

Chapter 99: Confrontation

Eledis

I told you to inspect that gifted horse with a fine-toothed comb! Now, your entire team's diseased, and you're stranded with no rescue in sight.

-Unknown

Kaedesas had been acting strangely during her most recent visit to Auden, but her behavior *right now* was bordering more on the erratic side of strange. She continually shifted her hands to the pockets where she stashed her journals, a nervous fidgeting that set my skin into a slow crawl. After dismissing the guard hovering over her, she'd hardly partaken of the feast set before her, picking at the bones of her dish, and alternated between bouts of pleased conversation and moody quiet.

I didn't know what to do with it.

"How are you finding our fair city this year?" I asked while buttering a roll.

She probably couldn't reply with much more than empty compliments. Since her arrival for the ball a few days ago, Kaedesas had yet to leave the palace. This dinner was the first time she'd emerged from her quarters, which was an outlier for her behaviorally.

While she loved to complain to anyone who'd listen about events like a ball, my experience with her belied those assertions. Social butterfly that she was, she'd never miss an event as widely anticipated as Auden's Anniversary Ball, one where her beloved Raimie had promised momentous news, unless something truly intriguing had preoccupied her.

The acceptable length of time needed for Kaedesas to answer my question came to an end, sending us wandering into the territory of the awkward, but she never noticed. She fiddled with her utensils, hunched over her meal with a curtain of hair hiding her face.

"What's wrong, 'desa?" I asked.

Maybe if I used Marcuset's nickname for her, it would get a reaction, and indeed, it did. Kaedesas winced, which made me cringe and suppress a need to apologize.

“Don’t, Eledis,” she said. “Don’t use that name. I like it when you call me ‘saya.’”

Lash-framed emerald eyes peered from behind Kaedesa’s hair, daring me to meet them, and I answered that challenge, even as a tingle of nervous anticipation zipped down my spine. Shivering, I folded my hands in my lap while lazily reclining in my chair.

“Why use the name ‘saya?’” I asked. “That nickname holds no resemblance to your-”

“I remember, Eledis,” she said, cutting me off, “or rather, this helped me remember.”

She withdrew a notebook from her pocket. Its pages wore the marks of use and age well, holding together despite its yellowed must and crinkled corners, and at the sight of it, warmth drove ice out of my chest. I still remembered her smile when I’d given that journal to her.

Then, a hollow pit carved through that warmth. After that blasted seer had cursed us, I’d helplessly watched her sob while she’d scribbled everything she’d need to remember into the journal.

She’d read it. She remembered. My heart couldn’t take the anxiety of what she’d say next.

“You’re the one who reminded me about the archives,” she said. “I store my oldest and most important journals there, among the many transcriptions of them that I’ve had made. When I came home after my last stay in Auden, I visited the archives in the hopes that you and Aramar might have missed something in your purge of your family from my memories. Instead, I found this.”

For how thin and airy it appeared, the journal loudly thumped to the table when she dropped it.

“Illasaya...” I breathed.

I was clenching my hands so tightly that my finger bones ground against one another. The times when she was her instead of an adopted, false persona were few and far between. What should I say to her? I’d thoroughly demolished our relationship during my negotiations with Doldimar. Giving our son over to him as a hostage had seen to that.

So, could I say *anything* to fix what we’d had? Considering how our old nemesis had vanished without a trace, our curse might soon break. This might be my last chance to make amends.

“I’m sorry, ‘saya,” I started.

But anger squeezed that apology into silence. Almost three hundred years had come and gone, and she *still* hadn’t forgiven me.

“He was my son too!” I said in a strangled cry. “Do you know, I have moments when I look at Raimie and I ache to hold our son, the two are so similar? *I miss him too!*”

Illasaya scraped her chair along the floor, gripping the tabletop so fiercely that her knuckles turned white.

“Our baby died a lifetime ago, Eledis. I've long forgiven that mistake,” she said. “Do you know what I couldn't stand?”

I matched her in stance and volume.

“What?” I snapped. “What action of mine was so horrible that you felt the need to *marry another man?*”

Circling the table, Illasaya got in my face, and my traitorous heart skipped a beat, despite the surge of anger surging along my veins.

“Your self-loathing, doubt, and pettiness were what distanced me from you, not some monstrous act,” she shouted. “For years, I tried to snap you out of your slump, but all you could think about, talk about, Alouin even show passion for were Auden and destroying Doldimar. You turned our dead son into the mark of your shame, the banner of your revenge, never seeing the blessing we'd been given. Life for as long as we wanted it! Together with one another.”

I tried to cut in, but sharp pain across my cheek halted that effort.

“You warped our living son into an unrecognizable weapon because of your guilt. He died thinking he'd *failed* you, and you've branded your mark into each of our descendants since, all because of a remorse you refuse to surrender,” Illasaya said, rubbing her palm. “Where did my husband go? Where's the smart, poised, charming man I married?”

Once her words had trickled to nothing, I warily eyed her.

“Are you quite finished?”

Stepping away with heat coloring the back of her neck, Illasaya nodded.

“Then, let's go,” I said.

I'd almost made it out of the room before her strangled voice chased me.

“*What?*”

Glancing over my shoulder, I said, “You said you wanted a life together. I'd assume we don't need to lead it here. So, let's go.”

She always *had* looked cute when shocked. Something about the frustrated gape of her mouth...

“I don't follow,” she said.

“Obviously,” I said, rolling my eyes, “otherwise, we'd already be out the door.”

I chuckled at her growl.

“saya, I only ever fixated on Auden because I thought you wanted it,” I said. “I won’t deny that the idea of wiping Doldimar from existence sustained me during our exile’s initial years. I also wouldn’t disagree that I blamed myself for the disasters that ended in our exile and our children...”

I trailed off, unwilling to face how much the sacrifice of one son had cut me off from loving the other or any of the descendants who'd followed.

Shaking my head, I continued, “But I never cared about *Auden*. I cared about you and your desires, and you didn’t seem happy without a realm to rule. So, I endeavored to get you one.”

A tiny squeak accompanied a faint flush in Illasaya’s cheeks, but she still looked unhappy.

“If that’s true, why did you keep obsessing, even after I claimed Ada’ir as my own?” she said.

That... was a harder question to answer.

“When you married Belqarim—”

On speaking that name, I twisted my lips into a sneer.

“—I thought you’d left me for good. I had nothing to live for, besides the vain hope that giving you Auden would return you to me.”

Pathetic, really, but it was the truth. I wasn’t sure what Illasaya thought of my confession, not with her face having gone carefully blank.

“What about your family?” she said. “Aramar and Raimie? They weren’t enough for you?”

“Aramar...”

I trailed off, scrambling for a sensible explanation.

“He made an irreconcilable mistake when he married Samantha. She was trouble from the moment the tear spat her into our world, but even knowing that, he proceeded to get further entangled with that woman,” I said. “I couldn’t forgive him for it, despite his potential. Still can’t. As for Raimie, you know why I don’t like him.”

“He’s a constant reminder of what you perceive as failure,” Illasaya said.

I reeled away from her frank assessment.

“How did *he* attract not only an Ele splinter but a Daevetch one as well?” I growled, lifting my hands to my hair. “Why not *me*? If an Ele splinter had come to me like it was supposed to, perhaps Doldimar wouldn’t have risen to power. Perhaps our son-”

Illasaya pried my hands off of my head. When had she crossed the room?

“There it is. Your self-loathing,” she said. “You did the best you could in difficult circumstances. Forgive yourself. I certainly have.”

How could she say that? How could she forgive me? I didn't deserve...

But wasn't that the point of forgiveness? To be given to the underserving?

Drawing a shuddering breath, I laughed. Here I was, complaining that Illasaya had never forgiven me for my mistakes, and when she did just that, all I wanted was to scream that it wasn't warranted, that I deserved her hate. Alouin, I'd been using the perception of my wife's loathing to feed my lack of self-worth.

When she gently squeezed my hands, I brushed hers with my lips.

“You're correct, as usual,” I said. “If you'll stay by my side, I promise to work on it until I can find the man you married once more.”

“A promise I can easily make,” Illasaya said.

A dense knot that I'd been carrying since our exile loosened, and for the first time in centuries, I could breathe easy.

“Let's leave this palace of memories, my love,” I said. “The world awaits us.”

“After you,” Illasaya said, smirking.

Oh, I'd missed her.

With a contented sigh, I opened the dining room door and nearly collided with Oswin.

Dismissively waving at the man, I said, “Whatever it is, I don't care-”

“Sir, your presence is required in the Ministers' Chamber,” he said. “We may have a problem.”

I took in Oswin's ashen complexion and jerky eyes before slumping. It looked like this damn kingdom would rope me into one final service to it before I could leave.

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