

The Masque of Hyde

**Myrmidon
Aeotheran, Orian System**

Keira looked pleadingly at the Zeltron, eyes dolefully wide like a baby animal. It was murder on Qyreia's willpower, and the half-Umbaran knew it.

"Why should I go to this party?! Why with Atra?! You know he hates me!"

"He doesn't *hate* you... Just doesn't like the whole Resistance thing. C'mon, please? This'll be a great way for you two to get to know each other; maybe find some common ground."

"Why do you want me and him to get along so much anyway? He's *your* dad."

"Well... I dunno. I'm making connections that didn't exist before. Be nice if they could connect with each other too." The half-hidden bashful look on the Seer's face said there was a different thought in her head, but the mercenary refrained from asking. "Please? For me?"

Once again, the Force user unleashed a powerful attack of cuteness that Qyreia could only try to squint derisively at. It was a fruitless effort, finally relenting with a laugh when Keira's nose poked her cheek. "Okay! Fine! But only because I can't stand that pouty face of yours."

"That ain't all you can't keep standing for," she said, wiggling her eyebrows.

"Don't you be starting that. I need to get ready. Thankfully, I come prepared for such occasions."

"Oh?"

Following the Zeltron to their bedroom, they went deep into the large closet where several containers sat completely untouched, including a scant few garment cases. One contained the Black Guard armor that Keira had never even seen her lover wear during her tenure in the position for the former Quaestor. The merc tugged out the bottommost box and hooked it onto the rack. The almost ritualistic care she took in unlatching the container to reveal the shimmering white and blue dress within only made Keira all the more giddy, if a little disappointed.

"Why have I never seen this before?! It's so pretty!" She looked at the gloves and expensive-looking mask that accompanied it, gingerly picking up the latter. "Wow..."

"I keep it for special occasions and fancy parties."

"Aaand since you never go to any of those..."

"Yup. Never wear the damn thing." Her red fingers slid along the smooth fabric tenderly. "I was gonna wear this for a party a while back with you, but it got cancelled, so the plans did too."

"Aww. And now father gets to see you in it, and I don't. Not that you won't stand out anyways because of that pretty red skin of yours."

"That's what the mask is for, dear," she said, grabbing up the hangar the dress was on and taking it to the refresher, along with what appeared to be a makeup container. "No peeking."

"I'll go let father know to expect your arrival," Keira replied excitedly, tinged with no small amount of anticipation.

Once the door shut behind her, the dress was hung on a wall mounted hook before the Zeltron took up the box and set it on the counter before stripping down to nothing but her underwear. *Black. I'll need to change that before I take off.* Qyreia leaned onto the sink, looking at herself in the mirror with a somewhat nervous air despite her earlier rambunctiousness. *This is gonna be interesting,* she thought as her eyes scanned down from her blue hair, over her bare red chest, down to her hips where the counter cut off the reflection.

There would be dozens, maybe hundreds of people attending. Some would be in more fanciful and elaborate costumes, some would be more formal like Atra had requested. *After his comment about trying "the more aged wine," I sure as hell wasn't about to wear anything skimpy.* Despite the memory, she wondered what her date for the evening would be wearing. Shaking the thoughts away, she resumed her mirror scrutiny.

“Damn red skin,” she muttered quietly, picking up a hypospray from the box that would transform her.

It had been rather pricey for something so small. Her hair was a simple matter, using a temporary dye that dulled the cobalt blue to a slate black. This medication, for lack of a better term, would chemically alter her skin pigment to the traditional off-pink that was so iconic to humans. The concoction was supposed to last anywhere between forty eight to seventy two hours, so there was no worry of a mid-party faux pas. It still felt wrong, somehow, for the Zeltron to use the device; as though she were just covering up yet another part of her heritage. No better costume in the galaxy than changing your biological appearance altogether though.

“Let’s just get this kriffing over with.”

Taking the injector in hand, she pressed it to her neck and felt the short, sharp sting as the chemicals surged into her bloodstream. *Side effects may include nausea, blurry vision, dizziness, and ringing in the ears.* It was short-lived, but Qyreia was hit with each and every one, and she nearly toppled over. The effect was powerful enough that Keira could sense something was wrong, and she began knocking on the door.

“Hey, you alright in there?”

“Fine! F-fine. Just... gimme a minute, okay?”

After several minutes of these side effects, they wore off, allowing Qyreia to regain her composure and see the main effect. “Whoa... that’s kinda astral.” Her skin had paled just as described and, after a quick application of the hair dye, all that remained of her old self was her steely-blue eye color. Not wanting to worry Keira any more than necessary, she slipped into her dress, pausing momentarily to marvel at her altered appearance[†] before opening the door to reveal the Gray Jedi waiting just outside.

Keira’s expression was priceless. “Whaa...?”

“I was hoping to use this fancy stuff with you, but... yeah. Disguise-costume-thing complete?”

Her partner grabbed her tenderly by the shoulders and looked up and down two or three more times, still unsure that this was the same Qyreia despite what she knew in her heart. “You are just too much for me, you know that?”

“Got a broken shower on record to prove it.” The flat look from Keira’s eyes brought a laugh from the Zeltron’s throat that she suppressed as best as possible. “Sorry. I’m glad you like it, though.”

“If it weren’t for that signature hair of yours I doubt father would even recognize you, and you even changed the color on that too.” She looked longingly at the human-looking Zeltron before a thought popped into her head and she dashed off. “I just had a thought!”

“Did it hurt?”

“Ha ha, very funny jerkface.” Returning from the kitchen, Keira produced a box that had been come in the mail only days before. “I thought that, since you and father are such connoisseurs, then you could share this drink your folks sent us.”

“Ohhh, no no no. That’s for *us* to share.”

“Then save me a little. Or I’ll tell your folks that I wanted you and father to have a good time. Either way, I insist. We can always get more.”

Qyreia’s expression soured, but she took the small box with the paired bottles within. “You’re lucky I’m such an enabler when it comes to you.”

“Don’t I know it. Now go! I already called a taxi to get you to the starport and chartered a shuttle to Arcona space.”

There was no time to question whose money had been used to pay for these extravagances, already rushed as she was to put on her fancy shoes and pick up the other accoutrements of her outfit before being sent into the taxi with a fond goodbye kiss. *If I get home in one piece, I might just tell her how much I love her*, the finely-dressed mercenary thought with a smile. The taxi ride was short and quiet, just as Qyreia had hoped. It offered the vain

[†] <http://aronan.deviantart.com/art/Masquerade-Q-human-disguise-591000219>

hope of similar conditions on the shuttle, since she would be attending the Arconan soiree on *their* time schedule. A nap during the trip would at least ensure that she would stay awake for the party.

Contrary to the norm, the taxi was given leave to take her directly to the landing pad. *Okay, that's weird. Saves me from having to walk around in this thing though.* Closing her eyes for a moment, enjoying the smooth sway of the vehicle, the Zeltron didn't even realize when they stopped until she heard the door being opened for her.

Seeing Atra standing by the open boarding ramp was another unexpected twist.

"H-hey Atra."

"Hey yourself," he replied with a surprising amount of gentility. "I'm surprised. Didn't know you came in models other than 'tomboy'. Gotta say, the change is appreciated."

Qyreia was used to his sense of humor enough to note the compliment. "You look nice too, jerk."

Her date was wearing what appeared to be nice, black pants with a charcoal gray shirt tucked in. All this was overlaid by a dark gray and black jacket or shirt, depending on one's perspective, that reached down to his knees, clasped by buckles and leather straps that didn't detract from the otherwise soft, formal appearance of the garment. Beckoning her forward to board the ship, they took their seats in the passenger section while they were ferried off to Arconan space.

"You know," Qyreia mentioned as she looked about the cabin, "feels kinda weird to not be the one flying for once."

"I almost forgot about your penchant for being the pilot for these clanmates of yours."

"They used to be yours too."

"Used to be," he said with finality, deflecting any further talk on the matter. "Might I ask what the box is for?"

"Surprise for later. Keira demanded that I share it with you, despite that my folks had sent it for me and her to have." Her eyes looked pensively at the box for a moment before turning back to the half-breed. "Sorry, that sounded really bad. Nothing against you, I just..."

"Don't worry about it. I was voluntold to invite someone. Only makes sense that you'd be given a similar task."

Qyreia's eyes watched him carefully, but with less hostility than she had expected by this point. "You're being awfully nice to me, considering how things went last time."

"Too bad no one would believe you if you told them." She would have thought he was serious if not for the slight grin on his lips. "You can relax. I have no intention of making tonight difficult for you."

The thought was reassuring, and the Zeltron even managed a smile. It seemed like there was far more to Atra Ventus than she had originally thought. The trip to Arcona space would be short enough, but the night was sure to be a long one. Perhaps she would see even more of the Combat Master's good points.

The Citadel, Estle City Selen, Dajorra System

When the shuttle landed on the capital world of the Shadow Clan, it seemed that the festivities were already well underway. Decorative lights seemed to adorn every molding and cornice of the elaborate complex, while holograms of ghosts paired comically with the apparently handmade counterparts that hung by strings from the ceiling and archways. It seemed such a waste, Qyreia thought as they left the crowded landing area, that Keira couldn't have come along. Even the Zeltron hadn't seen a party like this in years. Not a figure among the multitude was recognizable: some donned masks and fine attire like Atra and herself, while a great number wore more elaborate fare.

"Wow," the disguised near-human said as a bluish, furry creature scurried by while brandishing a whiskey bottle. "Hah! Great Ryn costume that guy had!"

"That *was* a Ryn," Atra said. "Don't pay any attention to him."

“Don’t go getting gloomy on me,” she said, taking his arm in hers. “Besides, he looked like he was having fun. That’s what a party is all about.”

The tall Force user grumbled something indiscernible, drowned out by music and the myriad voices around them, but relaxed a bit as the Zeltron squeezed his arm. Contrary to her outward appearance, Qyreia was rather nervous around so many people. With tensions being what they were within the Brotherhood, such a venue seemed the perfect place for an ambush. What’s more, she was unarmed and in unfamiliar territory, to say nothing for how her date was in the top echelons of the Inquisitorius. Thus, her grip was less to motivate the Umbaran and more to keep herself from panicking. At least he didn’t seem to mind too much.

Making their way through the crowd, past the great tree of the sheltered but no less lively courtyard, the duo had finally reached a comfort zone when a high-pitched, bubbly voice erupted over the din.

“Atra!” A tall, dark skinned woman with snow white hair that had been greeting people at the entrance vaulted forward, landing with a gymnast’s grace directly in front of them. “Attiebuns! I almost thought you weren’t going to make it!”

“Attiebuns?” Qyreia asked, hardly suppressing a grin as her eyes glanced sideward at the Combat Master with amused curiosity. Atra only rolled his eyes in silence.

“And *you*!” Before the Zeltron could react, the hyperactive woman had torn her from her partner’s arm and wrapped her in an exuberant embrace. “So *you’re* who I’ve heard so much about! Sort of. Anyway, new friend, hello!”

“Mrphr frm fr?” She hadn’t noticed that her ‘new friend’ was firmly braced in her cleavage, muffling the mercenary’s voice to unintelligible gibberish.

“Oh, I’m sorry honey,” she said, relaxing her hold. “Try again?”

“Who are you again?” Despite the plethora of thoughts racing through her mind, the elaborate mask couldn’t hide the smile that had erupted on her lips.

“Oh, I’m sorry! I’m Atyiru Caesura Entar.”

“The Consul of Arcona,” Atra intoned flatly, hinting at some formality that his date knew nothing about.

The Shadow Lady ignored the half-breed, head inclined toward the Zeltron as though looking at her from behind the elaborate sash that covered her eyes – or would have if she had any. “You can call me Atty. Or Atyiru. Whichever you like better. Just no *Consul* this or *ma’am* that, okeedokee?”

Qyreia didn’t know what to say. With everything that had been happening of late – her fight with the Resistance, the arguments with Keira, the constant battle to simply stay alive – it felt like a dark shroud had fallen over the Zeltron. Then suddenly this woman bounded forward, like a light in the dark, and called her “friend.” She didn’t even know the mercenary’s name; didn’t know the things she had done to other people, or the pain that she had suffered herself.

Neither the human disguise nor the mask could hide the tears welling up in the Zeltron’s eyes.

Wrapping her arms around the Miraluka, she buried her face in the taller woman’s chest, breaths shuddering as the emotional overload took over. Everything she had kept pent up and hidden away from everyone else came flooding out in a steady stream of tears and quiet sobs. She’d expected Atyiru to recoil or flinch at the sudden, odd display. Instead, she felt the healer’s arms envelope her tenderly, a hand stroking at her dyed dull-black hair.

“Shh, shh, it’s okay,” the Augur said soothingly. Her head inclined slightly toward Atra. *What did you do?* she mouthed, to which the man could only shrug.

“S-sorry,” Qyreia muttered after several long moments of venting her anxieties. “I’m... It’s just been rough lately.” She bit her lip, eyes nervously downcast as she wiped away the vestiges of the waterworks. “I’m Qyreia. M-most folks just call me Q.”

“What do *you* want me to call you?”

“Qyreia? Friend? I like both.”

“Alright Qyreia. Just know that you never need to apologize to me, alright?” The Zeltron nodded, lifting her eyes up briefly before turning them downward again. “And just because I don’t have eyes doesn’t mean I can’t see you looking like that. Cheer up, silly! It’s a party!”

“Okay,” she squeaked, half a whisper amidst the surrounding echoes.

The Consul turned to Atra. “You take care of her, Attiebuns.” She tipped Qyreia’s head up to look her in the face. “If you ever need anything, you just give me a call alright?”

“Same to you,” she said, finally managing a smile. “Thanks... Atty.”

As they walked away, the Shadow Lady waving behind them, Atra leaned in to speak to the Zeltron. “Are you going to be up for this?”

“I think I’ll be okay.” She took his arm in hers just as before, her smile broadening and expression less morose. “I’ve got a good date with me.”

Whether or not he enjoyed the remark was difficult to tell, but a slight smirk touched at the corner of his mouth that put the mercenary more at ease. A good thing too, as the atmosphere quickly grew thick with the heat of hundreds of moving bodies, all collected into a grand hall converted into the central party area. Tables lined the walls, their platforms covered with decorations, bowls of punch, and cornucopias of sweets and treats. More elaborate drinks were available at the dispersed stations manned by the more friendly personnel; the grumpier staff relegated to the role of bedsheet ghosts, providing the occasional jump-scare from around corners or within randomly placed cargo crates. From overhead came the glow of hundreds of colorful lights and the flickering of paper lamps, setting a perfect atmosphere for the revelry’s theme.

Staring in wonderment at all of the fine, nuanced intricacies of the decorations and the party itself, Qyreia was surprised when she felt a slight tug on her mask. Her hand went to the back of her head to feel Atra gently adjusting knot in the dark blue ribbon, loosened in the interactions with the high-spirited Miraluka. The polished stone and burnished gold of the guise tugged snugly against her paled skin, a ruddy blush creeping across her cheeks as the Seer finished his work.

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” he said from behind his own brushed-steel face cover.

Looking around fleetingly for a way to take her mind off of the conflicting thoughts running rampant through her head, she spied the tables along the wall and tugged at Atra’s sleeve. “How about a drink?”

“Sounds good. I’m going to need it with folks like Atyiru watching me.”

Qyreia chuckled as they wove through the crowd. “I like her. Think she’d have a problem if I sent her a message from time to time?”

“I think I would never hear the end of how happy it’d made her,” he replied, his voice sounding tired from the mere thought.

They collected the cups handed to them from the person in charge of the punch bowl and looked out over the hall. “What did she mean when she said she’d heard of me? Didn’t realize I was that famous.”

“The rulers of Arcona have their ways,” Atra said pensively. His tone suggested he knew more, but wasn’t about to go into it at length. “As I recall, the first time I met you was back on Sepros at an event like this.”

The Zeltron nodded, taking a sip of her drink. “Yep. Been a whole year in the Brotherhood.”

“And that was when you, if I recall correctly, ‘had the hots for me.’”

A hesitant cough whispered past her pale lips. “Yeeeah... I was kinda hoping you’d forgotten I said that.” She cast a sideward glance at the half-breed, watching his expression and looking him over. “So you remember then?”

“Bits and pieces,” he returned casually. “A lot happened back then.”

The gray and blue eyes of the Zeltron watched him thoughtfully for another moment before she turned to set down her cup. When she came to face Atra again, she was holding the mysterious box that she had brought all

the way from Aeotheran. Her eyes darted from the box to the man, back and forth, until finally her deft fingers thumbed the lid open to reveal two corked porcelain bottles, just large enough to fill the hand of someone Atra's size. Gingerly hefting one in her smaller, pale pink hand, she offered it to the Combat Master with almost none of her earlier reluctance.

"Here. I think now's as good a time as any."

Taking the sieve, he followed his companion's example and slipped the cork from the neck of the fragile looking container. In the dim light, the Umbaran could clearly discern the colorless, translucent liquid within. It gave off no scent that he could make out, piquing his interest somewhat. Raising her own bottle in toast, Qyreia clinked the containers together, an uneasy smile on her lips.

"Here's to continuing to not kill each other."

"Is that really the best toast you can make?"

"I'm nervous. Don't judge me." She sighed to collect her thoughts. "Here's to getting along and surviving another year?"

"Better," he said, tapping her bottle carefully before drinking the contents. When the draught reached his tongue, he noticed a distinct lack of flavor that brought a tinge of worry to his earlier interest. "You didn't happen to catch what this is called, did you?"

"Ambrosia of Love or some such," the Zeltron said, likewise noting the lack of flavor, but not paying it much heed. "Never heard of it before, so I figured it was a new liquor on Zeltros."

"Are your drinks usually so... bland?"

"Usually no, but they're always coming up with some weird concoction or another back home." *I can't imagine mom or dad sending me something like this though.* The pair looked away from their bottles and at each other, curious about the contents but otherwise not feeling any worse for the experience. *I guess it could be worse. At least I've got the old Atra back... kinda.* He was about to grab another cup of the strong punch when a gentle percussion line lit the air and Qyreia's eyes went wide. "Holy snot, I haven't heard this song in ages!"

"It's alright I suppose."

"Come on," she said, tugging at his hand earnestly. "Let's dance."

Atra hesitated, resisting the pull of the Zeltron who seemed to have lost some of her earlier anxiety. "I'm not much of a dancer. Formalized dancing, sure, but..."

"It's the same thing," she said, pulling close to grab his other hand. "Just... a bit faster. More improvisation."

"You are nothing *but* improvisation."

"And that's why folks love me so much. Come on Atraaa."

The pleading face was difficult to resist, even for the Force user so famous for his gloom and brooding. "Fine, but don't say I didn't warn you."

Hissing a quick victory cry, the disguised Zeltron tore through the crowd with the Umbaran hot on her heels. *What have I gotten myself into?* he thought to himself. At least he could appreciate the view. While not sporting the curves he was more fond of, the mercenary's slim athletic form wore the fine cloth of her dress well. Where before he had contented himself with the occasional perusal of the woman's outline, he found himself taking more and more of her in, like a hunger that only grew the more he ate. What thoughts cascaded through his mind when she turned and smiled at him, even he could not translate.

There was little respite to dwell on these musings. As the instruments picked up their melody and tempo, so too did Qyreia's step. At first, the half-breed could only do his best to keep up with the female that was leading their little dance. With practiced observation and surprising speed, Atra was able to pick up on his partner's motions, syncing with the rhythm of the music and her body in equal measure. Staccatoed steps became fluid and smooth. Simple shuffles became spinning flourishes.

Despite the crowded confines of the hall, it was as though the pair of them were in their own little world. Only weeks earlier, they had been ready to kill each other. Now they were like lovers lost in a sea of music. The Combat Master found his usual control and composure slipping into more indulgent facets, drinking in everything from Qyreia's smell to the crane of her neck when she spun deftly into him. Even without the outpour of pheromones made signature by her race, there was an allure that tugged him closer and closer and, as he did so, she likewise pressed him more and more. Their breath came heavy as their hearts beat faster and faster, all the earlier cares lost to the winds of passion offered by the costumed anonymity.

It was paradise.

They couldn't have guessed how many songs passed before their senses finally came back to them, Qyreia backed into the Force user with his arms entwined around her from some elaborate maneuver she could hardly remember. It was all a blur of excitement, the only evidence outside of the small, avid audience around them being the fine dew of sweat on their brows. As the final note strung out in a declining tone, she could feel Atra's hand sliding up her thigh, bared from the slit of her dress. When she turned her head to look at him, he was so close that she could feel his breath on her lips.

The scattered applause brought them back to their senses, and the Zeltron pulled away with a hesitance she didn't understand. Beneath her elaborate mask, the Privateer was flushed nearly to a red that matched her usual skin tone. *Frackin' hell, did that really just happen?* She looked over at her date, her vibrant eyes catching his attention enough to distract him from the weight of his waning restraint.

"So you *are* a Zeltron," Atra said, breaking the silence between them. "You are full of surprises."

"Stick around. You'll find plenty more where *that* came from." She looked around for a moment. "I'm gonna hit the refresher real quick. Feel like a drink after I get back?"

He nodded, watching his date saunter away toward one of the side rooms. For a fleeting moment, he saw the shimmering outline of a woman who could only have been the Long family Matron off in a distant corner. Whether she was enjoying the festivities or merely taking a walk, he could only guess. The diminutive woman disappeared from sight before he could concoct a conscious thought on the matter, turning his attention back toward the expectant return of the Zeltron. Absentmindedly stroking his dash of facial hair, he caught the unique scent of the woman on his fingertips, causing them to linger unconsciously by his flaring nostrils.

In the midst of this unceremonious act, his feral eyes caught movement near the refresher that Qyreia had ventured toward. Movement in itself was not unusual, but the nature of the motion caught his attention such that he ventured forth through the crowd into the darkened recesses of the elaborate stonework.

The masked figure stood no chance against the Force user.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?" he hissed, dragging them further into the shadows where his preternatural vision stood at an advantage over the more mundane capacities of the surrounding humans and near-humans.

"That woman," the figure choked from beneath Atra's grasp, "said her name was Qyreia. She's a... member of the Resistance. We have orders."

The Umbaran pressed the creature into the wall, unseen energies curling into his frame to add strength to his already impressive force. "She's *mine*," he growled. The would-be assassin nodded, only to feel the grip on his skull and throat tighten more and more. When Atra left the shadows, he was alone.

Had that happened earlier in the evening, he would have said it was for Keira's sake. Now, he was less sure of his motives. Here, she was his guest; under his protection. No, there was more to it when he had laid claim to the Zeltron. An innate trust and burning desire filled his mind whenever he allowed the image of her face to pass through his mental vision.

While Atra pondered these things, Qyreia was staring at herself in the refresher mirror, smiling nervously as she washed her hands. *What is going on tonight? I haven't danced like that since... since before I left home.* She inspected her paled skin and blackened hair, making sure the disguise was still intact. *And Atra... Frack me, what was in that drink?* She tore through her memories, trying to think of anything like the concoction they had imbibed. The name itself rang no bells of recollection, but the total lack of flavor or smell or even color seemed so familiar.

“Augh. Whatever it is, it’s making me lose my mind out there.” *Is that such a bad thing though?* “It is when I’m getting’ felt up on a dance floor.” *You didn’t seem to mind at the time.* “Yeah, well... I mind now.” Her eyes darted to a woman walking by that was eyeing her warily. “What?! You never seen a girl talk to herself before?! Scram!”

I wish I could just not care, she thought as the other occupant darted away. Her hand clutched tightly at the mask, ribbon hanging loose and limp over her wrist. She wanted to dash it against the mirror; destroy the image of the one starting her in the face so that she could forget who she was and where she was. *At any rate, I should probably head back out before that guy starts wondering if someone’s started a fight with me in here.*

As Qyreia left the refresher to reunite with Atra, a certain Shadow Lady was investigating a pair of porcelain bottles that had been presented to her by some of the security staff. They seemed innocuous enough, and there was no foul odor or other such hint of foul play about them. Atyiru dismissed herself from the party for a moment, feigning that she needed to get some fresh air, before heading toward a small alcove well removed from the crowds and any prying eyes.

“Let’s see what we have here,” she hummed, taking a sample of the few lingering drops of liquid from within the vessels and putting it through a chemical spectrometer. The machine buzzed almost with a music of its own, though an onlooker would question if the Consul was in tune with the machine, or the machine with her. When it finally finished with a soft *beep*, the Augur listened intently to the composition. “That sounds almost familiar...” It didn’t take long to find the culprit through a cursory search of exotic compounds, especially given the unique nature of the cork’s material. *A Zeltron elixir of infatuation, huh? Interesting. Well, it’s not poison at least,* she thought with a relieved sigh, making her way back to the party. *Still, whoever drank that is in for a wild night I bet.*

“Hey!” Qyreia said she squeezed through the crowd, fingers still trying to tie back the mask to her face. “Sorry I took so long. Wanted to get the sweat out from under this damn thing.”

“Don’t worry,” he said, stepping forward and taking the ribbons in his fingers. “You didn’t miss anything.”

The woman looked up at him, her eyes watching him warily though not for lack of trust. She could feel the cool, smooth surface of the mask’s interior tighten against her skin as much as she could feel her chest tighten when Atra stepped even closer as he finished the knot. *Don’t do it, Atra,* she thought, seeing the look in his eyes. *I’m not myself right now.* Qyreia’s head inclined as his hand cupped her cheek, his thumb catching lightly on the golden edge of her mask. They weren’t dancing this time, yet their breath melded as before. She could feel his heat on her lips as her eyes closed unbidden. *I can’t stop this.*

...This isn’t me.