**Arc 2 Chapter 21**

Anaïs woke shortly before sunrise, feeling the shifts in the Force around her change from the constant susurrus of low-level distortions that surrounded her bubble of serenity, like the rain that sometimes fell on the Circle, not scheduled like weather of Coruscant, and staying for *hours* at a time because of it. Opening her eyes and sitting up, she watched what was going on outside.

The activity in the darkened forest was still enthralling to watch, but the patterns of movement were smaller than before, not with the almost frantic energy she’d seen just after sunset. With treetops over a hundred feet above her head, most of the sunrise was obscured, but a few weak rays could be seen starting to slant through, and down, bouncing off the upper branches and slowly lightening the forest as a whole.

Most of the creatures had disappeared, and a few more did so even as she watched, entering tree trunks, landing and disguising themselves as what she’d previously thought to be moss, mushrooms, and the like, and only by watching them lie flat could she tell the difference from normal moss, mushrooms, and so on, their Presences in the Force blending into the low *thrum* of the life she sensed from the trees themselves.

As Lucian had said, *everything* had a Presence in the Force, but the Presences of most things were so small, and so still, that it was almost impossible to notice them, though being able to do so was, as the man had said, was *“when things get* ***really*** *interesting”*, with the caveat that it’d probably be a few *decades* before she could truly do so. As she watched the various Force-using creatures settle in to sleep, observing their various Presences not so much *disappear,* but spread and still, the Padawan started to think of a technique that Jorel had found mentioned in the Temple Archives, but hadn’t figured out on his own, nor could she. Force Stealth, or Force Concealment, had nothing to do with *actual* stealth or concealment, though Jorel *had* been able to make his ‘Veil’ technique by trying to do so.

The ongoing, passive use of Force Confusion was something that she herself struggled with, even her Mind Trick, the ability to press the patterns of one’s own thoughts onto another’s mind, was middling at best. However, *neither* of them had been able to see *this,* as Anaïs sat, watched, and meditated. Looking to the still sleeping Senara, the woman’s own Presence was partially concealed as well, though not as completely as she’d seen the girl do earlier.

With that example of an in-between state, the white-skinned woman’s Presence, a young tree made of the same material as the staff she carried, seeming to meld into the softer Presence of the tree itself, along with the ongoing processes in front of her, even if each type of Force-capable fauna did so *slightly* differently, the Jedi started to gain insight into the greater process.

Taking a deep breath, she tried to invert her gaze, looking inwards to her *own* Presence instead of outwards towards that of the lives all around her. It was. . . difficult, like a spanner trying to measure the width of its own handle, but not *impossible.* The image she got was hazy, all that a few months of intense training under Master Lucian had provided, but she could make out the edges of it.

Out of focus, like a holoterminal’s projectors were out of alignment, she could make out the crystalline core that Jorel had described, bright and glowing. *He’d* said it had appeared to be a ‘frozen flame’, but she couldn’t see it as clearly as he had, so she assumed he was correct in that. Some Jedi perceived the Force in their own ways, such as different notes in a song, or an enormous, interconnected forest, though, just as he had about *all* things, Master Lucian had his own opinion on such a viewpoint.

*“Limiting, and a crutch,”* he’d dismissed, as he’d worked with her to better sense things in the Force. “*You can’t fly a ship through song alone, can’t understand the complexity of a situation if everything’s a* ***plant.*** *Doing so helps you gain skill quickly,”* he’d explained, *“because you’re passing everything through a filter that you better understand, but what happens when you run up against something you* ***don’t?*** *You miss details through oversimplification, you lose the ability to work on a fine level, and, if you’re* ***really*** *unlucky, you are rendered blind to the Force-using plant monster that wants to eat your face and live in your skin, and has* ***already*** *taken over your comrade, because the stone-Presenced man you know suddenly being a* ***plant*** *isn’t unusual if* ***everything is plants,****”* he’d declared, with a specificity that made Anaïs wonder if he was speaking in hypotheticals.

So she did her best not to view what she *wanted* to see, but what was *actually there*. As such, and though it was out of focus, she could perceive movement within her own Presence, watching it slowly fall away from her crystal core into the greater weave of the Force itself. Carefully, she tried to move that bit of herself, but doing so was. . . *difficult.* It was part of herself, it *was* her, it should be easy to move, but she didn’t know *how.*

*Don’t force it,* she told herself, one of the few things that both the Temple and her Master both agreed on, if for different reasons. Instead she reached *out* to the Force, knowing what she *wanted* to do, and looking to it for guidance. She pictured what she saw the creatures doing, what she saw Senara doing, but her friend *made* the Force do what she wanted, while the animal’s use of it seemed more reflexive, like a bird flapping its wings, or an insect climbing a tree.

It was slow, but the bit of her own Presence that was the mist started to spread out, but that didn’t seem to be doing anything. Annoyed, Anaïs acknowledge the feeling of not getting the technique on her *first try*, while also acknowledging that it was *dumb.* Looking back out, she watched more and more of the creatures settle into to sleep everywhere, on the trees, on the ground, atop the occasional rock, and realized what she was doing wrong.

They were all spreading out their Presences to *match something else.*

Senara, when Anaïs had gone to help the Rime-Deer, had only become noticeable when she moved away from the tree she had been hiding herself with, and all of the animals and insects she was watching matched themselves to whatever they were sleeping on, under, or next to.

By contrast, Anaïs was trying to blend in with, what, the air? The world? The Force itself?

No *wonder* she failed.

Instead of viewing herself, or the world, she tried to view *both* which. . . wasn’t easy. Almost like looking two directions at once, only, she wasn’t looking with her *eyes,* and Master Lucian had already trained her by using the Force in two different ways at the same time. The push/pull combo that had saved her life against Uphrades’ Ember-Drakes had been one such use.

The clarity of her ‘vision’ suffered even further, the Padawan unable to see herself as she was *in* the world, only able to see the world, see herself, and know *intellectually* where she was supposed to be. Reaching out with one mental hand, she looked at the tree she sat on, getting the, for lack of a better word, *flavor* of its Presence, which, unsurprisingly, was that of a tree. There was something *else* there, likely Senara’s ‘spell’ that kept them concealed, but the Padawan ignored that.

*Walk, run, leap, fly,* her Master had repeated more times than she could count, so she started with just the tree, and *its* Presence. Keeping that in mind, she shifted her attention to herself, and tried to apply that to her silvery mist. Trying to turn the mist *into* wood started to work, but a sense of *wrongness* whispered to her from nowhere, and everywhere at once, and the Padawan instantly pulled back, even as a little bit of her mist started to shift, hardening, but snapping right back to normal.

*Okay. Not that,* she thought, but. . . she didn’t need her Presence to *be* that of the tree, turning her attention out to see a few of the last insects settle down, wood creeping over its embodiment in the Force, but, she could tell, watching closely, it only did so on the *outside.*

She’d tried to do it *all the way through,* though on her next attempt, even trying to transform *just* the top layer, the Force warned her away.

The Padawan sat, stumped, trying to figure out *what she was doing wrong.*

*Maybe it’s not even possible?* she wondered, as she was trying to do this the *Jedi* way, not the way everyone *else* on this planet seemed to use the Force. And she’d seen the change. The Presences that turned to wood, or stone, or dirt.

On a whim, reaching out to a small bird on a branch just outside of the two women’s zone of obscurity, she poked it with Telekinesis, *just* a little. It was somewhat difficult, and she had to use her sight alone to hit the bird, whose dark feathers had let it blend in as it clung to the underside of the bough, but the creature itself was invisible in the Force, yet she still managed it.

It squawked, distressed, feathers quickly pulled back as it glanced around for what had disturbed its rest, and Anaïs watched as its Force Stealth broke for a moment, before it resettled itself and drew the tree’s Force Presence up to its own. No, it used its *own* but. . .

*That’s it,* she thought, turning her attention back inward, while still concentrating on the tree. It was easier to copy what she’d seen, as both her and the bird were using the *same tree*, and she realized her problem was that she was trying to turn that bit of her Presence that was mist *into* wood, instead of just trying to have it *appear* to be wood. She’d thought they were actually changing the substance of what made them *them* in the Force, but, while that seemed possible, whatever *that* resulted in was something the Force *itself* had warned her *not to do,* and so she listened.

Now, she directed the mist, with the Force guiding her, not to *become* wood, but to spread out over the part of her that was the glowing crystal, the part she could not change, surrounding it with a thin cloud of Presence, before trying to change the nature of the very outermost layer, not turning it *into* wood, but merely giving it the *appearance* of being part of the tree, creating a little bubble for herself in the Force.

“Not bad. But without ze ward, you stick out,” Senara commented from behind the Padawan, who flinched, twisting, hand going for her saber before she caught herself, her Force Stealth technique shattering just as the bird’s had. The Force Adept just looked at her friend, one eyebrow raised, then offered her a bowl. “Stew?”

Blushing a little, Anaïs took the offered breakfast, made from ration cubes and the water that had accrued in their canteens while they slept, the devices pulling the substance from atmospheric humidity for as long as they were powered. On a dryer world, it wouldn’t be enough to survive with on its own, but in the lush forests of Bhoyaria they could easily refill themselves a thousand times over on a single small power pack.

The two ate in silence, the white-haired girl finally commenting. “Not bad, for a Jedi, but ven compared to *my* people’s magicks,” mid-sentence, the woman’s Presence in the Force disappeared completely, “you have a way to go.”

Anaïs rolled her eyes. “There wasn’t a lot of on it in the Temple Archives, just references. I’m trying to put it together from what I’m seeing out there,” she jerked a thumb towards the animals. “And from watching you.”

The Force Adept stilled. “From *me?”* she asked, suddenly warily.

The Padawan frowned. “Well, *yeah.* I’m not going to use your ‘spells’, since that’s not how Jedi use the Force, but trying to do it my own way, that’s fine, right?” the blonde woman questioned, now aware that she *might* have stepped on the other girl’s metaphorical toes, and wondering why the Force hadn’t warned her.

Senara considered this, before slowly nodding. “It vould not be considered ‘stealing’ our Magicks if you were to learn dem in zat manner. And, without ze convocation, you vould only have yourself to power zem. Just. . . if you zee anyone else like me, be *careful* Anaïs. Some of my sisters are. . . *touchy* about ze secrets of our people.”

*And that’s why the Force didn’t warn me,* the Padawan thought, nodding, her friend accepting of her words. “I will. If you want to learn some *Jedi* techniques, I could show you-“ she started to offer, but the other woman shook her head, cutting the blonde off.

“No. At least, not now,” Senara told her. “With how fast ve can move, we should be able to make it to our destination before nightfall.”

“And catch what we’re hunting as it leaves?” Anaïs questioned. The ‘Dreadwing’ they were hunting was actually a type of *bat,* and she could see the benefit of-

“When it iz at its hungriest?” the Adept questioned incredulously, “Zat would be a *terrible* idea.”

The Padawan hesitated, seeing the merit in that. “Then, in its cave, while it sleeps?”

Senara sighed, “Anaïs, did you look up vhat we are hunting?”

Feeling a little annoyed, as she *had,* the Jedi replied, “Yes, I *have.* It’s a bat, with a disorienting cry, and water-based abilities.”

“‘Disorienting. . .’, did you ask someone for help? Zat might explain it,” the white-skinned girl questioned, muttering the second part to herself.

The Padawan nodded, not seeing how that mattered. “Yes. It was in a book about ‘creatures of the Southwestern Forest’.”

“*Anaïs*,” Senara informed her kindly. “This is ze *Central* Forest.”

The Jedi processed that. “And. . . what’s the difference?”

“About a quarter of ze planet.”

The Jedi processed that as well. “So. . . the *Central* Forest Dreadwings. . .”

“Zeir screams are enhanced by zeir *wind* magicks, and zey use them to rip apart zeir prey,” the Adept gently informed her. “Ze effect is *magnified* in enclosed spaces.”

Anaïs had to ask, “And they’re *both* called ‘Dreadwings’?” Her friend nodded. “But, if they were trying to get me *killed,* I should’ve noticed something!” The Jedi complained, knowing she was whining, but she felt this merited some hurt feelings.

Senara, however, shook her head. “From vhat you sensed of his emotions, yes?” This time it was the Padawan’s turn to nod, as if, that person had wanted her *dead,* she should’ve felt something more than the mild dislike and boredom she’d gotten from the library worker. “Zen perhaps he did not mean to. You vould be surprised, Anaïs, just how many incompetent buffons zere are out zere. After all,” she smirked, “zey spurned *both* of us, so zey are already lacking in good sense.”

That statement brough a smile to the Jedi’s face, not because she was *prideful,* but because, she could admit, the isolation had been getting to her before she’d talked with her Master. Once more, she was thankful of the Force Adept’s friendship, and considered their hunt. “Then, we block the cave while it’s gone, and attack it when it comes back at the end of the night?”

Senara nodded, using a bit of water to wash off her dishes, tossing the liquid out the window and putting the wooden bowl in a small cupboard grown into the wall. “Yes, vhen it is fat, happy, and sleepy, ve will strike. But that means we need to leave soon if ve are to make it. You can watch ze wildlife when we’re done.”

Rolling her eyes, and washing off her *own* bowl, the Jedi packed her bag, making sure to put her long blonde hair up in a ponytail to keep it out of the way. She wished she could wear a Padawan Braid, as befitted her status, but, while her Master had let her keep it during her training on Uphrades, and during their unexpected and sudden mission on Noonar, the Ancient Jedi Master had insisted she get rid of it.

“*If we were Consulars, or even Guardians, that would be fine,”* he’d informed her. *“Both of them come bumbling into a situation like rampaging Banthas, being identified as Jedi almost universally a boon to their efforts. A Sentinel’s job, however, is to blend in, track down leads, go unnoticed, until it is time to strike, and then to move on. Not a job that lends itself well to easily identified styles of hair and clothing.”*

It was why Anaïs didn’t wear a Padawan’s normal garb, but instead a black and grey vest, with black pants, the only thing brown was her belt, itself with a bronzium buckle and studs. Lucian was closer to the Jedi image, wearing a mottled grey cloak, but the dark armor he wore underneath undercut it completely.

Then again, with the warm forest air on her skin, the material she wore breathable in addition to being protective, something that she’d learned was as rare as it was *expensive,* the Padawan was *perfectly okay* not wearing the undertunic, tabard, and cloak, *all* made of thick, rough-spun fabric, as she followed her friend to the edge of their shelter’s perception bubble.

From this end, Anaïs could see Senara reaching out to the bit of twisted Force that kept the entire thing hidden, interfacing with it somehow, and opening a doorway out. Together, the two of them leapt off into the now silent forest.

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They’d been travelling for hours, and had spotted scattered wildlife here and there, most of it on the larger side, such as person-sized birds, large cats prowling the branches, and a sinuous green snake, over fifty feet long, and soaking wet for some reason, that they moved around, as it stared at them, waiting, but content to go its own way as they went theirs, and more. Most left them alone, though the cats, which leapt between trees far easier than they should be able to, started to move towards them until Anaïs looked at one of them directly, and they broke off, the element of surprise gone.

Stopping for lunch at another of Senara’s hidden enclaves, both girls a little tired from their long travel, Anaïs finally asked, “Why are things so different?” At her friend’s confused look, the blonde girl clarified, “From my reading, twilight should be peak activity, with things quiet. But they were active all night, and during the day, we have completely different animals. I mean, wolves are normally nocturnal, but we saw them during the day, and the deer as well.”

“Ah,” the Force Adept nodded in understanding. “Zat is because different planets, are *different.*” Laughing as the Jedi shot her an unamused look, she continued, “But ze cycles of day and night, zey mean different things ‘ere. At night, it *iz* chaos, but a safer one. Small things come out, hunt, and survive. But in ze day, ze *true* predators come out.”

“Like us?” Anaïs asked, thinking of what her *master* would say, and getting a laugh from her friend.

“*Exactly.* Ze small things, zey are not zat valuable a prey, though some still have worth. No, it is ze things that have the strength to survive in ze light of day, such as it iz, that make for ze best foci. At least, to zose of Anamalia. Trees are trees, day or night, and so are crystals,” she remarked, waving her own staff, and nodding to the Jedi’s saber.

The Padawan nodded back at that, understanding the girl’s point, even if she didn’t use *her* saber that way. Anaïs had *considered* doing just that, when she found herself unable to make *any* progress in the Circle, as it *was* a Jedi’s weapon, but she knew that would just be an excuse, and *not* one that her Master would accept. Thinking of the man, “So, what’s the apex predator here? Us?”

Senara shook her head. “Not even close. In zis area. . . ze Thunder Rex. If you see a sixty-foot-tall blue lizard walking on two legs, crackling vith lightning, *run.*” She shrugged. “Or really, a sixty-foot tall *anything.*”

Anaïs remembered their flight over *to* the Circle, of the enormous bolt of electricity which had tried to strike their craft, of which Lucian had effortlessly avoided, and of the flash of blue she’d caught amongst the foliage. She hadn’t realized how the *deep* the forest had been, how tall that thing had to be in order to be seen from the air at *all.*

Thinking about it now?

“Good advice,” she’d nodded, and the wrapped up their meal, exiting the haven and taking off once more, both of them having recovered from their expenditures of stamina, keeping their respective Force techniques up and running.

They kept moving for another hour, before Senara motioned for them to stop, pointing to the branch they stood on. Turning to look at it, the Force quiet, Anaïs examined the slightly blackened sections, almost like something had charred the bark a little, the wood resilient enough to only be slightly burned. Turning an expectant look on her friend, the Jedi was rewarded with an explanation.

“Infernapes,” the Adept explained, looking around. “I’d normally say ve should go around, but between ze two of us, ve should be fine. And cutting through zeir territory will cut *hours* off our trip. Just follow my lead.”

The white-skinned woman waited for her partner to nod before taking off in a straight line, the same way they’d been going. Now, *knowing* they were entering dangerous territory, the Padawan started to pick out the bits of blackened wood on branches, tree trunks, and so on that she’d missed before. The Force hadn’t directed her attention to it earlier, because, to what she was doing, it wasn’t important.

It was a weakness of the Force that Lucian had brought up, in that it couldn’t answer questions you *didn’t think to ask*, and that it only directed you *right* when you needed to know something. This, in many ways, actively discouraged planning and encouraged ‘flying by the seat of your robes’ as her Master would say, and while it would keep *you* from stepping on a landmine, someone who *wasn’t* necessary for what you wanted to happen?

Well, such things happened in dangerous territory.

The way most Jedi got around such a restriction was to try and protect *everyone*, believing that to be the Will of the Force itself, but, as the Will of the Force was just *your* will, you got the same result either way. Thus, you either had to train yourself to better align your desires, or you had to learn to pay attention to things past the specifics the Force provided.

Master Lucian, of course, wanted her to learn *both.*

It was an ongoing process.

Soon enough, she spotted the creatures, smaller than she’d expected, and with long tails, more monkeys than apes, but naming schemes often didn’t follow standard taxonomies on planets. One only had to look at ‘Dreadwings’, which was apparently the name of *two completely different species*, to see that on Bhoyaria. They had dark grey fur, almost ashen, with visible flames licking the back of their black hands, though the creatures didn’t seem bothered by them.

They hooted, and hollered, but didn’t approach, the few that tried to chase after the two girls slowly left behind. As they encountered more, and more, and *more,* the Padawan started to wonder if ‘cut through their territory’ didn’t mean, ‘pass through the *heart* of their territory’. Finally, Anaïs could sense something in front of them, something with a very *large* Force Presence, and, looking back to the Adept, she could tell her friend could sense it too, and was happy about this fact.

One of the infernapes tried to jump in their way, but Senara twisted around the creature’s grasping, burning hands and kicked off its back, to move even faster, catching up with the Jedi as another creature leapt for *her.* Just like the mages, these creatures had no innate defenses against the Padawan’s techniques, and a simple push with Telekinesis sent it spinning, catching itself on another tree before it hit the ground.

The other infernapes held back, watching as the two girls moved closer to the beacon in the Force, stopping as they reached a small clearing, in the center of which, atop a small hill, was an *enormous* tree, with red and orange foliage that looked like fire as the leaves rippled in the breeze. Large, black, burned looking melons hung from the branches, and seemed to practically *smolder* in the Force.

The Force Adept leapt forward, into the clearing, and Anaïs hesitantly followed her, the Force itself warning of *danger* in every direction, though without the strength that suggested an imminent threat. “Senara,” the Padawan asked carefully. “What are we doing?”

There was movement, and there were easily a *hundred* monkeys in the central tree, watching them, with twice again as many in the trees surrounding them. Most of them were only a few feet tall, but they *all* burned, and the Jedi wasn’t sure she could take themif the attacked en masse*.*

From higher up, something *large* moved, an ape, easily ten feet tall, whose hair had turned grey-white, and whose hands burned a bright blue, descending the tree.

*“*Senara?” the blonde prodded.

The white-haired girl shot the Padawan a smile, black lips quirking up into a mischievous smirk. “Getting dinner,” she replied. “Get ready to run.”

*“Senara!”* the Jedi rebuked, but the girl was already casting, muttering to herself in her own language, several circles full of sigils appearing before her in ghostly, intertwining white branches. The Jedi recognized some from her classes, but a full third were obviously pulled from a different source, their shapes and designs completely different from the mix of blocky corners and swirls of the Bhoyarian language, instead almost sharp looking letters that appeared to be more carved into the air than smoothly grown.

The circle flashed, the Adept’s staff shining, and, with a rumble, roots burst up from the ground, encircling the lead ape, even as a branch high up twisted unnaturally, seeming to throw several of the head-sized melons in their direction. Senara caught one in her free hand, Anaïs catching two more, several others hitting the ground and rolling away.

The monkeys went *crazy*, charging them, while the lead ape shoved a burning hand through the roots that formed the wooden cage it was caught in, the air around it shimmering from the heat. “Now, my friend,” Senara prodded, recasting her first spell, the mantle of air to slow her fall forming around her shoulders. Another muttered incantation and a root burst from under the white-haired woman’s feet, throwing the pale woman high, and towards the tree line to the right.

Infusing *herself* with the Force, Anaïs did the same, leaping after her friend, as the creatures stated to converge on their previous position. Rising high, careful not to crush her purloined fruit with her now-enhanced strength, the Jedi reached out in two directions.

One mental hand gripped the higher branch of the closest tree that *wasn’t* the tree full of angry apes, the other went to try and grab her friend, but the Padawan found her grip sliding right off, not stubbornly resisting her pull, like a Jedi would, but as if the woman’s Force Presence was covered in *oil*. The Adept shot Anaïs a questioning look, then nodded, once, and suddenly the Jedi could hold her friend with her Telekinesis easily.

Starting to fall, the Padawan reached deep and *yanked,* simultaneously rocketing herself towards the treeline, while also *massively* accelerating her companion, the white-haired girl letting out a *whoop* of excitement as she blurred past the Jedi, another quickly woven spell extending the Adept’s mantle, letting her bank mid-flight, passing through the tree-line and heading further ahead.

Having to follow *real* physics, Anaïs landed on the tree-branch she’d been aiming for, and moved immediately, the few infernapes nearby coming for her. Focusing, the Padawan shifted her mindset, to the same one she’d used on Noonar, though without *any* of the preparation time she’d had then. Instead of hard-limits, she could only see the vague swaths that indicated danger, an incoming tide of *certain death* slowly coming at her from behind.

Looking for corridors of safety, she followed them the best she could, Force Jumping from branch to branch, splintering a few smaller ones as she leapt from them without care for the forest, only on *escape*. Through that, she was able to avoid a few creatures that had laid in wait for her, jumping around their ambushes, but she missed one, almost locking up in surprise and fear when a hidden monkey hurled a fireball at her head, in the middle of her arc.

*Needing* a way to change direction, without the time needed to reach out and push/pull herself around, she blindly reached out to the Force to help, for *some* kind of footing, only for her leg to suddenly catch on the air itself. Reflexively, her training on Uphrades kicked in and she blindly leapt from it, twisting around to see nothing at all there, her new path letting her miss the attack by inches, singing the tip of her ponytail, as she completed the somersault, landing on another branch and moving on.

*Master?* she thought, surprised, but she *knew* Lucian wasn’t anywhere near where she was, *had* no reason to be there, but, regardless, tried to send feelings of thanks out into the Force to whatever had helped. Nothing responded, but, still, that didn’t change how she felt, and she leapt again, catching sight of a gradually slowing Senara.

Coming alongside her friend, the Padawan glared at the girl. “This *better* be worth it.”

The Adept smiled unrepentantly. “It will be.”