**Chapter Twenty-Two**

Rather than strangle the idiot in front of her, no matter how much she wanted to, Anaïs called out, “Wait!”

“What?” the boy, apparently the grandson of the woman she was supposed to rescue, asked in turn.

“You’re saying, you have *no* idea where your grandmother could be?” she questioned. The Force had directed her to this location, presumably to save his life, but she’d wanted to save Melea Vondarr, as Master Lucian had ordered, and she had to assume that her being here would accomplish that.

The man in front of her, though she found herself thinking of the six-foot-tall moron as a *boy*, hesitated. “Well, I mean, maybe she’s at her other apartment?”

Pulling the flimsy from her pocket, she showed. . . “What’s your name?” she asked, realizing she had no idea.

“Oh! Oh, I’m Crix!” the boy smiled, standing up a little straighter and. . . *was he posing*?

“Anaïs,” she replied blandly, trying to get the pleasantries over with so she could go back to her mission. “Now can you look at this list and tell me which one’s her second apartment?”

Taking the list, Crix smiled even broadly. “Sure thing, Ana!”

*“Anaïs*,” she corrected, hoping to get the info so she could leave this idiot behind.

Crix looked over the list, frowning. “Are you sure these are right? I don’t know what most of these are.”

*No surprise,* she thought. *No, you’re being mean,* she corrected. *He’s naïve, but that isn’t his fault, you’re just frustrated you keep hitting walls and not knowing where to go.* “I just need to know which one’s her other apartment.”

“None of them are,” he finally announced, handing the list back to her.

“. . . then what’s the address of her apartment, if it isn’t one of these?” she asked after a moment.

“Oh, it’s-” he started to say, but a sudden feeling of *danger* lit up the entire space, and Anaïs was moving before she fully understood what was happening. With a twist of the Force she pushed the boy down the hall with a Force Push, pulling the fallen blaster to her as, infusing the Force throughout her body, she launched herself down the hall, the muted sound of something roaring growing ever louder.

Behind her, the apartment *exploded*, the blast chasing her, and she started to form a barrier at the front door, keeping it permeable to let her through as she jumped in a half somersault, twisting so her eyes were on the barrier as it formed, ignoring the impact of her back on the far wall, flaring the shield into being as it held back the inferno that raged where they’d just stood.

She fell, upside down, down the wall, one arm reaching out to catch herself as the shimmering golden barrier *almost* broke, but held firm. As the flames cleared, she saw something flying outside, lifting up out of her line of sight, hopefully having missed the glow of her Force Barrier.

*“Wow!”* Crix marveled at the Force construct, walking over and poking it seemingly without a care in the world. Thankfully, Force Barriers didn’t heat up or cool down, or else he very likely would’ve just burned himself.

Letting it fade, the boy flinched backwards as the heat of the burning apartment hit him in the face, and Anaïs allowed herself a small smile as she righted herself, working one shoulder and letting the Force fade from her muscles, thankful for it. “Alright,” she said, trying to play it off like what’d just happened was no big deal. If he wasn’t going to freak out, she wasn’t going to either. “The address?”

“Oh, sure. . . wait, they just tried to *kill me!*” the boy started to agree, eyes widening in horror, only know realizing what’d just happened.

“Yes?” she replied, hoping to just get through this conversation quickly. “That’s what the sniper was for. And the grenade.”

“But those were different!” Crix disagreed, and then promptly didn’t explain *why*. “No, no, I need to come with you! Grandma Melea’s in trouble!”

Anaïs looked to him, then the burning apartment, the building’s durasteel frame and ferrocrete walls such that it wouldn’t spread to the other units, then back to him. “Yes?” she repeated. “That’s why I’m here. To get her to safety.”

“I. . . I’m coming with you!” the boy declared, expression firming.

“what.”

Ignoring her incredulity, seemingly off in his own little world, Crix nodded to himself. “Yeah. I’ll help you save her! You’re a Jedi, but I can help too! Like. . . oh, where did I put my blaster?” he asked, looking around. “Oh, thanks!” he said, taking it from her unresisting fingers, as she stared with increasing horror. “Okay, Ana, let’s go!”

Having apparently made his decision, without any need for her input, the boy started to walk away.

Anaïs stood there, not sure what just happened, feeling generally distressed. Through the Force, she could feel her Master’s presence, far away and either he’d stopped fighting, or was far enough away that the small Dark Side blooms of violent death couldn’t be felt through the miasma that covered the city. Regardless, he was able to feel *her,* and she got a sense of. . . *concern*. Not in words, but just feelings.

“Master,” she said, trying to project her thoughts back to him, “I’m dealing with an *idiot.*”

She wasn’t sure if he could actually hear her, but in return she got a sense of confidence in her, but, under it, was an unmistakable feeling of *amusement.*

“*Thanks*,” she replied, deadpan, shaking her head. She had a mission, now she just needed to do it. Yes, it wasn’t going to be easy, but if it were, then *she* wouldn’t be needed, would she? Moving quickly, she strode down the hall towards the stairwell, where she could hear Crix heading towards the ground floor.

<SWPP>>

She caught up with the boy, and convinced him to take the back entrance. As there were several soldiers waiting at the front, so focused that they didn’t notice the pair coming out of an alley several dozen feet away, this was a good move. From there, they started the slow, *slow* process of moving across the city. Taking the roads, they slowly wound their way across the city, having to pass through several checkpoints.

Thankfully, despite Crix being on at least *one* list the enemy had, they weren’t stopped, the rank and file soldiers working off of an entirely different database. However, there was danger *elsewhere*, Anaïs several times having to force the boy to follow her down back alleys and to take the long way around several roads, the sense of *danger* laying thickly down them.

She couldn’t say *why* it was dangerous, or even where the danger was coming from, as Master Lucian had told her she would eventually be able to, only that going down those roads was a *bad* idea. The danger so great that it might result in her death, which made those areas stand out starkly, but the fact that so many places were so dangerous put her on edge. Put *her* on edge.

“Oh come on, Ana, the street’s empty! It’s right around the corner! Why can’t we just go down this one?” Crix whined.

His statement made her pause, as she was so focused on trying to feel the Force that she’d not been paying attention to *why* they were dangerous. Looking around, he was right, the street was empty. Completely empty.

“And the fact that everyone’s avoiding it isn’t a clue?” she asked, a touch sardonically, having tried, and failed, to ignore her tag-along’s complaints.

“. . . Oh. Well, *I* don’t see anything,” the boy grumbled, and Anaïs was tempted to let him walk down it.

*Be calm,* she told herself, centering herself in the Force. *You’ve trained for this. You’re better than this.* But she hadn’t prepared herself for *this* kind of trial. Fighting creatures, while difficult, held a certain degree of purity and simplicity to it. They tried to kill you, you tried to stop them, end of story. In the Temple things had been clear. Listen to the Masters, know they were wiser and thus almost certainly correct even if you didn’t understand, end of story.

But relying on someone who knew something you needed, but was Force-blind and *didn’t listen?*

*I need to learn how to pull information out of people’s heads like Master Lucian.*

However, she didn’t know that *now*, and trying to Mind Trick him into giving her the information, with how *bad* she was with that technique, was likely to backfire on her. She didn’t have the deft hand with it that Jorel had, and Crix was her *only* source of the information she needed.

“It’s a Jedi thing,” she told him for the. . . she’d lost count how many times she had. “And you said we’re almost there?” she pressed, trying not to sound too hopeful at being able to leave him behind.

“Yeah,” he smiled, misinterpreting her good mood. “My feet were starting to hurt, so I’m glad we’re almost done. It’s that way, Ana” he directed, and she looked around, trying to get a sense of which way to go.

*No, no, there!* she thought, putting forward the idea of going down different alleys, only to get a sense of *danger* from two out of the three. Heading towards that one, he followed, and it was another few twists before she froze, the street she was about to step onto awash with bad ends if she did so.

Behind her, Crix tried to step past her, blocked by her arm. “But Ana, it’s right there,” he said, not bothering to whisper, as the Danger around them started to increase. “*Hey!”* he objected as she grabbed him, and, with a touch of Force, picked him up, carrying him back and around a corner.

Before he could say anything else, she, following her instincts, jabbed him in the chest knocking the wind out of him, causing him to drop to his knees and quietly wheeze as the sound of boots came down the alley, though he didn’t seem to notice, doubled over as he was.

“Nothing here,” a man’s voice called, “Probably someone opening a window.”

“Next open window you see, send a blaster-bolt in, that’ll teach ‘em to keep their heads down,” a different man’s voice replied, followed by the sound of a person walking back out. The *danger* abated, but wasn’t quite gone, so she waited, and heard a lighter flick on, then a deep inhale, followed by a moaned exhale.

“Ahhh, that’s the stuff,” the first man sighed, and Anaïs peered around the corner to see a guard smoking something, eyes closed.

Moving silently, leaving Crix behind to continue wheezing, she stalked forward, reaching out in the Force to warn her, and approaching the guard. Stepping carefully around a bit of trash, the man took another pull on his cigarra, letting out a blue-tinged cloud of smoke that dissipated into the dirty air of the city.

Getting the stirrings of danger, she was already in position, so, as his eyes started to open, she launched herself forward with a set of paired strikes, one meant to knock the breath out of him, the other to knock him out.

Both hits landed, and he dropped, caught by her as she carried him back to Crix, who was only now recovering. “You hit m- *is he dead?*” he started to object, voice rising slightly at the unconscious form of the guard.

“*No*. Now come on, and *be quiet!”* she hissed, thoroughly annoyed at the boy.

For once, though, he did like she asked and followed her to the mouth of the alleyway, the danger still present, but less, the guard that likely would’ve detected them now unconscious. Blaster-marks dotted the buildings all around, and walls had been blown apart, as if by explosives, but it was a battle that was long over. There were over a dozen guards present, blocking the street off, and from the uncleaned pools of dried blood, a *lot* of people had died here. It had happened long enough that whatever traces of the Dark Side such a thing would create had faded, likely days ago, possibly even when her Master had been directed by the Force to come here.

Feeling an oncoming sense of *danger*, she shot Crix a warning look as he opened his mouth, and it abated, as the two of them pulled back, down the alley and around the corner, before they could talk.

“*That’s* why we couldn’t go down the street,” she noted, giving the boy a significant glance, though, given his shell-shocked appearence, she felt a little guilty. He looked, *physically*, to be her age, but *emotionally* he acted more like a child. Lucian had been clear that Jedi were *warriors*, despite the airs they put on, and that their training, while sheltered in many ways, exposed them to other things they would not be if they lived peaceful lives.

“Y-yeah,” he said haltingly. “Was that. Was that *blood*?”

It took her a moment to realize what he’d been focusing on, as she was thinking on what she needed to do next. “Yes. At least twenty people died there, maybe more. Do you have any other places to go?”

Mutely, he shook his head.

“Okay, we’ll do this the hard way,” she sighed, shooting him a questioning look as he took a few, frightened steps back. Ignoring him, she turned to the guard, stripping him of his comm-piece, his weapon, and considered using his own cuffs to bind him, but the Mind Trick was going to be hard enough to do *without* a physical indication that something was wrong.

Thinking better of it, she picked him up, carrying him further away from the others, down a couple more alleys and, hopefully, away from alert ears. Dropping the man back down, she reached over and, carefully, healed him of the concussion she’d given him minutes before, stopping as the thug moaned slightly, his eyes slowly opening. *“Wha?”*

Sinking into the Force, she tried her best. *“****I’m calm,****”* she instructed, voice resonating with the Force. “***You are my-****”* she paused, trying to figure out how to word it. The more believable the truth, the more easily it would be believed, and she hadn’t seen any *female* soldiers, so she couldn’t be sure just claiming to be a superior officer would work. *“****You are an assistant to the Baron’s general.****”*

The man’s eyes turned glassy, his will buckling under hers. *“I’m calm. You are an assistant to the Baron’s. . .”* he paused,resisting the command slightly, but as she pressed down on him with the Force, he gave. *“the Baron’s general.”* Dazed, the soldier stood and gave a sloppy salute, “Ma’am? What brings you. . .” he looked around at the alley in confusion, “here?”

In the corner Crix made a fearful noise, but Anaïs paid him no mind, struggling with the technique. In the hands of a properly trained Knight, the man’s mind would be theirs to control, but she *wasn’t* a Knight, and, while Lucian had trained her in a *number* of techniques, *this wasn’t one of them.*

“***I’ve been pulled to the side to report away from the others. This is unusual, but not that odd,****”* she stated, once more pressing down on his will, glad for that last few months training that let power through this, patching inexperience with power without completely tiring herself out.

“*I’ve been pulled to the side to report away from the others. This is unusual, but not that odd,”* he repeated, another sign of her lack of skill, as that should’ve been an internal thought of his own, but it was one he accepted. “Sorry Ma’am, it’s been a. . .” he trailed off, noticing the burning embers of his cigarra and quickly dropping it in what he probably thought was a subtle manner. “long day,” he finished lamely.

*And now for the other part. Selling my end,* she thought. Anaïs looked at him imperiously. “Tell me soldier, the area you’re guarding. What happened there?” *Wait, was that too direct?*

It was, as he blinked, frowning, “You don’t know, Ma’am?”

*Think!* “Of course I know. The question is do *you* soldier?” She wanted to say more, but Jorel had talked to her, *repeatedly*, about not including too many details when Mind Tricking someone, unless you were *sure* of them. Every single one you got wrong, like the Baron having ‘generals’, stressed the technique, requiring more raw power to overcome. Maybe the Baron had captains, or lieutenants, or something else, but her misnaming them had cost her, requiring her to exert herself to *make* him accept that what she was saying was true. No, the vaguer you were, the more your target would fill in on their own.

The man glared, not at her, but off to the side, but the technique wasn’t stressed as he muttered darkly, “Said I was listening with my eyes closed. Piece of Trvak poodoo.”

*“Soldier,”* Anaïs stressed, playing the role and trying to get to what she needed to know. Even without it being stressed, keeping the Mind Trick going was tiring, and she didn’t know what else she’d need to do today.

“Yes, Ma’am,” the man replied, straightening. “We rooted out the last bit of the resistance. Their last base in the city, but some of them got away. We’re waiting to see if any more showed up. We’ve already got a couple.”

Crix gasped, and the soldier glanced over at him, brows drawing together as he considered the boy. “Who are you?” he started to ask, but Anaïs dragged his attention back to her.

“What about Melea Vondarr,” she asked, the soldier looking back to her.

“Captured, along with some of the others, in the initial raid,” he repeated, frowning at her. “But everyone knows that.”

“Where? And what’s going to happen to her,” the padawan pressed, commanding, *“****Answer****”* when he stayed silent, her control over him fraying.

“She’s at base,” the soldier replied instantly, even as he fought her mentally. “She’s going to be executed at sunset. She’s the last leader, and when she dies, we’ll have this city.”

Her Mind Trick broke, snapped like struck glass, as his head snapped over to Crix, “And you’re going to die with her!” he declared, hand going for an empty holster. “Wha-gurk!?”

He looked down, where the green, glowing blade pierced his heart, then at Anaïs who, shaking held the saber steady.

The Dark Side pulse of his violent death was far, *far* worse than the man she’d killed earlier, threatening to overwhelm her. Shaking she held herself still, as the man that would’ve kill them both dropped to the ground, the saber cutting through him as he fell to the alley floor.

The Darkness surged around her, up her, as if to smother her, and she tried to remain firm, her training with that stupid Sith saber of Lucian’s helping her keep her head above the tide of blackness, not allowing the tainted energy access to her mind. *Why?* she thought. *Why is this so bad? I’ve killed before!*

But she knew the answer. In the Force, *intent mattered.* The men she’d killed at the club in Fabrin had been trying to kill her, their own bolts deflected back at them, and their deaths had been accidental. The man she’d killed earlier had been an accident as well, as she just tried to knock him out. But the man, the corpse before her?

*She’d meant to kill him.*

She’d known she’d have to, from as soon as she woke him up, knowing that to let him go would mean that, as soon as someone found her, they’d be hunted. If she was Lucian’s level, that wouldn’t matter, but she was *barely* making it as is. He was her enemy. He’d tried to kill Crix. But even before he had, she was planning on killing him, and that *mattered* to the Force.

Maybe the Temple was right and the Force judged one’s intentions. Maybe Lucian was right and the reasons *why* you did something, your state of mind as you acted, resonated more in the Force than the act itself. Maybe they were both wrong. But she’d *murdered* this unarmed man, no matter her reasons, and she had to *deal* with that.

Staying strong through that unexpected deluge of Darkness, she stayed whole, but felt. . . dirty, *tainted* by it, like she’d been splattered with his blood that’d stained her like ink in a way that would never wash off, and, suddenly, a few offhand, angry comments that Jorel had made, years ago, suddenly made sense.

No one said what happened, when his Clan left on the Gathering, but she’d known they’d lost people.

Shaking her head, she turned off her saber, looking at her pristine hands, the self-cauterizing wounds from her weapon ensuring there would be no blood splatter, and felt that they should be coated with red.

It’d be easier, the next time.

She knew it on a bone-deep level. Even if it felt just as bad the next time, she’d be prepared for it, though part of her thought it wouldn’t be, and that scared her. She could sense her Master’s presence, despite him being far away, wrapped around her comfortingly, and she leant into that feeling, taking strength from it.

Stowing her weapon, she took a deep breath, and let it out, shuddering slightly as she collected herself. “Well, that happened,” she said, more to herself then Crix. “Alright. We know where she is, and sunset is in. . five hours,” she stated, checking the slim datapad in her belt pouch. “And we need a plan.”

Before the boy, who was looking at her fearfully, could respond, her stomach grumbled, loud and rumbling, and she was reminded that, with everything that happened, she’d skipped both breakfast and lunch, the Force urging Lucian on so they’d made do with a ration bar while they’d landed.

“Also, lunch,” she amended, blushing a little, and the boy, laughing a little, nodded, though he still seemed scared, not coming any closer to her. “Come one, we’ll find somewhere we can talk.”

They left the alley, and the dead body, and she tried not to look back at what she felt was yet another step down a dark road, further away from the Temple, and towards what she didn’t know.

She failed.