**Arc 2 Chapter 35**

Classes at the Circle continued, and, with her new understanding of *ice*, a lot of the lessons Anaïs had ‘learned’ were starting to make more sense, now that she could *kind* of use the Magi’s way of manipulating the Force, though without doing it *exactly* the way they had. Her own style and more. . . *freeform* use of the Force made it harder for her to get her head around their multitude of radically different uses, even within one element, though, once she had it, she *really* had it, refining it until, like Fatsani’s demonstration of her bowls in the man’s Elementalism class, she could create things far in excess of her peers, though the speed she did so, while perfectly alright to the professors, given their quality, would be nowhere *near* acceptable to her Master.

But it was still good to see the gains, even if all the ‘Runes’ classes she had taken did was let her read the spells of *others*, and the fact that she’d no longer been academically stalling had meant that she had, if anything, *more* attention turned her way.

Senara, of course, was *no* help, using the Force to ‘fade away’ whenever one of the Bhoyarians approached her. At least the Padawan had gotten enough experience watching the other girl that the blonde girl thought she’d actually managed to figure out how *Jorel* had managed his ‘Veil’ technique, though it was *hellaciously draining* to use, which, given that Anaïs’ own ability with the Force was greater than his, at least when it came to Midi-chlorian counts, meant that she was certainly still doing something *wrong*.

At least Anaïs was also getting practice *tracking* her friend when, between one step and the next, the white-skinned girl would seem to disappear, steps quieting, Presence fading, and a hint of ‘not important’ projected outwards to everyone around her.

*Like now.*

Sighing, the blonde teen looked around, *annoyed,* trying to see what it was going to be *this* time. She acknowledged the feeling and let it pass before it could **Darken** her own Presence, seeing that, *oh by the Force, it was* ***Ainra****.* Acknowledging *that* annoyance, and letting *it* go too, Anaïs reminded herself, *Jedi must meet every challenge with grace and magnanimity. Even if it’s the same challenge seven Force-be-damned times over.*

“Hello Ainra,” the Padawan greeted pleasantly, with a smile that was only *somewhat* false. “How are you this lovely afternoon?”

The tiny blue-haired Bhoyarian, with a Presence like a baby tiger, marched up to the Jedi, and announced, “I have given your words due thought, and I believe my previous offers were in error.”

Surprised, Anaïs replied with hope that the seventh time was the charm, “You do?”

The small girl nodded, the Mage a *great* deal younger than the Padawan, or any others of her ‘circle’. From Ainra’s boasting, the Jedi knew the small girl had entered the Circle young due to her natural skill and familial connections. She would’ve possibly even been cute if she wasn’t so. . .

“I *do*. Instead of being a servant of my family, you shall become my *personal aide!”* the small girl pompously declared. “And you may bring *your* personal aide as well! It is only right, given my status, that my aide have an aide of her own!”

“*My* aide?” the Jedi echoed, confused.

“Yes,” Ainra agreed. “That pale girl that hangs around you. The foreign one with the silly accent. I’ve heard you’re training her up to *your* standards, as any good master should!”

Senara dropped her technique, glaring at the small girl. “Excuse me? *Vhat* did you say?”

“Oh, there you are. You are excused,” the *maybe* twelve-year-old smiled. “And since you didn’t hear me, I was just telling your master-”

“I *heard* vhat you said,” the Adept interrupted.

“Ah, good, then I won’t have to repeat myself!” Ainra nodded, satisfied, turning to face the Padawan. “Your response?”

Trying not to laugh at her friend’s outraged expression, Anaïs smiled kindly. “I’m sorry, but I’m only going to be here for a year at most. I have other duties that I cannot put aside for longer than that.”

The small girl stared, then nodded understandingly. “I see, very good, you are not so easily bought.”

Relieved, the Jedi started to say, “*Exactly,* I’m glad that-”

“So I need to find a price you’d be willing to set aside your previous contract for,” Ainra continued, as if the blonde hadn’t said anything. “You drive a hard bargain, Anaïs, but from what I can tell you are worth it! I will return when I have secured such a reward!” the child declared striding off.

“No, wait!” the Padawan called after, but her words fell on deaf ears. “*Ugh.*”

*“Your* servant,” Senara sniffed. “If anything, it is ze other way around!”

Giving her friend a flat look, Anaïs asked, “How are your attempts to use the Force coming, again?”

“Zhat-Zhat is entirely unrelated!” the Adept shot back hautily, before smiling. “You know she vill be back, of course?”

“Of *course* she will,” the Jedi groaned, as the continued on their way to their training area. *Acknowledge, and move on.* “Is it *really* so hard to understand that I’m not just, I don’t know, playing ‘hard to get’?”

“For me? No, I know vhat you Jedi are like,” Senara offered consolingly. “But Bhoyarians think of *Bhoyaria,* and little else*.* ‘Oh you vish my help? Vhell I already have plans zhat day,’ they say even if zhey did not. Zhey are *actually* asking vhat can you offer to make it worth it? Oh, but to say so outright vould be *rude,* and so they vould deny it, if asked, but vithout the offer of renumeration zhey vould be *most* offended. It iz a dance that everyone here does, while denying it, so of *course* you are too, or else you are just stupid, and you aren’t a dribbling moron, *unlike some zhat I could name,* so obviously you are just playing humble,” the white-skinned woman ranted a little, scorn dripping from her tone.

“Had some problems with that?” Anaïs teasingly questioned.

With a huff, the Adept replied, “You have *no idea,* my friend*.* At least ze staff of the Circle are above such things, as Headmaster Draconis has no time for zhem, but he is zhe *exception,* not zhe rule.” Quirking the edge of her mouth into a smile, she added, “Vhich is why *you* are clearly asking for a higher price.”

Looking to the sky, somewhat hoping her Master would swoop in any moment and tell them it was time to *leave*, the Padawan asked, “Why am I here again?”

Senara laughed, “To learn, of course. Now, vhile I am working on this ‘Light’ Magick of yours, you were trying to increase your speed of ice forming, yes?”

“Yeah, that,” the Jedi smiled, “On the bright side, at least *some* of them have taken the hint.”

<SWPP>

“I’m sorry,” Anaïs apologized, more out of politeness than anything. “Could you repeat that? I’m *sure* I didn’t hear you correctly.”

The heavily muscled man, likely in his early twenties, a sixth circle Mage by the tab on his robe, and thus in his second to last year of schooling, looked down at her pompously. “I have said you have the honor of being my bride. You may now thank me.”

*Well, this one’s new.* “Ah. Uh. *No*,” she replied, looking to Senara, ‘hidden’ as she was, the Adept also surprised, so at least it wasn’t just her.

“You will *not* thank me?” the man questioned disapprovingly. “You will learn *proper* respect, in time.”

“Uh, *no,* I mean I’m not going to be your bride,” Anaïs told him, wondering why she had to do so, looking around, and noting others watching them. Half of them had arrived as this stranger had, and the fact that *everyone* had gone quiet when he’d approached her should’ve been a clue that something was going on, but the Force was silent, not warning her at all. “Who are you, again?”

The Mage, his Presence like a large, metallic bull, seemed taken aback, before his brows knit together, and his other self metaphysically pawed the ground in annoyance. “Do you know who my family are?” he demanded.

“I. . . no?” she questioned. “That’s *why* I asked who you are?”

Senara laughed, quickly smothering it as the bull-man sent the Adept a warning glare, before turning his attention back towards the Jedi. “I am Limbani Azizi Badoli. You may now apologize.”

“For what?” Anaïs questioned, which only angered the man more. “I haven’t actually done anything worth apologizing for, at least to you.”

“You should *know your place*,” the man stated, anger bubbling up, “Or-”

“Or what?” she interrupted. “You walked up to *me*, declared I would *marry* you, and are now *threatening* me? You do know that’s not how this works?” She looked to Senara, “Or is it that way here, and no one told me?”

The Adept winced, “Zhat boy is zhe heir to one of zhe ruling clans, so he might believe it iz.”

As this ‘Limbani’ got angrier, the Jedi winced, pulling on her Temple training. This was *actually* one of the things covered by their Diplomacy lessons, as sometimes an official would, uh, ‘take a shine’ to visiting Jedi and want them to stick around. “Oh, I know how to handle this!” she smiled, ignoring her friend’s incredulous stare as she turned back to the. . . princeling? *Princeling.* “I am sorry, but as a Jedi I am not allowed to have personal relationships of that nature, as such attachments lead to the **Dark Side**,” she informed him, pausing as she realized they didn’t know what that was here. “Or, I suppose, you’d consider it as a ‘state that induces Foci Instability with my sect’s methods’.” Looking back to the Adept, “That’s the equivalent here, right?”

“You think me a *fool!?”* the man growled. “You *will*-”

“***Badoli,****”* A harsh voice called, and the students, who had been whispering, went silent as several moved aside, Professor Fatsani striding towards them. “What’s going on here?”

The muscled student looked at the approaching teacher, and informed him, “Clan Affairs. No business of yours. *Leave us.*”

“You are not on your clan’s property, *Badoli*,” the vine-Presenced man reminded the oxen one, spreading out through the Force. “You have been warned of this before.” He paused, seeing Anaïs. “And *all* of the Clans have been warned about leaving Ms. Vand-Ryssa alone.” Turning to her, he asked, “What’s this idiot doing?”

*“You forget yourself,”* the princeling warned.

“It is not *my* memory that is in question,” the instructor declared, unfurling in the Force even more, the plant-life all around starting to rustle.

Lifting a hand, the Jedi tried to de-escalate things. “He told me I was going to marry him. I said no. He didn’t like that.”

The older man turned and stared at the muscled student, who stared back challengingly. “She’s a *Jedi* you fool,” Fatsani stated. “*They don’t marry.”*

“Irrelevant. She shall be my bride, and be thankful for the honor,” Limbani reiterated. “The weak should serve the strong, and she shall bear me powerful sons while wanting for nothing. She is being ungrat-”

At the edge of Anaïs’ sense, as she was looking for *any* way out of this, she felt the Force nudge her, ever so slightly, and interrupted the princeling, repeating what it suggested. “*Fight me.*”

Both men paused, turning to look at her, the ox-boy the first to speak.

“What.”

Leaning into the feeling, the Jedi shrugged. “If you think you’ll be protecting me, that you’re stronger than me, then fight me. If you win, I’ll *consider* it, but if I win, I don’t need your help.”

Fatsani frowned. “You don’t need to do this, Ms. Vand-Ryssa. This clan brat’s in the wrong.”

That caused the princeling to snarl the teacher’s way, “I will *not* forgive this slight.”

“*Good*,” the older man replied with disdain, “Then maybe-”

“Limbani Azizi Badoli, will you face me, or not?” the Padawan interrupted, before the situation could devolve even further than it already had.

The younger man’s look was sour, but he declared, “I will, and when I prove my strength, you will become mine.”

“Not what I said I’d do,” she replied easily, “but let’s take care of this first. So when-”

The large boy turned and started to stride towards the arena, as they were apparently going to be doing this *now,* the students that had been walking with him surrounding him as he continued on, Fatsani fell in step with Anaïs as she started to head to the arena herself, Senara on her other side. “Do not kill him,” the older man advised.

“You are not concerned zhat she may lose?” her friend questioned.

The professor snorted, “She’s a *Jedi.*”

“Hmm, point,” Senara agreed.

“Thanks for the support?” said Jedi more asked than said. “Also, did he really think that’d work? Just walking up to me and telling me how it would be?”

“It would for most of the young women here,” the Ivy-Presenced man noted, pointing, and following his finger Anaïs was surprised to see the number of *glares* she was getting from some of the female students, the complete lack of any sense of *Danger* having led her to overlook them. “And this will not be the end of things. I could have handled it.”

She believed him, but, well, “The Force is my guide,” she offered, unable to say more.

Senara, on her other side, sighed. “Zhat is not a *reason*, Anaïs.”

Surprisingly, Fatsani shook his head. “For Jedi, *it is*. Trust me.”

“Vhell, you *are* a teacher,” the Adept offered. “You vould know.”

<SWPP>

Soon enough, Anaïs was in the arena, facing the princeling, students packed into the stands, but, feeling out in the Force. . . there wasn’t any real sense of *Danger.* Of the ‘trouble is coming’ variety, as opposed to combat threats. There was *some*, but, compared to when she’d faced Siri, and almost died under her electric assault, this wasn’t that bad. About the same as jogging on Euphrades, really.

The other Mage started casting before their referee started the match, Limbani insisting someone other than Fatsani oversee their bout, and, after waiting a moment, as casting before the start was supposed to be against the rules, the Jedi started pulling the Force to herself as well, settling into a higher state of Force Control, the energy filling and strengthening her body.

*“No casting before combat starts,”* the referee commanded her, but, looking to her opponent, who was currently surrounded by a *floating five-layer circle of steel runes*, without a word from the person overseeing it, she just kept going, ignoring the blatant favoritism. “I *said,*” the man started to repeat, sounding angry.

*“****Onai****,”* Professor Fatsani commanded, his Presence reaching out to grasp the lizard-Presenced referee, and contracting with a single tight pulse. *“****Enough.****”*

Her opponent’s ‘spell’ was straightforward, the Force twisting about him in a lesser version of Force Control, his skin changing color, turning grey and metallic. Taking out her saber, activating it, again the referee called out, “*Spells only!*” which was. . . not how this worked, the Headmaster having explained to her that as her saber was her ‘Foci’, it was thus allowed.

Feeling out in the Force, though, there was no real direction as to what she should do, so, shrugging, she deactivated it, clipping it back to her belt. Limbani smirked, an expression which twisted angrily into a scowl when Senara loudly observed, the Force carrying her words so *everyone* heard, “Zhe Badoli heir needs a handicap even against zhose he declares ‘weaker’ zhan him? I did not realize zhat Mages was so scared of facing others, zhat they needed such things.”

Focusing on herself, Anaïs focused inwards, then on one of the techniques she’d been practicing, bringing her hands together, a rod of deep blue ice forming in front of them, which she grasped, as it extended upwards, starting to form a-

*“Begin!”* the referee announced, Limbani charging forward at what would’ve been *blistering* speed for a normal person, but Jorel had been faster when they parted ways, and she’d only gained in skill since then. Splitting her attention to *see* the paths of *Danger*, the area in front of the princeling lit up in red, but it was a tight corridor, not fading off into the purples of ‘maybe’ dangers to either side.

*Is he really charging me like the bull-creatures his Foci is taken from?* she wondered, still forming her blade, calling the Force to her, ready for a Push herself to the side. Her opponent’s arms extended outwards, and, waiting until the time was right, she ducked and spun to the side without needing the extra force, his grasping, metallic hand missing her by entire inches as she turned, still forming the sword, taking her time with it to create it *correctly*, as it would appear she’d need it to pierce *steel*.

Turning and slamming his feet down, her opponent skidded to a stop before starting another charge, casting another spell, this one crowning his head with a small crown of sharp horns, looking even *more* like his Presence, speeding up slightly, but now even *more* committed to his path, allowing her to leap to the side, *still forming her sword*, as he missed once again.

*Definitely not a mid-battle technique,* she thought, only halfway done herself, as the boy snarled, casting another spell, metallic spikes forming in the air and firing at her, but their paths were painfully straight, and a half step to the side and lifting her hands slightly let her easily dodge the volley. *At least I know his preferred element.*

More spikes were fired, but they weren’t controllable after they were accelerated, and the *Danger* paths were so incredibly clear she easily moved through them, still forming her blade, her training against Lucian’s swarm of droids *far* easier, as these were all coming from a single, fixed location in set bursts.

Turning her back on the princeling, still forming the blade, she looked to Senara, who was trying not to laugh, the Padawan shrugging in a ‘what can you do?’ way, noting the *Danger* path of her opponent charging while still firing spikes, though the pounding sound of his metallic footsteps gave that away. The Jedi leapt up and back in a flip, not even needing to use Force Jump, to avoid him, as she landed, now in the center of the arena, putting the finishing touches on her blade, narrowing the tip to pierce if need be.

With an enraged bellow, Limbani cast another spell, sending three small iron bulls charging at her, but, with a targeted bit of Telekinesis to their knees at the right time, they tripped over their own feet, the puppets controlled through strings in the Force connecting the Mage to his creations.

With that her sword was *finally* completed, and, spinning it, the sensation of her blade having *weight* was odd, but she’d had Lucian show him a bit of how to use his own metal weapons, since her Master refused to use his saber against her when they trained.

Not that he *needed* to.

The bulls scrambled to their feet, but they were even more straightforward than their creator, and, dodging them as they charged, she noted the controlling lines were *present* in the Force, literally stretching out from a point on their backs to his hands. As they came at her again, two more bulls summoned as well, all five charging, they were easy to move around, Anaïs lightly jumping on top of one, crouching down to see how, precisely, the Force connected to it, and the framework of control points within that made it work.

The entire *thing* was Force-created, like her ice, but Bhoyarian wizardry meant it was still real and wouldn’t disperse like a Barrier would. However, metal didn’t naturally bend the way she was seeing it do so, which meant there had to be more there than she first saw.

The bull she was standing upon tried to buck her off, but staying on was the equivalent an *Initiate* level exercise, as she continued to study it. Well, Initiate level according to her Master, which meant she’d had to learn herself after he’d taken her on, but it was almost second nature to the Padawan at this point, the creature moving too stiffly to throw her off like an *actual* animal could.

It rolled over onto its back, and she moved with it, seeing how its underside functioned as she calmly walked across it, finally needing to move away when three other bulls crashed into hers, trying to climb it to gore her. She leaned out of the way of another iron spike, as she stepped onto one of the other bulls, seeing that, *yes,* the patterns of control were *exactly* the same.

She also noted that they weren’t *breathing.*

Which made sense, as creating *truly* living creatures was beyond the scope of Bhoyarian Wizardy, plants exempted, but that led her to realize that these were actually very basic *droids,* running off mechanical control via the Force instead of a cognitive unit and battery. With *that* in mind, stepping off her current bull as more charged her, onto another one, she had to guess the skin was a kind of smooth *mesh*.

Slashing out with her sword, slicing the back of the one she was standing open, but avoiding the lines of Force she was observing, it was *indeed* a mesh, controlling a *very* un-animal-like internal structure. It was a basic machine, the ‘spell’ seeming to handle the, as her master would say, ‘fiddly bits’, but there was no reason it was needed if one had a disciplined enough mind.

The one she was on was trying to lead her towards Limbari, who was prepping another barrage, this one with much smaller circles to try and hide his attempt, but she wasn’t watching for those, she was watching for the attack *itself*.

Stepping backwards off the creature, the attack went over her head easily, and a small jump had her on a different iron bull as it tried to gore her from the side, a swipe of her ice blade revealing the same internal structures. Concentrating, reaching into it with the Force, she was prepared to fight the Mage for control of his puppet, but, after a moment’s worth of resistance that she shoved her way through, the *entire* structure in the Force shattered, the creature going limp and forcing her to move to stay on top of it as it started to limply roll across the ground, coming to a halt.

*Now. . . something like this?* the Jedi thought, keeping half an eye for danger, but her opponent had momentarily stopped. *I’m not going to complain* she thought, as she took a firmer grip onto the not-droid’s innards, looking at the other four’s general structure to make sure she was doing it right, and. . .

Haltingly, she was able to force the construct to its feet, and this *was* a bit more difficult than the man had made it look, she could admit, at least to herself. Coordinating the feet was a right pain, but she could feel the Force with her, aiding her in attempting to bring ‘life’ to it in a way that surprised her, but she wouldn’t turn down the assistance.

The Light Side *was* her ally, after all.

With sudden ease and fluidity, she mentally settled herself ‘into’ the creature, the cut mesh on its back closing itself back up, making it amble over to her, shaking its head and letting out a short snort that she hadn’t *meant* to create, but had just felt right.

It was only then that she realized the arena was dead silent, everyone present staring at her in shock.

Everyone except for Senara, of course, the white-haired girl doing her best to not fall of her bench with laughter, somehow staying completely silent.

Turning, and looking at her opponent, she could almost taste his surprise, dismay, and the **Darkness** of his ***fear***, which *really* hadn’t been what she was going for. Shifting her ice blade to a one-handed grip, she patted her bull’s head, scratching it behind its metallic horns, as it leaned into the motion, tail swishing in enjoyment, and the Jedi asked, confused but hopeful, “I’m sorry, are you done?”