**Arc 2 Chapter 29**

The closer Anaïs and Senara got to the Circle, and civilization, the quieter things got, the minor Presences of the local wildlife, even hiding as they were, the Padawan carrying the scent of slaughtered predators with her as she hauled the Dreadwing parts on her back, becoming sparser and sparser, until dawn broke, and, while a little winded, the Jedi was ready to keep going.

“We’re *almost* there,” she told her friend. “Wouldn’t you prefer to sleep in an *actual* bed tonight?”

The white-skinned Force adept sent a skeptical look her way, “Are ze Jedi not supposed to be above such things like zeir ‘comfort’?”

Rolling her eyes, the Padawan replied, “I can go without, if I need to, but we *need* to get back anyways*.* Come on, didn’t you say we were out of range of the worst of the day-predators now? The ones that are worse than the night ones?”

“Ve *are*,” Senara admitted, grudgingly.

Anaïs smiled encouragingly, “And if you get tired, I can just carry you!” Hoisting the enormous backpack, she added, “You don’t weigh *that* much.”

“*Fine*. But you vill *not* carry me,” the adept commanded. “Bad enough zhat you are carrying our kill, I am not so weak zhat I need you to do *zhat* as well.”

“It’s not strength you’re missing, it’s *endurance*,” the Padawan teased her friend, “And I’ll help you with that later. Now come on, we’ve waited long enough!”

Spinning up the streams of Force Barriers in their lift formation, Anaïs picked up her cargo, then leapt away, Senara, grumbling, casting her own wind mantle and following a moment later.

Both of them pushed through as dawn fully broke, the trees slowly shrinking, and thinning, until they were no longer moving through a sea of branches, but merely making their way through a somewhat large forest.

While the Force Adept refused to admit it, she *was* starting flag, leading Anaïs to start taking more breaks, citing difficulties with her new technique. From the dry look her friend gave her, the white-haired woman didn’t believe the excuse, but the pauses *did* let the Padawan try and refine the ‘lift barrier’, trying out different formations and arrangements. There was no *best* way of doing it, she found, the Jedi realizing that she had to tailor the technique to her specific load, as the cylinder full of Force-infused bat parts wasn’t balanced at *all*.

She could practically hear Master Lucian reminding her that, ‘*With the Force, amazing things are possible, but while we can make things do what we want, it’s better to work* ***with*** *the way the Galaxy works. It’s the way of the* ***Dark*** *to deny reality, using raw power to warp the nature of things, but the Light* *is most powerful when it’s working* with *the natural order. And that includes physics, so keep reading!’*

It would be possible to try and rearrange everything in the wooden cylindrical cage, but there might be times she *wouldn’t* be able to do that, so she used this as a way to figure out how to deal with that kind of thing *before* she really needed it. After all, they *weren’t* having to fight, so Lucian’s imprecations against messing around in combat didn’t apply!

It was during one of these stops that the Jedi felt a familiar Force Presence approaching them. The Force Adept felt it too, rushing to her feet and running for a tree, halfway up it when she hissed, *“Anaïs! What are you doing?”*

“Come on, Senara. They’re friendly,” the Padawan argued, as a thin mist spread through the trees, and the muted sounds of hoof on root could be heard. “Besides, I’m not in danger, I can feel it. Unless they can hide themselves *that* way?”

The white-skinned woman hesitated, still clearly unhappy with her blonde friend’s decision, but she was unable to contradict her either. From the trees, with pristine white pelts and aquamarine antlers, came the same Rime Deer that they’d encountered on their way *into* the forest. A few of the smaller ones bleated excitedly and ran towards the Padawan, and, listening to the Force, she felt not a hint of danger.

Kneeling down, Anaïs let them approach, reaching out and scratching them behind their ears as they pranced about, the rest of the herd approaching more carefully, the stag at the back. The lead male watched her carefully, and growled a little, only for the largest female, the one that looked a little heavy, to bump her small antlers into his side, cutting the sound off.

The rest gathered, one buck looking inquisitively at the container full of Dreadwing parts, another leaning over and licking the cage.

*“Anaïs!”* Senara hissed, still hiding her own Presence, *“Do not let zhem eat our bounty!”*

One of the other Rime Deer leaned over to take a nibble, lips pulling back to reveal three pairs of fangs that could *easily* tear flesh, but a bark from the stag brought it up short before its teeth could make contact. The older animal turned an expectant gaze towards the Jedi, even as the buck whined, putting its head low.

“Hey, you said the hearts were useless, right?” the Padawan checked with her friend. They’d had extra room, so she’d packed them in anyways, but-

“I said zhey were *nearly* worthless. Anaïs, *do not* feed zhe *wild* *predators!*” Senara chastised.

Moving slowly, so she wouldn’t spook the animals, the blonde asked as she climbed the cylinder, “Why not? We fed them the dirt wolf thingies.”

“. . . Fine, but it iz coming out of *your* share,” the Adept grumbled, freezing as the stag turned to stare at her despite her attempts to hide. *“Just make them go away,”* she hissed, *“****without*** *getting either of us hurt.*”

Undoing the top of the cage, and shifting the Dreadwing’s decapitated head, Anaïs pulled out the large modules of muscle she was looking for, replying, “Why are you so scared? It’s not like they are as dangerous as the Dreadwings.” At her friend’s silence, she turned to look skeptically at the pale girl. “Wait, *really?”*

“Ve are *tired*, unprepared, unempowered, and zhey move around *zhe* *day, Anaïs!”* The Adept reminded her. “Zhey are not as much a threat as vhat we fought, but vhat we *came* here to fight originally? *Yes.* I am *still* surprised zhat we survived zhat fight, and I *vould not like to take zhat risk twice!”*

The Adept was hard to read, hiding her Presence as much as she was, but, reaching out, the Jedi could *feel* the edges of the other girl’s fear, and winced. “Sorry, I didn’t realize. Don’t worry, they *really* are friendly. Call it Jedi stuff, but getting along with animals is kind of our *thing*. And this place isn’t where I trained, or where *you* lived.”

“. . *. just hurry it up*,” Senara grumbled after a moment, her fear dropping to the point Anaïs could no longer detect it through the Force.

Nodding to her friend, the Jedi dropped down, plopping two of the hearts on the ground and pulling her saber, even as the herd looked interested. Activating the weapon, the stag’s head swiveled towards her, but it made no other motions, and, eyeballing the sizes of the Rime Deer, and the meat she had, the Padawan started to slice off sections, handing them out as the animals cautiously approached.

Focusing on her *own* Presence as she did so, the Jedi considered the fact that these creatures could feel her through that method just as much as they could *see* her, possible feel her *better* that way, given how they were ignoring Senara, despite the white-skinned girl being clearly visible. Anaïs had figured out the basics of how to *hide* her Presence, cloaking it against another, but what if she tried the opposite?

Not really the opposite, she realized, as she had no idea what that even meant now that she thought about it, but she’d seen how Master Lucian could diminish his own Presence, so what if she did that, but in reverse, not *changing* it but making it. . . more?

Whatever she did, the Herd all paused as one, and even her friend in the tree audibly inhaled in surprise, but Anaïs just smiled, showing that she meant them no harm, trying to help them read her intentions through her Presence. The lead female chuffed, and made a trilling sound, prompting the others to start moving towards the Jedi once more.

Soon enough, everyone but the lead two had been fed, and, cutting what was left, Anaïs sheathed her saber, holding out the last pieces, one a little bigger than the other to account for their differing mass. The stag approached her, leaning over and taking the larger piece in his teeth, before turning and offering it to the horned doe, who daintily took the cardiac muscle and set it down, tearing off strips, while the stag turned back to the Jedi and took the smaller piece for himself, nodding to the Force user before stepping back and ripping into the flesh with efficient brutality, swallowing it quickly.

The herd finished up, and, with a call from the stag, they started to move on, the smallest ones prancing back over to Anaïs, licking the last of the blood from her hands, butting their heads against her thighs, and then running after the does that were watching them, likely their mothers. The horned doe approached the Jedi, and the stag growled a little, but the doe turning to stare at it for a moment, at which point the stag fell silent.

Standing in front of the Padawan, the horned doe reached over to her arm, opening its mouth, but Anaïs didn’t feel a hint of danger as the Rime Deer gently took hold of her wrist with teeth that could rend flesh, the animal gently lifting up her arm until it was held out, repeating the process with the other limb, then nudging her hands with its head until they were together, and open.

Placing its face *over* the Padawan’s hands, the horned doe tilted its head, then lifted up one hoof to press against an antler, which, with a wet *Pop*, came loose and dropped into her waiting palm. Shocked, the Jedi saw the stub the horn had grown from, wet with dark blue blood, and moved without thinking, calling upon the Force to heal the injury, her desire to help this creature allowing the technique to flow freely, closing up the wound in seconds.

Pulling her hand away from the healed flesh, Anaïs looked at the horn in her hand, confused, but the now one-horned doe nudged that hand, pushing it until it touched the Padawan’s chest. “You, you want me to have this?” she asked, *still* confused, and, as if it could understand her, the doe nodded, leaning forward to give the Jedi an affectionate bump, and turning away to walk after the rest of the herd.

The stag walked by her, chuffed once in an oddly approving manner, and followed after what was clearly its mate.

It was only after they were long gone, the forest starting to warm, that Senara came down from her tree, giving the Jedi a disbelieving look. “Did you know zhat it would do zhat?” she questioned skeptically, but with a hint of cautious belief.

“I’m, uh, still not sure what it *did,”* the blonde woman replied, glancing down at the bit of blue-white bone in her hand, a foot long, and unnaturally cool to the touch. “Is, is that normal?”

The Adept didn’t answer for a moment, before she closed her eyes and sighed, muttering to herself, “*At least my sisters vere right about Jedi being* ***lucky****.*” Looking to her friend, she stated, “*No*, zhat is not. Do you know how much zhat is worth? It is a *lot.*”

“Oh,” Anaïs, replied, and, reaching out, she *could* feel the Force concentrated in the small antler, in a similar way it was concentrated in the dreadwing’s vocal chords. But. . . she didn’t want to sell it. “I, uh, take whatever it’s worth out of my share,” she instructed her friend.

“. . . *No,*” Senara said after a moment, the Jedi shooting her a confused look. “I vill take the worth of the *hearts*, like you asked. I had nothing to do vith you getting this. Zhat is *yours*,” she stated, shaking her head. “Now let us get back to zhe circle. I zhink your Jedi foolishness might be infectious, and dealing vith the pettiness of mages should be an effective cure.”

Smiling, Anaïs couldn’t help but tease, “Or you’re just a good person.”

Trying her best not to smile in return, the Adept nodded, “*Definitely* contagious. We should go, neither of us have had a shower in a veek, and the silliness is starting to reek.”

Laughing, Anais tied the top of her container back up, reworked her techniques, and took off after Senara, who had already started to leap from tree to tree.

<SWPP>

Getting out of the forest was easy, getting back on campus not so much. Not in the way that anyone was *stopping* them, but it was just awkward from the sheer amount of *staring* the local Bhoyarians were doing as they made their way around the walls of the Circle’s compound, the two of them tired as they plodded their way down side streets, moving towards the entrance.

As the walked, part of Anaïs tracked the people around them, recognizing a few movement patterns back from *Fabrin*, and, sure enough, a muscular man with horn tattoos on his arms stepped in front of them, flanked by half a dozen others.

“Hey there, little ladies. That looks *mighty* heavy,” he grinned, his malicious intent clear in both his voice *and* in the Force. “Why don’t you let us take some of it off your hands?” Behind him, three of his minions unsheathed blades, two of the others calling the elements to their hands, while the last one, a younger looking boy, seemed unsure, hanging near the back.

Stopping, the Jedi stared, turning to look to Senara, who just sighed into her hands. “They *can* see I’m carrying this entire thing, right? You didn’t hide part of it?” she asked the Adept.

“I did not. I vish I could say zhat this is a *local* thing,” the white-haired woman bemoaned, “but stupidity iz as ever-present as Magick itself.”

“Hey!” one of the two women arranged against them scowled, the other woman’s hand sparking with electricity, “Who are you calling *stupid*?”

“Not *you*, surely,” the Adept mockingly reassured the thug.

Pinching the bridge of her nose, Anaïs, pulled deep on the Force, and channeled her Master. Reaching out with Telekinesis as she stayed physically still, she grabbed the leader by his shirt and yanked him up off his feet, the Mage having even less resistance to such a move than some of the beasts of the forest, and she commanded him, “**Go home and ask yourself if attacking the woman carrying *ten times her body weight* in *monster parts* is a success strategy. Then ask yourself why you tried to *do that anyway*.**”

Her words rang out, thick with the Force, not trying to be gentle about the Mind Trick she was employing, like she had been on Delle, and not trying to instill a different mindset into the thug. This was a *command*, and nothing less, something that she wasn’t *entirely* comfortable with, but she’d rather not have to deal with any problems that came with taking out a local, given how much the Bhoyarians, Draconis and a few others excluded, *really* didn’t like her. There wasn’t the feeling of his will buckling, giving way to hers, so it was a bust, but at least she *tried.*

Dropping the lead thug back down, she gave him a condescending telekinetic pat on the head, maybe a *little* harder than she needed to, and looked at him expectantly.

“I, uh, maybe we should head back,” he told the others, panicking, his posse having all gone quiet. The thugs quickly following their leader as they practically ran down an ally.

“Wait, that *worked?”* Anaïs questioned, surprised. “I didn’t think it would.”

Beside her, Senara laughed. “My friend, you disabled zhe idiot without using a *single* circle. I zhink he might have pissed himself.”

Blinking, the Jedi muttered, “Oh, right, that’s a thing here. You don’t use them half the time, so I kinda. . . forgot? Whups?”

The Adept was *still* chuckling when they approached the gates, the two black-robed faculty members staring at them. Stopping instead of just striding through, Anaïs asked, “Uh, who do we talk to? We did a bounty-hunt thing? You guys take care of that, right?” Both staff members said nothing, staring at the container on her back. “There were extras.”

The man on the left spoke up, “Headmaster Draconis asked for you to see him.”

The one on the right added, “Is that a *Dreadwing* head?”

Senara stepped between them, a hand on the Jedi’s shoulder as she maneuvered her through the gates, “Like she said, we hunted a bounty, and vhere *very* successful.”

Entering the grounds, dozens turned to watch them, as Anaïs quietly asked, “Is it really that impressive?” but only got a smile in response. Making their way towards Draconis’ tower, the man himself strode out the front door to meet them, which was good as the Jedi wasn’t *quite* sure how she was going to manage to get her container up the stairs.

He called out to them loudly, “Ms. Vond-Ryssa, Ms. Senara, good to see your mission was a success!” Glancing upwards, he gave the skull perched on top of the container an approving look, “And my that’s a big one!”

“The other two were smaller,” the Jedi offered, and the Headmaster froze.

“Other. . . *two?*” he echoed, voice tight, gaze focusing as he looked her over carefully. “And you’re alright? Both of you?”

Senara lifted an eyebrow, answering, “Nothing zhat she could not heal.”

Shoulders dropping, the old man sighed, “Oh, that’s a relief.”

“Oh?” the Adept pressed, glancing between the two. “Forgive me, Headmaster, but you seem *especially* concerned.”

The dragon-Presenced man smiled, “One of *her* Order being injured badly, especially as others know she is here on Bhoyaria, would bring Republic attention, something we have been *successful* in avoiding up until now. I trust Ms. Vand-Ryssa to have discretion, but *others*. . .”

“I think I zee your point,” Senara grimaced, glancing back towards the Padawan. “Some Jedi can be. . . *somevhat quick to action,* against Magick-users.”

Anaïs *wanted* to argue, but the Temple had been clear on how any Adept that used the **Dark Side** was to be put down for the good of all, even if, not being Sith, they were clearly no threat to the Jedi themselves, and some of the things Senara had done *had* started to cross the line.

And one thing ***absolutely*** had.

But while the white-haired girl was a Force Adept, she wasn’t a ***Dark*** one.

If a Jedi came here, though, and fought someone like Jabari’s *sister?* Who gleeful reached for the **Dark** when she was losing?

They’d call in the Order, to clear out *all* of the Dark Adepts, for the good of the Republic.

“I, uh, yeah, I can see that,” she admitted, a little embarrassed. “Don’t worry, I won’t say anything!”

Draconis nodded, “I know, or I would not have allowed you to join our Circle. However it is my job to worry. Now, let us see about getting all of that processed!”

Waving a hand for them to follow, the man took off, and it was only as they did so that Anaïs realized that *everyone* was now staring at her in a way they hadn’t been before, and that the Headmaster’s words might’ve not just been meant for her and Senara.

<SWPP>

It took several hours, but their entire haul was processed, Draconis calling in a few faculty members who specialized in working with ‘magical’ animal parts, which itself then turned into a lesson that Anaïs found fascinating, and Senara, though she at first seemed disinterested in, quickly perked up as the impromptu lecture continued. There was an entire *science* to the working of the fading Force energies and patterns of slain Force-using creatures that centered around stabilized them and shifted their nature from something that worked in the way a *living* thing would and into something more akin to a Kyber crystal, not *alive*, but not dead and inert either.

In the end, Anaïs promised that, if she was still around next semester, she’d enroll in the woman’s class, Senara agreeing to as well, and they’d both walked away with enough money to *pay* for the entirety of next semester, *and then some.*

Though, other than a few tomes on the subject of ‘magical crafting’, as well as a few others, Anaïs wasn’t really sure what to spend that money *on*.

Draconis had created a small stand for her Rime Deer Antler, after twitching a little as Senara described their interactions with the graceful carnivores in a bit *more* detail than was truly needed, and now the Jedi sat on her bed in her dorm-room, considering the item.

She was tired, but sleep was not coming, and so instead was focusing on the object, which resonated in the Force. In a way, it was a bit like the Fire-Melon, though differently aligned, making the Padawan wonder if she was supposed to, what, grind up a bit of it at a time and snort it? Even as the Force gently advised her *not* to do that thing, she knew she wouldn’t, as it had been *given* to her, and to destroy it seemed just as wrong as selling it.

Instead, she took it in her hands and closed her eyes, meditating, sinking into the warm embrace of the Light side of the Force. The Presences of the Mages all around her could clearly be felt, but they were minor, and not her focus. The Jedi looked towards the item in her hands, which pulsed with the Force, the fact that it was freely given, according to the professor, meaning that it would *retain* its potency in a way one harvested from a dead Rime Deer would not, the removal process changing its nature just as much as a crafter would.

It felt of ***cold***, but a comfortable one. A cool drink on a hot day, not that Coruscant had many, or a refreshing breeze during training, something she was *much* more familiar with. Below that was other versions of cold, of the crystalline beauty of ice, of the stasis of a deep freeze, of the stillness of winter. The longer she meditated, the more she *understood,* leaning on second-hand experiences that she herself had *never* felt, but that seemed to dwell within the gift that had been given to her.

Eventually, exhaustion pulled at her, and she let out a low breath, hearing the faint tinkling of ice even *without* the antler, feeling a comforting cold wrapped around her, and she shook her head, having *clearly* spent too much time focusing on the item.

Opening her eyes though, she froze, or it would be closer to say she was the only thing in her room which had *not.*

A thin rime of frost covered the walls, and her bed was a solid block, fabric sheets stiff and brittle, cracking as she shifted her weight. The glass of water beside her bed had shattered, bits of glass arranged in a bloom of ice, and she somehow knew, *exactly,* which bits were the cup, and which was what had been contained within.

Standing, the floor was slick, but with her training that meant little as she moved to the door, only to find it frozen shut.

“Um, hello?” she called out, unsure, and a *little* freaked out.

*“Take a step back,”* a deep voice replied, and she did so, the door starting to steam as the ice covering it evaporated. A moment later, the knob turned, and it opened, revealing an older-looking student, his hand covered in orange flames. The Minerali student looked around the room and whistled, shaking his head. “Hell of an Awakening,” he commented, waving for her to step outside.

Confused, and still holding the antler, the Jedi asked, “A what?”

The student smiled, and clapped her on the shoulder with his non-burning hand, and only at that moment did Anaïs realized that everything on her person had been completely undamaged. “An Elemental Awakening. You’ve been in there for *days*. Draconis warned us you hadn’t had one, *somehow*.”

At her bewildered look, he laughed.

“Congratulations, kid. You’re a Mage.”