

## DOGSLEDDING

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

A strand of the bear fur trim of the thick wool blanket kept tickling Tristan's nose.

He blew on the hair, but it just came back, and he wrinkled his nose, fighting a sneeze.

Next to him on the couch in their suite's sitting room, Ilara laughed. The fire caught a warm orange glow over her face and made her eyes sparkle. "Surely you're warm by now. And I'm telling you, the tea would help."

"I will never be warm again," Tristan moaned. He knew he was being melodramatic, but he was grumpy about his cold fingers and ears. And yes, maybe he enjoyed being allowed to whine a little about his discomfort while knowing that at worst Ilara would tease him, not berate or punish him for showing weakness. "The tea is just a trick to expose my limbs to the cold air." He sneezed as the fur poked his nostril again.

She snorted and eyed him over the rim of her teacup. "You're going to have to adjust the blanket, Tris."

Unfortunately, easier said than done when he was currently cocooned inside of it like a tightly swaddled infant.

“Why don’t you just reach over here and pull it down a touch?”

Ilara had a lightweight blanket thrown over her legs, as if the woolen layers of her dress and the cup of tea in her hands were sufficient to fight the cold. Nika dozed on the floor between them and the crackling yet too-small fire, her head resting on her paws, looking perfectly warm with only her thick fur. Tristan, meanwhile, was convinced any movement would result in letting the infernal cold into his blanket armor.

His wife shrugged. “Maybe just wiggle a little.”

With a huff, he attempted to shimmy the blanket down—to no avail. “How are you not cold?”

Ilara’s lips pinched in a poorly concealed smirk. “I’m sorry the dedication of the new village lodge went later than anticipated and it was colder than you’d expected on the walk back, but I truly believe if you unwrapped yourself, you’d realize the fire has made the room plenty warm enough now and you’d adjust quickly.”

“There hasn’t been more than a dusting of snow so far this season, and yet it’s freezing,” Tristan complained, ignoring her advice. “What right does the weather have to be this cold so early into winter?”

“The clouds looked like snow this afternoon.” She beamed. “Do you know what happens on the first real snowfall?”

He shook his head. “What makes a snowfall ‘real’?”

“It’s enough snow for dogsledding.”

Nika lifted her head from her paws, suddenly wide awake, and cocked her head at Ilara.

Tristan nodded in the dog’s direction. “Looks like someone is excited about dogsledding.”

The fluffy dog’s reddish ears swiveled toward Tristan as she stood up and yowled.

“Aw, sorry, girl,” Ilara said. “No sledding.”

Nika’s head tilted back and forth. “Ahhh-raaaaaah-ergh?” Tristan would swear there was a definite question in the dog’s humorous noises.

“No sledding,” Ilara repeated.

With a whine, Nika settled back onto the floor and dropped her chin to her paws with a dramatic huff.

“Anyway.” Ilara shifted over so she could lean her head on Tristan’s shoulder. “The first day we have enough snow for...snow dog activities, it’s tradition that everything is canceled or rescheduled unless it absolutely can’t be. People will take their sleds out for the first time for the season if they have them, others will come to watch and cheer, and the observers will bring food and spiced tea and hot wine and it’s

basically a party. There's informal races and people show off their new or redecorated gear. It's great fun." She nudged him with her elbow. "So when there's enough snow, you can learn to drive a sled! Nika will be happy to help."

Nika whined again, making Ilara laugh.

Tristan now regretted his blanket cocoon, as he couldn't put an arm around his wife to cuddle her properly, but he didn't regret it enough to actually pull his arm out. Instead, he rested his cheek against her hair. "I don't know... I'll probably do it wrong."

"It's your first time; that's rather to be expected."

Shame heated his cheeks as he mumbled, "Exactly. I should just watch so I don't make a laughingstock of the royal family."

Ilara sat up abruptly and shifted to catch his eyes, concern lining her face. "Tris, Henry isn't here." Her soft words brought more heat to his face. "So what if you don't get it right the first time or even after several tries? No one will care. *I* won't care. Certainly, some may laugh, but it will more likely be out of sympathetic amusement, not mockery, because every Tallander has fallen off a sled or not attached the dog or made any other mistake you can make at least once. And if anyone does mock you, that is an indictment of their character, not you."

He swallowed against the lump in his throat. Over the last couple months, he'd learned Allyre's parting advice had been right. *"Habits die hard, Tristan, and thoughts can be difficult to change. Sometimes you won't feel whole or worth loving, and you might be tempted to shut people out or fall back on the actions and behaviors that were safe under Henry. That's understandable but fight it—ask your wife to help you. Sometimes my uncle would forget he ever escaped those bandits—that didn't make him not free, and it certainly didn't make him not worth loving. Remember—people make mistakes, but people aren't mistakes."*

Ilara tenderly stroked his beard. "Not being perfect at something isn't the same as failing. And failing is acceptable and normal—it doesn't make *you* a failure."

"Thank you, Ara," he whispered. He turned his head so he could kiss her fingertips.

"Easy there." She pulled her hand away. "If you're going to do things like that, I'm going to have to insist you get out of that blanket."

Now that might tempt him out of his cocoon. Tristan grinned and leaned toward her, letting his voice fall to a husky register. "Make me."

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The next morning, Tristan awoke to a cacophony of Ilara telling him to get up and Nika howling. Well, if the deafening

*aw-wooooo-wah-wah-wooooo-aw* noise that bordered on the dog version of screaming could be counted as howling.

“Those clouds *did* hold snow! A lot of it! A servant came by to tell us.” Ilara bounced on the bed next to him. “Come on, get up so we can get breakfast and then get dressed for sledding!”

At *sledding*, Nika leapt onto the bed and started licking Tristan’s face between whimpers.

“I think she knows you’re the only thing between her and going sledding,” Ilara said with a laugh.

He pushed the dog aside so he could sit up, frowning at the heavy curtains that Ilara had already tied to the bedposts so that they were no longer trapping in the heat. “Nika thinks that because you probably told her so.” He wiped dog drool from his cheek, his nose wrinkling.

Ilara got off the bed, moving in the direction of her wardrobe.

“No good morning kiss?”

She glanced over her shoulder at him with a mischievous smile. “Not until you’re dressed.”

“Merciless woman.”

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Downstairs in the main hall, the atmosphere was energetic, full of excited chatter and nobles rushing through breakfast with far greater urgency than usual.

“Will you sled today, Prince Tristan?” Lorik asked as he passed the head table with his wife, Ryn.

It was still slightly strange to Tristan to be a prince again after losing the title once before, even if his status as prince by marriage made him the least powerful member of the Talland royal family.

“I’m unsure Ilara and Nika are going to give me a choice in the matter.” Tristan hoped his jocular tone disguised his nerves.

Ryn beamed. “Oh, you probably haven’t ever been on a sled, have you? This will be so much fun!”

Tristan started to open his mouth to say he had, on the hunting expedition in Talland he’d been on years ago, but only Ilara knew about that. More importantly, he’d only sat on the sled, not driven it, and he didn’t want to give any false ideas of experience that might make Ryn and Lorik expect too much of him and then be disappointed. He liked Lorik—the man had been one of the first to make any effort to befriend Tristan—and he didn’t want Lorik to think less of him.

“Excellent!” Lorik grinned. “Don’t freeze too quickly. Once you get the hang of it, I want to challenge you to a friendly race.”

A lump formed in Tristan’s throat as Lorik and Ryn wandered off to another table.

Ilara placed a hand on his thigh. “It’s about having fun and socializing. You don’t need to prove anything or impress anyone.”

“Don’t I, though?” His voice rasped.

“Dogsledding isn’t what makes a good man or husband or a good prince or king consort,” Onak said matter-of-factly from Ilara’s other side. “If it were, I never would have married Ilara’s mother.”

Meelah leaned forward on Onak’s left. “Oh? Do tell.”

“When I was fourteen, I tried to show off to your mother while dogsledding. Hit a buried rock because I wasn’t paying attention, faceplanted into the snow, and broke my father’s favorite sled.”

Tristan gaped at the king. He didn’t want to think about how Henry would have reacted if he had done something like that.

“My father made me assist the carpenter in building and painting a new one.” Onak stared off into the distance with a soft smile. “But your mother kept coming by. She claimed it was because she was worried about the small cut I’d gotten on my forehead. Clearly, making a fool of myself on a sled and doing stupid things that I *knew* better than to do didn’t irreparably damage her opinion of me.” He shook his head and looked to Tristan. “You have nothing to worry about.”



“Thank you.” Tristan still didn’t feel comfortable enough to call his father-in-law *father*—or the more common *papa* in Talland—but he’d been relieved to find they’d settled into a comfortable and respectful relationship since his marriage. Things were still awkward at times, but they were both trying. Onak was certainly a step up from Henry, although that wasn’t saying much.

At least Tristan didn’t have to worry whether his father-in-law would mock him if he turned out to be the worst dogsled driver in the history of Talland. It was only everyone else and his own embarrassment he had to worry about.

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After breakfast they returned to their bedroom to put on extra layers, including an extra pair of wool socks. Ilara fastened a wide leather collar around Nika’s neck and tied a rope to the collar’s ring.

“A leash?” Tristan’s eyebrows lifted. He’d never seen any of the dogs wearing one.

“They get overeager, and there will be a lot of people and other dogs around. It helps remind her not to run off.”

Sure enough, although she stayed obediently close by Ilara’s side, Nika seemed like she was going to wiggle right out of her fur with excitement as they made their way to the dog lodge. Dogs barked and yipped around them, people talked and laughed and shouted orders to their dogs, and

sunlight filtered through a thin layer of ashy clouds to reflect off glittering snow that crunched with every step—and with every step the miniature ice crystals swallowed Tristan’s feet nearly to the top of his boots.

He caught sight of Remy assisting with erecting a shelter over a cart serving hot beverages and waved as they passed. Remy paused to grin and wave back before returning to work and laughing at something another servant said. He’d slipped into life in the Great House with far greater ease than Tristan. Since members of the royal family of Talland didn’t have their own personal servants, Remy kept busy with the other Great House staff, but everyone knew that if Tristan required assistance from a servant, that was Remy’s duty—and Remy would give both Tristan and the other servants an earful if they didn’t find Remy. It was good to have at least one person other than his wife he knew he could trust.

As they continued tramping through the snow, another group caught his attention.

“What’s that about?” He motioned in the direction of a group of Tallanders dragging shovels and wooden boards or stomping around on snowshoes over the snow.

Ilara glanced over. “Packing down the snow to make a track. The sleds and dogs can move easier and faster on denser snow, since they don’t sink so much.”

Faster also sounded more dangerous and with more opportunity for things to go wrong, but Tristan kept that to himself.

A servant brought out and helped them assemble an alarmingly small sled. The lightweight wood frame was painted a vibrant red, with a small cargo basket in the front, separated from the back by a rawhide net stretched beneath the handlebar, and a thin piece of metal fastened to the bottom of the runners. Once the sled was assembled and a large metal hook with two curved prongs tied to the front of the sled and driven deep into the snow to anchor the sled, the servant left. Nika whined with excitement as Ilara maneuvered her into a leather harness with multiple straps.

“The straps help disperse the weight more evenly and prevent her from choking herself,” Ilara explained. Even with her raised voice, Tristan had to lean closer to hear her over the cacophony of excited dogs. “This single-person sled would still need two dogs to go any real distance with an adult driving and any cargo, but for short bursts around the Great House, Nika can manage by herself.”

“Nika pulls with other dogs?”

Ilara nodded as she removed the rope from Nika’s collar, then she stood and moved to connect the harness’s thick leather leash to the sled. “Oh, yes. She’s well-trained and has been acquainted with the other dogs around the Great House

since they were pups, and the Master of Dogs teams them up to pull carts a few times over the summer. They can get rowdy when resting, but when attached to the sled, they usually only care about pulling.”

Now that Nika was attached to the sled, Ilara ordered the dog to lie down. Nika lay down with a huff, her ears pinned back against her head.

“You stand on the footboards.” Ilara pointed to two slats of thick bone nailed on the top side of the runners in the back. “Hold on to the handlebar with both hands. This”—she pointed with her boot to a lever sticking out between the runners—“is the snow claw. Step on it to bury the small claw underneath in the snow and it will help you slow down and stop. Unlike driving oxen or a horse, you drive a dogsled with your words. Bend down.”

Tristan frowned in confusion but complied.

She whispered into his ear. “Hoya is go. Whoa is stop. Kee for right, pay for left.”

“Why not just go, stop, right, left?”

“Because we say those all the time. These are only used for sled driving. Got them down?”

“Um...” He cleared his throat. “Go, hoyo. Stop, whoa. Right, kee. Left, pay.”

Ilara took a step back and clapped her gloved hands. “See, you’re catching on! Come on. I’ll drive us out of this bustle

and then you can practice.” She pulled out the snow hook, tossed it on the sled, and stood with her feet spread on the runners. “Nika—”

The dog leapt to her feet, her whole body tense and expression focused as a front paw lifted tentatively.

“Slow, hoya.”

Nika leapt forward, and Tristan had to run to follow—an act which was rather exhausting as his feet sank into the snow. His face was already growing cold. How long would they be outside?

“Go, Tristan!” Meelah’s laughter-filled voice called out to him from somewhere among the bustle. “Run! Hoya, Tristan!”

Tristan slowed a little so he could look for his sister-in-law, and when he spotted her, he sent her a dramatic frown. She just laughed and stuck her tongue out at him. He was considering being immature enough to return the gesture when Ilara called out to him.

“Over here! Come on, Nika is disappointed we’ve already stopped.”

“Are you sure about this?” he asked as Ilara stepped off the runners and, with one hand still on the handlebar, motioned for him to get on.

“You’re a Tallander now. Tallanders dogsled. Come on, it’ll be fun!”

He glanced around between a nearby lodge and the edge of the forest across snow-covered fields, but there were far fewer people around, and none of them seemed to be paying any attention to him.

It *did* look kind of fun...

“All right, but no laughing if I end up covered in snow.”

Ilara’s lips twitched. “I make no promises about laughter. But if I laugh, you may toss me in a snowbank.” She went up on her toes and kissed his bearded cheek. “You can do this.”

Right. Sure. How hard could it be?

“Quietly, what’s left?”

“Pay.”

“Right?”

“Kee.”

“Stop?”

“Whoa.”

“And make sure you step on the snow claw when you tell her to stop so the sled doesn’t run into her.”

“Run into her?” Tristan asked in alarm.

Ilara patted his arm. “It’s just lifting a foot and stepping on the lever. Try it.”

“Which foot?”

“Tris, you’re overthinking this,” she replied with a soft chuckle. “Whichever one feels more natural and balanced to you.”

He practiced a couple times and decided using his right foot felt easier. Meanwhile, Nika kept looking over her shoulder at him with impatience.

“Just try to go straight to the end of this building, then turn left toward the forest, then stop in the field. Hold on tight.”

That sounded simple enough. Hopefully. Rather than thinking about what could go wrong, he decided to just go for it. “Nika, hoyo!”

With a pleased yap, Nika surged forward. The sled started forward with a jerk, and he was glad he’d listened to Ilara and had been holding on tight. As they approached the end of the building, Tristan yelled, “Pay!”

Nika turned left, snow flying up behind her paws and her pink tongue lolling out of her mouth. The cold air stung his face, but Tristan couldn’t help but smile with exhilaration. As they approached the halfway point between the building and the forest, he called out, “Whoa!” and stomped on the claw lever.

Nika slowed to a stop, and the sled slowed too, stopping well before hitting her, much to Tristan’s relief. “Good girl!”

She did a little prance and looked back at him, as if waiting for his next command.

Ilara’s voice carried over the snow. “You did it!”

He looked back to see her silently clapping her wool-covered hands, a proud grin lighting up her round features. “I did it!” He grinned like a little kid. He’d actually done it and hadn’t messed anything up. Maybe it really was that easy, or maybe knowing that Ilara believed in him and wouldn’t be upset if he made a mistake had bolstered him.

“Prince Tristan!”

He turned the other direction and spotted Lorik and Ryn, each on their own sleds each pulled by a single sled dog. So far as Tristan knew, Ryn didn’t have her own dog the way Ilara had Nika, but apparently the House Heads all had their own sled dog teams that typically stayed in the dog lodge.

“Are you ready for that race?” Lorik called. “The track is nearly ready!”

Tristan’s fingers tightened on the handlebar. Driving the sled away from the main crowd with only Ilara observing and very low stakes if he made a mistake was one thing. But a race in front of everyone? What if he crashed into Lorik’s sled and dog? What if he shouted the wrong command in front of all the inhabitants of the Great House and the surrounding village?

His chest tightened. He could almost feel the dull sting of Henry’s palm against his cheek, hear the reprimand that if he was going to accept a challenge in front of the entire court, he



should have won and not made any mistakes, that he'd humiliated the monarchy—

“Come on, Your Highness!” Warm playfulness filled Lorik's tone, without a hint of this being a trap. “I owe you for trouncing me in those practice duels last month.”

Ilara laughed and shouted over the short distance, “Yes, let him win some honor back!”

Tristan met her eyes, and she grinned and winked. Just like that, they'd given him an out—if he lost, it wouldn't be humiliation, just Lorik regaining a little lost dignity. Not that Tristan thought Lorik had lost any honor in losing their practice duels—he was a good swordsman and had lost with good humor.

Wait. If Lorik could lose a practice bout and Tristan didn't think any less of him, why should it matter if Tristan lost a dogsled race? And a practice race at that.

“As soon as I figure out how to turn around!” Tristan called back.

The others laughed. “Just tell her to turn around!” Ryn called.

Really? Tristan looked to Nika. “Nika? Um, pay...turn around; hoyá?”

Nika did a little prance as she turned toward the left, and they made their way back to Ilara without incident.

“Maybe you should get her to this track, so I don’t run anyone over,” Tristan said, disguising his nervousness with a light laugh.

“You did great.” She took over the sled as he moved out of the way. “It’s a short track with two curves, but even if you run off the track, everyone will know it’s only lack of experience, and that’s hardly your fault.” His wife smiled up at him, her dark eyes shining. “I love you for doing your best to embrace Talland like this.”

“Anything for you, beautiful.” He leaned down and gave her a quick kiss. “But you’re right. It is fun.”

“Told you.” With that, Ilara turned forward on the sled. “Hoya!”

Several minutes later, Lorik and Tristan had their sleds lined up in front of the Great House at the head of a faint trail of beaten-down snow a couple paces wide. It was only about fifteen paces long, with a gentle left and right curve that wound around two of the buildings surrounding the Great House. Tristan, Lorik, Ryn, and Ilara had all walked along it so they’d know where they were headed.

A crowd had gathered all along the track. Small children waddling around in thick bundles of wool and fur wove between dogs tied to sleds and adults sipping steaming mugs of spiced tea and warmed, spiced mead. Ryn and Ilara had stayed at the far end of the track to watch the conclusion of

the race, but many onlookers—including Princess Kiri and a couple House Heads—had spread out furs over the snow and were sitting on them as if they were having a bizarre, freezing picnic. Tallanders were odd. But there were smiles and laughter everywhere, friendly ribbing and challenges to races, and rather being overwhelmed by mounting anxiety, Tristan found himself relaxing.

No one was here to judge or condemn or gossip, only to celebrate as a community. In front of their sleds, Nika and Lorik’s dog pranced in place. He let a smile spread over his face as he turned to Lorik.

“Ready, then?”

“When you are, Prince Tristan.”

He opened his mouth to say he was, then thought of something. “How about a friendly wager?”

Lorik’s right eyebrow disappeared under the furry trim of his hat. “Unexpected. What were you thinking?”

“If I win, you agree to spar with me every day for two weeks.”

“You seem to love seeing me lose,” Lorik returned with a laugh, and there was only good-natured humor in his eyes.

“But if you win...” *Just say it.* It was something he’d wanted to suggest for the last couple of months, but he always felt too self-conscious and uncertain of the response to risk it.

“You can call me Tristan. No honorifics.”

It was how Ryn and Ilara talked to each other, so it shouldn't be that significant. But other than Allyre, Tristan hadn't had someone address him by only his given name as a sign of friendship since he was a child.

Lorik tilted his head, then nodded. "I accept. Bowen! Count us down, would you?"

A young man stepped closer to the track. "Three. Two... One!"

In near unison, Lorik and Tristan shouted the command and their dogs bounded forward, quickly settling into a good stride. The first turn toward the left was on Lorik's side, and afraid of crashing into him, Tristan waited to shout the command until after Lorik had. But Nika seemed to understand what was happening, because she started turning before he'd even finished saying the word, keeping an even distance from Lorik and his dog.

Lorik shouted commands to his dog that seemed to urge it to speed up, but Tristan was content to let him pull ahead.

As they approached the next curve, he called out the command for Nika to turn right and felt a little rush of pride as she did so—sure, she was doing all the work and had been well-trained, but he'd remembered the right words and hadn't sent her off-course or fallen off the sled.

Lorik crossed the end of the track just before Tristan, to much cheering and hollering from the gathered Tallanders as

they both came to a stop. Ilara ran up to Tristan and buried the snow hook anchor in the snow as he stepped off the back of the sled, then slammed into him in a hug.

“Well done, Tris.”

The warm feeling of pride spread, making him notice the cold even less.

“I had a good teacher.” He kissed her forehead, then released her so he could turn to Lorik. “Good race.” He held out his hand.

Lorik gripped his hand through their layers of wool. “I almost wonder if you let me win, Tristan.”

It took a moment for him to speak past the unexpected surge of emotion at his new friend’s casual camaraderie. “Rest assured, I’m going to practice so that by the end of winter I can beat you.”

Lorik laughed. “I don’t doubt it.”

Tristan turned back to Ilara, aware of how cold his nose and fingertips were now that the exhilaration of the race was wearing off. “Now. What do I have to do to get a steaming mug of that hot wine?”