

Vengeance

An *A Thieving Curse* Tristan POV (#2)

“Your Highness.” Tears pooled in Raelyn’s eyes and her voice quavered, tempting Tristan to soften his heart. “Let them bury their son. Please, my lord.”

She dared to take the monster’s side and even risk her life to defend Alex, and then continue to call him my lord, like a wife would a husband? Did she mock him?

“We don’t have shovels.” Tristan turned his back on her and fought to keep his expression calm despite the pinch in his ribs. He couldn’t afford to cave to a woman’s display of emotion or betray his bruises from the dragon. He’d already lost enough face in the eyes of his knights and hunters and would have enough to answer to Father for.

“There are some in the cave! Please, Your Highness.” He looked back as Raelyn raised her bound hands, pleading with him. His gaze traced the tears slipping down her cheeks. “He was barely fifteen and a good friend. He deserves a burial.”

Tristan tapped the hilt of his sword, debating with himself as he felt the stares of his men boring into him. The fallen peasant *was* just a boy...but he was also guilty of treason for conspiring to keep Alexander hidden. If Tristan gave in and allowed a traitor an honorable burial, would he look weak? If he didn’t agree, would he look malicious? Perhaps he could agree while still appearing in control—and get answers to the questions burning his tongue at the same time.

“On one condition. Answer three questions truthfully.” He stepped closer. “Agreed?”

She dropped her hands and whispered, “Agreed.”

He drew close enough to reach out and touch her face—but stopped himself from wiping away her tears, an act of compassion she hardly deserved, and one Father would mock if he were present. Instead, he gently brushed his gloved forefinger over her lips, recalling her kiss that had set his skin aflame and made his knees weak.

“When you kissed me...” Tristan had to force the words past his tight throat. “It was just to give him an opportunity to escape, wasn’t it?” He let his hand fall back to his side. By the look in her eyes, he knew the answer before she spoke.

“Yes. I’m sorry.”

An involuntary flinch betrayed his hurt. *Stupid, Tristan.* Father had been right. Caring about her opinion only granted her power over him. “Do you love the monster?” he asked, fighting to keep his tone level.

“I don’t love a monster.”

He rolled his eyes. Let Raelyn play games and pretend Alexander wasn’t the villain here. Her delusions wouldn’t change the truth.

“Same question—do you love Tallon?”

She dropped her gaze to the grass. “Yes.”

The last shard of hope Tristan had clung to that Raelyn might one day love him, that they would be blissfully happy together, shattered into dust.

“Last question.” She still wasn’t looking at him, but he needed to see her face when she answered this question, so he hooked his finger under her chin and tilted back her head. Only when she met his gaze did he ask the question that might end not only the chance of a happy marriage, but of a union at all. “Did you share his bed?”

“No!” The genuine shock on her flushed countenance convinced him she wasn’t lying.

That was a relief. He wasn't sure he could have married her knowing she'd been with his cousin—not to mention Father would probably use it as a reason to break the treaty he'd never really liked.

Tristan turned to his men. “Keep them bound but let them get shovels and bury the body.”

Alex's voice intruded. “Let me help them.”

He frowned as he glanced at his cousin, his anger barely contained. But recalling how Alex had struggled to walk a straight line without his monstrous appendages, he laughed. “You can't even walk. How would you help? No.”

The knights and hunters went about their tasks, one escorting the dead boy's father into the cave to get shovels, while others made camp. Tristan supervised the camp building, but he wasn't paying attention and barely saw the movement happening right in front of him.

As a child, Tristan had believed being a crown prince would make life easier. He'd watched Alex with his many friends and observed how Alex's tutors and nurses doted on him. When Father was crowned, Tristan had thought those friends would become his and his tutors would be kinder. Crown princes didn't have to earn respect or deference or friendliness; it was a perk of being crown prince.

He'd been wrong.

His tutors didn't dote, they were harsh—because his father wanted a strong son. The sons of the courtiers didn't become his instant friends, and as he grew older, they grew more distant. Tristan had fought for every scrap of respect. What other choice did he have but to demand respect with strength and intimidation when rumors circulated about a suspicious bruise on his cheek when he hadn't been in training, or when his fighting instructor commanded the other young men—boys Tristan outranked as crown prince, who

should have been afraid to strike him—to hit him with everything they had?

So he'd learned to hit back harder. Others looking at him with fear was better than looking at him with pity, and Father mocked him less when he hid his pain and emotions. He became cold, impervious to their judgment, unmoved by their blows, and cruel in his victories. As Father said, "If you can't make them respect you, if on your own merit you can't make them submit to you and fear you, you don't deserve to have them bow to you."

Now his knights and soldiers looked at him with suspicion and doubt, but not respect, and certainly not with fear. Why would they?

They'd watched Alexander turn into a dragon and bat Tristan aside like a toy. They'd seen Gareth knock him to the ground and step on his throat. His ribs were bruised, his shoulder tweaked, but he couldn't let them see any more weakness after he'd lost the battle.

They'd witnessed Raelyn, Tristan's betrothed, choose Alex instead. Everyone had seen her jump in front of his sword—

He yanked off his gloves, fighting the mental image of if he hadn't stopped in time, if his sword had run her through, if he'd taken the life of the woman that he'd planned to spend the rest of his life with... His stomach churned as he started removing his armor.

And his men had listened to his cousin's lies about Father and curses, because Alexander had always had a gift for winning people over that Tristan had never had.

Even after Alex was executed, this would be new fodder for Father's taunts. Alex could seduce Raelyn, why couldn't he control his bride? Alex could make the knights doubt their king, why wasn't Tristan so convincing of an orator?

His cousin had made a fool of Tristan, undermining his manhood and authority. His hands shook as humiliation and anger burned like a bed of coals in his stomach. Father had been right all along.

Alex was better than him in every way, and Tristan was a disappointment.

He interlaced his fingers and squeezed, staring at the men building a fire before him but not really seeing them.

What he needed was a plan, a way to salvage the mess he'd made before he returned to Father. First, he'd best keep Raelyn away from Alexander—the more time they spent together, the worse things would look, and the harder it would be to convince her that Alex was a liar and a lost cause, and she needed to let him go. And somehow, he had to remind his knights that he was the crown prince. *He* was in charge and to be obeyed and respected and feared, not Alex.

But amidst the roil of anger and fear and shame, one thought stood out above the others.

Tristan wanted Alex to pay.

For every jibe from Father for the last twelve years...no, the last twenty-three years. For every questioning glance his knights sent his way. For seducing Raelyn...

His eyes burned.

It shouldn't hurt so much that she loved Alex, but every dream of gentle kisses or times of blissful solitude while she listened and cared, every imagined moment of exchanging looks with her in court banquets and knowing at least one person there liked him and wasn't waiting for him to slip up, every fantasy of the court seeing how happy he made his Eynlaean bride and being impressed with him, all of it and more was gone. He felt hollow, unsure what would happen in the future but with precious little hope it would be *happy* or good.

And Tristan hated Alex for it.

The injustice made it worse.

Alex was a monster irreparably tainted by dark magic. He'd knowingly seduced his cousin's bride. He was a liar who dared to

accuse Father of witchcraft when everyone knew it was Alex's parents who were evil. And yet Father would never stop comparing Tristan to him and his bride had fallen for him.

Tristan had tried. Tried to win over his bride who would barely speak to him as they rode—at least now he knew why—tried to kill a dragon, tried to punish Alex and his co-conspirators. All he'd succeeded in doing was looking like a fool.

He didn't know what to do with all the pain he felt—both in his bones from dragon Alex throwing him into a tree and the pain in his heart. The ache of betrayal and humiliation and loss.

This pain should belong to Alex. He wanted Alexander to hurt the way he did.

As he looked for his detested cousin in the dark, he was startled to see Raelyn digging the grave alongside the peasant man. Should he stop her? It wasn't right, letting a princess—even a captive one—dig a grave.

But she'd probably only hate him for interfering. Or would she hate him for not stopping her and ordering someone to take her place? Surely she wasn't used to that kind of labor.

She'd probably hate him no matter what he did, he reflected irritably. What point was there in trying when she'd already rejected him? Father was right. He needed to let go of notions of romance and simply expect her to fulfill her duty and do his own duties without emotion. Which probably started with not letting his betrothed so openly defy him.

With a deep breath, Tristan slipped on a façade of unfeeling stone and strode over to the princess, interrupting her digging. She'd blistered her hands, and Tristan internally cursed himself for not stopping her sooner. After ordering one of his soldiers to finish the grave, he put his arm around Raelyn and led her away, trying to ignore the way she stiffened, probably wishing he was Alex instead. She'd get comfortable with him touching her eventually. He hoped.

As they passed Alex sitting on the ground, he spoke up. “Are you all right, Rae?”

He called her by a nickname? They were that intimate? “Don’t answer him,” Tristan snapped.

Keep them separate. Remind the men I’m in charge—

“You should have let me help, you heartless scoundrel!” Alex shouted.

Tristan stopped walking almost involuntarily. His free hand trembled at his side with suppressed rage. *He* was the heartless scoundrel? Which of them was polluted by dark magic? Which of them had lied to, misled, and stolen the other’s betrothed? He turned his head to look at his cousin, who still remained seated but was glaring with all of the hatred Tristan felt in his own heart. This challenge and blatant disrespect from both Alexander and Raelyn could not stand.

When Tristan didn’t respect Father, he paid in bruises or blood.

He wouldn’t hurt Raelyn. But he wanted nothing more than to hurt Alex.

So Tristan released Raelyn’s shoulders and motioned over the soldier guarding his cousin. “Hold her.” He nodded at Raelyn, then crouched behind Alex. His chest tightened as he fought the urge to scream out all of the wounds on his soul.

Raelyn’s trembling voice reached toward him. “What are—”

“I suppose these holes aren’t much use to you anymore,” Tristan said, ignoring Raelyn. He poked a finger through one of openings on the back of Alex’s shirt where his wings had been and traced his fingertip over Alex’s skin, relishing the way his cousin tensed in fear. Other than the shirt holes, there was no sign of the corruption Alex had used to display so obviously.

“Seems a pity to have form without function,” Tristan mused aloud as he drew his dagger.

“Don’t!” Raelyn shrieked, but Tristan scarcely heard her.

He shoved Alex forward by the back of his neck. Alex made a sound rather like a snarl as Tristan positioned the blade over his back. *He might not look like a monster anymore, but the monster is still there.*

Someone shouted “Stop!” but Tristan didn’t care.

He sliced the blade’s tip from the top of an opening in the shirt to the bottom. Alex screamed and tried to push back against Tristan’s hand on his neck, but Tristan held him down. Vengeance coursed through him, intoxicating him.

Now who would doubt who was to be feared between them? Now who would defend this weakling or think *he* should be king? Tristan scored another line through Alex’s flesh in the other wing hole as the monster screamed and trembled, pathetic under just a taste of Tristan’s wrath and hurt. Did Alex understand now that he couldn’t win, that his lies wouldn’t succeed?

Moonlight glistened on the blood on Alex’s back and the tip of Tristan’s dagger as he stood. Alexander remained hunched over his legs, whimpering like a child and quivering.

In that moment, Tristan felt a rush of power like he’d never known before.

Then his senses flooded back, and he became aware of Raelyn on her knees, retching as she cried while Alex moaned in pain. The dead boy’s mother sent a frightened look at Tristan as she moved to Alex’s side and stroked his hair with her bound hands. All around them, knights and soldiers stared, but now when Tristan looked at them, they ducked their heads or dropped their gazes deferentially. Except for Alex’s friend who was digging the grave—he looked at Tristan like he was considering using the shovel as a weapon.

Raelyn stood, and Tristan returned his attention to her, the exhilaration of punishing Alex already fading. “Keep your distance,” he warned her. “Or I’ll give the monster reminders of his tail and horns, too.”

Disgust and fury mingled in her expression. “You’re the only monster here!”

The words hit Tristan like a slap. She was supposed to become meek and quiet after realizing there would be consequences for defying him. Instead she still couldn’t see that he was only punishing the real villain.

“Disrespect me”—he pointed the dagger at Alex, hating the effort it took to keep his hand from shaking with his fury—“same thing.”

“I’m sorry, my lord.” Again with the more familiar term of address, but at least this time, Raelyn withdrew slightly, her head bowed.

“All right.” Tristan cleaned the dagger on Alex’s shirt, confused to find the sight of Alex’s blood no longer brought him any comfort. “Goodnight—my lady,” he said, acknowledging their connection. Unsure he trusted himself to say or do anything more, he stomped off toward a campfire, leaving his infuriating cousin and stubborn betrothed behind.

But as he sat near the fire, Alex’s screams still replaying in his mind with a confusing mixture of a triumph and emptiness, a horrible thought barged into his mind.

What if Alex was telling the truth?

And if he was...did that mean Raelyn was right?

Was Tristan the real monster?

The thought kept him awake, and when he saw Raelyn sneaking across the camp in the middle of the night in the direction of Alexander, his doubts stopped him from interfering.

When he awoke the next morning, however, it was with fresh clarity.

If Alex was telling the truth, that was too big of a revelation for Tristan to know how to deal with. Besides, if Tristan started doubting, his men would follow, and he’d lose all semblance of

authority. Father might actually kill him if he didn't do his best to contain this failure.

So he would be merciless and remind Alex and Raelyn and Gareth and his men that treasonous acts like wrongful accusations against the king, attacking the crown prince, and seducing the crown prince's bride would not be tolerated.

Tristan's was King Henry's son.

And he would make sure they didn't forget it.