

# WINTER GETAWAY

An Alex+Raelyn short story

*Set the winter following*

*Alex's coronation*

*Contains spoilers for A Thieving Curse*

*and A Lonely Dance!*

As it turned out, winter was considerably more enjoyable as a human.

Even if Alexander was talentless on ice skates.

Raelyn skated over to his side, the carved bone skates attached to the bottom of her boots tossing up ice shavings as she halted. The cold had given her cheeks and nose a bright-red hue, and her blue eyes sparkled as if competing with the sunlight glittering on the snow-covered landscape surrounding the pond.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to pull you along?”

He shook his head. “I’m sure if you pull me along all I’ll do is make us both fall.” As if trying to prove his words, his right foot slipped, and he flailed for a moment before steadying.

Rethalyon had gotten a lot of snowfall in the last few

weeks, especially near the mountains. When Alex had mentioned off-handedly that he knew the crown had a hunting lodge in the foothills that he'd visited once as a child, Raelyn had immediately wanted to go. And after she'd gossiped with Meredith and Jasper and Peter about how much Alex had hated the cold as a dragon-man, she had insisted they go and try all of her favorite winter activities. With some help from Jasper, he'd managed to secure them a week away from court.

The trip out hadn't been as bad as Alex had feared. They'd taken a carriage until the snow got too deep for the wheels, then had transferred to another carriage from the royal retreat's stables that was fitted with runners like a sled to travel over the snow. The layers of blankets and a couple of warming pans filled with coals had kept them from getting too cold.

Also the cuddling. Cuddling was very nice and very good for keeping warm.

Since their arrival three days prior, they had made snowmen, attempted to make snow forts, had a few snowball fights, gone snowshoeing, and consumed much hot tea and mulled wine and hearty stew. They'd spent hours staring at the stars or watching snow flurries while sharing a blanket on a couch that looked out through a massive window onto a view of pine-covered mountains coated in a thick layer of snow. Other than the snow forts, a concept Raelyn had learned from Gareth, they were winter activities he had more

or less done before.

Snowball fights were more fun without massive, black wings making him a huge target. Even snowshoeing was more fun, because he didn't have difficult-to-clothe appendages that got cold far too easily and made him long for a blazing fire within a few minutes of being outside. And doing those activities with Raelyn also made them more enjoyable—despite the ever-present ache of missing Lucas.

For Lucas, Alex had braved the loathsome cold and the ice that liked to wedge between his tail's scales to play in the snow. How Lucas would have loved to join him and Raelyn in a prolonged snowball fight.

He blinked away tears and concentrated on moving his feet as Raelyn had instructed him. He wouldn't cry right now. Not while two of their guards stood on the shoreline, watching them skate. Besides, he'd already broken down missing his brother twice on this trip, and he didn't want his first getaway alone with Raelyn to be weighed down by sorrow.

The others had stayed behind, only a few guards accompanying Alex and Raelyn. Meredith had encouraged them to use the time alone to enjoy being a married couple without external pressures. Jasper had concurred that a break from royal duties for a week or so was needed after the traumas of Alex's return to the palace and the challenge of being thrust into a kingship he'd previously resigned himself to never having.

He certainly was grateful for a respite from dealing with the Court of Lords, many of whom he was struggling to know if he could trust. Several of the lords were clearly eager to take advantage of his youth and inexperience to strengthen their own positions. It was exhausting and frustrating.

Rather like ice skating.

Raelyn had already made it all the way around the perimeter of the pond again. “Once you get used to it, it feels a little like flying.”

“Don’t make empty promises,” he moaned.

While he didn’t miss most of being cursed, he missed flying.

One of the guards on the shoreline stepped closer as Alex and Raelyn neared them—Allyre Sharland, a smile twitching at his face. His secret half-cousin was one of the people Alex was confident he could trust, and he’d been grateful when the knight had agreed to accompany them as one of their guards.

“I could always get a rope, tie it around your middle, and pull you along, Your Excellency.”

The other guard sent Allyre a shocked look, but this was another reason Alex was glad to have him along—Allyre knew how to relax without dropping formalities. Everyone being so stiff around him all the time made him grumpy.

Alex made a very un-kingly face at Allyre, and now the other guard—Sir Avery—looked flabbergasted. “You’d pull me right into a snowbank if you tried to run around on the

shore.”

“Like Her Majesty, I can skate, Your Excellency.” Allyre’s grin widened. “And if you pulled me down with you, it would matter less than if Her Majesty was injured.”

Frowning, Alex stopped—although it took a moment of panicked scrambling to actually still. “I dislike the implication your life and wellbeing matter less than ours.”

Allyre inclined his head. “I’m afraid that’s a consequence of your crown that you have to bear, Your Excellency.”

He opened his mouth to argue, but how could he? Didn’t Jasper often remind him that as king, he was as much a figurehead, a symbol, a personification of power in Rethalyon, as he was a person? It was an importance he often felt tempted to shrink away from, although Jasper claimed that was evidence that Alex was deserving of his station, because he would not treat that power lightly. And wasn’t the very purpose of a guard to put himself between danger and his king?

That thought twisted painfully at his heart, dredging up flashing memories of Lucas throwing himself between Alexander and Tristan and his hunters—

He swayed, suddenly dizzy. Hands gripped him, steadying him. Raelyn on his left, peering up at him with concern. Allyre on his right, standing on the very edge of the shore, one hand gripping his shoulder.

“I didn’t mean to upset you, my king.” Allyre half bowed

without removing his steadying hand. The other guard edged a step away, as if worried his comrade was about to get himself into trouble and he didn't wish to be implicated.

Alex shook his head. "No, it wasn't you."

Would the jagged hole left in his heart from Lucas's absence ever close? Would there ever be a day when some small thing didn't prod at the pain of loss?

Maybe someday the red-hot pain of Lucas's death would join the dull ache of the scars left by the deaths of his parents and the death of Jasper's wife. But like the loss of his parents, he knew the twinge of sorrow, the emptiness left behind where once there had been life and love, wouldn't ever be truly gone. He'd once read that time heals all wounds, but he suspected often it was more that time softened pain more than eliminated it, and how much time was needed for emotional hurts was far more unpredictable and varied than any bodily ailment.

"Perhaps that's enough ice skating," Raelyn said softly.

He nodded, unsure he could speak. She helped him wobble to shore, where Allyre and Avery helped them remove the skates strapped to their boots.

"There's still a lot of daylight left," Raelyn said, craning her neck to look up at the blue sky above the snow-covered pines. She turned to him with a grin that eased some of the tightness in his chest. "Are you up to trying sledding? I have an idea to get you as close to flying as possible."

It was tempting to say no and remain cocooned in his

grief, but that did pique his curiosity—and he'd promised himself he wouldn't spend these precious few days alone together mired in sorrow. He knew Raelyn would understand, but he could also imagine Lucas's disappointed exasperation if Alex dared to forego a perfectly good opportunity for fun.

Perhaps later, after the sun had set, the grief would press in again. But right now, the sun was shining, the snow glistening, chickadees were singing somewhere nearby, and the love of his life was looking at him with hopeful anticipation. Lucas had saved his life. He'd want Alex to actually live it.

“Sledding I've done, although not since it proved difficult and painful with wings.” He forced a smile. “You go *down* a hill. How's that anything like flying?”

Mischief lit Raelyn's eyes and filled her smirk. She turned to their guards. “Sir Avery, if you would, could you fetch the sleds? Sir Allyre, we could use your assistance at the base of the hill to the west of the lodge.”

Both knights bowed with a “yes, Your Majesty,” while Alex eyed Raelyn with a mixture of amusement and concern.

They trudged through the snow, which was deep enough it came precipitously close to working its way into the top of Alex's big, tall boots. With her shorter legs, Raelyn was struggling more than he was, but he'd learned she didn't appreciate his offering to carry her over the snow. At least she had traded her usual dresses for a pair of thick, woolen trousers under a warm tunic that came to her knees. With the addition of her fur-lined coat, she looked cozy and adorable.

“This is something I used to do with Gareth all the time,” she said. “Frederick joined in when he was younger, but he stopped before I was really old enough to remember playing with him. Nathaniel would sometimes, but he often pretended to be too proper for such tomfoolery and reckless behavior. I think mostly to please Mother, who was convinced someone was going to break something.” She rolled her eyes, making Alex chuckle.

“Flying and reckless behavior?” Allyre glanced back at them from where he was leading the way and raised an eyebrow. “I suspect I know what you have in mind. My mother also didn’t approve.”

Raelyn turned her attention to the knight, beaming. “A ramp?”

His only answer was a knowing smirk.

“All right, now you two are making me nervous.”

“Oh, it’s great fun, Your Excellency. We just need to spend some time building up some snow at the base of the hill.”

After considering for a moment, Alex understood. “Ah. You really are trying to get me airborne again.” He laughed and elbowed Raelyn. “Further proof you and Gareth were a terror as children.”

Thankfully, despite his lack of experience, packing snow into a ramp turned out to be easy. Somewhat arduous as they pushed and shoved snow into a mound, but easier than building snowmen. Sir Avery arrived with the sleds and pitched



in to help with the ramp construction. Raelyn and Allyre kept insisting they build the pile higher as they constantly smoothed the side facing the hill into an upward slope. They got along well, and Alex found himself wishing he could tell Raelyn of Allyre's identity—it would be nice to have a blood relative around. But he'd given his word to Allyre that he wouldn't mention it to anyone to protect Allyre's mother's reputation, as well as prevent extra scrutiny falling on Allyre. He wouldn't break that promise, even to his wife.

Once Raelyn was satisfied with the height of their ramp, with its packed-down slope on one side and drop-off on the other, they slogged up the tall hill. Alex held the curved front edge of one of the two sleds, frowning down the hill. It looked steeper from the top, and that ramp looked questionable. The sled was only thin, long slats of wood, held together by two crossbars across the top, and a rope looped to the sides of the front curve. It could probably squeeze two people on it if they sat cross-legged but felt unnervingly light.

“Hm.” Raelyn shouldered him playfully. “I seem to recall someone leaping off the edge of a cliff with far more abandon than this.”

Alex made a face down at her. “I was confident in my wings.”

“I suppose I can be the one to show off this time, then.” With a roguish grin that did something funny to his stomach, she ran forward and jumped onto the other sled, careening

down the hill with a laugh. She used the rope to adjust her course for the ramp as she gained speed. He leaned forward, wondering if she'd just plow into the bank of snow—

But her sled followed the upward curve, and then she sailed off the other side with a delighted scream before crashing back into the snow. His breath caught, and he started forward, but Allyre's hand on his arm made him pause.

Raelyn popped back up, laughing and brushing snow off herself as she pulled her sled to the side. “Your turn, handsome! Come on!”

Allyre released his arm and gave him a reassuring smile and nod.

Well, Alex certainly wasn't going to chicken out now. He took a deep breath, then ran forward a couple steps before jumping to sit on the sled. It wobbled precariously, and he scrambled for the rope, hoping he wouldn't fall off before he reached the bottom. The sled evened out, and as it picked up speed, he found himself grinning. Then the ramp was in front of him, looking taller than he remembered, and he was going up—

For a few glorious moments, he was weightless as he flew over the snow, the frigid wind blowing his hair around his ears just as it had when he'd flown in his human form while cursed.

And then he fell back to the ground, the snow only doing so much to cushion his crash. He tipped sideways, sprawling

into the snow, but he didn't care. He scrambled to his feet, laughing so hard his cheeks felt stretched.

“See?” Raelyn clapped her gloved hands, bouncing a little.

“All right, I concede, that was fun—and did feel a little like flying.”

She pushed up on her toes and gave him a kiss that she ended too quickly, leaving Alex leaning forward in unsatisfied longing. Her eyes twinkled. “Back to the top!”

They spent the next couple of hours sledding and taking turns with Allyre and Sir Avery. Allyre had needed little convincing, and given how reserved he usually was, Alex was surprised that he seemed to enjoy seeing how fast he could make the sled go. Avery had appeared distressed at first at the notion of having fun instead of stoically standing watch, but after Allyre went down, Avery reluctantly agreed, and soon they were all laughing. Maybe it wasn't very kingly for Alex to encourage such familiarity and casual disregard for proper etiquette, but who was going to gainsay him? And with no one else around, who would even know? Maybe later he'd suggest to Allyre and Avery not to spread word of this around the court, but it was infinitely refreshing to be a person and not a king for even a little while.

A few times Raelyn and Alex went down together on one sled, which was a mixture of a perfect and terrible idea. He got to hold her close, and the sled went even faster down the hill, but going off the ramp was a disaster, and the sled tipped

much easier with two people one it.

At last, exhausted, frozen, and soaked from many crashes and falls into the snow and from tramping up the hill, they made their way back to the lodge.

Snowdrifts piled against the lodge's stone base, and icicles as thick as Raelyn's waist hung from the sloping wood roof above the upper level made of logs. Polished wood planks lined the walls inside, with animal skins and antlers and tapestries hung on the walls. The fires in the occupied and common areas were hard at work keeping the lodge warm, and they were able to comfortably remove their coats and boots in the entrance foyer.

Alex liked the lodge—it still had a dining room big enough to host a small gathering and a dozen bedrooms in addition to the kitchens and rooms for servants and guards, but it was smaller and cozier and less intimidating than the palace. Certainly much more difficult to get lost in. Alex still needed someone to escort him through his own palace, and he was painfully aware of how some courtiers snickered behind his back about it.

Or maybe he liked that none of those snobbish, calculating, maddeningly flirtatious, or overly formal courtiers were there. Only a dozen or so guards and servants, all of whom ranged from quietly unobtrusive to friendly but deferential.

Maybe he should have insisted Meredith and Peter and Jasper come along. Next time. They could all go together next...

No, not all of them.

He struggled to swallow the emotion tangling in his throat.

Raelyn looped her arm around his and leaned against his shoulder as they walked down the hall toward their bedroom, drawing his attention away from his loss.

“I think today was perfect.”

“It was wonderful. Thank you for insisting on this trip.” He felt she felt the depth of his gratitude for her unflinching love and understanding. He kissed the top of her head, then frowned at how cold and damp her hair was.

“It was an excellent idea. Even though my fingers and toes are icicles.”

“Agreed, although at least that’s fewer freezing appendages than I used to have. Once, when I returned from checking some traps, I had icicles dangling from my horns.” He shuddered with the memory.

Raelyn chuckled softly. “Well, I left a change of clothes near the fireplace in our room and instructed the servants to keep the fire going while we were out, so once we’re changed, we’ll just have to snuggle together under a blanket by the fire until we’re warm.” Her stomach growled. “Or until supper is ready. Whichever comes first.”

Alex laughed, suddenly aware of how hungry he was as well. “I’d say there’s nothing I like more than holding you close, but I think a hot supper might win out.”

She gave a melodramatic gasp. “Such a tender, loving

husband!”

He smiled and leaned down to kiss her cheek. “I seem to remember you abandoning me in bed yesterday morning for breakfast, my sweet, loving wife.”

“That was self-preservation,” she said matter-of-factly. “Your stomach was rumbling, and there *was* that time you threatened to eat me...”

He snorted as they entered their cozy room. “How many kisses do you think it would take for me to kiss you so senseless you forget that ever happened?”

“Hm.” Raelyn gave him a sultry smile as she eased away from his side. “Why don’t we test it and find out?”

*The End*