

## 42. Rhys

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.

42

RHYS

IT WAS FUNNY HOW ONE MOMENT COULD CHANGE YOUR LIFE.

One moment, my mother was alive, then she wasn't.

One moment, my squad mates were alive, and the next everything got blown to hell. Literally.

One moment, I knew my place in the world, only for it to get turned upside down with the simple unfolding of a paper.

Last night had been a mind fuck in every way, and I was still debating the soundness of my decision to pay my brother a visit as I stared at the townhouse in front of me. There wasn't as much security as I'd expected, though the townhouse was in one of the safest neighborhoods in northern Athenberg.

Until now, the only brothers I had were the ones in my SEAL unit. The idea of having a real brother? It kind of fucked me up, to be honest.

I walked to the front door and knocked, my skin crawling with anticipation.

Christian had left that morning. His had been the quickest trip in the history of international trips, but he had a mess on his hands in the U.S. so I couldn't blame him.

It was just like him to drop a bombshell then leave, though.

My brother answered on the second knock. If he was surprised to see me standing on his doorstep unannounced on a Thursday afternoon, he didn't show it.

"Hello, Mr. Larsen."

"Hello, brother." I didn't bother beating around the bush.

Andreas's smile disappeared. He regarded me for a long moment before he opened the door wider and stepped aside.

I walked in, my shoes squeaking on the shiny marble floor. Other than a few touches of white, everything in the house was gray. Light gray walls, gray furniture, gray rugs. It was like stepping into an expensive rain cloud.

Andreas led me to the kitchen, where he poured two cups of tea and handed me one.

I didn't take it. I hadn't come for tea.

"You knew." I got straight to the point.

He appeared put out by my refusal and placed the extra mug on the counter with a frown. "Yes."

"Why the fuck didn't you say anything?"

"Why do you think, Mr. Larsen? The world thinks I'm a prince. I

am a prince. Do you really think I'd jeopardize that to claim kinship with an American bodyguard who, I might mention, has been quite rude to me in every interaction we've had?"

I stared Andreas down. "How did you find out?"

When Christian handed me the paper with my father's and brother's names, I'd almost thrown it out. I knew in my gut opening it would lead to trouble. But in the end, I couldn't resist.

Two names.

Andreas von Ascheberg, my half-brother.

Arthur Erhall, my father.

Our father.

I was related to the two people I despised most in Eldorra. Go figure.

Andreas was silent for a long while. "When I found out Nikolai was abdicating, I was...worried. About Bridget. She'd never cared much for the throne, and I didn't think she even liked Eldorra that much. She certainly spent enough time away from it to give that impression. I thought she wasn't suited for the role of queen."

Barbed wire dug into my heart at the sound of Bridget's name.

Blonde hair. Sparkling eyes. A smile that could light up even my cold, dead soul.

It'd only been three days, and I already missed her so god-damned much I would've cut off my right arm for the chance to glimpse her in person, but she'd been locked up tight at the palace since she left the hospital. Probably busy planning her engagement to Steffan.

Acid seeped into my veins, and I forced myself to focus on what Andreas was saying instead of spiraling again.

"I realize you don't have a high opinion of me, but I do want what's best for the country. Eldorra is my home, and it deserves a good ruler."

I bristled at the implied insult. "Bridget would make a damn good ruler."

"Yes, well, you're biased, aren't you?" Andreas drawled. "I had someone dig into what she'd been doing during her time in New York. Figure out where her head was at. They mentioned you two seemed...close. Closer than the average bodyguard and client."

"Bullshit. I would've noticed a tail."

"You were distracted, and it wasn't one. It was multiple." Andreas laughed at my dark expression. How the fuck had I missed a tail? "Don't feel too bad. They weren't there to hurt her. Just gather information. I was curious about you, the bodyguard who seemed to have my cousin so enamored, so I had my people dig into your background, including your parentage." His smile hardened. "Imagine my surprise when I found out we had the same father. Small world." His tone remained light, but the tenseness of his jaw suggested he wasn't as unbothered as he wanted me to think.

The story was plausible, except for me missing the tail. I had been distracted, but I didn't think I'd been that distracted.

My mind flashed back to my uncharacteristic confrontation with Vincent in Borgia, the last-minute trip to Costa Rica, and the thousands of tiny things pre-Bridget me would've never done.

I do not become personally involved in my clients' lives. I am here to

safeguard you from physical harm. That is all. I am not here to be your friend, confidant, or anything else. This ensures my judgment remains uncompromised.

I scrubbed a hand over my face. Fuck.

“Say that’s true. Want to explain to me how you’re a prince when your father is a mere lord?”

Erhall. Of all the people, it had to be Erhall.

Bile rose in my throat at the reminder we were related.

Andreas’s eyes shuttered. “My mother had an affair with Erhall.

My father—my real father, even if he wasn’t my biological one—didn’t know until she told him before she died. Six years ago, cancer. I guess she wanted to go with a clear conscience. My father didn’t tell me until before he died, three years ago.” He barked out a short laugh. “At least my family can take secrets with them to their graves. Literally.”

“Does Erhall know?”

“No,” Andreas said a little too sharply. “And he won’t. My father was the one who raised me, not Erhall. My father...” A shadow flickered across his face and disappeared. “He was a good man, and he loved me enough to treat me like his own son even after he found out I wasn’t. Erhall, on the other hand, is a sniveling weasel.”

I snorted. At least we agreed on something.

Andreas’s smirk returned as he took another sip of tea. “Here’s a secret for you. I don’t want the throne. Never did. I’d step up if I had to, of course, but I would much rather have someone else fill that role—as long as they’re capable. The throne is the most powerful seat but also the smallest cage in the palace.”

“That’s utter crap,” I growled. “You’ve made your intentions clear multiple times. The meetings with the king and Speaker, the ‘helpful’ visit to my guesthouse the night before Nikolai’s wedding. Remember those?”

“Bridget needed a push,” he said coolly. “I wanted to see if she’d fight for the crown. But I also came back because...” He hesitated for a brief second. “I wanted to give Erhall a chance. See if we could connect somehow. That’s why I asked to shadow him during his meetings, more so than me wanting to be king. As for the guesthouse, I was trying to help you. I’m not an idiot, Mr. Larsen. Or should I call you Rhys, now that we both know we’re brothers?”

I glared at him, and he chuckled.

“Mr. Larsen it is,” he said. “I knew something was going on with you and Bridget long before the news broke. I didn’t have confirmation, but I could see it in the way you looked at each other. It’s a tough choice, love or country. Nikolai made his. Bridget, well, I guess she made hers, too. But before she agreed to marry Steffan”—the acid in my veins thickened and pooled in my stomach—“you two had a shot. Thought I’d give you a little nudge. You are my brother, and she is my cousin. Two of the few family members I have left. Consider it my good deed for the year.”

“What charity,” I said, my sarcasm evident. “You should be sainted.”

“Laugh all you want, but I was willing to push you two together because you were so clearly in love, even if it meant I had to take up the mantle should Bridget abdicate. Is that not a sacrifice?”

It was a sacrifice. But I wasn't admitting that to Andreas.

My head pounded with the volume of new information rushing in. There was every chance Andreas was bullshitting me, but my gut told me he wasn't.

"I almost told her about our father, you know. At Nikolai's wedding reception. It doesn't help much with the Royal Marriages Law, since it requires the monarch to marry someone of legitimate noble birth. You were born out of wedlock and never acknowledged by Erhall as his son—he doesn't even know you are his son—so you don't qualify." Andreas finished his tea and set it in the sink. "But she disappeared from the reception and before I could talk to her, The Daily Tea allegations broke." He shrugged. "C'est la vie."

Dammit. I'd hoped, now that I knew I was the son of a lord...

"If it doesn't help with the law, why would you tell her?" I demanded.

"Because I have an idea of how it might help in a roundabout way." Andreas smiled. "It might even help you get Bridget back if you work fast enough. Holstein's scheduled to propose next month. I'm willing to help you..."

"But?" There was always a but in these kinds of games.

"But you stop treating me like an enemy and as...perhaps not a brother, but a friendly acquaintance. We are, after all, the only direct family left besides our lovely father." Something flickered across Andreas's face before it disappeared.

"That's it." Suspicion curled in my stomach. It seemed too easy.

"That's it. Take it or leave it."

Something occurred to me. "Before I answer, I want to know. Did you ever snoop around my guesthouse when I wasn't there?"

He gave me an odd look. "No."

"The truth."

Andreas drew himself up to his full height, looking affronted. "I am a prince. I do not snoop around guesthouses..." the word dripped with disdain, "...like a common thief."

I pressed my lips together. He was telling the truth.