**Chapter 12**

Anaïs burst into the training room, clothing ripped and bloodstained, hair half burnt. Her Padawan bond easily directed her to *his* location, as he wasn’t trying to hide his presence to her at all. He sat, cross-legged, on the ground, a spark dancing between his hands, or maybe an ember. It didn’t matter, at least not now.

“Why didn’t you tell me there were *dragons!?*” she demanded.

He paused, the bit of blue-black energy in his hands dying, and glanced up at her, *far* too calm for what he’d done. “Dragons?” he asked, as if he *didn’t* know what she was talking about. “He shouldn’t be here for ye-, wait, Dragon*s?* Plural?”

Mentally tagging *yet another thing* she’d have to ask about later, she pressed on. “Yes, the *dragons.* The ones that apparently live outside, but I’ve never seen before. Thirty feet long, forty foot wingspan, two legs with foot long claws, gaping eight foot maws full of jagged teeth that spew *fire*, you know, *the dragons!?”*

“Oh,” he commented blandly, though with a smile of benign understanding that *was not warranted for the situation.* “The ember-drakes. Those aren’t dragons, Padawan Anaïs. Dragons have at *least* four legs,” he informed her, “while drakes only have two. We haven’t covered non-humanoid biology, so it’s an understandable mistake.”

She took a deep breath, getting her emotions under control. *He’s teasing you, Anaïs,* she told herself. Her master did not get upset with her unless she actually, *consciously*, did something wrong or incredibly dangerous, which, in the past handful of weeks, had been few and far between. However, when she was doing something wrong he’d dangle whatever it was she wanted in front of her, just out of her reach, until she stopped being *stupid* about it and remembered her teachings.

It’d taken *far* longer than she would’ve liked to get her emotions to the point where she could feel them, but not be controlled by them, and she was *still* learning. Being outside, where she could practically *feel* the Dark Side around her, hadn’t helped, but she’d been in this complex so long the walls had started to feel like they were getting closer every day, and she needed some space. She didn’t push her emotions to the side, ignoring them, like she’d been trained in the Temple, but acknowledged them, and, in so doing, moved past them.

“Master Lucian,” she tried again, calmer, “why did you not inform me of the alpha predator of this moon?”

He smiled, “Why would I need to tell you about yourself?”

She paused, considering her question, and took a moment to berate herself for her phrasing. “Why didn’t you tell me about the ember-drakes?”

“Why didn’t you tell me you were leaving?” he queried in return.

She narrowed her eyes, not feeling anger, okay, maybe a *little* anger, but mostly annoyance. “You told me you no longer needed to supervise me when I left.”

The Jedi Master stood up, opening his arms, hands flat and upturned as he gestured towards her. “And you did not, or am I speaking to a spectre?”

*You knew I was going to be attacked?* she thought, anger flaring for a moment as she processed what he said. *And he knew I’d survive,* she realized, the anger dying just as quickly, though a bit of resentment remained. “And if I’d told you I was going out?” she asked.

“I would have warned you, and also reminded you that some creatures fly through the use of internal gasses, which can be explosive,” he informed her blandly. “It would only be polite.”

Which was *another* lesson he had been trying to get her to learn. The somewhat aloof nature of the Jedi, while helping them to avoid entanglements, did not work well for other situations. Yes, he knew she was leaving through her padawan bond, but that didn’t mean she shouldn’t have told him. She even had a comm unit, currently in her room, to do just that.

“I’m sorry for not telling you, Master,” she apologized. “That was foolish.”

He only shrugged, “One could come to that conclusion.” *Which meant yes*. “So, tell me Padawan, what happened?” The Jedi Master took a seat on his cushion, another skidding across the mat-covered floor, coming to a stop across from him.

Taking her seat, she copied his posture, and described her. . . jog.

She’d been here for almost two months, eighteen long weeks of training, but she was still getting used to being on a planet with such low gravity when she left Lucian’s Lair, as she’d started referring to it in her head. She’d held out for five weeks before she’d asked if they could go for a run on the surface, as there was only so many times you could run the same loop through the repurposed halls of a ship before it became mind-numbingly *boring*. Master Lucian had offered to ‘spice it up’, but she’d been on exactly *one* of those, with what direction down was occasionally changing, as he did *something* with the ship’s gravity generators, one section of floor that'd been safe before giving way to a ten foot, if padding lined, pit; and turning a corner to run smack dab into a small *swarm* of training droids, their stinging lasers shocking her out of her disbelief, and that’d been enough, *thank you very much*.

Between the thinner air, the heat, and the omnipresent pressure of the Dark Side, it’d been a difficult exercise all its own. However, Master Lucian had, as they ran, taught her techniques she could use to deal with the conditions. How to gather air together to be something more easily breathed, which was merely a tricky use of telekinesis, though one *much* harder than it seemed. How to disperse the heat to cool oneself, the first step of cryokineses, which she’d never even *heard* of. How to construct a mental shell to keep out the low level influences, though he’d warned that only worked to a base level of Dark Side influence, and was not be relied on for more than a few days without being renewed, as the Dark Side would slowly corrupt the technique, leaving the practitioner vulnerable while thinking themselves safe.

More than that, he’d taught her how to read the environment, both with the Force and without, spotting the disk-shaped scorpions that buried themselves in the sand, stinging what stepped on them, like venomous landmines. Also how to spot the small, horned, rabbit-like creatures. She’d thought them cute, until one had opened up its mouth like a lamprey and jumped for her, only to be held in the air by Lucian with the Force.

“Dark Side infused environments tend to be treacherous, rely on poisons, and be *utterly* inhospitable. The Dark Side’s nature to take what it can selfishly infuses every aspect of the ecology. As with the nature of the Dark Side, however, if one is careful, mindful, and above all else *deadly*, one can live, or even thrive, but one can *never* let their guard down,” he’d instructed, as the formerly adorable rabbit had snarled and snapped at the air, it’s tiny horns weeping green fluid that hissed when it touched the sand. “For instance, the acid this secretes works very well in etching processes, making the material it’s used on more receptive to the Force. If you mix it with its blood, the effect doubles, but then it only becomes receptive to the *Dark* Side, which is utterly useless for our purposes.”

“Are there Light Side infused environments?” she’d asked, taking a cautious step away from the creature, even as her master held it tight, pulling out a vial and milking the acid like one would from a snake.

He paused, “They’re. . . the opposite,” he sighed. “I’ll take you to one I know of, in a year or two. I’ll have my friend take you,” he corrected, expression tight for a moment, before it smoothed out to his normal, placid, mildly amused default. “I’m. . . no longer welcome. But enough about that, we need to deal with where we are, not where we’ll be,” he deflected. “While we’re here, assume whatever you meet is dangerous, and you’ll be right, unless something else has shown up I’m not aware of, but wait for it to attack first. As you’re learning from your saber lessons, it’s far easier to counter than to strike.”

They’d been on several more runs, one every two weeks, but this time she’d gone on her own, to *truly* be away from everything else. She’d gotten to the point that she barely felt the Dark Side pressing down lightly on her, though she never forgot about it. Having adapted to the gravity, she’d sped across the scrubland in enormous, ground eating leaps. Master Lucian had explained that, once her skill with infusing the Force into her body had risen to an ‘acceptable’ level, she’d be able to do this on planets with normal gravity as well.

She’d been several miles away from the complex, the top of the highest crashed ship a blip on the horizon, when a shadow had passed over her, causing her to stumble and stop, looking up. High above the ground, the blue-black of its body blending in with the dark pseudo-sky of this place, the moon not large enough to have more than a basic atmosphere, was a large shape. Seeming to lack a head, the creature seemed like a giant, flying manta ray, long tail waving back and forth in the air behind it. A glint of something metallic was in the middle-back of its body, two somethings, too far away and too blended together with the rest of its body to make out. As she stared, she felt her senses blare out a warning, the Force seeming to scream at her to *JUMP!*

She did so, not hesitating, but harder than she meant to, rocketing over a hundred feet into the air, the lessened gravity making her normal jump something ridiculous. A second creature, which she hadn’t spotted, swooped down through the space she’d been in a moment before. It is maw, more like a gash in the front of its head, was opened wide, long jagged teeth lining its mouth, like a sarlacc’s.

Denied its prey, it flapped its enormous wings, lifting up in a gentle curve, but one that gained speed as it continued to flap. Feeling danger from above, she glanced upwards, seeing the first starting to dive towards her, it is wings held tight to its body.

As it neared, Anaïs had a moment of panic, caught slowly falling downwards with no way to dodge. The creature closed, its blue-black hide showing to be a tight pattern of scales, each one like a tiny, jagged tooth. As it opened its maw, she could see a glow from deeper within its gullet, a dark red fireball emerging to shoot forwards towards her.

Seeing the projectile, she remembered the shadowy balls of Force that her master threw at her over, and over, and over again, and reacted without thinking. Gathering up the Force, she pushed off upwards against the air while pulling the ground itself. It was unfocused, and wasteful in energy, pelting herself with sand and small rocks as it threw up an enormous plume of energy, puncturing a low-flying cloud, but it *worked*, yanked out of the air and hurling herself downwards.

Landing heavily, she rolled, grabbing her lightsaber from her belt and activating it, holding it at the ready. The dragon, because *what else could it be*, pulled away, but she was ready.

Moving even as the barest warning came to her in the Force, she leapt upwards again, but with a fifth the force, spinning around to face the second dragon as it tried to attack her from behind, pulling itself up to intercept her. This close, she could see its eyes, two sets of back beads, one below the mouth looking down, and another looking up, all four closing right before it would’ve hit her, maw gaping open to scoop her up.

That moment of blindness was her advantage, and she pull/pushed herself towards it. Her pull, centered on the creature, slid right off, as if it didn’t exist. Her push, however, worked just fine, sending her hurling for the creature’s broad back. She couldn’t grab onto anything, the creature's scales likely cutting into her if she tried, but she didn’t need to.

Her preferred lightsaber style was a defensive one, holding still and blocking incoming blows. She’d thought that’d been enough, but Master Lucian had worked with her to know when to move, and how to attack when moving. Fighting something this size, where if she were to block she’d be crushed under its enormous bulk, she was glad for the lessons.

Knowing she was nowhere near as graceful as her master, she still managed to land on the dragon, lightsaber plunging into its flesh, actually meeting some resistance. She started to slow, her leg cut on one of its scales, which broke off, imbedding itself in her flesh, but she was dealing damage to the creature.

Then it exploded.

Listening to the Force, she managed to wrap herself in a telekinetic shell the moment right before it went off, the creature’s scales, turned to deadly fragments, blocked a bare inch from piercing her. The force of the explosion shot up upwards like from a catapult, towards the other Dragon, which was waiting for her high in the air. Two long legs unfolded from its body, metallic claws glinting in the faint light of the explosion from below, shaded from the star’s illumination by its massive body.

Before she could do anything, it struck, legs grasping, and though she managed to dodge one, the other sunk itself into her leg, the same leg that’d been injured a moment before, causing her to gasp in pain. ***Kill it,*** she felt the Force whisper, but it wasn’t *her* Force. ***Destroy it for harming you!***

Shoving the thought out of her head, the pain of her injury having cracked her mental shell, she struck out with her saber at the claw grabbing her. It didn’t go all the way through, biting into the creature’s leg, causing it to bellow in pain, and she ignored the dark thrill of vindictive pleasure she felt at hurting the thing that she attacked her. A second blow, as she infused her Body with the Force, cut herself free, sending her flying back downwards, where the Dragon she’d injured was slowly trying to rise, but turned towards her, maw opening as it started to glow, preparing a fireball of its own.

Tired, bleeding, and trying her damndest not to get angry, which was *really kriffing hard*, she pushed herself off the ground, trying to get higher, as it was having trouble rising higher. It tried to track her, but as it began to twist upwards, a quarter of its back gone, revealing bare flesh and bone, it couldn’t manage it, the injury slowing it.

The flame passed below her, even as she felt the Force scream out a warning, and pulled herself down, towards the creature, but using the ground as her anchor point. She felt the heat wash over her back, the first Dragon having let loose another fireball, burning off the end of her ponytail even as she rocketed towards the injured monster.

It tried to pull up, opening its mouth to catch her, but it couldn’t, and she missed it by inches, her leg, *why was it always the same leg*, slamming painfully against its jaw.

Once again, her training kicked in, pulling her tight as she maneuvered herself to the only soft landing spot available, *the creature’s exposed flesh.* Falling into that pocket of seemingly exposed muscle and bone, the dragon panicked, its fear seemingly amplified through the Dark Side hanging heavy in the air. Through that fear Anaïs realized two things.

The first was that the explosion, however it happened, was *intentional.* While she could see the creatures exposed flesh, there was a thick, rubbery membrane along the inside of the muscle-pocket she sat in, protecting itself from the dangers open wounds brought in the wild.

Second, from this position, *the creature was vulnerable*. Whatever made its hide resistant, even to her saber’s blade, it wasn’t here, and the dragon *knew it*. It was already rising, turning, trying to dump her out from her seat.

Her saber, the green blade humming in her hand, struck out down into the creature’s flesh, finding no resistance, cutting a burning line as she rolled towards it’s center line, trying to reach its spine, assuming it even had one. The stench of burned flesh billowed upwards, the heat nearly scalding, but she kept going, trying to find *something* vital.

And she did.

There was another muted explosion, coming from the bottom of the creature, and the creature shudder, giving out a gurgling howl, and went still. Its death blossomed in the Force like a midnight flower under her, equally beautiful and terrible, glowing with the Dark Side, offering itself to her, if only she’d accept its power.

She saw the strength it would give her, how its death would increase her own capabilities, making it so that she would no longer need to fear these creatures, if only she killed enough of them herself.

She ignored it.

The concentrated Dark Side dispersed, with a feeling of angry disappointment, leaving her on her own once more.

Anaïs started to relax, the fight over, until she realized she was still eighty feet in the air.

Exhausted, bleeding, she tried to get up, but her leg buckled, and she fell back into the gory bowl as both Jedi and dead dragon plummeted towards the ground.

The creature hit, and she hit with it, but the dragon’s bulk provided a cushion, which, combined with the moon’s low gravity, meant she was little more than bruised when her arm hit a membrane-covered bone.

Laying there, she could see the other dragon circling above her, ready to keep fighting, and she felt anger rise in her breast. She just wanted to go for a *run*, just wanted to get *away* from training and combat and all this for an hour but *no* this stupid planet, moon, *thing* that was *soaked* in the kriffing *Dark Side* couldn’t let her have even *that, could it!?*

***It seeks to kill you,*** she heard at the edge of her perception. It was nothing like that stupid sith saber, and, if she hadn’t known better, she might’ve thought it was her own thought. She could hear it urging her on, showing her how she could reach out with the Force, grab it, and slam it down, grounding it *forever.*

She was a little tempted, it’d serve the dumb beast right for attacking something it’d never seen before, but she’d had enough death, *thank you very much*, and she just wanted to go back home to that stupid junkheap where *dragons* didn’t come out of *nowhere* and try to *eat people just out for a* ***jog****.*

She started a little as the concentrated Dark Side, the bundle of death, rage, and power from the Dragons death, which she’d thought dispersed, re-emerged, before slowly dispersing, as the deaths had on Fabrin.

*It didn’t go away the first time, it was just hiding,* she realized. Closing her eyes to let out a sigh, centering herself in the Light once more. *Dick.* Opening them again, she saw the creatures still circling, it’s presence in the force dimmed, almost cloaked, like Master Lucian could. *That’s how it snuck up on me,* she realized. One had shown up, attracting her attention, while the other dragon had cloaked itself and gone for the kill.

She tried to reach out to it, like she’d learned she could reach out to her Master, and like she’d seen her master communicate with others. ***Leave*** she commanded, and, after another few circles, as if to prove that it could’ve stayed if it’d wanted to, it did.

Healing her leg took nearly an hour, and she was thankful for her lessons in doing so. Nothing was broken, and nothing had been torn out when it’d grasped her, only flesh that was pierced and cut, so it was easy enough to mend, after she used the water-bottle from her belt to wash out the wound tracts, her master having been *very* clear on how healing could, if you were a novice, trap something within that’d need to be cut out later.

From there she’d pulled herself out of the dead Dragon, stumbled back home, having to walk so it took her two hours instead of the one she’d been running, and confronted her Master, who was currently sitting, far too smug, in front of her.

“I believe I am the appropriate amount of smug,” said overly smug Jedi informed her, as she finished her explanation. Holding his hand out, dark mists wreathed it, tendrils of shadow reaching out towards her.

Used to them, she sat there as they sunk into her flesh. All the little wounds that she’d not healed yet closed, a tension she wasn’t aware leaving her as he repaired the damage done to her body. She felt her head itch, slowly moving to pull her hair out of the ragged ponytail it was still in, her hair, half of which had been burned off, was once again the length it’d been before. “You regrew my hair?” she asked incredulously, and he nodded. “*How?”*

“Force Healing,” the man shrugged, as if that somehow explained it. “It is one of my more practiced skills.” After a few more moments, he let the technique drop. “So you have met the most dangerous predator here, other than ourselves, and came away the victor. More than that, you did so without using the Dark Side in your desperation, despite it practically *begging* you to,” he smiled.

She looked at him askance, “I’m a *Jedi,* and you’ve spoken, *at length*, on why using the Dark Side is a *bad thing.*”

Master Lucian nodded, “And Jedi Knights, who have gone decades only using the Light Side, still sometimes use the Dark Side when they think they are about to die. Most never use it again, only sparingly, and a fraction of either group ever admit to it, the stench of death on their presence obscuring its use, so long as they do not engage in it regularly. The fact that you restrained yourself, Padawan, is a mark in your favor.”

That was. . . *nice,* she thought. “Is, is that why you were teaching me Ataru? To fight those things?” she asked.

He shook his head, before nodding slightly. “Yes and no, Padawan Anaïs. With the Force, we can move like the wind and strike like lightning. That so many are content to stand and fight like trees, rooted, or like dancers, movements tight and never more than a few feet from there foe, is baffling.” he held up a forestalling hand, having had this conversation with her before, though it was more like an argument at time, “Yes, your style allows you to defend others, and on starships or in cities maneuverability is more limited, but if it only takes a bare few weeks to be able to implement its basest maneuvers, why wouldn’t you. Despite your focus on the defensive Soresu, you still incorporated the deflective Shien, even when at the Temple, after all.”

She thought back to the fight, how she survived by the skin of her teeth, moments away from death over and over again. “I need more training,” she decided.

Her Master looked at her, eyes slightly narrowed in confusion. “Yes? That is the reason we’re here, after all.”

“No,” she disagreed. “I need to train *harder.* I know you haven’t been pushing me as hard as you could, and that we’re only a third of the way through how long you thought it would take, but I need to get stronger *faster.*”

“Getting stronger faster is quite easy,” he shrugged, “From what you described, you could’ve harvested the Flame-Drake’s life force. You are proficient enough with healing to do so. Now that you’re aware of them, it shouldn’t be *that* difficult to track down the one you maimed and end it.”

She glared at him.

He smiled, “Acknowledging the Dark Side is not a mistake, and it *is* a valid, if much more dangerous route. One that quite a few Jedi have walked over the centuries, even though they deny it.”

“I am going to *work* for my abilities, *not* steal them from others,” she informed him, *knowing* that it was a test and *how dumb did he think she was?*

“Fair enough. Go clean yourself up, and come back here in an hour. I’ll have dinner ready, and then we’ll work on your Force Healing. Good job on the leg, by the way, it’s almost up to the lower end of Temple Healer standards. Or mid end, nowadays,” he commented slightly sourly, placidly pleasant expression returning. “And tomorrow you’ll go for another run.”

“What about the Drag- I mean Ember-Drakes?” she asked.

Shaking his head, Master Lucian informed her, “Oh, you won’t be going *outside*, you’ll be doing the run around the complex you did before, the one you deemed too difficult. Though, without me to scare them away, be aware that your chances of being attacked again if you go outside is about one in four.”

With a sinking feeling she nodded, having *literally* asked for that. “Yes Master.”

She started to turn, only to stop as her Master reached inside his cloak and tossed something to her. Reflexively catching it, it took her a second to realize what she was holding.

It was the Ember-Drake’s talon.

The one that had been *in* her leg a few hours previously, encased in what looked like a thin layer of transparisteel, the tip still stained with her blood. The beginnings of the creature’s hide rimmed the top, where it’d obviously been cut with a saber, and not her own. The transparent metal covering formed a loop, a thin strip of blue-black hide threaded through, turning it into a six-inch-long pendant.

She stared, transfixed, a thought occurring to her, so ridiculous she *had* to ask. “What *are* we having for dinner?”

“Ember-Drake steaks. Waste-not, want-not, and there’s something about eating the creature that tried to eat *you* that adds something special to the meal,” he told her, smiling broadly.

“You. . . *you were there!?”* she demanded looking at him, angered, confused, relieved, outraged, and whole bunch of other things.

The Master Jedi scoffed, “Of course I was, Padawan. I *am* your master, which means your safety is paramount.” His calm ‘Jedi Mater’ façade broke for a moment, as it sometimes did. The last few weeks he’d gotten more and more formal, to the point that she’d forgotten how he’d been when they’d first met. He looked at her, seeming, for some reason, a little hurt. “Anaïs, did ya think I’d *really* set you up to fight creatures like that *without support?*”

***Yes****,* was her first thought, but that was the anger talking. Now that she thought about it, it *had* seemed *way* more dangerous than anything she’d done so far. He still hadn’t removed the padding from their training room, for the Force’s sake! Fighting two fire-breathing not-dragons that could cloak themselves in the Force and, did she mention, *breath fire,* *had* seemed *incredibly* dangerous. *Which,* she realized, *was the point.*

It’d been a test, and she’d apparently passed. She wanted to be mad at having a test that she wasn’t told about, but this wasn’t the first time he’d done so. *‘All of life is a test, why should I warn you if the rest of the galaxy won’t?’* he’d asked in that stupid smug way of his.

Looking at him in the eye, trying to impress the seriousness of what she was about to say, she carefully enunciated, “You, *Master,* are a *jerk.”* And she wasn’t smiling. *At all.*

He just laughed, “And you, *Padawan,* are *filthy.* Go clean and center yourself. Your *real* training begins tonight. The Little One might do things differently, but I am *not* Er’izma, and we’ll try doing things my way. If it’s too much, you can ask for a respite, and there is *no* shame in it, but we’ll see how well you take the kind of training *I* had.” he paused. “Minus the hounds; they were *completely* unnecessary.”

She didn’t really have anything to say about that, so turned on her heel and left. His comment of, “Now where did I put the itching powder?” was *hopefully* just him teasing her, it wouldn’t be out of character, but if it made her better, it’d be worth it.