

The Citadel
Estile City
Selen

Zakath sighed softly to himself as he stood outside the Consul's private apartment within the Citadel. Even after a few months of routine visits here, Zakath was still not accustomed to the startling informality that the Shadow Lady of Arcona displayed to nearly everyone she came into contact with, including himself. Of course, being a Barabel — and a Force empowered one at that — tended to generate a measure of fearsome respect from the people he was surrounded by, mostly respect from people closer to his level of power, and fear from those who were weaker.

Atyiru showed no fear at all when it came to dealing with Zakath. Respect, certainly, but not the kind generated by fear or cold evaluation as an asset to be used. No, Atyiru's respect was... genuine and borne out of an appreciation for Zakath's talents and mind, regardless of his flaws.

It was... peculiar to him.

Ever since his failed mission on Port Ol'val and his subsequent suspension and confinement to the Citadel on Atyiru's direct order, Zakath had found himself meeting regularly with the Consul for meditation sessions, teachings, and as time wore on, dinners in Atyiru's apartment.

The dinners were mostly formal affairs at first in which Zakath and Atyiru (or Atty as she insisted he call her), discussed the lessons taught earlier that day. But, as he should've expected, the conversations inevitably were steered toward unrelated subjects, almost always by Atty, who would start it by asking questions of him on some subject or another, such as his past, what he enjoyed, and most unusual for him, asking for descriptions of color and what his favorite ones were.

His responses were curt at first, nothing more than blunt, direct answers to her inquiries. But as the dinners wore on, usually plied with mild alcoholic drinks urged on by Atty, the Barabel found himself loosening up somewhat to the point where he would elaborate more on his answers, to the Consul's obvious delight. Usually, by the end of the evening, Zakath would head back to his own quarters with a sore throat and vocal chords strained from what was an abnormal amount of talking for him.

And now he was here for another dinner.

Uncorking a small flask, Zakath let a small grimace touch his lips before he took a drink from it, allowing the foul liquid within to trickle down his throat. It was foul-tasting medicine, but as a physician in Estile City advised, it helped to lubricate Zakath's vocal chords for the long conversations he had with Atty. It was irritating at first, being forced to talk so much, and by the end of the dinners, he had found himself in a foul mood.

That had changed in the last few weeks.

His irritation had eased at first, almost unnoticeably, and then a mysterious feeling replaced the irritation, and it took almost a week of analyzing before he realized what it was.

Anticipation.

He was... *looking forward* to the dinners.

That had been an earth-shattering revelation for him. He was used to hardship, being shunned, and otherwise being regarded as an outsider, even within Arcona. The closest he came to a genuine relationship was with his student, the prickly Nath Voth, for whom he maintained a close affection for. All others were associates at best.

But Atty had somehow managed to worm her way past his defenses and lower his guard. And now Zakath was left with trying to figure out how to define their relationship. A romantic one, he dismissed instantly out of hand. He had little sexual needs, and even if he were interested in such matters, he would not find the Miraluka attractive by his standards.

Was it a by-product of mentorship? Atty had taken him on as a student of sorts, so perhaps that was an unintended result of the partnership. Otherwise, he did not know how to define it.

Perhaps he would ask, tonight.

Finally working up the courage, he raised his hand and knocked on the door in quick staccato thumps.

“Come in!” Atty’s cheerful voice rang out, muffled by the door.

Zakath opened the door and entered, closing it behind him. As he turned to face the main room leading into the dining area, his eyes fell on Atyiru herself entering, her slim form wrapping in a... *unique* outfit. He cocked his head slightly as she approached, noticing that Atty had chosen to wear what appeared to be a light summer dress of lime green studded with bright orange polka dots. The look was completed with a blindfold mask of a vibrant lemony yellow.

“Conzul,” Zakath greeted as the cheerful Miraluka stopped in front of him, her head craning up slightly with a bright smile on her lips. “My complimentz on your... drezz. It iz very... colorful. Az iz your mazk.”

“Is it?” Atty seemed pleased at Zakath’s words, her hands smoothing out her skirt. “I’m glad you like it, I’m told it’s very colorful. Bright and cheery.”

“Certainly bright,” Zakath assured her as Atty turned toward the dining room, the Barabel falling into step behind her. “No one would ever call it dark or dreary.”

As he entered the dining room, Zakath’s stomachs rumbled as the mouth-watering smell of spiced nerf steaks reached his nostrils. The table was practically groaning under the weight of the food arrayed on it, an assortment of meats mostly, with smaller amounts of fruits and other foods for Atty herself.

It was on their very first dinner together that Atty had discovered she would need to prepare a large amount of food to satisfy Zakath, as even though she was a trained medic, extensively trained to deal with the ailments of a large number of alien species, she had underestimated the size of the Barabel’s two stomachs and his capacity to pack away the food. It was a mistake that she made a point of not repeating again, much to Zakath’s amusement and appreciation.

“So how was your day, Zakky dear?” Atty asked as she settled into her chair, carefully moving her braided white hair behind her.

“It went well enough,” Zakath replied as he speared a large nerf steak with one of his talons, transferring it to his plate while Atty carefully spooned some fruity concoction onto hers, followed by a lighter slice of meat. “I went into the city today.”

“Oh, how lovely,” Atty exclaimed lightly, a bright smile appearing on her face. “Did you do anything exciting?”

“I tried to follow your suggestion of visiting a cafe,” Zakath replied, visibly wincing at the memory. “It did not appeal to me.”

“Oh dear. What happened?” Atty cocked her head slightly as she gazed in Zakath’s direction

“Nothing happened... much,” Zakath protested before tucking a chunk of meat into his mouth, chewing and swallowing before continuing on. “But they had nothing substantial to eat, and their drinks were foul-tasting. It did not help my mood, and scared everyone else off. I didn’t threaten to kill them or anything, though.”

“I see. You being in a bad mood scares people off?” Atty’s voice was skeptical.

“Glowing eyes is scary, apparently.”

“Oh, that’s right. Your eyes glow... purple?” Atty asked, and then continued on before Zakath could respond. “Honestly I don’t know why that would be scary. I’m told purple is a perfectly lovely color, so why would people be scared of that?”

"I think it iz the fact that I am a big scary Barabel that scared them rather than the eyez," Zakath replied dryly. "I am not a cuddly perzon one would want to hug."

"Don't be silly, Zakky," Atty scolded. "I would hug you anytime."

"You can't see me," he pointed out.

"Nonsense, other than the dark, murdering, battle-seeking, slightly suicidal part of you, you're a perfectly good person. It just takes work to see it, but well worth the effort, my dear."

"I... thank you?" Zakath said, his voice slightly quizzical as he glanced over at Atty, his talons continuing to cut up the steak on his plate. "Regardlezz, I don't think being social would help me here in thiz city. I do not have the temperament for it."

"Oh, I suppose you're right," Atty sighed before taking a delicate bite of her steak. "Hmm. Needs a bit more pepper. Anyways, I suppose you are a bit more suited to work-oriented settings, and I think you've made sufficient progress that your confinement can end very soon."

Zakath froze, one talon raised halfway to his mouth, a roughly cut cube of meat speared on it. After a few seconds, he lowered it to his plate again, his eyes now firmly on Atty. "Conzul?"

"Atty, dear," she corrected almost absently as she set her fork down and leaned back into her chair. "It's something I've been considering for some time now. And really, the point of the exercises in going out into Estile City wasn't to turn you into a social creature per say, as much as that would be lovely to see. It was to teach you tolerance for others. We can't help people's reactions to others, but we can certainly control our own responses to them. I think you've learned all you could from the people here."

"What are you saying, Con- Atty?" Zakath caught himself at the last second.

"I think it's time for you to resume your service to Arcona, Zakky dear." Atty smiled at Zakath. "There has been some personnel changes, and a position has recently opened up in one of our more undisciplined battleteams. Tell me, what do you know about the Tyrant Sword team?"

"Not much," Zakath admitted. "I know they are part of Qel-Droma, but little elze."

"Mm. Well they're... I suppose pirates is an apt term to describe them." Atty frowned slightly at the description she had just used. "But obviously I want strict limits placed on their conduct. They may be pirates operating under our sanction, but I do not want them murdering and pillaging wantonly. That is where you come in."

"How so?"

“Both Arcy and myself have reviewed your service records while you were onboard the Nighthawk as its Security Chief,” Atty continued on, pausing to take a sip of water. “Your service was exemplary and you ran a very tight ship. And believe me, impressing Arcy is no mean feat. Anyways, your title would be somewhat different if you join Tyrant Sword, but the function will essentially be the same.”

“Keeping them in line,” Zakath replied, a slight smirk touching his lips. “I can do that.”

“Indeed, I believe you can, dear,” Atty assured him with another bright smile. “You will serve as an executive officer of sorts to Tyrant Sword’s new leader, a rising star in our ranks, a man named Mks Ehn. Your primary task will be to make sure his orders are executed promptly, and that strict rules of engagement are kept to.”

“That iz straightfoward enough,” Zakath acknowledged before pausing briefly, shooting Atty a suspicious look. “What’z the catch?”

“Must there be a catch?” Atty protested, a mildly offended look touching her face.

“Atty.” Zakath’s tone was flat.

“Oh, so suspicious, aren’t you?” Atty mock-sighed before adopting a more serious tone. “Very well. Our lessons together will continue, just over holo and through datapads. A reading list, etcetra. I want to keep in regular communication with you to keep your progress continuing. I don’t want you slipping back. You already know my reservations about the Sith doctrines you have practiced in the past, and how I think they affect you. The reading material you’ve read so far has been elementary, but I’m going to start supplementing them with some more advanced philosophies that I would like you to consider, my dear.”

Zakath fell silent as he returned his attention to the steak in front of him, using a talon to spear another chunk of meat and bringing it to his mouth. As he chewed on the tender flesh, he considered Atty’s request.

It was true that when Zakath backed off from using the Dark Side through the Sith techniques that he had used for so long, his self control over his temper had begun to come back. It was not a welcome revelation to him, but he had learned to accept it and ease off on it, trying to explore more neutral ways of accessing the Force, while still being faithful to the ideals behind the Sith Order. But Atty wasn’t asking for that.

She was asking, in an indirect way, for him to leave the Sith Order behind.

A part of him instantly rebelled at the thought, a flash of anger shooting through him, causing his eyes to flare up in a flash of violet heat, while his talons dug reflexively into his palms

That did not go unnoticed by the Consul, who straightened up and furrowed her brows in concern but refrained from saying anything for the moment.

Gritting his teeth together, Zakath forced himself to calm down, running through some of the simple mental relaxation exercises that Atty had taught him in the first couple weeks of training. After a couple moments had passed, he could feel his eyes beginning to return to normal, and the anger leaking away from his tensed muscles.

"I promise nothing," he said finally, forcing himself to look at Atty, almost hating the concerned look she was giving him. "But I will... consider what I read."

"That's all I'm asking for, Zakky." Atty's concerned expression evaporated as she gave him a bright smile. "Just read and consider the words, nothing more. Of course I would like your opinions on the doctrine as well, perhaps we can have a lively debate on their merits..."

"I- wait." Zakath paused and shot her a puzzled frown. "How can you even *read* these doctrines? Aren't you blind in that sense?"

"Zakky, dear..." Atty shot him a reproving expression before fetching a datapad that had laid unnoticed next to her plate, and tapped a visibly engraved button on the side of it. "Behold, the wonders of technology."

"The Art of Cooking, by Chef Lucien Lachance." The datapad began playing, a man's deep calm voice coming out of a speaker built into it. "Cooking has always been a passion of mine, especially with apples, and in the pages ahead, I hope you will enjoy the exquisite recipes within—"

The datapad cut off as Atty tapped the button again, smiling sweetly at Zakath.

"...point taken." Zakath barked out a chuckle.

"*Thank you*, Zakky," Atty replied, her smile turning to a brief smirk before returning to a serious look. "But back to the subject at hand, would you like the job within Tyrant Sword?"

"Keep a bunch of pirates in line and be on the move again, in exchange for reading what doctrines you want to supply me with and giving you my opinionz?" Zakath asked, his lips curving up slightly. "Doez that sum it up?"

"Yes, that's about it," Atty replied, her smile widening. "You accept, don't you?"

"Of course." Zakath snorted slightly as he returned his attention to his plate. "Not that I had a choice."

“Zakath, dear.” Atty’s voice grew serious as she leaned forward and placed a slim hand over his own much larger one. “You *always* have a choice with me. Never doubt that.”

Zakath looked down at the hand that covered his own and then up at the Consul’s earnest face, suddenly realizing that she had used his full name for the first time in their conversation.

“...Thank you.”

“Anytime, Zakky dear, anytime.”