

Endearingly Awkward

Glass beads and silk flowers decorated Maenaki's crimson hair. Its various strands were tightly braided at both temples, leaving a flaming river smoothly pouring between her shoulders and ending at her lower back. Her warrior braided-mane accentuated her delicately tapered ears, leaving them framed and sticking out of thin curls. Hung around her slender shoulders was a wide piece of sheer fabric. A delicate platinum hoop connected the two sides at the center of her chest and a two more attached to her wrists. Smokey metallic embellishments outlined the frame of her black silken gown, forcing the eye to the features she wanted to be seen. Hanging in the groove of the dress' plummeting neckline was a shining, heart-shaped, bright red pendant that seemed to glow with an inner light.

The Seeker was pleased when she entered the room and all eyes abruptly passed over her, concealing a small sneer behind a placid and emotionless visage. It always amused her when a room of people was too proper to admire something lovely. Her sea-green eyes took in everyone on her late walk to her place facing the stairs. After a few moments, everyone finally looked.

Except this one.

She caught sight of her target as she scanned the Summit in the room, casually and politely smiled at any leers and glares she met. On the other side of the Consul's ostentatious throne, looking malicious as ever, stood the Seltron's new favorite pet project. The Arconae looked as disapproving as ever and Maenaki had to conceal a small smile that tried to creep across her lips, having found herself recalling his avoidance for physical contact. It was an amusing challenge to get close to him.

The Battlelord would have usually been paying very close attention to such an important series of meetings, however, it seemed as though one particularly recalcitrant Battleteam member could not stop her incessant griping. The purple Twi'lek stood barking up everyone's trees and the Consul looked about ready to throw a ball and make the ex-slave play fetch. Then the Aedile felt it: a sudden calm rushed over the Summit, enticing the Seeker to catch another glimpse of of her prey.

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His Excellency, Timeros Caesus Entar Arconae, stood next to the Serpentine Throne and did as was bid of him by his Consul. He listened to the complaints of whining children and ignored his instinct to drop them, sobbing, to the floor. The Elder took a

deliberately slow inhale as yet another mouthy woman with headtails, who yelled in his direction, turned her back and walked away. But the Adept simply pushed the thought from his head as the *new* Aedile stepped forward.

Having only spent a few weeks giving this replacement an introduction to Arconan leadership, Timeros still knew little to nothing about her. He *did* know that some of his most steeled and dutiful guards could be seen to exchange small smiles with her. They seemed to, beyond that, respect her and speak of her in high regard. But the Arconae still did not presume to trust the Battlelord. Afterall, he knew his apprentice, the former Aedile, well enough to know her judgement was...lacking.

Maenaki stood before the dais, her long dress gliding softly past her ankles and a long slit showing her leg and her high and unsuitable shoes. Timeros narrowed his eyes, begrudging the fact that she took none of his advice on combat appropriate clothing.

“I’m not a soldier. I can defend myself well enough, however, I did not come here to instructed to be a barbaric gun-slinger... That’s what Arcona has people like you for.”

“I cannot impart the information required of me if I am being denied access to it. You simply cannot possibly believe that I can send our people to do *their* jobs without knowing *what* I am sending them into. If I can’t be given the resources to do my job properly, at least tell Terran to be here so I can get temporary access through him.”

A series of huffs, scoffs and chuckling was heard through the large chamber and Timeros saw Atyriu smile.

“Maenaki,” the Miraluka said, shifting slightly in her seat, “you are completely correct. You have been an invaluable asset since you have joined our ranks and have proven yourself a loyal member of Arcona. However, I’m afraid not everyone shares my feelings, so we will take this slowly. You will be given full access to files and information, but only as you need it. That is as much as we can do for you right now, but it should be enough to keep Qel-Dromans out of unnecessary harm. Was there anything else?”

“No, my Lady. And thank you.” The Seltron moved away from the stairs and back to her place as the next speaker took the floor.

“Brother, I don’t need eyes to see your disapproving frown,” Atyriu whispered over her shoulder.

Timeros said nothing, allowing the Aedile of Galares to speak. The small Ryn man seemed to sway on his feet as he talked with his hands, tail twitching uncomfortably as he tried to address the Summit with carefully worded phrases. The Entar clasped his hands behind his back and let his gaze scan the crowd. Most of the gathered Summit had their eyes on either Kordath, the floor or their Consul, but Maenaki had been looking at him. She averted her gaze back to Atyriu once their eyes met, her face unchanging, as though she had expected to get caught.

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The Seltron felt her ears twitch once the Arconae shifted his gaze back to the Shadow Lady, alerting her to the gaze of another. She turned her head, looking towards the large doors that made up the entrance to the grand room. Terran stood by one of the doors, gesturing toward her. The Aedile sighed, glancing quickly at the Consul, who smiled eerily in her direction. With a relieved sigh, the Seltron gave a quick bow and backed away from the platform. She turned around smoothly and made her exit.

“So, Maenaki...Did you have fun?” Terran asked, sarcasm coating his tone as he gave a roguish smile.

“Please, just call me Mae. And it was an enlightening experience.” The Seeker waited a moment, catching a glimpse of the Kiffar raising an eyebrow, before she continued. “Please tell me those meetings are no longer mandatory. I could be writing reports or picking glitter out of the carpet instead.”

The Quaestor chuckled, “I think you’re off the hook. For now. Quite a few people still have a hair up their ass about you...You seem to have the staff fawning over you and that’s making people nervous.”

Maenaki missed a step as her high-heeled shoe slipped on the marbled floor. She barely caught herself as Terran turned around, not bothering to stifle the urge to laugh at her. Her pink cheeks showed no sign of humiliation and she grinned as she fell back into step, brushing off the back of her skirt with a shrug.

“I’m sorry, but being untrustworthy because I am polite and charming...” she laughed, “that’s absolutely ridiculous. Are all Arconans so afraid of a little levity?”

“Heh, you could say that,” Terran said, reaching his office and opening the door. “Come on in. I’ll get you an access code and then you can get back to Ol’val. By the time you get back everything should be unlocked for you. I will be staying in Estle for

another day, then I'll be back. Just send me a message if you have any issues."

"You're very...administrative for someone with a smile like that." Maenaki's ears twitched as she spoke softly, but with a straight face.

"Why else do'ya think Atty keeps me around?" the Quaestor retorted as he opened a drawer in his desk. "And here ya go. Shouldn't be too much of an issue, just plug it into your console and it should do the rest."

The Seeker smiled, bowing her head slightly in gratitude as she held her hand out. Terran dropped the datachip into the High Inquisitor's palm and smiled as she politely thanked him. They both wore sly grins as Maenaki left his office.

Terran brought his wrist up to the top of the desk and flipped on the comm. He pressed a few buttons and waited for the response.

"Is it done?" the voice on the other side asked, jumping directly into business.

"Yeah. She's got it." Terran smiled, "And I-

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"Yeah, good talkin to you too." Terran muttered as he dropped his wrist to his side. He had no choice but to heed the Consul and her corpse-like advisor. Atyiru did promise to add a bonus to his stipend, payment for humoring the Arconae. The Quaestor, however, knew Atty well enough to know that she really agreed with the Elder's plan. Fortunately for him, the Kiffar's mercurial nature had him wondering about the stipend instead of anything else.

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Timeros sat behind his desk, focusing on his console and waiting patiently for the impending alert. A quick flash of yellow appeared on the screen and the Arconae quickly activated the bug. It was a simple enough procedure and after a few quick clicks Maenaki's access code was being tracked. Each file the new Aedile searched for would be logged and forwarded to both Timeros and Atyriu, providing them with the ability to keep track of her from their distance on Selen. But it would go through the Adept first.

As the Elder shut down his console and set about gathering his few things to leave, buzzing peeled through his quarters.

“Enter,” Timeros said, making a motion with his hand towards the door. It slid open and Maenaki stepped in. No sign of fear or anxiety crossed her face, even as the Arconae stood straight and faced her. “Do you require something, Aedile?”

“In fact I do, Your Excellency.” The Seeker sighed, stepping further into the room and smiling politely at the Arconae. “I’m sorry to tell you this, but I am needed on Ol’val and will be returning. Thus, I don’t believe I’ll be able to make our next sparring lesson.”

“I am aware. You did not just come here for that.” The way Timeros stated it as a fact and not as a question made the Seltron’s ears twitch. She could feel the desire to grin growing and forced herself to give the Adept a courteous nod instead. Afterall, smiling did nothing to evoke feelings from a stone.

“Of course, my Lord Arconae. I came here because I was hoping you would join me for dinner.”

Unlike Maenaki, Timeros had very little ability when it came to reading people. Her tone sounded sincere, her smile appeared gentle, but the Elder was hesitant. Arcona, and even the Brotherhood, was known for its hedonistic and malicious women. He kept his thoughts off K’tana as he stood still, icy-blue eyes trying to weed out her intentions. As he searched for his answer, the Aedile grew bored.

“Timeros, it’s only dinner.” Maenaki laughed, making a small gesture with her hand. “I’m not going to burn down the Citadel if you reject the offer. I simply wished to present you the option before we return to active duty. It will be quite some time before we meet again.”

A few more moments passed. Maenaki kept looking at the Adept, her face carefully and studiously neutral as she waited for his response. Somewhere behind the Entar’s motionless face, she knew, his clockwork mind was whirring, drawing conclusions and coming up with an answer.

Then, finally, he inclined his head a fraction of an inch.

The Seltron smiled, tilting her head down to hide some of the glee, and pushed a small braid behind her ear.

“Fantastic. I suppose you would prefer discretion, as I would. So I will go make a reservation and send you the time and location. I’ll be sure that the restaurant is...quiet.” Maenaki smiled, looking at him for some twitch of approval.

I wonder if he creaks, she wondered to herself, hiding her amusement behind her amorous grin.

“As well, discretion would be advised for the location,” came the Elder’s nearly robotic reply. Maenaki dropped the excitement back down and slid fluidly back into being polite and diplomatic.

“Of course. Until then.” Without waiting for permission to leave, the Aedile turned and walked out, leaving Timeros uncomfortably staring after her for a moment before returning to his task

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Maenaki may not have known about the tracking device on her datachip, but she had been in the business of diplomatic espionage for nearly four decades. All the tips and tricks, all the dos and don’ts, and all the ways to get access to places she did not belong, was her job. Acquiring proof of their trust in her had been the point of her meeting with the Summit and she believed that their gift of extra access was enough, for now.

Regardless, the Seeker preferred using the information given by a useful and living source, especially over Black Ops dossiers- which tended to be highly edited when dropped down the political shoot. Whatever juicy secrets were to be found, they would come straight from the mouth of her mostly-live prey.

The Aedile made her way to the visitors' hall and found her quarters easily enough. Although they lacked most of the amenities she had acquired for her ship, the room had everything she needed to change and freshen up. Fortunately, this time, she brought an extra set of clothes.

A fairly large bag sat on the quaint bed and Maenaki smiled as she walked over to it. She pried it open and gently pulled out another intricate black dress. This particular outfit was her favorite, consisting of various accessories and a plethora of interchangeable pieces. The Aedile slowly laid the dress on the mattress, smoothing out the bumps and feeling the cool precious stones against her fingertips. Once it was perfectly flat, she reached back into the bag and pulled out a coil of large feathers, a

corset and pair of long black stockings. At the bottom of the bag were several pairs of shoes, all varying in height of heel and design.

Once dressed, the Seltron tightened a few braids, sitting by her console and making the reservation. She quickly checked her reflection as she made her way out of the room, making sure to forward the time and location of the restaurant as she passed.

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Timeros received the message a few moments later and locked up his office. His face was placid, stoic as ever, but his mind was abuzz with the whirring gears of a soldier. Maenaki had promised discretion and the Elder found her choice and actions acceptable and that she had, in fact, kept her promise. The building was not far from the Citadel, hidden between two larger and bustling restaurants and going unnoticed by the majority of civilians.

Inside the decor was rich, but not lacking in tact or elegance, and the lighting was dim. Most of the seats near the window were left empty, but low voices could be heard coming from a small staircase which lead to an upper floor. A small man with greying hair and deep mauve skin made his way over from behind one of the kitchen doors.

“May I help you, m’Lord?”

Timeros realized that Maenaki had not given him a reservation name and was about to leave when he heard the Aedile’s voice ring out.

“Timeros, thank you for coming.”

The Elder turned around, finding Maenaki to be standing halfway down the stairs. He noticed she had, once again, changed into something that would be detrimental in combat. Long black feathers draped down over her full lace sleeves and connected to a collar of plumage that lay against the bunch of intricately woven crimson braids. The lace bodice was overlapped by silver strands and a silken skirt poured down into a shining river over the closest stair.

Timeros read this as restricted breathing, limited mobility, and impractical in every way. Yet he still could not take his eyes off of it. How it seemed to glide over her body like dark water...

“Won’t you come join me?” she beckoned, walking slowly up the stairs. The Elder’s jaw twitched in his discomfort, but he was already moving towards her.

Maenaki lead Timeros to a table, far enough away from prying eyes and ears for his approval, and he sat down across from her.

“You did not provide a name,” he stated simply, casting a cool look to a young Zabrak woman as she offered to pour him a drink.

“Be polite,” the Seeker whispered, giving him a wave of her hand before turning her attention back to the waitress. “Yes please, dear. Pay his glacial stare no mind. Being that lovely clearly came with a cost.”

“Yes Ma’am,” the Zabrak giggled as she filled the glasses, avoiding the Adept’s gaze until she left them alone.

“Pardon my teasing, but we do not wish to upset the staff. At least not until after we eat.” Maenaki folded her hands on the table and smiled softly. “Now, what was that about a name?”

“For the reservation,” Timeros said with a slight gesture toward the table.

“Oh, do forgive me. I should have told you in the message. They do not ask for names here. A simple description is required. Had I known you would wear the same clothes I would have been more precise. But I did promise discretion.” The Seeker chuckled softly as she raised a playful brow.

“In the future you will know to provide more information about the setting...and formality of your arrangements.” The Entar shrugged, looking unphased as the waitress returned with her offerings of the menu.

“Now, now. You’ll be making the arrangements next time. I would like the caramelized feen, please.” Maenaki smirked at the waitress, who had to bite her lip to stifle a laugh before nodding and turning to Timeros. The Arconae glanced at the woman and, in a surprisingly polite tone, requested some strangely named dish. He looked directly into Maenaki’s aquatic eyes and the corner of his lip twitched.

“You presume that a next time will happen.” Again, Timeros stated and did not ask. This time he caught the flicker of movement as the half-Sephi’s ears wiggled through her braids. Maenaki smiled, a single slender brow raising ever-so-slightly as she carefully considered her next words.

The Seeker focused on his pupils, but quickly realized it was far too dim for her to tell if they had dilated from her comment or if it was just the lack of light. Her mind raced for another option. The Aedile could see that even his breathing remained as slow and barely noticeable - as it always was. She realized then that she could not read the Adept. At least not his body language and certainly not in the dimly set room. She was sure that she could probe his feelings for a clue, but refused to give herself away over the mistake of underestimating him. The challenge was intoxicating.

“I do,” she stated confidently. “Would you care to know why?”

Timeros raised an eyebrow and gave his curt nod.

“Because I prepaid for our meal and drinks. In professional terms, that means you owe me. And,” she paused, tilting her head slightly and looking up at the Arconae through her lashes, “on more personal terms, I wanted to leave an open ended invitation.”

Timeros’ brow twitched, his eyes narrowing slightly as Maenaki raised her head and gave him a half-smile. He shifted his gaze to the dark purple liquid in his glass, waiting for the Aedile to take hers first. Quickly picking up the social cue, the Seeker lifted her glass and slowly inhaled. The Entar followed suit before he brought the crystalline rim to his mouth.

Maenaki suddenly coughed, a quiet and disapproving sound. She wrinkled her nose and scowled at the wine glass with a dark look of contempt.

“It’s much sweeter than I expected.”

“Perhaps you should not order dessert wine before dinner,” Timeros mocked before slowly sipping the syrupy liquor.

“Let me guess, you have an exquisite nose for wine.”

“Doubtful,” he paused, gesturing towards the bottle still on the table, “but my reading ability appears to surpass your own.”

Maenaki looked over at the bottle; the label was turned away from her, causing her to scoff.

“It seems that my attention was clearly focused on something else.” Her breath suddenly caught and she realized she was beginning to enjoy herself a bit too much.

She regained self-control and narrowed her eyes as she whispered, “More specifically, some*one* else.”

“Ma’am?” The waitress stepped up to the Arconans and set their plates down. “Enjoy your meal.”

“Timeros?” Maenaki said, an amused smile stealing across her lips. He looked up at her as she gently shook her fork in his direction. “I don’t think I made a mistake when I ordered the dessert wine. Funny, though. I did not plan to do this.”

He recognized the small segmented fruit, and although this one was slick with a whipped blue sauce, he still knew what it was. Timeros made nothing of it and gave Maenaki a partial shrug. She held up a finger on the other hand and slid the fork between her lips. A moment later she sipped the wine.

“I made an unintentional good choice.”

“Strange how that works.”

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Hours passed and the Arconans delicately picked at their meals, Maenaki enjoying the challenge of making the Elder crack a smile. A few times, after a clever and diffusing retort, he gave her a look of possible amusement, but she did not force it to happen and decided to bring up a topic they could both agree on.

“I wish K'tana had stayed with us,” she muttered, looking solemnly at the table while swirling her wine. “She must have been a useful asset.”

Timeros did not even flinch. The slight furrow in his brow actually seemed to soften as he too stared into his drink.

“Arcona needs fewer undisciplined and rebellious children.” His voice was gentle, if pushing towards an icy indifference that nearly made Maenaki sigh. His ability to distance himself was unflappable and something the Seltron admired. It seemed as though nothing could get under his skin.

But Maenaki wondered, just how deep beneath that frigid armor did his real feelings lie? She could sense a tingle of rage and pressed further.

“Perhaps she made a home in one of the other Clans?”

The Aedile did not expect a callous reception and was not disappointed. A thick and oppressing air filled the building. Several chairs scraped against the tiled floors as people scattered from their seats, dispersing from their tables and scurrying down the stairs and quickly out of the door. Maenaki sat frozen. She willed herself to calm down, her hand flinching as her insides and survival instinctively told her to flee, but her curiosity wanted to see what would happen next.

The Adept did not look at her as he retracted his aura, allowing the woman to rethink her words as he stood up from the table.

“Better that she die.”

His words, dripping with vitriol and underlying pain, pricked across her rosy flesh. Sea-green eyes, swimming with tears, caught his icy glare as the Seltron reached out with her hand. She stopped before touching his hem, dropping the hand back to her side.

“I’m sorry, Timeros. That was thoughtless of me,” her soft voice whispered to the floor as the Elder turned away.

Once his eyes were off her, Maenaki smiled slightly, like a nexu-cat after a meal, satisfied and serene. A moment later she dropped it and stood up.

“Please, if it is not too much to ask...”

Timeros paused, not turning around to face her.

“Would you escort me back to my quarters? It is only my second briefing and I have not yet memorized the way.” As the Adept made to brush off her request, she quickly added: “I promise to walk there quietly.”

Timeros flicked his hand in her direction and the two quietly left the restaurant.

The entire distance was silent and was filled with anxious glances to the floor. They walked rigidly and made no eye contact as they approached her room. Timeros pointed at the door, passively keeping his gaze on the hallway. Maenaki, hiding her pride, stepped in front of him.

“Timeros, please know that I am deeply regretful of my choice of words.” Despite knowing what she did, the Seltron placed her hand on his wrist. “We will find her and bring her home.”

The Adept pulled his arm from her fingers and glared at her coolly.

"Home," he repeated, voice bereft of affect. "Would that she ever considered Arcona that."

He turned and made his way down the hall, Maenaki standing in awe at his passing. She held her composure a moment longer as she opened the door and walked in, closing it behind her and resting her back against the wall. She sighed with a smile and shook her head.

"Silly boy," she giggled to herself, moving across the room to her console. The Aedile remained standing as she swiped her fingers rapidly over the keys, her grin seemingly stuck to her lips.

A moment later, Timeros received her message.

Don't forget that you still owe me dinner, Rollmaster.