

INTERROGATION

An *A Lonely Dance* bonus scene
(Contains spoilers for *A Lonely Dance*!)

Pale early-morning sunlight filtered through massive latticework windows, and lit candelabras cast the empty stone corridor in an unsteady glow. The red carpet beneath Allyre's boots dampened the sound of his footsteps, making this wing of the Rethali royal palace seem eerily quiet. Or perhaps that was simply his nerves at being summoned to an audience with King Alexander again.

Two days prior, Allyre had given the king and queen his account of the Talland mission and answered their questions about Tristan and his romance with Princess Ilara. The day before, Allyre had briefly seen Tristan before he went to his own audience with the monarchs, but his guard duties had kept him busy the rest of the day, so he hadn't yet learned whether King Alexander had granted Tristan permission to get married. It must not have gone too badly. The royals had seemed pleased with Allyre's report, and he would have heard if Tristan had been thrown in the dungeon.

But then why had the king summoned him again?

He reached the Viper Throne Room—one of twelve royal audience chambers, which seemed excessive—and nodded at the guard standing outside the door. Sir Morville gave a crisp nod back and stepped to the side of the door carved with a viper chasing its tail.

“His Excellency said to send you in when you arrived.”

With a steadying breath, Allyre entered the small room.

King Alexander was alone in the throne room. Other than the two thrones, there was no other furniture, and the windowless chamber was lit by a gold-filigree chandelier hanging from the ceiling. Allyre had forgotten the Viper Throne Room was one of those preferred for royal meetings the sovereign wanted to ensure were confidential. What did it mean that Alexander had summoned him here and with no one else except for the guard outside?

He dropped to one knee on the dark-green carpet and bowed before his sovereign, as his position as a summoned knight demanded.

“Rise.” At least the king’s tone was friendly. That was a good sign.

As Allyre straightened, the king continued.

“I thank you again for your service in escorting the former baron Tristan Carbrey to and from Talland, and for your service beyond the call of duty in Talland.”

A bit of panic sparked in Allyre at *former* baron, but he checked it. Tristan had intended to ask for release from his vows of fealty; if he had been successful, he would no longer hold any Rethali title. However, he also would hold no title if his cousin had stripped him of his rank as punishment for perceived disloyalty.

King Alexander steepled his fingers. “Will you again act as Tristan Carbrey’s guard, this time to deliver him safely to his bride in Talland, and then return to Rethalyon without him? It’s not an order, but merely a request, as you are familiar with Talland and Carbrey and spoke well of him, and he of you. You are free to decline.”

His heart swelling with joy for his brother, he bowed. “Gladly, Your Excellency.”

“No hesitation.” Alexander nodded slowly. “Perhaps not surprising, given Carbrey specifically requested you.” His jaw tightened as his expression grew colder. “Once we’re done here, if I am satisfied, you will be assigned to Tristan Carbrey effective immediately and will leave with him and Sir Masarik in two days. After you have seen him settled into his new position in Talland, you will return. If your answers aren’t

satisfactory...your punishment will depend on what defense you give of yourself.”

Punishment? Allyre gulped against the sudden dryness in his mouth. His shoulders tensed, and he tried to think of what he'd done to displease his sovereign. Alexander's gaze focused on Allyre with a distinct wariness, almost distrust.

“There's something you should know about me, Sir Sharland.” Alexander tapped a finger on the arm of his throne. “I hate liars. Which is why I'm deeply curious if you have lied to me.”

Allyre's lips parted. “Your Excellency?”

The king leaned forward on his elbows. “You and Sir Masarik both spoke highly of Tristan Carbrey, but you...it was more personal. Even Raelyn—” He cleared his throat and blushed.

Adjusting to court life and the expectations of decorum and responsibilities placed on a king had to be difficult for him after twelve years in a cave.

“The queen noted it as well,” King Alexander continued. “Sir Masarik spoke of Tristan with respect and general camaraderie, even some friendship. You spoke of him with something closer to affection and like you knew him well. Twice you slipped and called him Tristan, not Baron Carbrey. And Tristan spoke of Sir Masarik with respect, but

of you with a deeper regard. He also called you Allyre more than once, while Sir Masarik was always Sir Masarik.”

The king let his words hang in the air, observing Allyre as if waiting for him to break. Allyre didn’t speak, unsure if he was being invited to do so. His report had skipped over his relationship with Tristan as he’d deemed it irrelevant. He’d also asked Tristan, Masarik, and Remy not to tell anyone. He didn’t want anyone getting the hare-brained notion that he’d be more loyal to his dethroned progenitor or his half-brother than to King Alexander. Aside from that, Allyre wasn’t about to tell anyone who didn’t need to know information that might tempt some small-minded individuals to see his mother in a negative light.

However, if the king thought Allyre was being deceptive, he might have no choice but to tell the truth and beg the king not to repeat it.

“When you joined the guard here,” Alexander said, “I asked you, along with the other recruits, if you had ever been to the royal palace. You said no. Was that true?”

“Completely, Your Excellency.”

“I also asked you if you had served Henry or Tristan Carbrey. You said no. Was that true?”

“I previously served no one, Your Excellency.” Allyre licked his lips, wondering if he should go ahead and admit the truth.

“I asked if you had any friendship with Henry or Tristan Carbrey.” The king scowled. “I believe I recall your answer being specifically that you had never met either of them.”

“That is correct, Your Excellency.”

Alexander hummed, looking increasingly displeased. “At the time, I thought that good. But now...I find it suspicious. The captain of the royal guard informs me you volunteered first to escort Tristan and without any convincing. He had to discuss particulars of payment with Sir Masarik before he agreed. You, he says, hardly cared about the details.”

All the rivers and seas, did the king think Allyre had conspired against him? Would it be terribly improper to answer a question the king had not yet posed? He wasn't sure. Perhaps Alexander with his rusty court skills wouldn't know, either, if he spoke out of turn. “Your Excellency—”

“I am not finished,” the king snapped.

Allyre flinched. That must be a *no* to speaking when not invited to do so.

Alexander's clear tenor rang with challenge. “Did you lie to your sovereign, Sir Sharland?”

“No—”

“Do you mean to tell me that you so quickly volunteered to guard Tristan Carbrey and then became so

close with him in a relatively short period, even more so than his other guard, and yet had no prior relationship with him? Because you seem a decent man, Sir Sharland, well-regarded by the other guards and by Sir Masarik. But the more I consider both your words and Tristan Carbrey's, the more I wonder if you were honest with me. While I do not suspect Tristan to be a threat to my rule, as I mentioned, I do *not* take kindly to liars."

Allyre licked his lips, wondering if *now* he was supposed to answer.

Something dangerous glinted in Alexander's eyes, and his nostrils flared. "Tell me the truth now, Sir Sharland, and perhaps I will show mercy."

Allyre took a deep breath and dropped to one knee, using the moment to calm himself and measure his words. "I did not lie, not then or now, nor would I ever tell a falsehood to Your Excellency. I had never visited the palace, and until I became a guard here, I had never set eyes on Tristan Carbrey. I have never seen Henry Carbrey. Tristan and I were not acquainted prior to the visit to Talland. No false information was given." He licked his lips. "But I may have omitted information. I—"

"A lie by omission many would argue is still a lie." The king's voice had lost all hint of friendliness. "What was

it? Letters exchanged? Messages? Bribes? With Henry or Tristan? For what purpose? Was Baron Sharland involved?"

"No!" Allyre shook his head, almost frantic. "No, Your Excellency, nothing like that." He forced another slow breath so he could think through his words. "Tristan Carbrey did not even know of me before Talland. He initially feared I was an imposter there to kill him, and then for a while he believed me to be a spy for Your Excellency."

Tristan hadn't been entirely wrong, considering how King Alexander had interrogated Allyre on his return.

"But I did know of Tristan, as my father spoke of him when recounting meetings of the Court of Lords. And I did have an interest in Tristan and in befriending him." Still kneeling, Allyre clasped his hands behind his back, then dropped them back to his sides.

"Your Excellency asked if I knew or had a relationship with Henry or Tristan Carbrey, and I did not, not in the sense Your Excellency meant of a mutual acquaintanceship. That was why I specifically said I had not met them."

He bowed his head, hoping the king would accept the gesture of respect. "I took the royal guard position here in the palace for experience and to serve Your Excellency, the rightful king. However, I also took it because it increased my chances of meeting Tristan Carbrey, and I volunteered for the escort assignment so I could get to know him. He didn't know

until I told him myself while in Talland, but Tristan Carbrey is my half-brother.”

Based on the complete silence that followed his pronouncement, that hadn't been what the king expected at all. Allyre lifted his head. Alexander was staring at Allyre like he was trying to decide what to make of him.

After a moment, Alexander cleared his throat “Explain, if you please.”

Allyre gave as much of a bow as he could while still kneeling. A little extra courtesy never hurt. “The short version is that we have the same father, but I was conceived outside of wedlock, while Tristan's mother was dying, and my mother was manipulated and pressured into relations with Henry Carbrey. My mother married Baron Sharland before I was born, who raised me as his own, and my grandfather convinced Henry Carbrey to disown me before my birth.”

Henry had so easily agreed to Allyre's grandfather's demands. A hefty secret restitution payment and swearing in writing to never acknowledge or pursue his child, his own flesh and blood, had been worth it to Henry to protect his own reputation. Baron Callas had been more concerned with preventing slander against his daughter, of course, but that didn't change that Henry hadn't cared about his son. Allyre hated that every time he thought about Henry's abandonment, it stung. It shouldn't, he told himself. Henry was a monster

who had done terrible things and had treated his legitimate son horrifically.

In fact, after Tristan's curse had broken, he'd told Allyre just how cruel Henry had been. Allyre had avoided so much pain by not being raised as Henry's son, and hearing how Tristan had suffered infuriated him. Julius Sharland was a wonderful father, and Allyre loved him and loved being Allyre Sharland. He resented Henry Carbrey for so many reasons. And yet...

A deep part of him that he didn't understand was hurt that Henry had so easily abandoned him.

So when on their return trip Tristan had admitted he sometimes missed Henry even though he also hated him and wondered if Henry would have finally been proud of him for slaying a fae lord, Allyre had understood the confusion of conflicting emotions his brother felt.

Allyre forced himself to continue speaking, realizing he had wandered into his own thoughts. Alexander watched him with a raised eyebrow.

"Despite Henry's promise, my parents—the baron and baroness Sharland—didn't trust Henry, so I'd never met my blood father or my half-brother. But I am related to them, and I did wish to find out what Tristan was like and befriend him, and I did carry some affection toward him even before Talland."

“Why?” King Alexander asked, clearly bewildered. “Tristan is the son of the man who misused your mother.”

“So am I,” Allyre said, ignoring the tightness in his chest. “Also, my father, Baron Sharland that is, would speak of Tristan when he returned from the palace. He related how Henry was cruel to Tristan, always criticizing him and acting cold toward his son, how Tristan appeared to fear his father, and the rumors he heard of the king arranging for his son to be beaten during combat training.”

His right hand fisted. He’d been furious when Tristan had told him that not only was that rumor true, Tristan had a large scar on his calf from a time Henry had ordered a squire to exchange his blunt training weapon for a sharpened blade.

“That was how I learned the truth,” Allyre admitted. “My father accidentally said in front of me, ‘It boils my blood to think he could have treated Allyre like that. That man shouldn’t have one son, and I’m grateful he didn’t get his claws into another.’ He didn’t have much choice but to explain what he meant by that.”

“I knew there was some, but...I didn’t realize how pervasive Henry’s mistreatment of Tristan was.” Alexander sighed heavily, his expression troubled. Then he shook his head. “So...what? You told him you’re his half-brother and you immediately became close?”

“Sort of, I suppose.” Allyre fiddled with the edge of his tunic, then he forced his fingers to be still. “I believed in him, in his ability to be more than his past or his father, and I think that had more weight coming from me. He’s a good man, Your Excellency; Henry just tried to burn the goodness out of him. And Tristan never had anyone he could turn to for help or who would listen. He suffered alone for years without a single friend to confide in because no one believed it to be their place to speak of it or attempt to help him or so much as befriend him.”

His shoulders drooped. “I’m just as guilty of avoiding him and ignoring his suffering. I’m not sure I’ll ever forgive myself for my cowardice. So is it surprising we grew close quickly? I’d wanted to know him for years, and Tristan was completely alone and desperate for someone to care.” Belatedly, Allyre remembered he was talking to Tristan’s cousin. “I mean no disrespect, Your Excellency—”

“No, of course not.” Alexander rested his chin on his fist, his forehead furrowing. “I... You understand, we—we had a rocky start after twelve years, and he wasn’t—that is, Henry started teaching him to be cruel young.”

Allyre nodded. “He fed Tristan many terrible lies, Your Excellency, and showed him precious little affection. I won’t deny that Tristan made terrible mistakes. Mistakes which he deeply regrets and is determined to never do the like

of again, but his actions caused grave hurt nonetheless. I haven't been personally hurt by Tristan and was invested in uncovering his potential to be more, because—" His face heated.

"Because?" King Alexander prompted.

There was no avoiding it now. "Respectfully, Your Excellency, I didn't mention this before to protect my mother's reputation, but also because assumptions are easy to come by. Much as Henry once argued that your parents were wicked and their wickedness tainted you, making you beyond redemption, there are those who argue Tristan is tainted by simply carrying his father's blood, doomed to similar cruelty without capability for change. I'm thankful that Your Excellency is not one of them, but at our first meeting...I didn't know Your Excellency's mind."

Understanding lit the king's eyes. "You feared what assumptions I might make about you."

Allyre inclined his head.

"And you feared the connection yourself," Alexander added gently. "If you could help Tristan change, you could prove neither of you were cursed by your progenitor."

"Yes," Allyre whispered, embarrassed Alexander had seen through him so easily. "So I didn't lie, Your Excellency, nor did I have a malicious intent to deceive. But I did deceive you, and for that, I sincerely apologize, my king. Do with your

subject as you will, Your Excellency.” He bowed over his knee, scarcely daring to breathe.

“You may rise. I am satisfied...cousin.”

Allyre stood, caught off guard and unsure what to do with the king’s acknowledgment of their relation. “If it pleases Your Excellency, might I make a request?”

Alexander nodded.

“I request my true parentage remain secret, Your Excellency. I don’t wish any gossip to circulate about my parents. Additionally, I am your loyal servant and would not see anyone call that into question.”

“You do realize it might also afford you favor, power, and recognition if your status as the king’s cousin was formalized?”

Another jolt of panic went through Allyre. “Even so,” he said, trying to keep his tone level. “That is my request, Your Excellency.”

“Wise and humble and thoughtful of your parents.” Alexander nodded approvingly, a soft smile playing on his face. “I’m sorry to have pried, Sir Sharland.”

“I’m sorry to have caused Your Excellency doubt.”

“And well-spoken as well.” Amusement shone in his cousin’s eyes as he nodded. “Jasper would probably have loved to have had you as a pupil. I was a poor student, I’m afraid.” He lounged back on his throne. “One last thing, Sir

Sharland. I presume I can expect you to return with Sir Masarik after you escort Tristan Carbrey to his wedding?”

“Oh, yes.” Allyre smiled. “I have sworn an oath to you, my king. My father would never forgive me for breaking my word without just cause, and my mother would never forgive me for moving away.”

That made Alexander laugh. “Very good. You—”

“Your Excellency?” Allyre dared to interrupt. The king tilted his head. “We’ll return, but...if we perhaps encounter some heavy autumn rains...perhaps Your Excellency would not mind should our return from Talland be delayed?”

Alexander chuckled again and nodded. “Travel and weather can be unpredictable. Should you have to shelter in Talland for an indeterminate amount of time, I couldn’t hold that against you.” His expression softened. “He should have family and someone who cares at his wedding.”

“Thank you, Your Excellency.”

“You are dismissed.”

With a final bow, Allyre departed the audience chamber and headed toward his brother’s room. It was past time he congratulated Tristan on officially being a betrothed man.

Allyre will return in a future Miraveld Chronicles novel.