

## Lies & Villains

### An *A Thieving Curse* Tristan POV (#3)

Tristan stood alone in the courtyard, struggling to infuse steel into his backbone and maintain an expression of stone. On one side, the Eynlaean royal family hurried into the palace, on the other, Eynlaean and Rethali knights together—casting each other distrustful scowls—escorted Alexander and his friends toward the dungeon. Alexander, who...

Might actually be innocent.

The world seemed to tilt again, as it had after his father had whispered *it can't be* in response to Alex saying his curse was broken. Father seemed more furious than surprised to see Alex and more in shock that Alex's curse had broken than that he was alive. That had crushed Tristan's hope that his father hadn't lied to him, that he honestly had thought he'd killed the monster prince—it meant Father had lied.

And if he'd lied about killing Alex, if the look in his eyes meant what Tristan thought it did...Father had lied about everything. And Alex had told the truth.

No, it couldn't be. His father could be harsh, but he couldn't be a murderer and curse-caster. He just had known Alex was alive. That was all.

It had to be.

Because if it wasn't...Tristan had done *everything* wrong, and Alex and his friends shouldn't even be being put in the dungeons at all.

At least Tristan had kept his composure in front of his father, for the most part. Father was clearly furious, but hopefully Tristan's actions—trying to separate Princess Raelyn and Alex and emphasize that they were still under a treaty and not backing down from

holding Prince Gareth accountable—would win Tristan some leniency from Father. And prevent Father from doing anything rash to the Eynlaeans, like calling for Gareth’s immediate execution. They could try Gareth and give him some minor punishment to achieve justice and not cause a war, but if Father was in a mood and thought Tristan wasn’t handling it well enough himself, he’d take over—and he’d be looking for somewhere to unleash his fury.

But doing what he knew Father would want him to do had never felt quite this wrong.

Arguing sounded from the direction of the entrance to the dungeons and Tristan shook himself. The group with the prisoners—possibly innocent prisoners, he thought with a wince—had stalled outside the door. He jogged over.

“What is happening here? Is escorting prisoners such a complicated task?” His tongue lashed out with all of his overflowing frustration and confusion.

One of the Eynlaeans scowled. “Your men want us to wait here, but my king has ordered me to leave two of my knights in your dungeons.”

Father wasn’t going to be happy Tristan had acquiesced on this point. His stomach writhed with dread of the conversation he was going to have to have with his father and king.

“This is entirely too many guards. Where do you think these bound prisoners are going to go?” Tristan pointed at two of the Rethali knights. “You two, stay. The rest of you, go about your regular business. Now!”

The other three knights reluctantly departed, leaving Tristan, the two Rethalis, the three Eynlaeans, and Alexander and his three friends, all still with their hands bound and their necks linked together with rope.

“Come on.” Tristan strode inside without looking at Alex, and led the way past the startled, bowing guards in the guardroom and

down the steep stairs to the cells. “Unbind them,” he snapped at no one in particular, but one of the Rethali knights hurried to obey, the other watching warily with his hand on his sword.

Tristan pulled open the barred door of a cell. “You two.” He pointed at the married man and woman—the parents of the boy his archer had slain. If Alex had told the truth, that boy hadn’t been guilty of treason, and his blood was on Tristan’s hands...he couldn’t think about it. He’d be sick.

A Rethali knight shoved the couple into the cell, and Tristan closed the door with a clang and a loud click as the lock engaged. He moved to the next cell and opened the door. “You.” He motioned to the older man with the bowed back. “In.”

The knight went to shove the prisoner again, but this time, Alex blocked him and made a sound like a growl. “Don’t touch him.”

The hunched man looked at Tristan as he shuffled past into the cell, but Tristan averted his gaze. *Traitors to the throne*. He’d been so sure they had to be, and he’d treated them as such, but now...

If what Alex had said was true? The traitor was his own father, and these people had been loyal to the rightful king. Tristan’s stomach heaved violently, and he focused again on carving his entire being out of ice. Cold, merciless, in control, not admitting to a wrong until you were certain the mistake was yours and there was no other recourse, because a king should be in the right or convince people that he was—or lose their respect. That was what Father had taught him.

His father who might be a murderer.

“Tristan!”

He started at Alex’s shout.

“Thought you’d lost your hearing,” his cousin muttered. “Let me stay with Jasper.”

Tristan hesitated, then nodded. Alex glared at him as he entered the cell, and Tristan slammed the door closed after him. He looked to the Eynlaean who seemed to be in charge of his fellow knights.

“Your men can stay alongside these men.” He motioned to his own knights. “Our guards will be exchanged every four hours. You can do with yours as you please. But they are only to stand outside the cells and watch, nothing more.”

The Eynlaean nodded stiffly. “We don’t wish to interfere, only to ensure justice isn’t threatened.”

Tristan opened his mouth to snap something about the Eynlaeans daring to question Rethali justice, but considering what Father had just tried in the courtyard—even considering his own actions over the last few days—the concern was valid. Instead, he looked to the Rethalis.

“No fights or quarrels between the Rethali and Eynlaean guards will be tolerated. We are still under a treaty. Draw your weapons or use your fists against each other, and you’ll be in a cell next.” He looked to the Eynlaeans. “Is that clear?”

They all nodded, Rethali and Eynlaean alike.

“Good.” Tristan turned to go, but Alex’s voice stopped him.

“Tristan.”

He stilled but didn’t look back.

When after several heartbeats, Alex hadn’t spoken again, Tristan started forward.

“Just don’t hurt her,” Alex said quietly. “Please.”

Tristan hesitated, then turned his head so he wasn’t fully looking at Alex, but his voice would carry. “I told you. Princess Raelyn is safe with me.”

“Because you’ve been *so* kind and gentle with her so far.” Alex’s voice was the spoken equivalent of an eyeroll.

He couldn't argue. It wouldn't be entirely true, and princes didn't argue their own innocence—it made them look weak. “I won't hurt her,” he said, then he strode out of the dungeon, the Eynlaean knights' leader following a few paces behind.

Tristan didn't acknowledge the Eynlaean or the curious expressions on the guards' faces in the guardroom. His footsteps slowed as he neared the castle.

For days he'd been dreading Father's reaction to him bringing Alex back alive, but only because it would be inconvenient and cause a lot of questions and Tristan would have to admit his failure in fighting the dragon and all of that would make Father irritable. But if Father were guilty...he wouldn't just be irritable. Tristan had never been so nervous to face his father.

He pushed open the door into the palace, and his hope that perhaps Father would be busy was dashed when Steward Prescott hurried over to him, his expression tight.

“His Excellency requests your presence in his chamber immediately.”

Tristan nodded, his face a mask of granite disguising the turmoil inside. At least Father wanted to see him in his private suite. Usually if he planned on giving Tristan a thorough dressing down, he summoned him to a throne room.

He debated between walking slowly to forestall the inevitable and give him time to gather his confused and scattered thoughts and emotions into something organized, or hurrying to not give Father another reason to be angry with him. He opted for hurrying and jogged through the halls, narrowly avoiding colliding with a few servants.

Father called him in before he'd even finished knocking. Tristan entered, closing the door firmly behind him, and passed the empty armchair to kneel on one knee before where his father occupied the other armchair in front of the empty fireplace.

“What have you done?” Father ground out. “What happened in those mountains!”

Tristan mostly hid a flinch. “Princess Raelyn...lied,” he started.

“As I suspected,” Father snapped.

“What?” Tristan lifted his head, remembering what Father had said about not trusting dragons...he’d suspected the entire time? “That was why you didn’t want me to go,” he realized aloud. “You feared I’d find Alex...” Horrified surety washed over him. “It’s all true?” His voice cracked. “That you killed Uncle Philip and Aunt Kendra, that you cursed Alex? And...lied about killing him so no one would look for him?”

“I did what I had to do!” Father sneered. “This is why I never told you. You’re too weak and stupid to understand. My fool of a sister might not have been a sorceress, but she was a sickness in this palace, making Philip weak and useless. They’d have ruined Rethalyon eventually. I could rule so much better, so I took the throne the only way I could.”

Tristan stared at his father, scarcely able to draw a breath. “With...dark magic?”

“Not *all* with magic. I spent years researching plants and poisons to find ones that would be difficult to detect and easy to slip into Kendra and Philip’s food and drink without affecting the taste and would make them appear to be going insane before their final deaths.” Father tilted his head. “Well, technically, I stabbed Philip.” He shrugged as if admitting to regicide was as common as commenting on the weather.

Meanwhile, Tristan’s world splintered further. His father had never been the hero of the story. He’d been the villain all along. What did that make Tristan?

“Then they were going to crown the boy! It was ridiculous. But I knew it’d look too suspicious if he died. So I found a witch,

and she had just the thing—among some other interesting talismans. So yes, I cursed Alexander.” Something vicious sparked in Father’s eyes. “Such a good curse. Warping his appearance, and as an added bonus, ensuring he couldn’t speak of his curse or how it happened. All he could do was weep in a pathetic puddle on the ground.”

Tristan’s chest heaved with each breath. He’d known Father was ambitious and merciless, had even admired his ruthlessness as strength, but this... How could he do those things to his king? His own brother-in-law? To his own *sister*? And then to his prince, soon-to-be-king, his own nephew? A worse thought slid into his chest like a knife, joining the invisible blades of his mistakes and Father’s villainy and lies—would his father do the same to him if it suited his goals?

“But then he escaped. That steward helped him.” Father practically spat the words. “So I rode out looking for him. Didn’t find him, but claimed I did and that I killed him, and hoped he’d be smart enough not to return. Even if he did, I could make up some lie about not wanting the people to panic that a monster was roaming free. He’d still be a monster, anyway, and then I could kill him for real. That curse is nearly impossible to break, so it never occurred to me that he might return as a *human*. Was it already broken when you found him?”

“No. He was part man, part dragon. Then he turned into a dragon—”

“But that doesn’t make sense!” Father leaned forward. “The witch said only blood shed in a voluntary act of self-sacrifice would break it, and Tallon didn’t know that.”

He winced. “There was another in their group. A young man, barely more than a boy, but he had a sword. He put himself between me and dragon Alex. Trying to convince Alex to flee and prevent me from hurting him. One of my archers killed him.” The words tasted like ash in his mouth, and he wanted nothing more than to

leave this conversation and this room with its thick, hot air and looming stone walls. “Then Alex’s curse broke.”

“I suppose that’s not entirely your fault.” Father hummed. “I wish we didn’t have to wait for the interfering Court of Lords to kill him and have it over with.”

Tristan gawked. “But...if Alex is innocent—”

Father’s palm connected with Tristan’s cheek, hard enough to make it sting sharply but not enough to bruise. “If Alex is innocent, what do you think will happen to me? To you? He’s a liar, besmirching my good name, and the spawn of a sorceress. He’s unfit to rule and his lies are treason for which he deserves to die. That is all you will ever say outside of this room, is that clear?”

Tristan’s throat worked as his mind reeled under the weight of so many lies and now his complicity. But Father was right. What would happen to them if Alex was crowned? Most likely, they’d both be beheaded. The thought sent a shiver down his spine. Even as much as he hated Alex...no, how could he hate Alex when it was his father who was the true monster all along? But stemming the anger that rose every time he thought of Alex proved difficult, even as the hatred twisted together with the knowledge that Raelyn had been right.

*It’s not Alex’s fault*, she’d said. Alex had been an oblivious brat sometimes as a child, but he hadn’t done anything *wrong*. Alex was Father’s victim, not foe. He’d stolen Raelyn, yes...but as much as it rankled, she’d been right about that, too—she hadn’t even met Tristan when she fell for Alex.

Tristan wasn’t sure he could bring himself to *like* the cousin he’d grown up despising and who had stolen his bride’s heart, but he wasn’t sure he wanted Alex to die. However, he wanted to die even less. If one of them had to die...Tristan wanted to live.

“It won’t be difficult to convince the Court of Lords a second time,” Father said as he settled back on his chair. “I’ve been a good



king. You know this. And he's lived in a cave. It's ridiculous. Not to mention it's too wild a tale and with no evidence. If we maintain innocence and that Tallon is a liar, the Court won't support him."

Tristan nodded. The Court likely wouldn't vote for something as reckless as deposing the king they'd had success under for the last twelve years just to crown a young man who'd spent most of his life in a cave as a half dragon beast. There was no guarantee Alex would be a good king or know anything about ruling. And if Tristan had been so sure Alex was lying, the Court likely wouldn't be difficult to convince, either, especially without any real evidence.

"But must he die?" Tristan ventured, bracing himself for another slap.

"He'd be a threat, you fool! We can't allow him to live, that would be admitting he told the truth. But tell me," Father said, his tone burning like hot oil, "why did you bring him back *alive* if you believed he was lying?"

Tristan lowered his head again. "Our laws state—"

"You were in the mountains! You could have said he resisted, and you had no choice!"

He winced. "Alex told his story and Princess Raelyn recited our laws at me, in front of my men, and they were...doubting. The princess threw herself between my blade and him; I nearly killed her by accident!" He shuddered at the memory. "If I'd killed Alex after all of that, my men would have resented me. It would have sparked suspicion that I was hiding the truth, and I thought...I thought it was a lie, and that would be clear when we returned."

What a fool he'd been, but not for the reasons Father thought. If he hadn't been so stubborn in his surprise and fury at seeing Alex, if he had listened...would he have done things differently? Would it even matter?

“So you let a girl dictate your actions.” Father snorted. “And lost the confidence of your own men in the process. And the princess is clearly too invested in him. Does she care for him, then?”

“She loves him,” Tristan admitted, and the words were another knife in his chest.

After the way he’d treated her in the mountains, when he’d been so blinded by his anger toward Alex that he’d ignored her fear and discomfort, and after he helped ensure the innocent man she loved died, he doubted theirs would ever be a happy marriage. Was there still a chance? Some way he could apologize and make it up to her, prove he could be a decent man and husband and win her affection? Or at least avoid her hatred?

“And he loves her,” Tristan added, the words also painful as he recalled Alex’s plea that he treat Raelyn well.

Father grunted. “That won’t do. If the Eynlaeans break the treaty, we’ll have less leverage against the Court.”

“King Weston assured me the treaty still stands.” He left out the *very tenuously* part.

“At least you did one thing right,” Father muttered. “But the girl...if she speaks in Tallon’s favor, that won’t look good. But if she spoke *against* him, if she would declare her affection and loyalty to you and even say she despises Tallon, that would work powerfully in our favor.”

“She wouldn’t. She risked her own life repeatedly to protect him.” Tristan couldn’t imagine anyone doing that for him if they didn’t have to, and another invisible knife slid into him.

A dark smile spread over Father’s face. “There are ways to force cooperation.”

Tristan leaned back in alarm. “Father, we can’t hurt or threaten her—”

“No, no.” Father shoved out of his chair. “Come.”

Somewhat reluctantly, he followed his father through the door at the back of the sitting room into the king's bedroom. Father strode to a corner and removed a painting from the wall, then hooked a finger into what looked like a boring hole in the stone and pulled off a piece of false wall. A padlocked chest about as wide as a man's forearm sat in the secret hole, and Father lifted it out and carried it to his bed. He reached behind the right post of his four-poster bed near the wall and felt around until he withdrew a key, then peeled off the wax that had held it in place.

Curious yet with a mounting sense of apprehension, Tristan drew closer as Father opened the chest. Inside were several stones wrapped in thin bands of parchment scribbled with words in a tight handwriting. Father shifted through them, reading labels and shoving them aside.

"Ah-ha. This one." He pulled off the strip of parchment and turned to Tristan, holding out the red stone. "You can read and speak the Old Tongue, right?"

Tristan hesitated. "Not well."

"Of course not." Father's upper lip curled in disgust. "I'll read it so you can pronounce it correctly. That's important." He set the stone on the bed next to the chest and read the words slowly, the harsher sounds of the Old Tongue grating on Tristan's ears. The lines of runes on the stone glowed a faint yellow. "Read it just like that. It will only work if you read it aloud, correctly, while holding it against the girl's chest over heart."

His gaze snapped from the stone to Father's eyes. "What?"

"It's a love spell." Father's mouth curved smugly. "Use it on the Eynlaean princess and she'll fall madly in love with you and no longer care for any past lovers. She should do anything you tell her to—even testify against Alexander Tallon. Even say she hates him."

Tristan stared at the talisman. Raelyn would love him? She'd *want* to kiss him, to snuggle against his side on dark nights when the

weight of the crown seemed too much? Her face would light up when he entered the room instead of looking distressed? She'd revile Alex, and instead of losing yet again to his cousin, he would win. A surge of vindictive pride surged through him at the thought. They'd get married and live a happy life where he could trust her completely. He started to reach for the stone, but then faltered.

*Anything you tell her to.* He should want that, right? A wife and a queen weren't supposed to refuse her husband and king, right? *"Your affection feels like punishment."*

It wouldn't be what she truly wanted. It wouldn't be her choice, any of it. What kind of man was he if his wife only wanted him because he had cursed her? He'd be...his gaze darted to Father, whose expression was darkening as Tristan hesitated. He'd be just like his father.

"I can't." The words barely made it past his lips. He'd disagreed with Father before—it usually ended badly—but he'd never outright refused to obey him.

"You...what?"

"I can't—can't do that to her. She doesn't deserve that. And—and I'd like to earn her trust, not force a false infatuation and take advantage of her because she literally can't say no." His stomach twisted. "I've already...I—I kissed her when she didn't want it and...she's afraid of me. It wouldn't be real; it'd all be lies."

"She wouldn't even know. It will feel real to her." Father picked up the talisman and tossed it to Tristan, who caught it on instinct.

"But I'll know."

Every kiss, every touch, every look for the rest of their lives would be tainted with the knowledge of what he'd done, of the choices he'd stolen from her—of the fact that he'd broken his promise to Alex that he wouldn't hurt Raelyn. Of the fact the love

and companionship he'd hoped and longed for was a lie. If the curse ever somehow broke, she'd hate him.

"Oh, what does it matter?" Father snorted. "This will make the Court hearing go faster and smoother and the nobles will love that she's enamored with you. It will also help with Argent, who currently isn't fond of you for treating his children as prisoners. How could he act against or hate the man his daughter so ardently loves? Not to mention it will make life better for you, too. You'll have to bed her one way or another; this way, she'll want it. You can thank me after your wedding night."

"And the knowledge that she likely wouldn't have wanted it if I didn't use this is meant to make me feel better?" Tristan exclaimed, revulsion rippling through him.

"I thought you and your pathetic sensibilities would be pleased not to have to force her."

"Force—I wouldn't!" Tristan considered throwing the stone at his father for only a moment, but he wasn't that bold. "I don't need an heir next year! I'd take the time to convince her. And she's a princess who's been trained for a political marriage; she knows what's required. I'm sure she'll agree with time!"

Father snatched the padlock off the bed and threw it at Tristan with such sudden force he didn't have time to react. "Useless, spineless idiot of a boy!"

The padlock slammed into Tristan's ribs, and he cried out, stumbling back. He pressed his empty hand to the aching spot on his chest, which was still healing from the bruises dragon Alex had given him.

"Get out of my sight," Father snarled. "You can't properly kill a dragon, can't properly dispose of a threat to your own position and your own father, can't obey your king, can't even control your own wife! I'm ashamed to even look at you. Take that spell and *get out* before I lose my temper!"

Tristan turned, stumbling as his feet caught on the rug covering the floor, and raced to the door, his heart in his throat.

“I don’t want to see your face until tomorrow night! And when I see you then, you’d best have used that spell!”

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Safely in his room, Tristan collapsed onto his bed, the stone still clutched in his hand. Tears burned at his eyes, and the spot on his chest where the padlock had struck him throbbed in time with his thundering heart.

It wasn’t the first time Father had been angry with him, but he’d never thrown something before or hurt him in a manner with such a potential for serious injury before. It was also the first time he’d cast Tristan out of his presence. Such intense vitriol had never before burned in Father’s eyes when he’d looked at him. Usually Tristan could entertain the hope that he could do better, could prove he was as strong and unshakeable and powerful as the great King Henry Carbrej. Most days, Tristan convinced himself that when he proved himself, his father would look at him with pride shining in his eyes and never find fault with him again.

He’d hoped killing a dragon would do it.

Instead by bringing Alex back, he’d ensured the death of not only any hope that Father would ever look at him with pride and love, but any hope that his Eynlaean bride would ever love him.

Unless he used the cursed talisman in his hand.

If he used it, he’d never forgive himself.

If he didn’t...

Normally he’d dread a slap or punch, maybe a rare kick if Father was particularly disappointed. Perhaps that his sword-fighting instructor would be extra attentive with his cane at their next practice.

Something had changed now. A line had been crossed that Tristan hadn't even considered existed. If he didn't use that spell, he was terrified of what his father might do to him.

But would it be worse than enchanting Raelyn and condemning Alex to death?

His eyes blurring with tears, he placed the stone on his nightstand and curled into a ball on his bed.

Tomorrow.

He'd decide what to do tomorrow.