

21. Bridget

You are being provided with a book chapter by chapter. I will request you to read the book for me after each chapter. After reading the chapter, 1. shorten the chapter to no less than 300 words and no more than 400 words. 2. Do not change the name, address, or any important nouns in the chapter. 3. Do not translate the original language. 4. Keep the same style as the original chapter, keep it consistent throughout the chapter. Your reply must comply with all four requirements, or it's invalid. I will provide the chapter now.

21

BRIDGET

SIX WEEKS LATER

"His Majesty is ready to see you." Markus stepped out of my grandfather's office, his face so pinched he looked like he'd just swallowed a lemon whole.

"Thank you, Markus." I smiled. He didn't smile back. He merely gave a quick nod of courtesy before he spun on his heels and marched down the hall.

I sighed. If I thought my becoming crown princess would improve my relationship with Edvard's closest advisor, I was sadly mistaken. Markus seemed more displeased than ever, maybe because the press coverage after my brother's abdication had...not been great.

Also not great? My nickname: Part-Time Princess. Apparently, the tabloids did not appreciate all the time their future queen had spent away from Eldorra, and they delighted in questioning my commitment to the country and general suitability for the throne every chance they got.

The worst part was, they weren't completely wrong.

"I'll see you tomorrow for the ribbon-cutting," I told Mikaela, who'd accompanied me to my meeting with Elin earlier regarding image damage control.

"Sounds good." Mikaela snuck a peek at Edvard's half-open door. "Good luck," she whispered.

We didn't know why my grandfather wanted to speak to me, but we knew it wasn't good. He didn't summon me to his office unless it was serious.

"Thanks." I mustered a weak smile.

Mikaela had been my best friend growing up and was currently my right-hand woman during my training to be queen. The daughter of Baron and Baroness Brahe, she knew everything about everyone in Eldorran high society, and I'd recruited her to help me transition back into Athenberg society. I hadn't lived here in so long I was completely out of the loop, which was unacceptable for the future queen.

I hadn't expected her to say yes to such a big task, but to my surprise, she'd agreed.

Mikaela gave my arm a quick squeeze before leaving, and I steeled myself as I entered Edvard's office. It was a huge, mahogany-paneled room with double-height ceilings, windows overlooking the

palace gardens, and a desk large enough to nap on.

Edvard's face crinkled into a smile when he saw me. He looked far healthier than he had in the weeks following his collapse, and he hadn't shown any symptoms since the big scare, but I still worried about him. The doctors said his condition was unpredictable, and every day I woke up wondering if that would be the last day I'd see my grandfather alive.

"How's training going?" he asked after I slipped into the seat opposite him.

"It's going well." I slid my hands beneath my thighs to tamp down my nerves. "Though some of the parliamentary sessions are quite..." Tedious. Snooze worthy. So boring I would rather watch paint dry. "Verbose."

Nobody liked hearing themselves talk more than a minister who had the floor. It was amazing how little one could say using so many words.

Unfortunately, a monarch's duties included attending parliamentary sessions at least once a week, and my grandfather thought it would be useful for me to get acquainted with the process now. Ever since I returned to Eldorra, my days had been jam-packed with meetings, events, and "queen lessons" from the moment I woke up to the moment I went to sleep. I didn't mind, though. It kept my mind off Rhys.

Dammit. My chest squeezed, and I forced myself to push aside all thoughts of my old bodyguard.

Edvard's chuckle brought me back to the present. "A diplomatic way of putting it. Parliament is a different beast than what you're used to, but it is an essential part of government, and as Queen, you'll need a good relationship with them...which brings me to why I asked you here today." He paused, then said, "Actually, there are three things I wanted to discuss, starting with Andreas."

Confusion mingled with my wariness. "My cousin Andreas?"

"Yes." A small grimace crossed Edvard's face. "He'll be staying in the palace for a few months. He's due to arrive on Tuesday."

"What?" I quickly composed myself, but not before my grandfather frowned at the breach of propriety. "Why is he coming here?" I asked in a calmer voice, though I was anything but calm. "He has his own house in the city."

Andreas, the son of my grandfather's late brother Prince Alfred, was—how should I put this tactfully—a complete and utter ass. If entitlement, misogyny, and general asshole-ness could walk and talk, they would come in the form of one Andreas von Ascheberg. Luckily, he'd moved to London for university and stayed there. I hadn't seen him in years, and I didn't miss him one bit.

Except now, he was not only returning to Eldorra but staying in the palace with us.

Kill me now.

"He would like to return to Eldorra permanently," Edvard said carefully. "Become more involved in politics. As for why he's staying here, he said he would like to reconnect with you since you haven't seen each other in so long."

I didn't believe that excuse for a second. Andreas and I had never gotten along, and the thought of him anywhere near politics made

me want to run for the hills.

Unlike most constitutional monarchies, where the royal family stayed politically neutral, Eldorra welcomed royal participation in politics on a limited basis. I wished it didn't if it meant Andreas would have a hand in anything that might affect people's lives.

"Why now?" I asked. "I thought he was busy living the party life in London."

Andreas had always talked a big game, bragging about his grades and subtly hinting at what a good king he would make—sometimes to Nikolai's face, back when Nikolai had been first in line to the throne—but that was all it'd been. Talk. The closest he'd gotten to actually taking part in politics was majoring in it.

Edvard raised one thick, gray brow. "He's next in line for the throne after you."

I stared at him. He couldn't be implying what I thought he was implying.

Since my mother had been an only child and I didn't have any children, Andreas was indeed second in the line of succession now that Nikolai had abdicated. I tried to picture him as king and shuddered.

"I'll be frank," Edvard said. "Andreas has hinted at certain...ambitions regarding the crown, and he does not believe a woman is up for the job."

Oh, how I wished Andreas was in the room right now so I could tell him where to shove his ambitions. "Perhaps he should tell Queen Elizabeth that the next time we visit Buckingham Palace," I said coolly.

"You know I disagree with him. But Eldorra is not Britain or Denmark. The country is more...traditional, and I'm afraid many members of Parliament secretly hold the same sentiment as Andreas."

I curled my fingers around the edge of my chair. "It's a good thing Parliament doesn't appoint the monarch then."

I may not want to rule, but I wouldn't stand for anyone telling me I couldn't rule because of my gender. Never mind the fact the monarchy was merely symbolic. We were the face of the nation, and there was no way in hell I'd let someone like Andreas represent us.

Edvard hesitated. "That's the other reason I wanted to speak with you. Parliament may not appoint the monarch, but there is the matter of the Royal Marriages Law."

A tight coil of dread formed in my stomach. The Royal Marriages Law, enacted in 1732, was the archaic law requiring monarchs to marry someone of noble blood. It was the reason Nikolai abdicated, and I'd avoided thinking about it as much as possible because it meant my chances of marrying for love were slim to none.

It wasn't simply a matter of finding a nobleman I liked. Potential marriage partners were chosen for maximum political gain, and I wasn't naïve enough to hope for a love match.

"I don't have to marry yet." I fought to keep the tremble out of my voice. "I have time—"

"I wish that were true." Edvard's face creased with a mixture of guilt and trepidation. "But my condition is unpredictable. I could collapse again any minute, and the next time, I might not be so lucky. Now that Nikolai has abdicated, there's even more pressure to

ensure you're ready for the throne as soon as possible. That includes finding an acceptable husband."

Marriage technically wasn't a requirement for the monarch, but Eldorra hadn't had an unmarried ruler in...well, ever.

Bile rose in my throat, both at the possibility I might lose my grandfather at any minute and at the prospect of living out the rest of my life with a man I didn't love.

"I'm sorry, dear, but it's the truth," Edvard said gently. "I wish I could shield you from the harsh truths of life the way I used to, but you're going to be queen one day, and the time for sugarcoating is over. You are the last person in our direct line of succession, the only one who stands between Andreas and the crown"—we shuddered in unison—"and marriage to a respectable aristocrat, ideally within the next year, is the only way to ensure the throne and the country remains in good hands."

I dropped my head, resignation filling me. I could abdicate the way Nikolai had, but I wouldn't. As much as I resented him for putting me in this position, he'd done it for love. If I did it, it would be out of pure selfishness.

Besides, the country wouldn't survive two abdications so close to each other. We would be the laughingstock of the world, and I would never tarnish our family name or the crown by passing it on to Andreas.

"How am I supposed to find a husband so soon? My schedule is already so full I hardly have time to sleep, much less date."

My grandfather's eyes crinkled, and he suddenly looked more like a mischievous youth than a king who'd ruled for decades.

"Leave that to me. I have an idea, but before we get into it, there's one last thing we need to discuss. Your bodyguard."

The word bodyguard made my heart twist. "What about him?"

I was still getting used to my new bodyguard, Elias. He was fine.

Nice, competent, polite.

But he wasn't Rhys.

Rhys, who'd rejected my offer to extend his contract.

Rhys, who'd walked away a month ago without looking back.