why did you set Lastimus up with a potential bride? They are laughing and courting one another in the yard as we speak.”

“Jealous, Askavian?” Conrad’s face twisted into a wide smile. “I can promise you Lady Estelle is not here to court Lastimus. In fact, that is a relationship that would be forbidden, considering Estelle is Lastimus’s blood-related sister.”

“What?” I flopped into a chair, barely able to contain the laughter that threatened to spill from my lungs as the heavy weight of jealousy left me. “How is that possible?”

“After his parents left him to the wolves, Lastimus was saved and his parents imprisoned. We adopted Lastimus, while his sister went north to live with her aunt and uncle. I recently received a letter saying that Estelle has been suffering from heartsickness over a broken betrothal, and we decided she might benefit from having the support of a family member. Besides, as adults, it’s time you made connections with your birth families. As loath as I am to let you go, our adoption of you boys has served its purpose. It’s time you got to decide whether you want to stay here or go back to your parents’ lands. Did you not wonder why I set you up with seemingly random noble families today?”

“Lord and Lady Virmire are my parents?” If I hadn’t been sitting, I would have fallen. Instead I gripped the arms of my chair, shaken to the core by Conrad’s revelations. I looked at Eskil, who seemed similarly shaken. I supposed he had not expected the pompous Earl Briscow to be his father.

“In the end, you deserve to know all the facts if any of you are to accept the duty the Choosing will bestow upon you. Everan will require nothing less than the absolute loyalty of its heir. To take on such a burdensome promise, you must first know all that you are giving up.”

“I don’t understand,” Eskil said. “I thought Father was going to make us all heirs?”

“That was the original plan, yes, but things have changed. I won’t reveal more about the Choosing, it wouldn’t be proper. You’ll just have to wait until

tomorrow to see what is on your father's mind. In the meantime, make use of these hours to speak with your birth families while they are here for the Festival. They will be happy to let the pretence slide, now that you know who they are."

"I'm tired of waiting," I admitted. "This cloak and dagger act about my future has grown wearisome. It has come between me and everything in this world I care about." I realised the truth of my words as they stumbled from my mouth. "I don't even want the throne. I don't want to leave with my birth family or consider Lastimus's departure. I just want things to go back to the way they were before. I was happy, then. I made jokes and laughed with my brothers, performed magic tricks for them, and dallied with the idea of being a Master Mage someday. Now the future is here and I don't want to take another step towards it."

"You're a prince, Askavian. You have duties to perform." It was Eskil who piped up. "Do you really think I wanted things to turn out this way? I never imagined I could become so distant with my own brothers over a crown. If this is the price of ruling a kingdom, then I'll throw the crown into a ravine and declare Everan a republic."

Conrad laughed heartily. "As I suspected, Eskil, you have grown up to be a wiser man than anyone else would have expected. If it was up to me, I would hand you the crown right now and let you do as you wish with it. I would be quite happy to retire to the countryside with your father. Being Prince Consort is a burden I never wanted. I simply loved your father enough to make whatever sacrifices our relationship demanded. I would have shaken the world to stand by his side. Luckily, I only had to shake Forwell."

I was the one who nodded, as I accepted that it was impossible to have everything that I craved. I had to decide my fate instead of waiting around for things to happen to me. I was tired of planning for two different lives. It was time to make a choice that would change the entire course of my life's path. One life would not be mine to choose, that of my duty and career... but whom I chose to spend my life with was mine and mine alone.

"Eskil, I regret to inform you that I cannot keep our deal," I said, a nervous smile spreading across my face.

Eskil looked at me with equal parts shock and horror. "Askavian? What do you mean?"

"I mean I cannot wait until the night of the Choosing to tell Lastimus the truth. The crown is irrelevant, and a relationship with my birth family will

come in time, but Lastimus... I do not want a life without him in it. Knowing that, I can't keep it to myself until the Festival. I must speak my mind now, or forever hold my peace."

"Be that as it may," Eskil said. "I wish you luck, Askavian."

"Good luck to you as well, brother," I said, clapping Eskil on the shoulder. "May you cease to be Saveroy's shadow, and become his light instead."

With a smile on my face and my old energy back, I opened the door with the strength of certainty and set about finding the love of my life, the one who had been by my side every single day that I could remember, and the one who I wanted to remain with me until the end—my brother, Lastimus.

Chapter Seven

I stepped out into the courtyard as the first rays of light rose on the horizon. I'd been awake all night without even realising it, pacing the halls sleeplessly like a ghost as I pondered my confession to Lastimus. Every time I passed the courtyard I'd expected to see him gone, retired to bed like the rest of the castle. However, he simply sat on a moonlit bench, lost in thought. Lady Estelle had long since left, leaving Lastimus to mull over whatever it was consuming his thoughts. A vain hope that it might be me he was thinking about pushed to the surface of my mind, but I had to admit there were a thousand things he might be pondering at any given moment. The world had given him a lot to think about in recent days.

I sat down on the bench next to him wordlessly. The carefully constructed speech I'd been planning in the hallways dissipated like so much smoke, the words losing form and shape in the face of Lastimus's presence.

"The Festival will be starting soon," Lastimus said. I knew what he meant. We didn't have much time before the castle started to rise and the halls became a cacophony of noise and excitement. A buzz thrummed in the air between us, tense and startlingly electric. I was aware that something had changed between us, and that we both felt the difference. We needed to put words to it now, before it was too late. Once the Festival began, there would be no time for moonlight meetings and quiet negotiations for a future together.

"I've been thinking..." I said.

"As have I," Lastimus replied. "It's about all I've been doing."

"I've wanted to speak with you. I was going to wait until closer to the Choosing, but... I've realised the Choosing doesn't matter. Whoever becomes the heir... it's irrelevant. My feelings for you won't change whether I hold a crown or not. The entire course of my life shouldn't be dictated by whether I'm the heir to a throne."

Lastimus smiled and visibly relaxed. "So you've realised that too, hmm? I was hoping you'd come to that conclusion. But it wasn't one I could force you towards. You had to realise it for yourself."

"Just like Father did when he chose Conrad to be his husband, knowing as a king with duties and responsibilities that his choice might not be accepted by

the Council. But they made it work, because they had the love and the will to make it happen.”

“Indeed.” Lastimus’s hand rose to meet my cheek, and we leaned together until our foreheads touched. “Consequences be damned, we feel what we feel. I shan’t be afraid to love you anymore. Even though I’ve believed for so long that what I feel might be wrong, I cannot convince myself to leave you behind and chase down a more conventional life.”

“So you do feel the same? More than brotherly love?” I had to be sure we were on the same page. There was no more time for generalities or beating around the bush. I thought I would be afraid when I came to this moment, but a kind of peace settled over me and fear was a million miles away. Lastimus was my brother. We had watched each other grow up, knew one another better than we knew ourselves. To reject our love and go our separate ways would be like cutting off our own limbs. To think we had considered mutilating our souls over a crown seemed foolish and obscene in hindsight.

Perhaps that’s what Father had been so enraged about at the dinner table. He had given everything to be with Conrad and won, while his sons were unwilling to stand up and fight for what they wanted.

Lastimus’s lips found mine, and I wondered how I’d ever thought I could give this up in order to sit on the throne, or flee to the four winds to win a mage title I didn’t want. The kiss was soft, searching, and I lost myself in it, in Lastimus. I wondered if I might wake at any moment to find it all a dream, but the kiss only deepened, drawing me further into my brother’s embrace.

I was home. How I thought I could ever have been content anywhere else puzzled me as I let all my thoughts go and allowed myself to simply feel what I felt. My love for Lastimus came rushing in like water through a broken dam, filling the dry riverbeds of my soul with much-needed moisture. We parted for air before diving in once more, hungry for each other’s kisses. My hands roamed through Lastimus’s silken tresses, caressing his hair like I had dreamt of on so many long, lonely nights.

“How long have you felt this way?” Lastimus whispered, between kisses.

“Always,” I whispered in response, and I knew it was the truth. We might have pretended to be brothers, but we had always been soulmates, closer, somehow, than the others. There was something that we shared that was silent and unspoken, but which bound us closer than brothers should ever be.

I silently thanked the Gods we had not been born blood brothers as I claimed another kiss and slipped a hand beneath Lastimus's robe, opening it and letting the first rays of sunlight shine on his pale, untouched skin. I kissed down his throat, and he threw his head back in surrender, inviting me to explore him further. My body responded in kind, my cock hardening beneath my robes and creating an obvious tent that nothing could hide. His nipples were hard in the brisk morning air, and I took one in my mouth, running my tongue across the hard nub as Lastimus shuddered and melted into me.

"Tell me I'm not dreaming," Lastimus said. "This is too good to be true."

I pinched Lastimus's other nipple between my fingers, and he yelped. "See," I said, reluctantly releasing his nipples from my relentless assault. "Not dreaming."

"You could have any maiden in the land. Why would you choose me?" Doubt flickered in Lastimus's eyes, and I pulled him close for reassurance.

"Hmm," I said. "Let me see... You're incredibly intelligent and insightful, you're the most handsome man I've ever laid eyes on, and you laugh at my jokes."

Firelight danced in Lastimus's eyes as the sun rose, turning the sky a brilliant shade of orange. He smiled, shaking his head in mirth. "What am I going to do with you, brother?" He winced at his own words, the laughter wilting away from his expression. "I suppose I should not call you that anymore."

"Men can be brothers in more ways than one. It does not have to mean a blood-bond. I would always have you call me brother, if you can make yourself comfortable with it."

Lastimus's smile returned. "Then, brother, I have a request."

"Oh?"

"Promise me nothing will change today. Even if one of us should become the heir."

"I swear it. Nothing will come between us and the bond we share, Lastimus. I would abdicate sooner than give you up. Any of our brothers would make good kings. We do not have to sacrifice our sanity for Everan's sake. She is perfectly fine no matter what we do." I sealed my promise with another kiss, hunger for a man so long denied me rising up within me once more. Just as I

was sure I would succumb to my desires and take Lastimus then and there on the bench, I heard excited voices and approaching footsteps. Lastimus and I pulled away from one another sharply, Lastimus pulling his robe closed as if we had been caught doing something shameful. Two excited young servants hurried by without even giving us a second glance.

Once they were gone, Lastimus looked back at me with guilty eyes, but the moment had passed. I smiled and placed a chaste kiss on his forehead. It would take both of us time to grow accustomed to the fact that we were more than brothers now and that we did not have to be ashamed of a relationship that was not actually forbidden. If we planned to stay in the capital, we would have to rid ourselves of that shame, or Forwell and the Council would seize upon it and use it against us. Even if neither one of us were Chosen, it didn't matter. Our shame could destabilise the whole family. If we wanted to be together, we had to show pride in each other and our love.

I took Lastimus's hand in mine, raised it to my lips and kissed it like he was some fair maiden. He let out a soft laugh, the guilt in his eyes dissipating.

"Let us go to the Festival, my love," I said, rising in a grandiose gesture and offering my hand. He took it, playing the part of my fair maiden with a giggle.

"To the Festival," Lastimus agreed, and we set out to wash, dress, and experience what was to be one of the most historic days in Everan's long history.

Chapter Eight

The Festival erupted around us; noise, laughter, and rich smells filling the air as the wealthy and poor alike mingled in the city square. The tight cobbled streets were packed to bursting, the press of people stifling and hot. I was blissfully unaware of most of it, the Festival a distant event compared to the immediate sensation of Lastimus's warm hand in mine. The words of nobles wishing to prematurely congratulate me raced over my head; I was glad to mingle with the commoners and view prize vegetables where I was not expected to make polite conversation.

We'd made no announcement of our relationship to anyone, but the smiles on our faces were enough to tell the world that something had changed. I felt a slight prickle of guilt as we passed by Eskill, who was being somewhat ignored by Saveroy and the host of guests he'd decided to entertain, including his birth family and several nobles an heir to the throne would want to curry favour with. Eskill shot me a pained look, and I tried to communicate sympathy as Lastimus ushered me along with the crowd who were heading towards the main stage for the dance that preceded the Choosing. The sun had reached its peak and the time had come to decide our fates.

Lastimus claimed the first dance with me, his steps graceful and practiced. I felt foolish and clumsy, my two left feet barely remembering the training we had received in courtly etiquette as young princes. He urged me to relax as the band played a slower song, and I fell into step with him before he passed me off to Lady Estelle.

"So you are the sibling who has captured my brother's heart," Estelle said, a smile playing across her lips. She had discarded the furs for a dress that sparkled in the sunlight, making her almost too radiant to look at. Men looked on enviously as we danced, flowing together as we found a familiar rhythm. I knew I could have married her and gained some semblance of happiness, if my life with Lastimus had not come to be, but Estelle deserved more than to be some mere consolation prize. I handed her off to a fine young knight at court who I felt might make her a good match, then gracefully retreated from the dance floor to allow others their turn. Talos danced with a dozen lords, ladies, knights, and maidens, but he seemed almost to be going through the motions, his dancing precise, yet artless. I could understand why his mind might be elsewhere, with the Choosing so close at hand. Worse still were Eskill and

Saveroy. The energy between them was angry and difficult, their brotherly ease twisted into some kind of awkward refusal. I realised Eskil had made his confession and found only rejection in Saveroy's heart. They danced together now to keep up appearances, and my heart broke to see it. Lastimus drifted back to my side and linked arms with me as he witnessed the tension between our brothers. I looked away, leading Lastimus to the refreshment table in order to get away from Eskil's sorrowful gaze. There was nothing I could do to help, and I feared my happiness was only an additional burden to him.

The dancing continued until dusk, and everyone from nobles to commoners alike had had their fill by the time the trumpet sounded to announce the time of Choosing had come. I bit my lip anxiously as the crowd parted for Lastimus and me.

We stepped forward, the crowd filling the gap we left behind. We climbed the steps to the stage, Lastimus's hobble barely apparent as he leaned on me. We unlinked arms and joined hands once more as we stood side by side with our brothers.

Father rose from his makeshift throne and walked down the line, inspecting each of us as was customary. I felt nervous as his eyes looked down to the clasped hands that joined Lastimus and me, but we did not shrink back. With a slight, barely audible grunt, Father nodded and turned to the audience.

"We are gathered here today to Choose the heir to the throne from among our five worthy sons, as custom dictates. Though they may not be our sons by blood, each one is a true prince of Everan, worthy to take the throne. I would feel proud to Choose any one of them to be Everan's guardian and master. That's why I Choose none of them."

Our eyes widened. The crowd gasped. None of us? What did that even mean? Was the Choosing being postponed, or did Father have something else in mind? Conrad stood and stepped forward, taking Father's hand in his with a smile. For a moment I thought he might be the heir, but I couldn't imagine him smiling in the face of such a burden. He'd never wanted power. Father would never be so cruel as to force it upon him.

"Everan has long been an example to other nations of a land at peace. Indeed, we have never known war. Our people live in far greater comfort than those of our neighbours. That is why we know Everan can stand to be even greater. What I propose is more radical than you might be prepared for, but you shall thank me for it, eventually. What I want for Everan is a new age, where the people Choose their leaders in fair and free elections. Where the land is

ruled not by a King and a Council of hereditary nobles, but by true representatives of the people, chosen from among Everan's best and brightest minds, with no value placed on status, birth, or wealth. No more will class dictate what a man or woman can achieve in this nation!"

The audience was stunned, the light of hope shining in the commoners' eyes. That's when I truly understood the ingenuity of Father's plan and the great love he'd invested into it. He'd never planned to make us kings. The circumstances of his royal birth—and Conrad's life of poverty—had been a prison they'd had to fight against all their lives. He didn't want that for his sons, or his people. The freedom of choice for all was the legacy he planned to leave behind. He planned to make Everan a land of opportunity and hope. It was a bold social experiment, one that only a king as beloved as he could hope to sell to his people.

Forwell looked about to explode, his face puffy and red as he stepped forward. "This is an outrage!" he bellowed. "You cannot unseat the nobles of this country in order to favour the unwashed, uneducated masses! Everan will collapse within a decade!" He looked around at the nobles, banking on their support, but they only shook their heads as if dealing with a spoiled child's tantrum. Lady Virmire shot me a smile, and I realised it was one of approval from a family I'd never known. They hadn't given me to Father and Conrad to chain me to a throne. They had allowed me to grow up at court because they respected and trusted the King and his Prince Consort. Lastimus squeezed my hand, and I looked over to see tears in his eyes. Not tears of sadness, disappointment, or loss, but of pure joy.

Father had Chosen us all, in his own way. He had chosen to set us free from the shackles of duty, which would have made us fight every day to stay together. Father and Conrad had spent their power to destroy the Council who had fought to unseat their love, the Council who believed that birth, status, and adherence to tradition were the measure of a person's value. The Council who had always treated Conrad as a second class citizen, a man of poor birth who stood inferior to the King in every way. Now Father was telling them that Everan needed more men like Conrad and less like Forwell. I could have laughed with joy. Conrad had tears in his eyes, even though he had helped plan this silent coup. I suspected they had long held the dream of forming a democracy, but had considered it an impossibility until now.

"Let us celebrate," Father said. "The dawn of a new Everanian republic begins today!" And so we raised our goblets and drank and danced with nobles

and common folk alike, long into the night, as Forwell snuck away to lick his wounds.

As the Festival's first day drew to a close, Lastimus and I slipped away from the festivities and headed to the lake. There was much to talk about, yet nothing to say, and so we watched the fireworks display from our secret place. I suspected the dancing would continue until morning broke. History had been made in the Five Realms, as the first democracy was born.

A shadow emerged from the trees, and I let go of Lastimus's hand as Eskil shuffled over. His face was downcast, eyes meeting the ground.

"I take it things did not go as planned," I sighed, guilt flooding my veins. I'd promised to be there for my brother, but I'd broken my end of the bargain, wrapped up as I had been in the Festival and Lastimus.

"Saveroy doesn't feel the same way as I do," Eskil said, slumping down beside Lastimus and I. "I guess I always knew it. His birth family has offered him a tournament in his honour if he comes home, and he's elected to take it. His family has no other living heirs, and he wants to take the lordship once his father passes, even if it's just a worthless title now. After Father's announcement, I suppose it's the only way he can cling to the security and order that he needs. It was hard to hear that I have no place in his future, though. I suppose I was only ever his shadow after all."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"I'll get over it, in time," Eskil said. "Don't look at me with such guilt and pity, Askavian. I'm still a man with pride, you know. I'm happy for you and Lastimus, I truly am. Perhaps this is a good thing for me. I need to find out who I really am when I'm not trailing in Saveroy's footsteps. A good place to start will be helping Father and Conrad as Everan transitions into a democracy. I have to say, I never expected this."

"Even Lastimus didn't see it coming," I said. Lastimus nodded beside me, placing his hand on my arm.

"You are right, though, Eskil," Lastimus said. "Father and Conrad need us now, more than ever. The days ahead will be hard. Forwell will not take being publicly shamed in stride. No doubt he will attempt to win the election, and we cannot be sure the people will not cast votes for him, especially the nobles. We must be wary. If Forwell should become President, he will be more powerful than ever."

“Father and Conrad are taking a gamble, certainly,” Eskil said. “Lastimus, I would like to read some of your books. I know I have never been interested in strategy before, but I feel I would do better to understand the minds of political and military men.”

“I would be happy to help,” Lastimus said. A smile lit up his face, and I realised the acceptance of his value in his brother’s eyes was a validation he had yearned for almost as much as my love.

“How is Talos?” I asked, changing the subject away from politics. Nobody had seen Talos since the Choosing, and I was beginning to grow concerned for his safety.

“I suppose I can tell you now,” Eskil admitted. “Talos has left Everan on a journey. He told me last night that he had no desire to take the throne. It was always his intent to leave Everan and see the world.”

Lastimus nodded, and I turned to him. “You knew?” I asked.

“Yes,” Lastimus confirmed. “I helped him find maps for his quest.”

“I never knew Talos wanted to leave. He never confided in me much.” I played with a long strand of grass, curling it around my finger. Disappointment flared in me, but I had to accept the truth that Talos and I had never been close. His taunting of Lastimus over his disability had always divided us. Perhaps Talos would learn humility out on the road, and return a better, wiser man. I would be happy to welcome him home, when the time came.

“What are you going to do now, Eskil?” Lastimus asked.

“Now, I’m going to sleep,” Eskil said. “We still have three more days of the Festival to go. Don’t stay up too late. Lord and Lady Virmire expect to spend some time with their son tomorrow.”

“Yes, Father,” I said mockingly. Eskil shook his head and walked back through the trees, leaving Lastimus and me alone.

Lastimus lay back in the grass, and I curled up against him, watching the moons rise. We were content to simply lay there a while, the cool night air caressing us reassuringly. Certainly, nothing had gone as planned, and all our cards had been thrown up in the air. Our lives were suddenly ours to live, and I had no idea what I wanted from my newfound freedom. Maybe I would become a Master Mage, after all, and travel the world with Lastimus by my side. There was nothing to chain me to Everan, now. A new realm of possibilities stretched

out before me, and I smiled at the thought of being able to choose my own destiny. Nothing was set in stone, but it only made the future a more exciting prospect.

I knew one thing for certain: I wanted Lastimus by my side, always. I crawled up and claimed his lips in a soft kiss, and he pulled me down on top of him. Sapphire eyes met mine with an intense need, and I realised there would be no sleeping for us that night. The only certainty in an uncertain world was our relationship, and so we clung to each other as we always had: as brothers, and now soon-to-be lovers, facing the future together as one.

The End

Author Bio

Victoria was born in the United Kingdom but emigrated to the United States at age 21. She's bisexual, genderqueer, happily married, and still shouts in a British accent. She lives with her husband in Pennsylvania where she spends a lot of time playing and talking about video games, especially Japanese role-playing games.

Besides the Culture Wars series, she is the author of Wings of Destruction, an asexual m/m romance novella published by Less Than Three Press, The Miracle, an f/f short story published by Evernight Publishing, along with m/m romances Reunited (Totally Bound Publishing), Nami (Wilde City Press), and The Dragon's Curse (Less Than Three Press). She loves to write about all colors of the rainbow and celebrate love wherever it may be found.

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