**Book 2 Chapter 19**

“Are you sure we don’t need anything else?” Anaïs asked, for the third time, as both girls left the Circle of Magic behind them. “We have the space,” she pointed out hefting the nearly empty backpack for emphasis.

Her partner rolled her eyes, but the white-skinned woman’s ill-repressed smile gave away the fact that her exasperation was fond. “And ve will need all of dat space carrying back our catch,” Senara replied, for the third time. “Ve are not spending months away, Anaïs, ve are spending a *week*, at most. Our prey vill either be slain, or it vill force us to retreat. Given vhat I’ve heard of Jedi, I think I know vhat the outcome vill be. Or vould you like to spend time with your. . . *admirers?”*

The Padawan groaned at her friend’s teasing, casting another glance at the school, and the city of Bamide that lay on the other side of it, the week-long festival just starting. She hadn’t discounted the Headmaster’s warnings, that there were several different groups, each representing interests that extended outside of Bamide, that wanted to give her offers, or ‘offers’, in return for what they believed to be the secrets of her ‘sect’.

However, she hadn’t expected them to be so *blatant* about it.

Okay, none of them had come right out and said what they’d wanted verbally, but *seventeen separate students* had sought her out in the last week, always when Senara wasn’t there, to offer to show Anaïs around the upcoming festival. On the surface, it was a nice gesture, if one could overlook the fact that each and every one of the Bhoyarians making the offer had been busy pretending that she didn’t exist for the last several months. However, while they seemed nice enough in appearance and tone, their Presences had given them away instantly.

Not *all* were tinged with **Dark**, looking at her with a hunger that made her want to cut them down with her lightsaber, though many were, but every single one looked down on her, with jealousy, or covetous anger, or obvious distain, their foci-warped Presences all that much easier to read to her Force-assisted eyes. Listening to both what they said, and what she could tell they *felt*, she hadn’t turned them down completely, only insisting that she’d already taken someone else’s offer and was going to be with them, though she’d always said she’d make sure to say hello if she saw the person at the festival. Some had taken it well, some had not, but only one had insisted she should go with him instead, cutting off her path, stepping forward to try and back her against a wall menacingly, attempting to loom over her.

She had gently, but firmly, lifted him an inch in the air and deposited him back where he’d previously stood, several of the other students around them laughing as the man’s visage had **darkened**. “*You dare?”* he’d demanded, wrathful, and she’d nodded, smiling, reading the man’s evil intent in the Force, but also feeling no danger of an incoming attack.

He’d glared at her for another few moments, before huffing and stomping away, muttering under his breath, “We’ll see how you are *later*.” It had been quiet, and if Anaïs hadn’t been trained to have supernaturally sharp senses by Master Lucian’s itching-powder laden training, she would have missed it, but the statement just confused her. *Didn’t he want to know my ‘Seethe’ secrets?* She’d thought, only for Senara to explain that his Clan likely planned to double-cross her the second they had what they wanted, while believing themselves stronger than her. That her ‘secrets’ would make them even better, but *obviously* they could ‘suppress’ her, which seemed to be a local euphemism for beating someone unconcious.

“But, when others come for me?” the Padawan had demanded. “They can’t be that dumb.”

The Force Adept just shrugged. “I zink you will find that zey absolutely can be. Zey believe you alone, Anaïs. I doubt zey know of your Order, or zat you have ze headmaster’s ear. Eizer way, ve vill not be vhere they expect us.” And it had been hard to argue with *that*.

Now both of them had left the school, with only the basics, into the wilderness that extended as far as the eye could see, several hundred miles, if the map she had was correct. Reaching the tree line, where grass gave way to forest, the Padawan looked up, each column of timber several hundred feet tall, with thick branches spreading out, a formidable barrier. It was nothing on place like Kashyyyk, where the trees were so large that no light reached the ground, and a single wroshyr branch was wide and strong enough to serve as a landing pad for *spacecraft*, but it was still an impressive sight.

Senara took off at a sprint, surprising Anaïs, the Adept bringing the Force around her as she reached the first tree, leaping and running up the trunk, using the Force to help stabilize herself in a way that the Padawan hadn’t seen before. The woman’s use of the Force was external, moving *herself* with Telekinesis but only in small amounts, just enough to cancel out gravity, though not entirely, also utilizing small bursts to help her stay moving in a straight line when she started to tilt to one side. Slowing, she leapt off the trunk, landing on a branch forty feet off the ground, and looked back to her friend.

“Vell, Anaïs? Are you coming? Ve have far to go before we make camp.” she called down, a hint of challenge in her tone.

Taking a moment to center herself, the distance looked great to the Padawan, but her memories superimposed Master Lucian’s base on Uphrades on the tree, phantom durasteel over dark oak. Bending her knees, The Jedi channeled the Force through her legs, pushing off as she sent a blast of Telekinesis downwards, rocketing herself upwards towards her friend, slowing as she neared, *almost* overshooting but sticking the landing.

Shooting a smirk the Adept’s way, the Padawan launched herself forward again, trusting in the Force to guide her as she soared forward, landing on another branch a few dozen feet away, and let out a breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding, seemingly for weeks. Everything about the Circle of Magic was small, finnicky, controlled, and often so unnatural she couldn’t find a way to do things that stayed with the Light side of the Force, and it was good to stretch her legs and just *go.*

Looking back to her surprised Partner, Anaïs couldn’t help to ask, “Well, are we?”

<SWPP>

It was several hours later that they came across the first Force-using animals. Senara had gone over some of the more common ones in the past week, but hearing about them and seeing them were two very different things. They’d been moving through the trees, keeping to the branches to avoid ‘problems’ as the other girl had put it, both women using radically different techniques.

Anaïs had been using her tried and true Force Jumps, Senara stopping after they’d been at it for an hour, outright asking the Padawan if she could keep up the pace until sundown, and had been incredulous when the blonde had said she could. *Apparently* the closest technique the Adept had to what her Jedi friend was using was a draining, all or nothing attack. From *that* perspective, Anaïs could see the other girl’s point, as if she had to move herself through Telekinesis alone it *would* be tiring, even with the five second wait time she had before her friend caught up with her after every Jump, though still not to the level the Adept was suggesting.

Senara, meanwhile, had been maintaining a ‘spell’ that hung about her like a mantle, lifting her up and practically carrying her on what seemed to only be a breeze, and one that the Jedi had been trying to wrap her head around for hours. It wasn’t as fast as the Padawan’s jumps, but had a consistency to it that let the white-skinned girl move smoothly even without Anaïs’ ability to let the Force guide her movements, lacking the surety of the Padawan’s landings, making the tattooed girl’s smooth navigation of the treetops even more impressive

Both of them stopped as the Padawan felt a ripple in the Force ahead of them, and to the left. Carefully feeling for danger, she didn’t wait for her partner to catch up, leaping forward again when it felt safe. Looking for what was nearby, it was half-hidden, almost muted, and felt. . . *muddy?*

Catching up to the Jedi, Senara looked at the same patch of forest floor Anaïs was staring at. “Ah,” the Adept breathed quietly after a long moment. “Good eye. Almost didn’t see zem.”

“Them?” the Jedi echoed, confused. “It’s. . . I’m getting dirt, and mud, but. . . in the Force.”

“You vould. Look,” Senara directed, pointing to the side. A dozen large tan deer started to amble over, the bucks with large, pure white horns that gently trailed light blue mist, which drifted down their bodies and across the forest floor. Seeing the unnatural effect, it was only by concentrating on them that the Jedi could tell that these animals, too, had a Presence in the Force. They matched the small ripples they made to the small motions of their environment, their lives hidden amongst that of the trees, nothing more than a cool breeze in the Force to her senses.

One of the does, a fat one with smaller antlers than the male deer, though larger than the other females, glanced up at the two women, cocking a head to the side in vague interest.

Turning to ask Senara what they should do, Anaïs realized that she could barely feel her friend in the Force, the winding white tendrils of the girl’s tree-like Presence vague and ghostly, as if they were nothing but a mirage, blending into the tree she was standing upon even better than the deer had been, though the woman was clearly standing right beside her. Holding up a pale finger to black lips, the Adept shook her head, and pointed back down to the ground.

Looking below, watching, waiting, a glimmer in the Force was the Padawan’s only warning. Following its whispers, Anaïs threw a hand forward, a silver square of force appearing beside the doe. It was startled, moving back as the ground beside it erupted, snapping stone jaws slamming nose-first into the barrier, which held fast, the stone-covered wolf bouncing away as three more leapt up at the already moving deer.

One small buck leapt a good fifteen feet away from its attacker, the barest glimmers of Force Control at work to enhance its muscles, while the other stood its ground, swinging its small crown of horns inwards to smack the attacker away. As it did so, the Force moved with it, and the antlers grew, spikes of ice covering the bone, quickly stained dark red with the wolf’s blood. The last wolf closed its jaws on a doe’s leg, only for the Force to *flex,* A stag charging into the clearing, and an icicle as big around as Anaïs’ arm spun into being within its crown of antlers, firing forward and impaling the dirt-covered wolf, which let go of its prey with a pained howl.

The other wolves lunged for the injured doe, the two bucks charging in while the Stag fired another icicle, but one of the wolves dodged and leapt in, stopped cold as Anaïs grasped it with Telekinesis. It was *heavy,* far heavier than something that size should be, but it only needed to be held for a moment before another icicle came in, slamming through the dirt-wolf’s neck, its death clear in the Force.

The remaining predators howled, before turning and, with a twist of energy, leapt into the ground, which gave way as easy as water to the creatures, their Presences diminishing as they fled.

“Vy did you do zat?” Senara asked, confused, and a little annoyed, but Anaïs was already in motion, leaping down to the ground at the Force’s urging. The stag’s head snapped towards her, another icicle forming, but the Jedi felt no danger, as the doe that had spotted her gave a bleating cry.

*Are they intelligent?* the Jedi thought, looking at them, their Presences in the Force slowly coming into focus. Reaching out, she *could* feel them, the stag’s wariness, the buck’s flighty readiness, and the doe’s pain. Trusting in the Force, she held her hands up, and slowly the stag’s attack broke apart, showering the animal’s shoulders with a fine coat of azure snow.

“I want to heal her,” she said, but the animal merely stared at her, not relaxed, but not ready to try and kill her in a moment either. *Right, animals don’t speak Basic,* she chastised herself. *But they seemed to understand the Force. . .*

Extending an open hand, she focused on her desire to help the poor, injured creature, and healing silver mist started to gather in her hand, in many ways similar to that coming off of the deer before her. The Stag stared, and she worried she’d made a mistake, before it slowly tilted its head in the direction of its injured mate.

Slowly approaching, the doe pulled back, limping badly as dark blue blood welled up from the ragged, torn flesh of its leg, but a snorting grunt from the Stag stopped it, letting the Padawan get close. Carefully reaching forward, she made sure to not touch the wound directly, sending the energy that drifted from her down deep into the injury, healing it from the bottom up, to make sure nothing was caught in the wound.

On herself the process was almost automatic, and other humanoids were close enough it only required a little effort, but on this animal she moved slowly, and with great care. Her efforts yielded results, ragged bits of stone she’d not seen pushed out and falling to the ground, the rock fragments shaped like wolves’ teeth. *Did they come off when it bit?* she thought, reminded of certain marine predators from her studies that did similar things. Soon enough, the pain she sensed faded, and carefully touching the bloody flesh, the Padawan felt the doe’s leg, checking for injury, and found none.

Standing up, and letting out a relieved breath, she almost jumped, as the stag had come *right* up next to her, as the others gathered around them both, curious. The healed doe took a hesitant step on its injured leg, letting out a pleased trill, and daintily moved up to nuzzle against the stag. The others let out happy cries, the braver of the bucks moving up to her and, careful of its horns, now free of ice, bumped the Jedi’s shoulder with its head, before starting to trot off.

The others moved past her, each one gently rubbing up against the Padawan, the fat doe second to last, dipping its head over to rub Anaïs’s hand affectionately, before moving after the others. The Stag was left, staring at her before lifting its head slightly and snorting at her in a way she could only describe as *approving* in the Force, the creature slowly walking by her, not touching her, and following the rest of the herd.

The Padawan watched them go, disappearing amidst the trees, and when a voice came from behind her, this time she *did* jump, the lack of any danger from the Force, or presence in it, making her drop her guard.

“That vas *very* foolish, Anaïs,” Senara noted neutrally, leaning against a tree. Stepping away from it, the Adept’s half-hidden Presence became clearer, no longer tangled up in the faint feeling of the tree itself. “I have heard ze Jedi are soft-hearted, but. . . vhy?”

“Why?” the Padawan echoed, just as confused as her friend seemed.

“Vhy did you interfere? Iz not respecting ‘ze cycle of life’ one of your tenents. Besides, ze wolf iz worthless, vhile Rime-Deer antlers are in high demand. And zen to waste Magick on healing dem. . .” the Adept trailed off.

Anaïs shrugged. “The Force suggested I should,” she offered, which, since the Force was just what *she* wanted to do already, that didn’t mean much, as she was just saying that she was doing what she wanted to do, but it sounded better this way. “And I’ll be fine in a minute or two.”

“Does ze ‘Force’ often send you leaping into danger?” Senara asked, frowning.

The Jedi wanted to say no, though, thinking about her time as a Padawan, she couldn’t truthfully disagree. “I was fine,” she dismissed instead, looking to change the subject. “And why is the wolf body worthless?”

“Because *everyone* zat wants one already has zeir own pack,” the Adept replied, rolling her eyes. “Raised for ‘purity of foci’. Worse, ze hide of zese dirt dogs are worthless, and even as food, zey taste *terrible*,” she remarked, idly kicking the wolf’s corpse.

The wolf’s limbless corpse.

The wolf’s limbless, tailless, corpse, of which only the top *third* remained, its head untouched.

“Uh, Senara? Where’s the rest of it?” Anaïs slowly asked, looking around and seeing a few scattered bones, dark red streaks staining the grass. The Adept just gave her a level look. “*Senara?”*

“*You’re* ze one who decided to jump into ze middle of zem,” she offered. “Maybe wait and listen next time?”

“But,” the Jedi tried to argue. “But, I wasn’t in danger.”

The Adept considered that, asking, “Because you felt it with your Magick?” Anaïs nodded. “Ze same Magick *zey* use?”

“It’s not the *same* use of the For-” the Padawan tried to argue, stopping at her friend’s unamused gaze over her technicalities. “Yes.”

“Zen, *perhaps*, zey might be able to show you what you wanted to see?” Senara asked leadingly.

The thought seemed ridiculous, but. . . “*Can* they do that?” Anaïs questioned in turn, a cold trickle running down her spine at the blasterbolt she’d just unwittingly dodged, surrounded by omnivorous, or possible even carnivorous, deer.

“Zey cannot,” her friend informed her, allowing the Jedi a moment to sigh in relief, “But ze creatures on my homeworld? Zere are a few zat *do*.”

“So, bad habit to get into?” the Padawan questioned, getting a dark laugh and nod from Senara. Staring at the remains of the earth-aligned wolf carcass, the blonde had to ask, “If they ate it, why’d they leave those parts untouched? Is it poisonous?”

With a smirk, the Force Adept rolled the remains towards the Jedi. “Zey left *you* some, as thanks. So tell me, Anaïs, are you hungry?”

“Didn’t you say they taste like *dirt?”* Anaïs shot back, stopping the bloody mess with a bit of Telekinesis.

Walking up to the Padawan, the Adept tsk’d. “So ungrateful, you Jedi,” she teased, wrapping the Force around her and running up a nearby tree trunk.

Shaking her head, Anaïs infused her body with the Force and took a few enhanced steps, launching herself upwards with a blast of Telekinesis as she followed her friend deeper into the forest.

<SWPP>

With the reason for *why* they were travelling through the treetops had now been revealed, they kept up the pace through the seemingly endless day, the sky blotted out by the omnipresent ceiling of leaves, though the height of the cover kept lifting, the trees having slowly increased in size. Keeping her senses open as she travelled, Anaïs had been able to feel the presence of other Force using animals, and one tree that Senara had, when the Jedi had pointed it out, made them both back away from slowly and go around, the Adept keeping an eye on the Padawan as they did so.

“What’s the problem?” Anaïs had asked, after they’d put it far behind themselves. “It wasn’t dangerous.” At the pale woman’s look, she’d amended that to, “It didn’t *feel* dangerous.”

“You did not feel it on your mind?” Senara had inquired, letting out an annoyed sigh when Anaïs shook her head. While something the Padawan still struggled with at the higher levels, maintaining weak Mental Shields, after so long on Uphrades, was a practice she kept up with. “Jedi. Of *course*,” the white-haired girl opined.

They moved on for several more minutes, the Padawan finally cracking and asking, “So, what do they do?”

“Zat famed Jedi *discipline*, however,” the Adept had mused to herself, as Anaïs huffed in annoyance. Resisting external effects completely different than the kind of ‘internal serenity’ her Temple teachers extolled. “Ze tree enraptures those who come too close. Its victims sit on its roots until zey perish, whereupon zey feed it with their bodies.”

“That’s *terrible,”* The Padawan had gasped, horrified.

“I’m told it’s a very peaceful death,” Senara had shrugged nonchalantly, “but we have plans, zo I thought it better zat we not get too close.”

“*Thanks*,” Anaïs had shot back, a little sarcastically, but still truly thankful for her friend’s presence. They’d continued for a few hours past that, finally slowing as night crept through the treetops, Senara leading Anaïs to one tree in particular, one that had an odd presence in the Force. Unlike the last one, which had nearly shone with it, the tree itself wasn’t the source of the distortion, so slight it was hard to get a hold of, even up close, but something high up on it.

Following the Adept, the other woman stopped, calling the Force to herself as she wove a complicated ‘spell’, hands glowing green, the light drifting forward and spreading out, seemingly sticking to the oddity in the Force, partially covering it. With a wave of her hands, Senera opened a hole in the mist, revealing an odd growth in the side of hundred-foot-tall tree that hadn’t been there a moment ago. Jumping through the hole she’d created, she landed at the edge of the growth, which slowly unwrapped itself, forming an odd little hut.

“Come on, Twilight is ze hunter’s time,” the Adept warned, and Anaïs quickly followed her, the glowing green Force technique closing itself before dissipating, leaving the shell of whatever was around them intact. With small twists of Force, Senara manipulated the wooden structure of the shelter, reshaping it to fit both of them, forming a second wide bench, to which the white-haired woman waved the blonde to sit on.

Doing so, Anaïs looked around the structure, trying to figure out the complex Force technique, which cast a wide illusion, hiding them from everything else. Following the flow of energy, she tracked it to a small bit of twisted white branches, seemingly made of the same material as Senara’s staff, small carved symbols dotting it at irregular intervals. The way the Force twisted and looped around and through the construct was fascinating, and also an amazing example of the other woman’s Force Sect’s practices.

Senara herself had taken on aspects of the Magi’s techniques with her use of the Force, but this was all of the differences Anaïs had seen between her friend’s Force use and that of the native students, collected and magnified. “How?” the Padawan asked, unsure. For Magi-based techniques, the pale Force Adept had been happy to share and collaborate, but the woman had *also* been tight-lipped about her home world and people, other than vague statements about its dangerousness, which didn’t help the Jedi narrow things down.

“Of course you’d find ze totem zat fast,” Senara remarked fondly. “Vhy would I expect anything else? My apologies, Anaïs, but *zat*, is a secret of my people.” With a smile, the woman pulled out her bedroll, stretching it out over the bench, explaining its purpose. “Really, I should not even be showing you *zis* much, but I von’t tell my elders if you don’t,” she explained with a small smile.

Making a zipping motion, Anaïs smiled back, as they both took out their rations, the Jedi taking out the small stove that came with her survival gear, heating their meals, a small glow-rod activated to cast light across their small haven.

Both women ate their dinners in silence, looking out the ‘window’ Senara formed, the totem keeping them hidden. As night fully fell, more and more things started moving, large shapes prowling the forest floor, while birds, lizards, and more moved around the upper layers, all of them giving the shelter a wide berth.

Then, slowly, the lights started to appear.

At first it was an odd little glow here and there, but soon enough there were dozens of points of illumination as bioluminescent life revealed itself, changing the darkness into a dance of colors and shadows that captured the eye, and Anaïs sat there, accepting the cup of herbal tea Senara passed her, taking it all in.

The Force in the forest had been calm, the larger creatures making some small waves here and there, but otherwise still. *Now* it reminded her of nothing so much as the ponds of the Temple gardens, when the plants were watered, the falling droplets turning the still, placid surface into a riot of ripples, none so great as to blot out the rest, forming abstract patterns.

*Everything* here used the Force, it seemed, a hundred different creatures using it in a hundred different ways. A collection of insects, all glowing with faint actinic blue light, moved together, small crackles of electricity jumping between them, the lot of them flaring as one, both in brightness and in the Force, when a lizard unleashed a long tongue at them, a soft *snap* as a small bolt of lightning struck out, deflecting the appendage, only for a black bird, that seemed to have cloaked itself in shadows, to drop down as the glow faded and snatch a single flying beetle, flapping off into the darkness of a nearby branch with its prize and a muffled *caw* of victory, calling the shadows back around itself with the Force.

The forest was beautiful, but it was *equally* dangerous, and she had to wonder how many people had gone for a hike, never to return. When she asked, her friend shook her head, putting the Padawan’s fears to rest.

“How long did ve travel, Anaïs, before ve found danger?” the Force Adapt questioned, smiling at her friend’s baseless worries. “And how long vould it take someone untalented in ze arts of magick? Days? A veek? And zen, vhile useless for us, given vhat *we* hunt, zose dirt-dogs vould still be valuable for the poorest Bhoyarian. A hunt vorth the dangers.No, *any* magick-gifted creature zat comes too close to ze city is culled, and ze deeper one goes, ze more dangerous, ze more wonderous, and ze more *profitable*, zey become.”

“And what *we’re* hunting?” the Jedi asked.

Black lips twisting into a wry smile, Senara answered, “A custom order? And one zat vill take *both* of us to slay? If ve succeed, and ve will, even cut in half, each of us vill be very, *very* comfortable.”