

The evening Selen air played with the leaves, the flowers, and the corners of Citadel's courtyard, creating a symphony of sound that appeased the toddler at her feet. Shay'Ira giggled out a sentence of half formed words as she shook her small stuffed Cythraul at the trees. It brought a smile to Zujenia's weary face. His — her daughter didn't know of the dangers of this galaxy, so much innocence held untainted. A sigh escaped her lips, her torso sinking with a quiet, necessary resolution. She needed to get stronger, to protect her.

Pushing herself upright from the well-crafted bench, she squared her feet and lifted her overlapped hands. Closing her eyes, the half-Ryn drew upon the Force, attempting to will it up through her arm muscles as she does when imbuing them with greater strength or agility. When Zujenia opened them, the air before them sparked and coalesced in a half-formed barrier. Its surface pocketed with hexagonal holes. A heartbeat passed before it dissipated at her surprise. She did it, sort of. Atyiru and Kord had both mentioned about her somehow creating a large barrier when she was in the medical ward months ago. A vine inked hand hovered against her bare abdomen where two distant memories of pain flared fresh to mind. Her eyes watered, threatening to spill welling tears. Zujenia wiped them away quickly and breathed.

*Kord...*

She could feel his gaze upon her back, up high from the tower his living quarters where held. Zujenia wished there was more options than the courtyard to practice in, but the Port risked exposing the fact Force users live there. The training hall here was more used than she liked, and the beach or the Tameike's were a firm no. Using the courtyard wasn't that bad, and Zujenia was thankful that the Ryn was giving her space. She needed it.

*"It's feelings, Zujibeau..."*

Zujenia startled, nearly jumping and tripping on the blanket she had laid on the ground for Shay. The voice, ethereal and eerie but only due to its familiarity, singsonged from behind her. As her amber gaze settled upon the incorporeal form, recognition took flight. The long white hair waved about the tall figure and her floral gown, unbraided for once. The blindfold that normally rested across the woman's face was missing, revealing the shallow valleys where most would have eyes. But that smile, it was as welcoming and loving and as a deep embrace — nearly melting Zujenia to her knees.

"Atyiru..." she finally whispered out, drinking in the moment. Her master has visited her a few times before, yet they had all occurred in dreams. This was in the open, in the middle of the Citadel no less, and she was awake. Something clicked in the half-Ryn's mind of what was right right now. "Wait, you shouldn't be here. People are going to think I'm talking to a ghost or crazy."

*"From my understanding, that is what I am seen as, yes? Easier to believe with me as one."*

Her Master's words unintentionally drove up some guilt within her she hadn't dealt with. "...I'm sorry, I-I couldn't change it."

*"Zujenia, it was my choice to make, do not weigh blame in it."*

"Choice? What—" she cut off as the matching vined hand of Atyiru's waved her off.

Shay looked up in confusion towards her mother, trying to figure out whether she was talking to her. Noticing the older hybrid wasn't, she went back to having 'Fluff' fly about. The Miraluka cocked her head toward the youth with another smile. She paced gracefully up beside her and knelt, reaching a hand out to touch the child's white hair before resisting mere centimeters before. *"She has your eyes."*

Zujenia blinked. "Mine? Atty, you know better than anyone she isn't—"

*"Family is more than blood, something you already know. And sometimes we pass on to those close to us bits of ourselves. Shay'lra has your determination, wanderlust, and loving nature alongside as much traits from her father..."*

Atyiru straighten up right and closed the distance between her apprentice and herself. She raised a hand, touching it lightly against Zujenia's cheek as she wiped away a tear. *"I told you it was feelings, didn't I? It is how we connect with one another, build ties and weave lives — lives you wish to protect."*

*"Zujibeau,"* the spectral Miraluka stepped back, gesturing her arms to more than the two hybrid's before her, more than the evening lit courtyard. *"Emotions is the key to unlocking the Force in the way you seek, especially love."*

Zujenia nodded hesitantly, she wasn't quite sure what she meant. As she went to inquire an explanation, a small group of Journeymen entered the garden. They chattered among themselves about their training they have waiting for them in the morning. A couple even tossed a wave in her direction. The half-Ryn smiled and nodded back before exhaling when they left earshot. Atyiru clapped her hands together beside her and beamed brightly, *"Right! With a reminder from those young ones, let us get to work. Project forth—"*

"Wait, what? You're here to train me?" exasperation leached through Zujenia's voice.

*"You had opposed my hand in emotional support, so I had gathered helping in something more formal would be acceptable."* Atty tipped her head to the side in slight confusion, but the arc of her brow suggested she had believed she had found an acceptable loophole. *"I am also well practiced with the abilities you seek."*

Zujenia sighed, tossing a look towards the darkening heavens as she bit her lip in indecision. She could do the right thing and tell the 'ghost,' Ryns did not like using such a word, off and to conserve their energy. Or... "Okay...but only for a couple minutes."

*"Excellent! Now, prepare to call forth your barrier again."*

A cocoa finger twirled at her for her to focus. Zujenia obliged, setting her stance and raising her arms. Her nose twitched in anticipated determination.

*"Focus upon the love you feel for those close. Allow it to solidify your resolve. You can protect them, you will."* Zujenia did as she was told her breath catching in her throat as the faces she held near appeared in her mind. Atty's longer arms slid along her own, *"Let the feelings direct the Force through your being, and the Light shall manifest outwards."*

The warmth building in her center shifted upwards, letting loose like the first rays of sun upon the prairie back home. The barrier bursted before them, expanding wider and sturdier than before.

"Huh...I..I did it," she stuttered out.

It wasn't perfect, still a bit holey, but neither was life. Life was full of gaps, unknowns, and mystery. It's through our connections that we're able to bear for a moment the uncertainties, that we can experience them together. Zujenia glanced over to Atyiru, her chest rising and falling from exertion and the thrill of accomplishments. Her master shared with her smile, proud of her and content she would be fine for now, before fading to leave only the green scenery behind her. Sometimes, life meant that those helping to cover the holes end up falling. They leave a mark that can never be forgotten.

"Mama," a small, red hand tugged on Zujenia's pant leg. Shay's big amber eyes were peeking out from under her blanket, "I'm cold."

Night was almost upon them. The half-Ryn had lost track of time, too late to catch a shuttle home. A groan escaped her as she recalled giving her room here away to the overcrowded recruits. She scooped up the toddler and her cythraul toy, bouncing her on her hip lightly. "Alright, Chia, let's go inside, maybe see your papa about a sleepover."