

Epilogue

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RHYS

Six months later

“Do you solemnly promise and swear to govern the People of Eldorra according to their respective laws and customs?”

“I solemnly promise so to do.” Bridget sat in the coronation chair, her face pale but her hand steady on the King’s Book as she took her official oath. Her grandfather stood beside her, his face solemn but proud, and the rest of the cathedral was so quiet I could feel the weight of the occasion pressing into my skin.

After months of planning, the big day was finally here. In a few minutes, Bridget would be crowned Queen of Eldorra, and I, as her fiancé, would officially be the Prince Consort in waiting.

It wasn’t something I’d ever dreamed of or thought I wanted, but I would follow Bridget anywhere, from the smallest, shittiest town to the grandest church. As long as I was with her, I was happy.

I stood with Nikolai, Sabrina, Andreas, and the other von Aschebergs in the front row, closest to the coronation. The ceremony took place in the sprawling Athenberg Cathedral, which was packed with thousands of high-profile guests. Heads of state, foreign royals, celebrities, billionaires, they were all there.

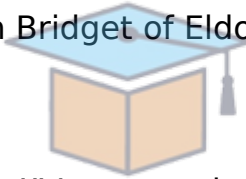
I clasped my hands in front of me, wishing the archbishop would speed things up. I hadn’t talked to Bridget all day, and I was itching to get to the coronation ball so we could have some alone time.

“Will you to your power cause Law and Justice, in Mercy, to be executed in all your judgments?” the archbishop asked.

“I will.”

Pride seeped through me at Bridget’s strong, clear voice. She completed her oath, and a collective hush fell over the cathedral when the archbishop lifted the crown from Edvard’s head and placed it on hers.

“Her Majesty Queen Bridget of Eldorra,” the archbishop declared. “Long may she reign!”



Summaryer

“Long may she reign!” I repeated the words along with the rest of the guests, my chest tight. Beside me, Nikolai dipped his head, his face shining with emotion; next to Bridget, Edvard stood ramrod straight, his eyes suspiciously bright.

The archbishop finished the ceremony with a few verses from the King’s Book, and it was done. Eldorra officially had a new ruler and its first female monarch in over a century.

A low, electric hum replaced the hush. It skittered through the soaring hall and over my skin as Bridget rose for the exit procession; judging by the way the other guests shifted and murmured, I wasn’t the only one who felt it.

It was the feeling of watching history being made.

I caught Bridget’s eye during her procession, and I flashed her a quick grin and a wink. Her mouth curved into a smile before she tamped it down, and I fought back a laugh at her overly serious expression as she left the church.

“That was the longest ceremony ever.” Andreas yawned. “I’m glad I wasn’t the one who had to sit up there.”

“Good thing you’ll never sit up there, then.” My relationship with Andreas had developed into something resembling genuine friendship over the months, but his

personality still left a lot to be desired.

He shrugged. “C’est la vie. Let Bridget shoulder the burden of a nation while I live like a prince with none of the responsibilities.”

Nikolai and I exchanged glances and shook our heads. While Andreas and I never missed an opportunity to sneak a dig at the other, I had a much easier relationship with Nikolai. Another brother, albeit by marriage rather than blood, and I didn’t want to murder him half the time.

After the formal exit procession, the guests filed out of the cathedral, and soon, I found myself in the palace ballroom, impatiently waiting for Bridget to arrive.

Only five hundred people received invites to the coronation ball compared to the thousands at the ceremony, but that was still too many people. All of them wanted to shake my hand and say hi, and I indulged them half-heartedly while eyeing the door. At least my lessons with Andreas came in handy—I remembered everyone’s titles and greeted them accordingly.

My pulse kicked up a notch when the Sergeant at Arms’ announcement finally rang through the ballroom. “Her Majesty Queen Bridget of Eldorra.”

Triumphal music played, the doors opened, and Bridget swept in. She wore a lighter gown than the ornate affair she’d donned for the ceremony, and she’d replaced her crown with a more wearable tiara.

She waved to the crowd, her public smile firmly in place, but when our eyes met, a hint of playfulness crept in.

I excused myself from my conversation with the Prime Minister of Sweden and made my way through the crowd. For once, I didn’t need to use my height or build—everyone parted when they saw me approaching.

The perks of being the future Prince Consort, I supposed.

By the time I reached Bridget, she had half a dozen people fighting for her attention.

“Your Majesty.” I held out my hand, cutting off a woman who’d been gushing over her dress. The crowd fell silent. “May I have this dance?”

A grin played at the corners of Bridget’s mouth. “Of course. Ladies, gentlemen, if you’ll excuse me.”

She took my hand, and we walked away with six pairs of eyes burning into us.

Bridget waited until we were out of earshot before saying, “Thank the Lord. If I had to listen to Lady Featherton compliment my outfit one more time, I would’ve stabbed myself with the spikes from my tiara.”

“We can’t have that, can we? I very much like you alive.” I rested my hand on the small of her back as I guided her across the dance floor. “So, you’re officially queen. How does it feel?”

“Surreal, but also...right.” She shook her head. “I don’t know how to explain it.”

“I understand.”

I did. I felt much the same way. I wasn’t the one who’d been crowned, of course, but we’d waited and planned for so long it was strange to have the ceremony behind us. We’d also had time to get used to the idea of Bridget being queen, and now that she was, it felt right.

We always end up where we’re meant to be.

“I know you do.” Bridget’s eyes glowed with emotion before she made a face. “I can’t want to get out of this dress, though. It’s not as bad as my coronation dress, but I swear it still weighs ten pounds.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll rip it off you later.” I lowered my head and whispered, “I’ve never fucked a queen before.”

A chuckle rose in my throat at the deep blush spreading over Bridget's face and neck.

"Do I have to stop calling you princess now?" I asked. "Queen doesn't roll off the tongue quite as nice."

She narrowed her eyes. "Don't you dare. By royal decree, you're never allowed to stop calling me princess."

"I thought you hated the nickname."

I spun her around, and she waited until she was in my arms again before saying, "As much as you hate when I call you Mr. Larsen."

I used to. Not anymore.

"I was joking." My lips grazed her forehead. "You'll always be my princess."

Bridget's eyes shone brighter. "Mr. Larsen, if you make me cry at my own coronation ball, I'll never forgive you."

My smile widened, and I kissed her, not caring if PDA was against protocol. "Then it's a good thing I have the rest of our lives to make it up to you."

BRIDGET

Three months after my coronation, Rhys and I returned to the Athenberg Cathedral for our wedding.

It was as grand and luxurious as one would expect of a royal wedding, but I worked with Freja, the new communications secretary, to keep the reception as small as possible. As queen, I couldn't have a friends-and-family-only party for diplomatic reasons, but we cut the guest list from two thousand to two hundred. I considered that a major victory.

"I'm jealous," Nikolai said. "You only have two hundred people to greet. My hands nearly fell off at my reception."

I laughed. "You survived."

We stood near the dessert table while the rest of the guests ate, drank, and danced. The actual wedding ceremony had gone off without a hitch, and as much as I enjoyed seeing my friends and family let loose, I was counting down the minutes until I could be alone with Rhys, who was currently talking to Christian and a few of his friends from the Navy.

He hadn't expected his military buddies to come, since he hadn't spoken to them in so long, but they'd all showed up. Whatever worries he might've had about seeing them again, they seemed to have disappeared. Rhys was smiling and laughing and looked perfectly at peace.

"Barely," Nikolai joked before his smile faded. "I'm glad things worked out for you and Rhys," he added softly. "You deserve it. When I abdicated, I didn't think...I never wanted to put that kind of pressure on you. And when I realized what it meant...what you had to give up..."

"It's okay." I squeezed his hand. "You did what you had to do. I was upset when you first told me, but it all worked out, and I enjoy being queen...for the most part. Especially now that Erhall is no longer Speaker."

Erhall had lost his seat by half a point. I'd be lying if I said the news hadn't given me immense pleasure.

I had, however, worried Nikolai would be upset or jealous about the repeal. Would he be bitter I got to stay with Rhys and keep the crown? But he'd been nothing but supportive, and he'd admitted he enjoyed his new life more than he'd expected. I think part of him was actually relieved.

Nikolai had grown up thinking he wanted the throne because he didn't have a choice to not want it, and now that he was freed from those expectations, he was thriving. Meanwhile, I'd taken up the mantle and grown into the role.

Ironic, the way things turned out.

“Yes, he was a bit of a toad, wasn’t he?” Nikolai grinned and glanced over my shoulder. “Ah, it seems my time is up. I’ll talk to you later. I need to save Sabrina before Grandfather forces her to name our baby Sigmund after our great-great-uncle.” He hesitated. “Are you happy, Bridget?”

I squeezed his hand again, a messy clog of emotion tangling in my throat. “I am.”

Did I feel like the weight of the world was on my shoulders sometimes? Yes. Did I get angry, frustrated, and stressed? Yes. But so did a lot of people. The important thing was, I no longer felt trapped. I’d learned to master my circumstances instead of letting them master me, and I had Rhys by my side. No matter how terrible of a day I had, I could go home to someone I loved who loved me back, and that made all the difference.

Nikolai must’ve heard the sincerity in my voice, because his face relaxed. “Good. That’s all I need to know.” He kissed my cheek before he beelined to where a five-months-pregnant Sabrina sat with our grandfather, who’d spent his post-ruling days fussing over his future great-grandchild and trying to find a suitable hobby to fill his time.

Edvard had forced Rhys to teach him how to draw for a few weeks before it became clear his talents did not lie in the artistic realm. He’d since moved on to archery, and I’d had to add a hazard pay bonus for the staff accompanying him to practice.

I turned to see what had made Nikolai leave, and my face broke into a smile when I saw Rhys approaching.

“Long time no see,” I teased. We’d only had one dance together before we were pulled away by various friends and family.

“Don’t remind me. My own wedding, and I barely see my wife,” he grumbled, but his frown eased when he drew me into his arms.

“We should’ve eloped.”

“The palace would’ve had something to say about that.”

“Fuck the palace.”

I stifled a laugh. “Rhys, you can’t say that. You’re the Prince Consort now.” The King Consort title didn’t exist in Eldorra, so even though I was the queen, he was called the Prince Consort.

“Which means I can say it even more than before.” Rhys grazed my jaw with his lips, and goosebumps of pleasure dotted my arms.

“Speaking of Prince Consort...what benefits come with the position?”

“Um.” I tried to think through the fog in my head as he caressed the nape of my neck.

“A crown, a lovely room in the palace, medical benefits...”

“Boring. Boring. Even more boring.”

I laughed. “What do you want then?”

Rhys lifted his head, his eyes gleaming. “I want to bend—”

“Hi guys, I’m so sorry for interrupting.” Ava appeared beside us. She looked lovely in her mint green bridesmaid dress, but her face was etched with concern. “Have you seen Jules and Josh? I can’t find them anywhere.”

“She’s afraid they’ve murdered each other,” Alex added, coming up behind her.

Ava rolled her eyes. “You’re exaggerating.”

“Not by much. I saw Jules with a knife earlier.”

“I hope they haven’t. Bad press if there’s a murder at my wedding,” I joked. “But no, I haven’t seen them. Sorry.”

Still, I swept my eyes around the room just in case.

Booth, whom I'd insisted attend as a guest instead of a guard, was deep in conversation with his wife and Emma, who'd flown in a few days ago so we could catch up before the wedding. Apparently, she'd gotten more attached to Meadow's cuddliness and Leather's foul mouth than expected, and she'd adopted both from the shelter. I was delighted, especially when Emma promised to send me pictures and videos of them often.

Steffan was dancing with Malin. I'd called him after my press conference to apologize for not giving him a heads up, but he hadn't been upset at all. He said it'd given him the courage to stand up to his father, and considering he was attending the most publicized event of the year with Malin, it must've all worked out.

Christian stood in the shadows, chatting with Andreas, but his eyes strayed to something—someone—on the dance floor. I followed his gaze and winced when I saw Stella.

That's not good. Or maybe I was reading too much into the situation.

Even Mikaela was in attendance, hanging out with some of our old school friends. I'd invited her as an olive branch, but it would take a while before I trusted her again.

Almost everyone who played a major role in my life was there... except Jules and Josh.

"I haven't seen them either," Rhys said.

Ava sighed. "Thanks. I just wanted to check. Sorry for bothering you, and congrats again!" She dragged Alex away, probably to look for her brother and Jules, even though Alex looked like he would rather eat nails.

"Well, that ruined the mood," Rhys said dryly. "We can't even have a conversation without getting interrupted."

"Perhaps we should wait until after the reception because that'll keep happening. I already see Freja coming toward us. Unless..." I lowered my voice, a spark of mischief kindling inside me. "We hide."

We stared at each other for a beat before a slow smile spread across his face. "I like the way you think, princess."

Rhys left first, slipping out under the auspices of using the restroom, and I followed soon after. We couldn't be gone long, but we could steal a few moments for ourselves.

"Your Majesty!" Freja called as I passed her. "Where are you going? We need to discuss—"

"Ladies' room. I'll be back." I quickened my steps and contained my laughter until I reached the small drawing room where Rhys was waiting.

"It's like we're sneaking around again." I shut the door behind me, my heart racing with the twin thrills of finally being alone with him and doing something we weren't supposed to do.

"Just like old times," he drawled. The lights were off, but enough moonlight filtered through the curtains for me to see the carved planes of his face and the tender heat in his eyes.

"So, tell me." I looped my arms around his neck. "Was this where you expected to end up as a kid? Hiding in a royal drawing room with your wife on the night of your wedding?"

"Not exactly." Rhys brushed his thumb over my bottom lip. "But someone once told me we always end up where we're meant to be, and this is where I'm meant to be. With you."

Forget butterflies. An entire flock of birds took flight in my stomach, soaring into the clouds and taking me with them. "Mr. Larsen, I do believe you're a secret romantic after all."