

## Team Rainbow Sunshine Llamarama 'Of Tubs, Tails, and Tattoos'

Atyiru #13486

Zujenia #14615

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The women's refreshers were silent. More so, even, than the rest of the sprawling Citadel, hushed with dreamers and haunted by the sleepless tucked away in their chambers. They contained a deeper, finer silence than the hallways, or the barracks, or the garages, which were populated by breathing and quiet bustling and dim lights. The silence was deeper than that in a few, lonely, ornate offices, where even in these profound hours of rest, certain figures worked on, diligent, yet heedless of duty and too harrowed to sleep. The silence in the refreshers was deeper even than that of the empty places and the sepulchral corners, which lacked all life.

And it was exactly as Zujenia had planned.

The lone woman, white hair curling around her face and bouncing in a high tail, darted through the door, cloaked in shimmering nothingness, her steps barely a whisper of a breath. Her amber eyes shone brightly as she ghosted inside, scurrying past the lockers, going up and down the rows of shower stalls, past the bathes. Heartbeat hammering, limbs coiled, she peered into each, each corner and nook, searching — searching long.

But she found only silence.

The half-Ryn relaxed and dropped her Force-sewn guise with a relieved sigh.

It had taken her quite a good deal of sneaking, creeping, plotting, and fretting to make it to this moment. She'd poured over floorplans accessed thanks to her Master's credentials in the archives, crouched in corners watching clanmates, memorized guard rotations and the daily schedules of everyone that worked in this wing, from the mechanics and cleaners to the neurotic Sith and sleepless Quaestors. She'd been with Arcona nearly two months now, and finally, her work was paying off.

Zujenia was going to take a nice, long, hot bath.

Glancing over her shoulder at the door despite her preparations, she moved quickly over to the lockers, selecting one back a few rows near the far wall, so she'd be able to duck if necessary. Her belt went first, then her shoes. She unwrapped her vest and untied her mother's armband, stuffing them in the back of the locker, then pulled off her gloves. With one last look at the doors and a quick check of her senses as she'd started learning, the Acolyte took a deep breath, untied her tail, loosened her pantlegs, and pulled her shirt over her head.

Her arms were up in the air, still half-ensconced in the fabric around her elbows and over her face, when something in the Force screamed up her spine. The half-Ryn ripped her shirt overhead and out of the way, coiling like a manka cat about to leap, and swiveled around, reaching for her discarded belt—

“You’re shy, aren’t you, my little bean?”

“Master!” Zujenia gasped, half in shock and half in flustered exasperation as she dropped her vibroblade and instead crossed her arms over her bare chest. Turning, she saw the Miraluka standing out in the middle of the room, as if she’d come from nowhere.

The Consul gave a sheepish smile. “My apologies, sweetling. I didn’t mean to startle you — have a bad track record of it, particularly in these bathrooms, funny enough. I did try to make my presence known first.”

“You couldn’t have, I don’t know, knocked?” grumped the Journeyman, her short tail lashing with agitation. Her skin crawled, the hairs — all *lots* of them — standing up in ruffled poofs. Atyiru moved closer, and though the blindfold she wore was obvious, being neon pink and blue, the half-Ryn still hugged herself tighter to cover up. She desperately wanted to cloak herself again or duck behind a locker, but her pride wouldn’t have it.

“Well, no. I *was* already here, after all. Besides, what lesson would there be in that? I *am* training you to use the Force, after all. Keep your senses sharp.”

“Bu...but...” Zujenia’s brows furrowed. “I checked. And I was so careful. Oh, drat!”

Her Master stopped in front of her with a giggle. “You did very well, actually, Zujubean. I’ve just got a couple more years of maaaaybe kinda sorta stalking people around here in particular than you do. How else am I supposed to plan parties or have breakfasts or, you know, cause a few heart infarctions because Ashla and Bogan forbid they forget to *brood*.” The Miraluka snorted, waving a hand. “But that’s beside the point. Really, you would have been alone, but I had some suspect of your plan and was curious, so I just came to wait when I knew no one would be here for an hour — which, I *see*, hehe, you’ve figured out.”

“Yes...I did,” muttered the Acolyte, shoulders slumping. She smoothed some of her hairs down discreetly. “Well, uh, Master, now that you’ve caught me, if I could finish my bath...?”

“Oh, of course! We can chat while you do. I’ll join you,” Atyiru said brightly, clapping her hands. The Consul wore only a fluffy robe, and spun promptly on her heel to head for the baths. Zujenia grumbled under her breath. She was well and stuck now.

Mood declining, the half-Ryn sighed, scowled, then took a few breaths and followed her Master, discarding her remaining garments as she went. The Miraluka seemed busy fussing with putting

up her long rope of hair and nodded Zujenia at the bath she'd chosen, already filling with steaming water. Trying to summon some enthusiasm, the Acolyte dipped quickly into the tub set in the floor, breath hissing out at the sudden burning. Still, it wasn't unbearable, even pleasant after a few stinging moments, and it made her more comfortable. More obscured. Which, in itself, was ridiculous, because her companion was *blind*, or at least somewhat was.

But still...

"Zujenia?"

Startling slightly and hating it, and her own nerves, Zujenia blinked up at the Seer. "Yes, Master?"

"You wanted to talk?"

Zujenia blinked some more, untying her hair and retying it in a bun as she noticed a few strands dragging in the water. "Umm...no, Master, I think you wanted to talk."

"Oh, that's right! I did."

"*Master*, come on!"

"I'm only teasing you, dear." With deft, dark fingers, the Miraluka finished the elaborate contraption that was her crown of braids, all the loops, big and small, thick and thin, stacked atop each other, looking rather like some strange plume. The half-Ryn's neck and back cringed in sympathy, imagining the weight. "I *did* want to speak with you about something, though."

"What's that?"

"I said already. You're shy. More than shy, really. I've seen it. And yet, I only see it with rather certain things." Untying her robe, Atyiru turned around, slipping the fabric off her shoulders. "I want to know why, because I want to help."

Zujenia inhaled sharply through her teeth.

The Miraluka's back was a carpet of crisscrossing scar tissue, ugly, haphazard and puckered, like land tilled by a one-legged drunkard and his brain-damaged nerf. Here and there were tiny craters of undamaged skin, some licks crawling over her shoulders and arms or over her thighs. She tried to count, to find some semblance of order or a starting place or *something*, and couldn't. Her head ached a bit looking.

“There is no such thing as a painless lesson, Zuju,” her Master said, soft, but with steel underneath. The half-Ryn realized she’d been staring, possibly for awhile, given how full the bath now was, and dropped her gaze. “No, look. I want you to look.”

“Master?” Slightly unsure as she tended to be when the Miraluka noticed such things that it seemed she shouldn’t be able to, Zujenia glanced back up, growing more uncomfortable. Her tail curled around her leg under the water habitually.

“We all have scars, my little jerboa, and very few are so obviously physical as mine here.” The Consul gestured at her back, finally approaching and stepping into the tub, the faucets shutting off with a touch of her hand. “The Brotherhood is a...a fine place. A broken place, but fine in that all its broken parts lean against each other and make something. It is just the way it is. And, by the nature of its turmoil and the forces we wield, it leaves many, many casualties behind. You’ll find a high incidence of wounds of all kinds here. So many fighters. So many hardened and blistered. When I worked as a medic full-time here, I saw patients every single day, and not one came to me without a scar already on them — some more than most. It is nothing special or peculiar here. Nor are the ones no one can see with the eyes of man. The demons inside our heads tear so many of us apart, and the Force, Ashla and Bogan bless it, exacerbates these internalized murders. The Dark is *strong*, differently than the Light. Both are beloved, but both are unique as well, and the things that Darkness holds dearest, welcomes easiest, these are things that scarred and battered children like those of the Brotherhood feel most of all. Do you understand?”

“I think so. You’re saying the Dark Brotherhood is aptly named.”

Atyiru chuckled, her slight smirk showing pride. “Aye, and?”

“And not all injuries are physical. The mental are just as dangerous, if not worse because of the environment and circumstances we’re in. I have to be careful of the Dark Side.”

“You have to be *respectful* of the Dark, and the Light, for that matter. This is no lecture on the nature of the Force, my sweet, not this time. My point lies in your first observation.”

“People’s’ problems? Their, what, instabilities? Weaknesses? Fears?”

“Yours, actually,” said the Consul, folding her legs under her as she sat on the raised ledge along the edge of the tub. “Whatever it is that makes you go to such lengths to have a bath alone, away from anyone else, when not once since your arrival here have you otherwise used the public freshers, just your own, and when you tend to conceal your appearance so.” Atyiru gave a solemn smile, almost sad. “You need not feel shame with me, Zujenia, nor, if I might add, feel shame for your body or your scars. For your pains. These are important things, and I just want you to know that you *can* show them to me, if you wish it.”

Zujenia stared down at the water before her. Despite Atyiru's promise of confidence, the Hunter didn't say anything. It wasn't from lack of trying, but whenever she formed words a lump in her throat forced them back down. Thoughts raced in her mind. She had come to just take a bath, didn't she? But, Zujenia knew that wasn't true. Why was it she hid her tail beneath her clothes? To obscure the inherited traits of her mother's people? Her hands gripped her knees tightly, creating a tether for her reeling mind and the rising frustration born from her insecurities. The Half-Ryn took several deep breaths, an attempt to calm her nerves. Dark amber eyes darted back to the Miraluka who was still focused patiently on her apprentice.

"I just wanted to take—" She paused. Who was she fooling? Only herself. Atyiru may not have eyes, but that doesn't mean she couldn't see. In fact, the Miraluka's special 'sight' would have clued her in to the hybrid's heritage the first time they met. Sure, Zujenia could easily say she was just taking a bath, but it didn't answer the other questions, the real question. Then, there was also the question of trust. Zujenia knew she could trust Atyiru, yet a nagging pull of wariness kept her from doing so, from opening up.

"I...I don't know," Zujenia finally sighed. "I..."

"It's okay. If you want, we can figure it out together, but do not feel like you have to tell me. This isn't an order, Zujubean." Atyiru gave her a light smile, one weighed down by the wish to help her student grow past her qualms.

Her assurance rubbed unintentionally against the Hunter who was still choking back the crippling irritation from being dragged onto the spot. Brows snapping together, Zujenia looked away, biting her tongue. She watched small ripples transverse the water's surface, results of the two bathers' shifting motions. Leaning back, the Half-Ryn slouched against the inlaid tub's side, refusing to glance at the Shadow Lady.

"Fine," she said shortly, her voice shifting to a more respectable yet still tense tone as she continued. "...Master. You wanted to know why I make an effort to hide my appearance? Well..." She swallowed. "I do so to blend in, making travel easier. I've noticed that...that society doesn't take kindly to certain species and the *mutts*," she hissed. "That spawn from them and Humans."

But she hadn't always. It was a practice she had taken up in her teenage years while visiting her father. Quickly picking up that the noble Human kids looked down upon her, Zujenia had grown tired of fighting them, of constantly proving or defending her worth. So, she hid. She hid who she was with a small purple ribbon from a gift box her father had given her. An image of him watching his daughter with a look of sadness on his face as she ran off to play flashed through the Half-Ryn's mind.

Zujenia drew her knees up close to her chest, burying her round nose between them. Here she was, a runaway looking to change society, to craft a better world for Ryns and others, hiding her own being away in the process. Heat rose behind her cheeks as tears brimmed her eyes. Atyiru felt the waves of emotions radiating off of the Hunter.

*Anger, hurt, anxiety,...*

A blend that drew the Miraluka to reach out, leaning to grip Zujenia's knee. A hand intercepted her, knocking the Shadow Lady's arm firmly to the side. Atyiru dropped it to her own lap as amber eyes flashed. Zujenia had lifted her head, her fiery gaze locking on her master. She shot up, standing in the middle of the inlaid tub, her modesty forgotten.

"Atyiru! I-I can't show my true self here. Your clan, the Brotherhood! They won't accept me. I..." Tears raced violently down her face as she choked on her words. "The Humans want to cage me like an *animal*. You want to know why I hide? It's because I don't belong in either world."

Her voice grew quiet as she slid down to her knees, hands fisted, her chin barely inches above the water as stray hair drifted on either side. There it was, the reason she hid, in only a couple of sentences. Protection from pain, from being beaten and left broken. Zujenia had taken her precautions, forcing herself farther from who she was, cloaking it akin to the shadows she has learned to hide in with the Force. Atyiru sensed this; it read painfully clear between the two.

There was no hesitation in the arms that next engulfed the young woman. Atyiru embraced her apprentice, drawing her close. The Force net caught waves of nauseating rage, pain, and regret that the Shadow Lady swallowed, holding and feeling it out. She knew the very ugly side of life, more than most any would argue. Yet, the Miraluka knew better. To deny yourself of who you were, especially feeling pressured to do so, was one of the largest offenses to a soul.

Zujenia felt the urge to push away, to cry out in her anger, but exhaustion took its toll and her arms dropped limp against her sides. Tears still streamed down her face as she let herself be held. Atyiru's slow, rhythmic breathing weathered against the stone of the *Shadow's* emotional turmoil, calming her. The sweet scent of the Miraluka's stark hair caressed her nose as she buried her head against her master's shoulder. It smelled like a warm summer breeze, foliage in the sun. Images of adventures in the woods with her father and her adopted sister, Xira, flashed inside her mind. Air caught in her throat as she felt a pang in her heart, calling up a true sob.

*"Breath in... breath out,"* the Shadow Lady whispered.

Eventually, Zujenia's inhaled and exhaled at a pace matching Atyiru's. Her sobs were no more but an occasional hiccup. Slowly, she edged away, settling back upon the submerged sitting ledge. She gingerly washed her face, pushing back the strands of hair while doing so. Atyiru smiled heartedly at her apprentice, finding her own place against the bath's wall.

“Zujubean...why did you come here again?” the Consul inquired. She had never asked before, knowing the Half-Ryn would tell her at her own pace, but now was a good time. She licked out tendrils of the Force to feel for emotional changes within Zuj, not unlike a garden spider with her web.

“Master?” Zujenia replied after a pause. “I...don’t believe I’ve ever said.”

Atyiru just adjusted her head in Zuj’s direction to appear as if staring, waiting. *Snag, tug.* A small vibration of anxiety traveled through her Force web, only waning slightly when the Hunter sighed.

“I left home to try and change the social hierarchy. To...to bring down the crown of gems and gold that forms the noble class.” Silence answered Zujenia as Atyiru waited for her to continue. She bit her lip as her stomach fluttered. “I...I’m lost Atyiru. I didn’t know where to go, so I let the stars guide me.” Her facial expression dropped. Her master nodded, silently encouraging her to continue. Atyiru knew Zujenia had to release herself now, her finger in control of the trigger holding her back. That trigger finger was slowly slipping away.

“I guess...I try to blend in too keep myself leashed. If...if I lose control, I..let the beast out within...” She glanced away. “I’ve come close to killing someone. After that I...”

“Chained yourself?” the Shadow Lady suggested when the younger woman’s voice trailed. Zujenia responded with a nod, her tail resuming to its cell around her leg. The Consul’s smile dropped lightly. She was glad her apprentice had opened out, but she felt sympathy for the girl. Crossing her legs, she focused onto Zuj, reading a steady mix of emotions.

“Hun, being a hybrid doesn’t mean you don’t fit in with either species, but that you hold dear the best of both.” A heavy sigh escaped her, her brows furrowing with sadness. It took Zujenia back, this expression of sorrow. Atyiru lost her train of thought for a moment as her heartstrings were pulled by the memory of her father. “You have the best aspects of both of your heritage, Zuju. You’re compassionate and free-willed like your Ryn ancestors, determined and flexible just as the Human race.” Atyiru smiled warmly at Zujenia, recovering briefly from her thoughts. “Zuj, Your father is human right?”

“Yes. A jedi.”

“Noble?”

“Y-yes.” Zujenia stuttered as she realized where Atyiru was going.

“And your relation with him is?”

“...well.”



“Zujubean. Don’t be afraid to embrace who you are. Let the Human in. There are beautiful souls out there. Let the plants awake and grow beneath your skin, dear. Hold them close, let them bloom acceptance and freedom.” Atyiru blew one of her own stray hairs away, giving Zujenia a beaming smile. The Hunter blinked a few times, taking to heart the wisdom her Master spoke.

“Aty—”

“Shh. Zujenia, do you trust me?” the Shadow Lady asked in a more serious tone. The Half-Ryn longed to, but her eyes would have betrayed her still weary being. Zujenia scolded herself. Having just spewed her guts within this bath session, one would think she would be able to trust. Sighing, she focused upon the Miraluka whom, through the threads of the Force, had felt the youth’s hesitance.

“Master, I don’t know...but I’m willing to try.”

“Excellent!” Atyiru chirped. “Than I’ll help you lockpick your chains, okay? Now, quickly get up, dried off, and dressed. I have a place to take you.” She clapped with heightened enthusiasm. Reaching over, she flipped the knob up that pulled the drain before following after her confused and cautious apprentice. Both dried off quickly and retrieved their clothing from their temporary lockers.

Zujenia donned her usual loose fitting outfit. She rounded the partition in the locker room to encounter the Consul who...was not wearing her usual garb. Instead, a short, brightly colored dress hugged her torso before flaring away at her left hip. It was at that instant, the Half-Ryn felt a rising ping of dread.

“A-Atyiru, where are we going?”

“To a club!” her master exclaimed, marching off in a bouncing gait as she lead the apprentice into Estle City.

-X-

It was quiet.

Quiet, but not silent. Though the room was comfortably hushed, half-dancing footsteps filled it, sashaying about this way and that, closet to bathroom to small kitchenette.

Zujenia hummed to herself, feet tapping rhythmically as she paused to tie up her hair in front of her mirror. The beat was steady, thudding. The reverberating from her throat was less a melody than it was a low chant, *buh-buh-buh-buh*. It harmonized with each clapping note of her bare feet against the floor.



It was one of the simple, electronic songs from the club her Master had spirited her to, and it popped into her head often, usually without her realizing it. Despite her not truly fancying the music, its catchiness — and, perhaps, attached sentiment — ensured that she began just this: tapping, dancing, or humming it at random moments.

That night had been a week ago, now, but the evening was still fresh in her mind. Atyiru had spirited her away from the baths and to a mysterious secondary room behind one of the janitorial closets, stuffed full of gowns, accessories, and various party favors. It was, apparently, one of many, “just in case anyone forgets to brood long enough for spontaneous fun!” Zuji had only grown more bemused and apprehensive at the sight, until her master had revealed to her a selection of garments that made her amber eyes widen to the size of saucers.

Even now, she felt herself give a little wiggle at the thought. Such pretty, shiny things...

Entranced, the half-Ryn had been fitted into an embarrassingly backless dress that looked like it was made of glimmering gems and yanked out into Estle City’s cool nightscape. They had passed one of the baker’s supplies shops Zuji knew well, and several other areas — down that street, Kordath’s old apartments, down another, the tavern other than the Citadel’s the Arconans favored, and that way the place she’d bought little scissors for trimming Tre — before disappearing into a swath of buildings utterly unfamiliar to her. The club they had finally entered was dark save for its colored, bright lights, its interior oddly cozy and busy, with many odd pieces of furniture around the bar and dance area. And it had been, most definitely, full of both Humans and non-Humans alike.

Without much time to protest, a drink had been shoved into her hands, courtesy of her master, and she’d been pulled into a tangle of writhing, happy bodies by the Miraluka. They danced to a drumbeat, hypnotic and pounding, the Shadow Lady’s laughter free and bubbly as the burning liquid in their glasses. Her discomfort had been high at first, but slowly, Zujenia found her tail unwinding from its *beskar*-tight prison around her thigh, found herself swaying more to the music, found herself feeling both lost in the crowd and accepted amongst it.

Her master had leaned close at one point, after they had danced away from one another, and whispered in her mind to be heard over the bass: *you’ve two good eyes, my little bean. All I’ll ever ask of you is that you use them. What do you see here?*

And so Zuji had looked as she danced and the night grew blurred around the edges, watching people of all species and sorts moving together, alive together, their bones all beating to the same strumming pulse. It hadn’t been like the galas with her father’s people, laced tightly and so painfully scrutinized, every eye upon her reminding her that in a sea of faces, she was either alone or judged. No, there, bodies melted into bodies at sequences and leather seams. It was raucous, wild, thriving. The white flashes she’d caught glimpses of were teeth bared in smiles, not the edges of eyes looking askance at her. Atyiru’s own grin had glowed in the light, her hair

reflecting an ethereal violet that lit her frame like stars. She'd taken Zuji's hands and twirled her around, hugged her close, spun her away again. Step, step, spin. Step, step, twist. Step, step, *be free*.

And somewhere in the beat of brass and booming, there had been the faintest *clank* of some of those chains of hers clattering to the ground.

And after that...well...there had been a lot more drinks and she didn't remember too much after that. Not that the matching tattoo she and the Consul now shared on their hands wasn't a suitable enough indication of just *what* they might have gotten up to before they'd woken up passed out in the Citadel courtyard. Now, when they stood side by side, hands touching, the design revealed a knot of interwoven, thorny vines: strong, resilient, entwined. Around the beautiful, viney lacework was a carefully scrawled declaration: *Hybrid And Proud*.

The Shadow paused in her tapping, blinking as her eyes refocused on the mirror-image before her. She finished fastening her hair back and slipped on her headband, reaching finally for her belt and boots. She had a class to attend in the afternoon and a meditation session with her master before that. Perhaps with time for a snack in between?

Or, perhaps, just maybe, she could go down to the messes for dinner and find Adem, or Atyiru, or Kord if he'd happened by from Ol'Val. Maybe, *just* maybe, she wouldn't cover her tail. It tickled along her leg at the thought.

Biting her lip and smirking very faintly to herself, Zujenia grabbed her electrostaff, turned out her lights, and stepped from her not-too-quiet-room—

—and into the clamor and the clangor.

-x-