

THE KING'S MAN

SNEAK PEEK



ANYTA SUNDAY

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All the characters in this book are fictional and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

This book contains a torturous slow burn love story.

A decorative floral wreath with intricate scrollwork and leaf patterns, framing the title.

Beginning

I discovered his name beneath the violet oak, a long way from home, when I was only nine. Even then, he was sharp-tongued and far too composed. And even then, I couldn't stop staring at him.

Prince Nicostratus Aetherion.

The boy who saved me from drowning. The boy I saved from poison.

The boy who would grow up to change my life forever.





Quick!
Redcloaks—three of them—ghosting through the trees with swords drawn and those unmistakable crimson cloaks.

I rip a precious thornwort root free and shove it into my belt. Akilah needs this. And I need to live long enough to get it to her.

I launch down a bushy embankment, boots skidding, cloak snagging on underbrush. Twigs whip my face. I don't stop. The clearing's ahead—

I lurch to a halt, boots suctioned into the mud.

I'm not the only one trespassing in the royal woods.

A young man stands at the cliff's edge. Tall. Still. Cloak and hair caught in the wind. He's carved from silence, as if from magic, from something old and untouchable. Beautiful. But wrong. There's a shimmer to his face; subtle, but unmistakable.

Not his real face.

Not that it'll matter. Masked or not, the redcloaks won't ask questions.

He doesn't look like he's seen them. Doesn't look like he sees *anything*.

I veer toward him, heart thundering, and wave with wild urgency.

He turns. Not startled.

Just a blink. A faint frown. On a fancy fake face.

I reach him in a few strides and grab his arm.

He glances at my fingers curled around his sleeve. Too late.

I curse under my breath, squeeze the man's arm, and flash him a reckless grin as the redcloaks break through the trees. They spot us. They move fast. We're in for it now, unless . . .

I drop to all fours.

"Don't panic," I whisper, already crawling through dirt and leaves. "Just play along." No one can possibly take us seriously like this.

I whinny. Loudly. "Your faithful steed is here." I toss my hair with a wild neigh, rearing up dramatically. "Climb aboard! We ride into the sunset!"

"You're unbelievable," the young man mutters. Creamy and composed, his voice slides straight down my spine.

But no time to dwell.

He slings himself onto my back, and I nearly collapse beneath the weight of him.

Somehow, I hold it together, biting my tongue when he offers a most dignified: "Giddyup."

And giddyup I do, hissing for his ears only, "Ride me proper. My mane. Steer with it."

A long released breath. Then he grabs a handful of my hair and yanks it.

Behind us, the redcloaks falter, confused. Muttering.

Lunatics. No threat. Let them go.

I crawl with my masked rider into the shadows of the woods, heart still hammering, until we reach the nook by the river, half wrapped in bramble and shadowlight, where Akilah waits.

She startles, blinks, rubs her eyes, then sighs. Her look says it all: This is so Cael Amuletos.

I grin, breathless. "We're safe." I shift beneath him. "Dismount."

The moment his weight vanishes, I sit back. Too fast—he stumbles, catches a tree trunk but still falls, hitting his knee with a solid thunk.

I lunge forward, offering a hand.

Then I freeze.

His pain. I feel it in the air—sharp, sour, sparking against my nose. Too strong to ignore.

I reach for my healing pouch. "Let me read your pulse—"

"No." Firm. Cold.

He braces against the tree to pull himself upright, back turned.

I hesitate. That 'no' was more than cold. It stung.

I glance over. "Why?"

He faces me, tight-lipped. "I'm fine."

He's lying. The pain's still there, clinging to the air like smoke.

"You're not," I murmur. "I can sense it."

"Just . . . leave it."

I open the pouch. "I can—"

"I said leave it!" The words lash out, but beneath them . . . a slight tremble?

I flinch. Not at the volume. At the wall that just slammed down between us.

I reach toward his arm, gently—

And he roars. "I'll heal myself!"

My hand drops. I let the pouch flap fall shut. Silence blooms, and it tastes bruised and bitter.

He glares. Actually glares. After everything.

Something twists inside me. I step up close to that marble-perfect face, my pulse still ragged.

I breathe him in. Pain still shivers off him, but underneath . .

. that mask. That magic. It pulses with scent. Ancient herbs, rare, exact. Detectable enough for me to name them, if I focused hard enough. “This isn’t your real face.” I say, breath hitching. My nose brushes his hair.

The air hums between us, charged and prickling.

“What are you doing?” he rasps, and clears his throat, too quickly.

“I recognise these herbs.” My voice is quieter now. Lips tingling from the proximity of his magic.

His nose flares.

I draw back slightly. “Were those redcloaks chasing you?” I tilt my head. “Are you a wanted criminal?”

He snaps, “What if I am?”

My breath stutters. Then I square my shoulders. A dangerous thrill flickers under my skin. “Then I guess I’ve become an accomplice—”

He’s already turning away. Already disappearing behind trees.

I start forward, but Akilah grabs my arm and shakes her head. “Just leave it.”

But . . . but . . .

There’s something about him. That arrogance. That impossible mask. That voice.

It itches under my skin. Part curiosity—no one masks like that. That level of precision is definitely criminal. But mostly?

It’s the sheer rudeness.

Even after we’re back at the manor, I’m still fuming.



I dart my gaze left and right, then slip into an alleyway, narrow and hung with icicles. Down the slippery stairs I go, careful, breath fogging, until I reach the canal path.

In the distance, fires flicker beneath the bridge. The homeless and the sick huddle around fissures of warm air still venting from the last earthquake. Their coats are threadbare. Their fingers, blue. The cold will only deepen their ailments.

I quicken my step.

And promptly slip on the ice.

My heart leaps into my throat as the world tilts and I flail toward the freezing canal. For a suspended second, time stretches. Far too much time to imagine how utterly miserable the next few seconds will be—

Hands catch me.

Strong. Steady.

I let out a long breath of relief, eyes still squeezed shut. Then I feel them—fingers, still wrapped around my arms. I glance over my shoulder, and don't need to hit the canal to shiver.

I blink, and then, despite everything, a laugh escapes. "Maskios!"

That beautiful, fake face pinches. "That's not my name."

"Who are you, then?"

“What are you doing down here?”

I yank free of his grip and face him fully. “Did you follow me?”

“You looked like you were up to something you shouldn’t be.”

“That’s not an answer.” I eye him. “So are you here to stop me? Or help?”

He glances past me, to the bridge and the sick beyond it. Hesitates. Then—

“Why not. I’m a criminal, after all.”

That surprises me. He was so rude last time I saw him.

I laugh again, soft, involuntary. Then I rise onto my toes and tug his hood up over his head. A small gesture. Unnecessary for a man already masked, but I’m . . . compelled to do it.

“Follow my instructions,” I murmur.

I take his hand and lead him beneath the bridge. I pass him three bottles of herbal teas and my apothecary pouch. “Do you know your herbs?”

“Better than most,” Maskios says, with just enough arrogance to make me snort.

There’s already a line. Each one greets me with kind smiles and offerings—prettily knotted thread, wildflowers. Whatever they have. I slip one posy of flowers behind the clasp on Maskios’ cloak and get to work.

“Why not use a medius spell rather than all these simplex ones?” Maskios asks, batting away a wildflower as it droops toward his mouth.

I raise a brow. “Have you not heard how sharp the blade of a guillotine is?”

“I’ve seen . . . I mean, you’ve *never* used medius spells before?”

I lean in and whisper, “Only when I’m sure I’ll get away with it. The local luminist loves to—”

As if summoned, he appears. A luminist, in glowing white robes, ringing his spiritual bell as he walks the far side of the underbridge. My heart leaps into my throat.

“Live virtuous, modest lives. Follow the rules of the linea, and be reborn as linea. Pay homage at the luminarium.”

I yelp, grab Maskios, and duck behind a brazier.

He murmurs against my neck, “Why are we—”

I slam a palm over his mouth and shake my head.

Only when the luminist has passed do I exhale and drop my hand, now damp with Maskios’ breath. He stares at me in the dark, and that oddly ticklish shiver returns.

I hold his gaze. “He and I don’t see eye to eye. If he sees me, he’ll tell Father.”

We emerge from behind the brazier to tend to a malnourished child covered in rashy rings.

“Is it plague?” her mother asks, clutching her close. “Is she going to—”

I take the girl’s pulse. “It does look fearsome, but I’ve seen this before.” I speak gently to the child. “Did you play in the woods? Did you touch a plant that looks like strawberry vine?”

She nods. I smile. Maskios watches closely.

“She’s touched thistleweed,” I murmur. “Harmless. It’ll fade on its own eventually. But . . .”

I pour a spell into her skin. Within minutes, the rash fades.

It’s past midnight when I heal the last person in the line. My head is spinning from overexertion, my limbs heavy. Still, I keep upright, mostly because Maskios is watching. I pull myself up the icy path toward the street.

The cobblestones blur. The lights from nearby houses shimmer.

And then I tip . . .

Into strong arms. Again.

I bite back a few self-chastising words and shiver. “Windy.”

“Let’s sit a moment.”

We perch on the bridge wall beneath a sky dusted with stars. Across the canal, the dome of the royal luminarium glows with magic. I grimace at the sight, but bow.

Maskios studies me. “The way you were with the luminist, I thought you didn’t care about the Arcane Sovereign.”

I shrug. “I distrust the idea that if we follow rules we’re reborn as linea, and I have definitely—repeatedly and shamelessly—broken linea rules. Bowing seems redundant. And yet . . . just in case.”

Maskios nods slowly. “I’ve told myself again and again not to do certain things. And yet, I keep doing them anyway. Telling myself no seems pointless, but still. I keep trying. And failing.”

I smile faintly. “Are you trying and failing to reform your criminal ways?”

“As successfully as you are.”

I laugh. “I wish I could practice properly. As a vitalian. There’s so much I don’t know, so many spells I’ve only heard about, and even more I haven’t.” The Arcane Sovereign himself must have it in for me up in the heavens.

The luminist’s bell sounds again ahead. And approaching fast.

I lurch off the wall and bolt, slipping and sliding down the icy arch toward the shadows of the side streets.



Small flashes of my magic light up the leaves in the tree I've climbed. "Take this one, Akilah."

"Must we really collect syrup *here*? There are trees in the city."

"Not this kind. This tree is rare. It makes the best taffy."

"Great. We're not just pilfering royal syrup, we're pilfering *precious* royal syrup. Have you not heard the phrase *off with his head*?"

"Look at all those stains! That's years of syrup gone to waste. Years of delicious taffy that never came into existence."

"You and your taffy!"

"Let the whole world know: I love taffy!"

"The difference between syrups is barely noticeable. Are you sure you didn't come back here for . . . other reasons?"

"Ha!"

A deep voice rumbles from below, startling me. "You love taffy more than life?"

Akilah yelps. I lose my balance and tumble.

I just manage to plant a foot on a broad shoulder and launch myself back onto the branch. "Arcane Sovereign!" I gasp, clutching the trunk.

I peer around. And nearly fall again.

Those lips pressed tight. That unimpressed stare at the fresh boot print now decorating his spotless cloak.

My breath catches.

He steers his horse a step closer, just enough to flick my nose with a single finger.

“Maskios!” I wince-laugh. “We meet again.”

“Not my name.”

“Who are you then?” I hang further off the branch. “Are you *really* a criminal?”

He tries to flick me again, but I swing out of reach.

“You can call me . . . Calix Solin,” he says.

“Sure, Maskios. I’ll do that.”

He glares. “I travel here a few times a year to study. From Hinsard.”

“A scholar from Hinsard.” I reach for one of his braids, lift it, and breathe in the scent of magic—just like I did the first time. And the second. The scent fascinates me. I want to . . . understand.

“Why hide your true appearance, then?”

Calix regrips his reins, meeting my gaze head-on. “I have trouble with unwanted attention. My magnetic beauty becomes problematic. Like Skeldars.”

I laugh and drop the braid. “I’m part Skeldar. Does that mean *I* have magnetic beauty?”

Calix jerks his horse back a step and looks away.

I glance up at Akilah. “What do you think? Am I handsome?”

“No,” she says serenely. “You’re *extremely* pretty.”

I murmur, “Why don’t I have trouble with unwanted attention?”

She tosses down the answer without hesitation. “You scare all the girls off by ‘testing’ spells on me in front of them. They’re afraid of their own faces coming to ruin.”

I frown. "I haven't noticed any girls."

I glance back at Calix and the aklo riding with him, noting their leathers and the curved sticks they carry.

"You play drakopagon?" I ask. "Are you any good?"

Calix scoffs.

"Veronica is forever urging me to practice. Come forward a few steps?"

His jaw tightens. "Why?"

"Three steps should do it. I can drop in front of you or behind. Take your pick."

With a muttered curse, Calix grabs his drakopala, moves his horse, and taps my rump with the curved end.

He glances at his aklo and sighs. "Give him your horse. Go back."

I drop into the saddle, syrup-sticky hands gripping the reins. Calix casts me a long, wary glance—like he still isn't sure why he's doing this, and dare not imagine what will happen next.

I wiggle my fingers. "Syrup's a bit sticky."

He flicks a lazy finger. Magic swirls, cleansing and efficient.

I sigh. "What a waste." I lift a knuckle to my mouth. "Should've been licked clean."

Calix slams his eyes shut and spurs his horse forward.

When we arrive at the drakopagon pitch, a half-dozen young men are riding hard, tossing a tied-up bundle toward a hoop at one end. They're laughing, whooping.

But over the din, a sound pierces through.

Meowling.

Calix and I frown, searching for the source.

Our gazes land on the bundle.

My heart drops.

I urge my horse over the low fence and canter toward them.

"Give me that cat."

"Get off the pitch," one growls. "It's ours."

“You’re torturing it.”

“No one wants to drop it. It adds stakes to the game. Better for practice.”

“How’d *you* like to be tied up and thrown around for fun?”

Calix rides up beside me. “Release the cat. At once.”

The youths snicker. “Who do you think you are? King?”

“Who do *you* think you are?” I snap. “Rich bullies with nothing better to do?”

One swings his drakopala at my face—I duck.

“We’re all first-born sons of high-ranking officials! We’ll be running the court someday!”

Enough.

I wheel toward the one holding the bundle, toss out a sleeping spell— He slumps in the saddle.

I catch the cat.

And immediately we’re under fire. Nasty spells come flying.

Calix charges into the throng, blocking each one. “Get to the woods.”

I obey, galloping hard, heart in my throat.

One glance over my shoulder. A spell slices through Calix’s sleeve.

At the clearing, I pace, stomach knotted. Watching every shadow.

He comes on the whisper of wind and hooves—upright, composed. But his eyes spark as soon as he sees me.

He halts his horse hard.

I pat the bundle at my chest, the cat now safe in a sling. I offer a smile, slide my horse closer, and nudge his foot from the stirrup. I lean over and carefully tuck the sling’s strap around his neck.

“There-there. Maskios has money. He’ll take care of you.”

I return to my seat and raise a brow. “Why are you glaring at me like that?”

"That was dangerous. You risked your life. *For a cat.*"

"They might've killed it!"

"You can't save everyone!"

I turn so we're side by side. "I can try."

"Sometimes you *shouldn't*. Sometimes you just have to make hard choices. Not everything can be saved."

"How defeatist."

"They would've spelled you from your horse. You'd have been trampled. Killed. And in the end, it wouldn't matter. You're just *par-linea*."

Just par-linea.

The words slice sharper than any spell.

I rear back, my horse shifting beneath me. "Just *par-linea*."

The ache is sudden. Raw.

"That's the truth."

Leaves rustle around us.

The cat meows softly from his chest.

I slide off the horse. My hands tremble as I pass him the reins.

I don't look at him.

As soon as the reins leave my fingers, I bow my head.

And walk away.



A kilah gives me a sidelong look.
“It’s just borrowed. For noble purposes.”

“To pretend you’re a noble, you mean.”

“That’s what I said. Noble purposes.”

She rolls her eyes and returns her focus to the arena.

I’d snuck into these tournament games plenty of times in my youth. But this is the first time I’ve dared to walk through the gates in full view, complete with a fine cloak, an overconfident strut, and a mouthful of lies. The fine cloak—the one with the glowing gold-threaded vines and red-and-green floral silk lining—is my older brother’s wedding cloak. It billows dramatically behind me like I actually belong here. Like I’m a full linea, like everyone else who’s officially allowed to attend.

All to stand at the front of the wooden stands overlooking the arena carved into the base of the Claviska cliffs.

The cliffs themselves loom above, spiralling into clouds, and the games below are framed with bright flags and shouting vendors. Today’s event: the mounted archery challenge.

A dozen contestants gather at the far end, their horses restless, heads high. Each has swallowed a temporary spell to block their magic, making this a test of sheer crude skill. Raw instinct.

The rounds begin.

Riders thunder past, loosing arrows at moving targets while their horses leap fences and pivot mid-stride. The first round is impressive. The second, breathtaking.

By the fourth, I'm transfixed.

At first it's just a glint. A smooth, shimmering fake face. My breath hitches.

Surely it can't be . . .

It *is*. Just take in that absurd composure! That haughty confidence.

I grit my teeth and watch him. He's dressed in dark riding leathers and an eye-catching cloak, looking as cool as frost, loosing arrow after arrow with barely a glance at the targets. His horse weaves through obstacles, every motion fluid, lethal, exact. Like a dance.

I forget how to blink.

My hand grips the fencepost beside me so tightly I swear it groans. My stomach does something swoopy and undignified. I hate that I feel it.

I hate that I *still* feel it.

Just par-linea.

His words are still raw in my ears. I can still feel the punch of that moment in the woods. The way he spoke.

But even so, I can't tear my eyes away.

The crowd cheers. A horn sounds for the next round. I stare, the world growing foggy around the edges.

Akilah nudges me.

I shake my head.

She raises a brow.

I cling harder to the post, like it's the only thing keeping me upright. It might be the only thing keeping me upright.

I stare out over the arena again.

Calix Solin draws his bow.

His arrow thunks into the bullseye with effortless, mesmerising precision. The crowd erupts. I can't look away.

By the eighth round, only three contestants remain. And Calix is one of them.

My fingers tighten around the fencepost the moment I catch him laughing with the others. Like they're old friends, not rivals.

Then suddenly, he scans the stands.

My entire body freezes.

I don't breathe. I don't blink. I can't look away. I don't even want to.

Our eyes meet. Something slingshots through my middle, sharp and tingling. My breath comes out thin, shaky. I grip the post so hard I feel splinters dig into my palms.

His gaze doesn't waver. It clings. Angry? Annoyed?

Just par-linea.

I swallow hard and force my gaze away. Toward one of the other contestants, who's galloping through the course now with schoolbook precision.

I cheer. Loudly. Too loudly.

Akilah side-eyes me.

When the flag waves for Calix's final round, I slouch against the post, angled away like I couldn't care less. I'm not looking. Not really. Just watching from the corner of my eye. Every limb stiff. Every heartbeat thumping louder than hooves.

He hits the first targets dead centre, shearing through his rival's arrows. The crowd roars. I don't turn my head. I won't.

Another shot. Bullseye.

Then . . .

Another arrow is nocked, the bowstring pulled taut. But—

Thunk.

It sinks into the post beside me. Pins my sleeve.

My heart launches into my throat.

The crowd gasps. Akilah shrieks. I whirl and meet Calix's gaze, burning and unrelenting.

I glower. He glares right back.

And without so much as a bow to the judges, Calix rides out of the arena. No nod to his rivals. No fanfare. Just a sharp exit, straight out of the games.

And . . .

It's too much.

Before I know what I'm doing, I tell Akilah not to wait and bolt from the stands. I find the family horse I 'borrowed', and swing myself into the saddle with a leap.

Ahead, a figure on horseback cuts through the mist toward the cliffs.

I urge my mount after him. "Maskios!"

Through the low clouds, I catch up, just as we break above them.

Calix whirls, teeth bared.

I raise my pinned sleeve. Then fish the arrow from my boot and wave it pointedly. "Why?"

His fingers tighten on the reins, jaw flexing. Silent.

I prod. "Because it doesn't matter if you hit me, a par-linea?"

He huffs. "If I'd wanted to hit you, I would've."

"So you just wanted to ruin my sleeve?"

"You were unchivalrous."

I lift the arrow. "And what was this?"

"That," he says through clenched teeth, and then a sigh, "was an overreaction."

I blink. Lower the arrow. That . . . is almost an apology.

I tug at the torn sleeve and let some of the bite drain from my voice. "I'll get in trouble for this."

"I'll replace it."

"It'll never be the one my brother got married in."

Calix stares at me, aghast. "Why did you wear that?"

I shrug. "Getting into these games isn't exactly easy. I don't own any fancy clothes. I suppose I could get married, get a wedding cloak of my own . . ."

"I'll give you some of my clothes."

"And boots," I add quickly. "So I can run far away while you stand there barefoot."

He blinks. "Why would you run from me?"

I pull my horse back a step. Look away. My cheeks burn.

"You're . . . unnerving."

"Unnerving!"

"Exactly that."

He clears his throat, softens his voice. "Around me, I'd say you're rather shameless."

I yank the arrow out again and guide my horse up beside his, pointing the sharp end at his chest. "When have I ever done anything shameless?"

He plucks the arrow from my hand with maddening calm. "No, you're right," he drawls. "Not shameless at all."

The arrow brushes over my palm and I jerk my hand away, gripping the reins hard. I turn my horse, facing the path ahead, and mutter, "First to the third sharp bend."

"I play drakopagon," he warns. "You have no chance—"

But I'm already off, thundering up the path.



“*Y*ou turn your corners too sharply and it startles your horse,” Calix says calmly.

I pat my mare and take the lead, guiding her along the misty path. On one side, a sheer cliff face looms, its rocky shelf vanishing into clouds. On the other—nothing but a steep drop, lost to the mist below.

“She’s used to pulling carts, not racing. You had the advantage—”

The earth moves.

A sudden, sharp jolt.

The tremors deepen, fast and violent.

“Cael, move!” Calix throws out a hand like he expects a shield to spring into place.

But nothing comes. He’s still blocked from the tournament spells.

Hooves clatter and echo off the mist-shrouded stone. Rocks break loose above us, tumbling down like a volley of arrows. One hits the cliff path with a crack, another explodes into shards near Calix’s mount, which stumbles and rears.

My mare’s eyes roll and she shies back; I grip the reins, trying to soothe her.

Something whistles past me.

A blur.
Pain explodes at my temple.
Everything jerks sideways.
And then—
Nothing.

I stir.

My head throbs.

A groan slips from me as I blink in blurry painted images. They don't make sense. Swirls and light, out of focus, shifting. "Where . . ." My voice scrapes up my throat.

More blinking. Gradually, my vision sharpens. A domed ceiling above me. Soft wall murals, glowing in the firelight.

We're in a lunarium.

I wince and turn my head toward the fire blazing in a shallow pit in the centre—where a reliquary would be, or a violet oak. A figure crouches beside it. "Maskios?" I murmur, rubbing my temple.

"You were knocked out," Calix says without turning. "The path was blocked. We had to ride into the mountains."

"We're in the mountains?"

"I thought we could take the trail down the other side. But now that we have to camp, we may as well leave the way we came. Once my meridians reopen tomorrow, I'll clear the road."

I push myself upright with a wince and glance at Calix, his profile lit by the flickering fire. "We're stuck here for the night?"

"Will that be a problem? Will Akilah be searching for you?"

"I told her to go home. She might only start panicking in the morning."

"Then she won't panic for long."

“What about me?” I rub my temple. “Should I be panicking?”

Calix glances back at me. “Would you? So I might see what that looks like?”

I grin, then immediately wince.

“Your meridians are still intact,” Calix murmurs. “Heal yourself.”

I hardly need telling. I form a spell and steer it into my head. Relief floods in fast. I spring from the makeshift bed—Calix must have built it—and drop beside him at the fire.

Before he can put down his jar of liquor, I swipe it, lift it to my nose, and take a long, exaggerated sniff.

“I’ve never tried alcohol before,” I say, mischief warming me faster than the flames.

Calix reaches out to take it, but I twist away and chug down a good gulp. “Quite sweet.”

He yanks it back. “You’ll knock yourself out again.”

“You’re not secretly thrilled? You won’t have to deal with me for the rest of the night.”

I laugh and keep talking, warmth and adrenaline making my tongue loose. I edge closer to him as the air turns colder. When I finally bump against his side, I hear it.

A hiss of breath.

Pain floods the air around us.

I whip around and stare at his lap. “You’re hurt. Let me—”

He bats my hands away and shifts just out of reach.

“It’s nothing,” he mutters. “Just a few rocks. I’m fine.”

“This again? You won’t let me heal you because I’m par-linea? That’s ridiculous.” I roll up my sleeves. “If I’d known you were suffering, I would’ve healed you first—”

I summon a spell.

My hair flies up from the blowback. I blink, stunned, as fizzled magic crackles from my fingers. I try again. Just a fizz.

I freeze, horror blooming. “I . . . I can’t.” I look at him, alarmed. “It must be the liquor!”

Calix stares at me, and *laughs*. Really laughs. He reaches out and flattens my hair with his palm.

I go utterly still at the touch.

Our eyes lock.

Calix’s hand drops. I whip my head back to the fire. Such pretty dancing flames. Very interesting.

“So,” I say, throat tight, “have you practiced archery for a long time?”

“Since I could lift a bow.”

“Even though you can use magic?”

“Sometimes magic isn’t an option. We need other ways to survive. To fight.”

I glance at my hands. “Even to heal?” I frown.

Calix gestures toward the fizzled spell. “What if this happens again? When your magic fails?”

“I’d rather never drink again!” I groan.

We fall quiet.

After a moment, I shift my gaze toward the fire and murmur, “I desperately want to be a vitalian. It’s my dream.”

“Your only dream?” he asks quietly.

I nod. “If I ever stray from it, I hope someone will boldly plonk me back on the right path.” I tilt my head back, gaze rising to the smoke curling into the starry sky above the luminarium’s dome. “I think that might be true love.”

“Helping one stay on the right path?”

“No.” I turn to him. “Helping *one another* stay on the path.”

Maybe it’s the night air, the leftover fear from the earthquake, or the firelight softening his sharp edges, but something shifts. We talk easily. Until we yawn. Until we curl beside the fire and sleep overtakes us.

Deep.

Dreamless.
 And when I wake . . .
 The luminarium is quiet.
 Empty.
 My breath is the only breath to fog the air.
 Maybe . . . maybe he went out to forage?
 I wait.
 I pace.
 I call his name.
 I search the rocky ledges outside.
 I wait some more.
 But he doesn't come back.
 Calix is gone.
 I kick the cold ashes and stub my toe. A laugh sputters out of
 me. *Of course*. What was I thinking?
 That one night would *mean* something?
 That we were, what, *friends*?
 I wrap my cloak tighter and start down the mountain.
 No note. No goodbye. Not even a horse left behind.
 I'm going to get an earful from Father.
 And my brother. This cloak . . .
 I march down the mist-wrapped path, a silent declaration
 accompanying every step.
Calix 'Maskios' Solin—you! You just wait.



The canal banks are aglow with magic under a crisp night sky.

Blooms of light drift through the air, swirling, shimmering, dancing like the spirits in love that they are. Soft glows wrap around couples strolling hand in hand, casting hues of gold and violet and rose onto their faces. The reflections of those soulful lights glitter in the canals, transforming the city into a dream of love.

It's the Lovelight Festival.

Love drips from every floating lantern, and every whispered wish into a lover's ear.

All this beauty, and I can't enjoy it. Not while I'm being chased, anyway.

Sons of high-ranking officials. The same insufferable ones from the cat incident.

I was just sniffing sweet buns near the spice vendor when—Yelling. Pointing. Flinging of spells. I ducked, yelped, and bolted.

I'm still doing it. I rush along the path six feet above the canal water, heart pounding, dodging errant spells as they spark against the cobblestones behind me. Not the lights I want to see today!

"Stop him!" someone shouts.

"He stole our cat! No one gets away from us."

"You'll never find true love acting like this!" I shout back over my shoulder.

The wrong thing to say.

A light spell slices past my ear and I scent the drop of blood that spills with it.

I keep running, cloak flying behind me. The path curves, narrow and slick; a bloom of light spins into my face; I stagger—

And a rough gust of wind—or magic, or bad luck—*shoves* me sideways.

My feet miss the edge.

I tip. Fall. Right into the shadows beneath the canal bank.

The air whooshes from my lungs as I land half-sprawled, half-hugged, blinking wildly as I register a boat, a small one tucked beneath a stone overhang.

And Calix.

Of course it's him. Sitting silently in a boat. Like an inconveniently breath-catching fate.

Holding me on his lap.

My eyes widen and he plants a finger over my lips. Fast footsteps clank and clatter on the path above. "*Where'd he go?*"

"Must have reached the other side. Come, we'll get him yet."

By the time the echoing claps of their boots disappear, the rowboat has drifted back out from under the bridge, farther away from my noisy pursuers.

The night skies stretch overhead, the water around us is a deep inky black, the trees on the banks are a rustle of moving shadow. I'm still frozen on Calix's lap and his finger is still at my lips.

And then *boom*—all around, lovelights burst out of lovers glittering and twirling.

The lights dance and speckle the surroundings, casting light and shadow over Calix's face, mine. We stare at one another.

He drops his fingers gently off me, and I . . . my breath is tight. There's something soft in Calix's gaze, something that seems real amongst the shimmer of his magic mask.

I sink into his hold, then tremble. I shouldn't . . .

It's relief. To have gotten away.

Calix's breath hitches, I feel the tickle stop combing my hair.

I frown at his mask that keeps holding me hostage.

Calix throws me off his lap and I land on the bank with a thunk and a thundering heart.

"I'm not your enemy."

"You're not my friend, either."

Calix sinks a fraction. "What were you up to tonight, before you ran into those nobles? Should I drop you off to someone?"

I pat my belt, feeling for a pouch that is no longer there. Must have fallen in the chase. I sigh and look at Calix imploringly. "Are you hungry? How about we go for some pecan puffs?"

"Pecan puffs?"

"Ground pecans in a creamy custard set into the lightest, flakiest pastries, and pretty taffy art to top it." My stomach rumbles. I pat it. "Shall we share a plate?"

Calix picks up his oars and shakes his head at me. "You've lost your money, haven't you?"

"Please? They're a hassle to make so they only sell them at the lovelight festival. I'll have to wait an entire year . . ."

"I don't know. Buying someone dessert sounds like something a . . . friend would do."

"What . . . Are you *upset*?" There's something about his tone, his posture . . . "Well, I'm upset too," I say. "You took off without a word!"

Calix looks over sharply, expression pensive. He steers to a set of steps and ushers me onto them.

I frown. Is this it? Another sudden departure between us?

But Calix follows me onto the stairs. At my confused look, he taps my rumbling belly with a cane he pulls from the boat. "Pecan puffs."

He snaps through the streets, leading the way while I frown after him. He disappears from the mountain without a word, he's upset we're not friends, and now he comes along to feed me pastry puffs?

Also—I come to an abrupt halt outside the inn Maskios is heading into, and then hurry inside after him. "Why are you still hurt?" I demand the moment we are seated at a small table.

He stiffens. "Father was furious at my absence that night. I was . . . punished. I'm to heal without magic."

Harsh. "He's tough on you."

"He's tough on everyone."

At my inquiring brow, he clears his throat. "My brother disobeyed him too. We're both hobbling on canes today."

I lean in with a smirk. "Then let's order sikelion lamb and emberfruit pheasant, too. And some borage tea. With that, I can take away your pain."

"You just want more free food."

"We both win."

He orders everything I ask for and the dishes fill every spot of space on the table.

And I moan into all of it, especially the delightful bite of pecan puff.

But, then I catch myself. I smartly put down the pastry and look directly over the table. "Enough."

He shifts, chest puffed on a held breath.

"Why do you keep frowning? Why are you sharing this meal with me? Why were you so upset before?"

Calix looks away. "I was upset before I met you tonight." His jaw quivers. "My marriage has been arranged."

I stare and shift awkwardly on my seat, suddenly finding the last morsel of puff immensely interesting. “Arranged?”

“But I can’t. I really can’t.”

“Is she not nice enough? Pretty enough?”

“She’s plenty nice and plenty pretty. That’s not it, Caelus.”

Calix searches my face, imploring. “Being with someone should be intimate, passionate. Should be felt deep inside.” He shakes his head. “I can’t be that with her. Do you understand? I *can’t*.”

I breathe in sharply, something inside sinking. My gaze takes a slow stroll down Calix to where he disappears under the table. I gulp and slowly look up at him again.

I eye the shared food between us . . . Was this supposed to be payment for . . . help? I hesitate, then pick up the last morsel of pastry puff and pop it into my mouth, swallowing over a tight lump. “I understand.”

Calix lets out a shaky breath, briefly closing his eyes, and I find myself leaning over the table with a lingering downward glance as I whisper, “I can get that happy for you.”

There’s a pause. A momentary thickening of the air between us. And then Calix hurtles to his feet. He’s staring hard at me and then he’s dropping money on the table—

But before I can even ask what’s wrong, he turns and walks out.

Again.

Gone.

I stare after him, floored.

“Fickle!” I yell.

The innkeeper glances over, raising a brow.

I take another bite of pecan puff.

“And I want the rest boxed up,” I add.

Back at home, I sneak past a pair of aklos scrubbing the floor

and an akla ironing Father's robes like she's waging war on every wrinkle. I tiptoe down the corridor, clutching my pastry box like a treasure.

My room welcomes me with its familiar herbal scent. I don't bother lighting the lanterns. I just flop onto my bed, puff box cradled in my lap.

I tear it open.

He's just one silly young man.

That's all.

One masked, frustrating, annoyingly mysterious young man who doesn't know how to say goodbye properly. Or how to stay. Or how to . . .

I sigh.

He'll come and he'll go. Probably he's already gone. Vanished from my life like the last bite of this puff.

So forget him.

He doesn't get to take up space in my mind like this. Lingering like the scent of magic after a spell.

Lingering thoughts should be reserved for people who matter.

Like my family.

Like Akilah, who's practically my sister, who's stuck by me through more than anyone else.

Like Veronica, my stubborn, sharp friend who taught me to how to wield a drakopala stick.

And even like the prince I once slept beside in the hollow of a violet oak, the one who made my heart stutter for the first time in my life.

Those are people worth remembering.

Not some too-handsome, magic-masked, cryptic-lipped, just-par-linea-declaring *drakopagon-playing*—

I bite the puff too hard. Cream oozes down my chin.

I wipe it off with the back of my sleeve, scowling at the ceiling, nodding in fierce self-agreement.

“No more thoughts.”

I finish the last puff with a growl and fall back into my pillows.



*I*t all happens in a furious blur.

I'm just leaving the side gate, a woven basket over my shoulder, when I'm snagged off the path and dropped onto the saddle in front of Calix. He says nothing, just flicks his reins and bolts forward.

"Maskios! This is a crime."

He mutters drily, "I'm a criminal, after all."

I protest, but not *that* hard; I sling my leg over the horse to straddle it more comfortably. Calix spurs the horse on, his front shifting tight against my back. Tight, and silent. He doesn't speak until we arrive at cliffs, where he steers the horse towards the treacherous path. "White chryslaced fungi grows around here somewhere," he says. "Help me find it."

"White chryslaced—who's been poisoned?"

Calix's jaw flexes.

"Tell me," I say sharply. "What did they consume? What are thier symptoms?" Who are they?

Calix grits out basic answers. "... Now we need the fungi."

I wince and my head bows forward. "It's the wrong time of year."

The horse halts abruptly and he hisses into my hair. "What?"

"You won't find chryslaced fungi here."

“I *must*.”

“You won’t.”

“Don’t tell me I won’t!” he roars. “I must and I will. My brother is everything to me. *Everything*.”

Brother? But of course, why wouldn’t Calix have a family? He has a whole life he keeps hidden along with his criminal face.

“Everything?” I murmur.

Calix bristles like I’m challenging him. “I’d jump off a cliff for him; I’d give him my heart. I’d do *anything*. We will hunt every crevice of these mountains until we find our miracle!”

“We will find your miracle,” I murmur. “But it won’t be chryslaced fungi.” I take the reins from Calix and steer the horse back down the path, ignoring his furious demands to give them back.

I take his angered words against the back of my head and ride swiftly from the mountains and into the swamplands. Calix is furious. But he’s also not putting up a fight.

I jump off the horse. “You’d really do anything for this cure?”

Calix leans towards me. “You’re not planning to hold me hostage, I hope.”

I grab that fake-fancy face with a bright smile and an eager shiver. “Aquamare can be used in place of the fungi. I’ll find it, and in return you’ll unmask yourself.”

Calix rips himself out of my hold, and I wade into the swamp, waist-deep, searching.

Calix stirs on his horse and I feel the heat of his stare as he watches me. “How are you so sure this will work?”

“Grandfather was once poisoned like your brother. Also the wrong time of year for the fungi. He’d studied water roots in depth and though they look different, the way they break down is the same. It’s this burst of poison they both release that’s the antidote.”

“Why don’t the vitalians know of this?”

“Back then they wouldn’t listen to him, a par-linea.” I let that word linger a longer moment. Let it sink into him that it’s a par-linea who will be healing his brother. “This cure survives only through Grandfather’s notebooks and . . . well, me.”

He shifts tightly in his saddle again.

I yank and pull at weeds, even hold my breath and submerge in the murky, cold depths. It takes an hour before I find the yellowed root, and I brandish it high, waving from the water. I wade back, weighted by drenched clothes and tangling reeds, but I’m laughing. “Your brother is saved. Take off your mask!”

Calix looks towards the hills in the distance. “There’s no point.” The sun catches on the ridgeline, sinking beyond it. “I won’t be seeing you again.”

At the edge of the swamp, I stop. The way he says those words. Like a promise.

The mud sucks around my boots, rooting me there. My heart is banging tightly in my chest. I squeeze the aquamare, fighting an achy swoop in my belly.

“Since I won’t be seeing you again,” I choke out finally, “there’s no threat in me knowing the you behind your mask.”

Calix is cold. “You won’t like him. Or perhaps you will, but for the wrong reasons.”

“I don’t care about your face! I want to know who’s beyond the magic. I want to know who I’ve . . . spent this time with.”

“We’ve only shared a few moments.”

His answer comes too quick, too pointed.

I steel myself against the sting. “Moments can be real too, if you want them to be.”

Calix readjusts his grip on the reins.

I keep speaking, “But they can only be truly real if you let yourself be vulnerable. If you can expose your true self. Without that, what we’ve had will never be deeper than banter and rivalry.”

These words have him stiffening. “What?”

I throw up my hands, scratching my face with the aquamare. “I thought you wanted to be friends.”

He turns his horse before me and grabs the aquamare. His gaze holds mine too tight. His voice vibrates too deep. “I can never have friends.”

That’s it. He turns his back and rides off, and I’m left wobbling in the marsh, watching him.

Until he is gone and there’s no elegant cloak, no sharp tongue. No trace of his shadow.

Just the stillness of something abruptly ended, and the ache of something I don’t . . . have the words to name. A something that lingers.

The next week.

The next month.

Even three years later . . .



*In books 1 & 2 of
The King’s Man
May 13th*