

A Thieving Curse

Alexander Bonus POV Chapter 27.5

Author note: This is a flipped point-of-view of a scene that ended up on the chopping block for varying reasons, but mostly because I realized the item Alex gives Raelyn was never mentioned again and it was easier and better for word count to cut this scene than try to add references to what Raelyn does with the gift. But it was a cute scene, so instead of just deleting it, I cut it and safely pasted it into another document, and then later rewrote it to be from Alex's perspective, and expanded upon it, adding what Alex was doing and did before and after the cut scene.

Alex paced in his room. He'd added firewood and stoked the fire until it raged, the flames leaping dangerously out of the rough hearth in the stone wall. He still felt cold in spite of the heat. Not his skin; not his wings or tail. Deep in his chest, a tendril of cold had taken root. How had everything gone so wrong?

How could he say goodbye?

He *loved* Raelyn. He loved her in a way that made his heart physically ache, that made him want to fly and want to roar. He hadn't meant to fall in love with her. It just happened so easily, so quickly and silently. Oh, Alex had thought Raelyn pretty from the moment he leaned over her unconscious form after scaring away the wolves. Even as he had been panicking over what to do and the strong scent of blood and the fact she wouldn't wake up, he'd thought her beautiful. He'd felt a strange tug in his chest toward her when he'd placed her on Lucas's bed and, careful of his hideous

claws, had brushed loose strands of golden hair out of her face.

When Alex saw Raelyn in Meredith's rich blue dress, her arms spread as she laughed at the sky and drank in the sun, she'd stolen his breath away. Still, his heart wasn't supposed to get involved. It did, though.

His heart had broken for her when she fell apart, her small form shaking from sobbing after the minotaur. It shattered when she cried against his chest after seeing her brother. She had ripped him open, and then stepped into the void with her teasing, laughter, kindness, and love of flying. Raelyn had captured him with her smile like the heat of the sun on summer solstice—he could bask in that smile and never have need of a fire.

But now she was leaving, and Alex could already feel the cold her absence would bring. She was still in the cave, and already he missed her. After he'd admitted he loved her and kissed her—his skin flushed at the memory, and that cold in his chest seemed to shrink—he'd been terrified he'd scared her again and would lose her. Instead, she had remained his friend. She'd stayed. And that was more than enough.

Or so he'd tried to tell himself.

Alex sank onto his bed, adjusting his wings and tail with hardly a thought. Between Raelyn remaining friendly after his blunder and the fact he was certain she'd started to return his kiss before shoving him away... He'd dared to hope that one day she might return his feelings. Now he would never know. Because even without meaning to, his uncle was still ruining his life. Still taking, taking, *taking*.

A flash of indignant heat flared in his core, promising to drive out the chill of his sorrow if he just let it grow. Instead, he leaned his elbows on his knees and held his head in his hands, taking slow breaths, focusing on his body—his human body. Hands gripping his head. Feet in his boots, keeping him attached to the

ground. Heat on his skin.

He couldn't lose control, especially not now, less than an hour before he needed to take Raelyn nearly to Hathlon. But even knowing that, he couldn't stop the questions tearing at his mind. They were too loud to ignore.

Would Raelyn be safe at the palace? Had Tristan become as cruel as his father? Would Tristan love Raelyn? Treat her with the respect and tenderness she deserved, or would he be unfeeling and harsh? Would he make her laugh? Would Raelyn tease Tristan the way she teased him? Alex groaned, and acrid smoke crept up his throat.

Keep it together. If he went near the palace as a dragon and wasn't completely in control of his emotions, he feared what he might do. Because he'd thought of another answer when Raelyn first told him about her brother's imprisonment.

Kill them. Kill Tristan, kill Henry, keep Raelyn for yourself. She was supposed to be yours, anyway.

The invasive, horrible thoughts came easily and unexpectedly when the dragon stirred inside him. So far, he'd managed not to give into the bloodlust that usually accompanied an unintended shift, but Jasper had taught him to run from temptation when he felt the dragon coming. "*Means plus opportunity invite bad decisions,*" the old steward advised. Better to leave than tempt his anger and the dragon inside him. Which was another reason, even in a controlled shift, he wouldn't go too near the palace. First so he wouldn't be spotted, but more importantly because he needed to keep his emotions reined in as much as possible. Getting too close to his old home and his treacherous uncle was asking to incite his rage.

Alex closed his eyes and forced his thoughts in another direction, visualizing calming things. Basking in the sun. The sound of the river in the cave, slow and gentle and echoing. Meredith. He

had cried himself to sleep in her arms so many nights after they first fled the palace, and her soft humming and the weight of her hand rubbing his shoulders or his arm never failed to soothe him. Just thinking about her often helped. Raelyn had started to help, too. Now the thought of her felt like he was being wrung out like a wet rag.

But the focusing process had helped. The dragon fury and the urge to shift had quieted.

With a sigh, Alex stood and went to his closet. He would need a clean set of clothes to put on after he shifted back. He reached for a shirt and stilled as his gaze landed on a miniature wooden goat he had carved. His throat tightened as he picked the figurine up and ran his thumb over its little horns and long scraggly beard. He'd spent hours and hours trying to get the face and tail and hooves as detailed and realistic as possible. He wasn't great at it. His long claws made any task more difficult, and sometimes they scratched the wood and then he'd have to fix the flaw. But he was proud of how the carving had turned out.

The goat had only been partly finished when Raelyn had come charging out of the woods calling him a liar. She might as well have taken the whittling knife from his hand in shoved it into his heart when she told him to leave her alone. After he'd explained the truth and then made the horrible error of mistaking her closed eyes while she processed his declaration of love as an invitation to kiss her, he had nearly burned the goat in frustration. It was for Raelyn, after all, and why would she want it after all of that? A little spot of hope had stopped Alex from destroying it, and he had finished the carving, but he'd been too afraid of coming across as overly forward to give it to her as intended.

Alex curled his fingers around the carved goat. Would Raelyn accept the gift now? Would she take it with her to the palace? He smiled, thinking of a simple carved goat sitting on a vanity next

to a pearl-studded tiara or a necklace dripping with topaz. The idea was ridiculous, but he could pretend it was true. If she accepted it, he could believe she would keep it and remember him.

When Raelyn had first started to accept him, he had feared if she went to the palace and his uncle and cousin, she would believe he was evil. Now he just feared she would forget him while he spent the rest of his life remembering her. He straightened his shoulders and strode out of his room, the figurine clutched in his hand.

When he arrived at her door, he hesitated. This was foolish. She was a princess; she wouldn't want a stupid carved goat. But she wasn't just a princess, she was *Raelyn*. And Raelyn loved goats. Raelyn named goats after legendary knights in honor of her brother and complained when she *wasn't* woken up in the middle of the night to see a goat give birth. A princess would scorn his gift. But Raelyn? Her decision to return to her arranged marriage didn't change that she was the woman he had fallen in love with, and that was the woman for whom he had so carefully carved a miniature goat with a silly beard.

Just be a man and do it. Alex knocked. As he waited, all his doubt came crashing back.

The door creaked open, and Raelyn smiled up at him. He could melt in the warmth of that smile. And this would be one of the last times he ever saw it. His gaze fell to the stone floor. She had to leave, he understood that, and he couldn't blame her for saving her brother. But it didn't make her decision to leave him sting any less.

"I..." Alex swallowed. "I made this for you. It was supposed to be something for your room, so it was less...barren. Something of your own to make it more of"—his throat caught—"of your own." He didn't meet her gaze as he held forth his fist and uncurled his fingers, palm up. His hand trembled, and he focused on keeping it steady. "I'd still like you to have it. If you want it, that

is. You don't have to—”

Raelyn scooped the little wooden goat out of his hand, her fingers sliding over his palm and sending a jolt down his arm. “Thank you, Alex.”

He watched her turn the goat over and inspect it out of his periphery but couldn't bring himself to look at her face. He'd be crushed if she didn't like it, but if she turned that smile on him again, she might as well set him on fire and watch him burn. If it was even possible for him to burn.

“It's beautiful,” she said softly. “I'll keep it forever so I never forget Ruby and Apples and Sir Roderick and the other goats. My best friends.”

Remember the...goats? He couldn't stop himself from glancing up at her, an offended frown pinching his lips.

“I'm joking.” Raelyn laughed, that cute, uncertain chuckle that indicated she was trying to cheer him up. It made his heart crack. “It will remind me of you,” she said softly.

Alex nodded, the muscles in his neck taut. He should say something, but he didn't know what. Besides, he feared if he spoke, he would either start crying or beg her not to leave him. And if she kept looking at him like that, with that slight, sad smile, her eyes full of affection, he might try to kiss her again. So he turned and hurried away, trying to shove down the maelstrom of emotions building in his chest.

Only when Alex was back in his room with the door closed did he let himself fall apart. His stomach burned, the air in his lungs warming as tears traced burning trails down his face. He breathed fire into the already roaring fireplace, the flames scalding his mouth more than usual, even though they never left any burns. The spewing flames glowed yellow tinged with white and blue. The heat actually made him uncomfortably warm, which never happened, and the stone inside the fireplace glowed red as the wood was

consumed by the scorching fire. His breath ran out and the flames died, and he sank onto his knees, staring at the pile of smoldering charred wood left in a heap of ashes in the fireplace.

You lived without her before; you can do it again, Alex told himself.

He'd check the traps alone or with Lucas again. That would be fine; he'd always enjoyed the solitude or time with Lucas. Sure, the days he went by himself because Raelyn was busy felt lonely now, but he'd get used to it again. He wouldn't have anyone to tell stories to that hadn't already heard them or been there when they happened, but what did that matter? The others were still good company. He'd get used to not looking for Raelyn every time he returned to the cave after working on something without her. The spot across from him at the table would be empty as it had been for years, they'd just remove the extra chair and things would be back to normal. And Lucas would probably move back into his old room and leave his new one unfinished...

That cold wrapped around Alex's heart again and he shuddered, everything in him recoiling from the thought of pretending that Raelyn had never been there.

No, there was no going back to before Raelyn. Alex wouldn't want to if he could.

Raelyn would leave, yes. He would fly her to Hathlon, deliver her almost directly to Henry so she could marry Tristan, and never see her again. But he would never forget her. She was too deep in his heart for her to leave his memory. And somewhere in the royal palace, he would picture a little carved goat carrying a piece of his heart and keeping him in Raelyn's memory.