

We arrived in the general area of the market and quickly decided it was too heavily populated for us to hang around unnoticed. Instead, we flew around a little longer and found a tucked-away alley next to a run-down building. It wasn't abandoned from what we could tell, but it may as well have been. The permacrete walls were covered with graffiti, and while we got quite a few looks, no one said anything. When Nal pulled the speeder bike into the alley next to us, he looked around and shrugged.

"Good as any I saw," He said, having been flying around in a different direction, looking for a similar place to set down in. "Should take turns on watch."

"Yeah... that's not a bad idea," I agreed, stepping back into the cargo space of the speeder truck.

We both sat down on opposite benches by the cockpit, taking a second to sit back and think. Tatnia and Miru joined us a moment later on the other two benches, each of us in a [different corner](#).

"I think we should take another day," I said, leaning back in my seat. "The slower we take this, the slower the Enforcers catch on to what we are doing and start shooting down A-A5 whenever they see one."

"We could mix it up," Miru suggested, having dragged the tool chest Nal had bought for her to her bench, slowly going through the tools and inspecting them. "I know you guys picked slavers 'cause it's basically morally positive stealing, but there are plenty of messed up people on this planet to steal from."

"I wouldn't necessarily be against it, but it's much harder to guarantee we aren't killing some down-on-his-luck security guard who is just trying to provide for his family."

Nal stayed quiet, but Tatnia scoffed and shook her head while Miru giggled at my hypothetical scenario.

"I know, I know, it's a bit much. But you can't argue that someone standing guard for a spice runner is different from someone standing guard for a slave trader," I pointed out, getting two reluctant nods. "I would probably sleep fine after the former, but I know I'll sleep *well* after the latter. Find us a target we know is bad and won't come back to bite us in the ass, and we can talk."

We discussed our options for a while longer, eventually deciding that, yes, we would be waiting for the next day to start watching the market. However, we also agreed that we would also hit a transport if an opportunity presented itself.

With that decided, we basically split up. Nal and Tatnia left to scout out the surrounding area, mostly just making sure there wasn't anything dangerous nearby and visiting a market Nal had spotted from the speeder bike. When they mentioned the market, I handed Tatnia a chunk of my own credits, asking her to pick me up a nice jacket, something cool but not too ostentatious. She gave me a look for a moment before shrugging and pocketing the credits.

While they were gone, Miru and I carried her tools out next to the MVR-3 speeder, as Miru wanted to spend some time working on it. She was taking her role as the team mechanic seriously, and she wanted to get a sense of the bike's condition so that no problems popped up during anything important. Both she and the bike were hidden from view by anyone out of the alley, meaning she would hopefully be left alone. We kept the door into the truck open and the sensors on in case she wasn't. They would alert me if anyone was getting too close.

While she was looking at the speeder internals, I was sitting on one of the interior benches, grimoire in my lap, slowly going over my spells. I was multitasking again, snapping the lesser ward on and off, over and over again, trying to commit it to memory while simultaneously reading up on the next spell I wanted to learn, oak skin. While a large part of me was tempted to learn another destruction spell, I hadn't learned anything from the alteration branch, and I needed to know if I would struggle with it like I had with my first illusion spell. I also wanted to find out just how much more durable I would be with it cast on myself.

The process was familiar by now. I started by reading through and working out the spell matrix before adjusting and experimenting with its size, shape, angles, and rotational position to get it tuned to myself. Unfortunately, I quickly learned that alteration was definitely not my strong suit, the tuning process taking the longest any single spell had taken me so far. Every single aspect of the matrix had to be adjusted, tuned, and shifted a dozen or more times. There was no staring gimme, where a chunk of the original matrix just worked, and every adjustment needed to be precise and exact, with none of the haphazard adjustments seeming to work. It was much more challenging and finicky than learning clairvoyance had been, though it was hard to say just how much more difficult it was.

When I finally managed to oak flesh on myself, I let out a whoop of excitement before cursing to myself. I could feel the spell interacting poorly with the heavy-duty combat boots that Nal had bought me yesterday.

The magic seemed to be shifting between my skin and the boots, the protective footwear seemingly absorbing some of the spell's energy. I quickly pulled on my armored combat gear and cast the spell again, cursing louder as it interacted to an even greater degree, sapping and interfering with the spell's structure and effectiveness.

I knew that in the game, there was a perk that increased the potency of these protection spells, but only as long as you weren't wearing armor. Judging by how much wearing armor was messing with the casting of the spell, I could only assume that in a more realistic setting, that showed up as armor actually reducing the spell's effectiveness.

I cursed under my breath a third time, recasting the spell a few dozen times, working it into my brain enough that I could practice more later without struggling to work out the matrix again. This spell, and its more potent variations, would be useful to know, but I would not be running around in robes, relying on it completely to protect me. I might be a wizard, but give me good, solid armor any day.

Having answered several questions by learning my first alteration spell, I moved on to adding another combat spell to my repertoire. A large part of me was tempted to learn elemental flare, a spell the book described as an elemental explosion, but I couldn't risk it. Testing a spell that would explode was not a good idea in my current location, no matter how much I wanted to try it, especially because I didn't recognize it. Instead, I settled for learning frost, as casting it in the cargo space was probably safe as long as I didn't do anything stupid with it... Probably.

After spending so much time on the oak skin, it was very nice to spend some time learning a spell that came relatively easy to me, or at least wasn't extra challenging. The spell matrix took the usual fifteen or so minutes to work out, and the tuning process was worlds simpler than the alteration spell had been. So much so, in fact, that I finished it before Nal and Tatnia returned from their exploration. It was just starting to get dark when I held out my hand and cast a beam of freezing energy out of my palm, causing ice crystals to grow on the cargo space floor.

I stopped the spell immediately, looking around for a moment before casting it again, this time at the seat cushions across from me. I only held it momentarily when Tatnia climbed into the space with wide eyes.

“Should you be doing that here?” she asked, reaching out to touch the frozen spot on the cushions, jerking her hand away. “Sithspit, that is cold.”

“Uh... it's fine if it's just freezing energy, right?” I asked, getting a really disappointed look from the woman. “Right... I'll find a better target.”

She nodded before pulling something out from behind her back and throwing it at me. I managed to catch it, dropping my grimoire in the process. I pulled the grimoire away, feeling the familiar weight settle before opening the wrapped package now in my hands.

Inside was a sturdy and well-designed [blue jacket](#). It was made of a material I didn't recognize, with patches of different materials around the sides and on the forearms. It had dark yellow bands over the shoulders, as well as several clips and bits, some as highlights and others as utility. It seemed to be at least lightly armored in certain places.

“Damn, Tatnia... this is fantastic,” I said, quickly putting it on. “It even fits perfectly. Thank you.”

“She spent some of her own money,” Nal said as he stepped up into the cargo space. “It is good quality.”

Tatnia smacked Nal in the stomach, giving him a look that told me she hadn't intended on telling me that she had spent some of her own money.

“You didn't have to do that, but I can't argue that this isn't worth the extra money,” I said with a smile. “How much do I owe you?”

“Don't worry about it,” She assured me. “It wasn't that much extra.”

“Well... thank you,” I said, looking back down before testing my range of motion. “It's exactly what I needed.”

“Why did you need one so badly?” Miru asks from outside the speeder truck. “You already have armor.”

“C'mon Miru, everyone knows that an identifiable look is what separates a badass from the dispensable goons,” I said before looking at everyone else. “Speaking of which, we should also look into getting you guys some new looks. Something to set you apart.”

Tatnia rolled her eyes and walked to the cockpit, sitting down in the copilot's chair. Nal shrugged and started going through one of our storage containers to the side of the cargo space. After a few minutes, he pulled out a prepackaged meal, which he offered to me.

Soon we were eating dinner, chatting about the plans for the next day. Eventually, when we had all finished, Nal agreed to stay up for watch first, and the rest of us prepared our beds. I fell asleep quickly, the fatigue from all of the magicka usage catching up with me. Eventually, Miru woke me up for my shift on watch. I switched between learning the spell structure for the flame spell and researching this variation of the Star Wars universe on my data pad.

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We started our surveillance the next morning. Nal was set up near the market, sitting in an outdoor bar, with the speeder bike parked nearby. The rest of us were in the A-A5, surveying the location from up high, parked in a pay-by-the-hour parking structure for air speeders. It was attached to a truly massive apartment structure, so no one asked questions or even looked at us weirdly when we pulled into an empty spot. Once we were set up, Tatnia and I sat down in

the pilot and copilots seats, taking turns with newly purchased electrobinoculars, watching the entire market simultaneously.

It was incredibly hard to watch. Both Tatnia and I were tense with disgust and rising frustration as we watched living, breathing sentient beings sold like pets, like equipment. It was nauseating, and more than once, we had to stop and look away, putting the Electrobinoculars to the side as anger bubbled inside us.

Someday I would put a stop to this, I swore to myself. Eventually, when I was stronger and more powerful, with more resources than a beat-up flying van and a couple of friends, I would tear apart this institution, with my own two hands if necessary. Until then, all I could do was focus on getting to that point and do as much good as I could afford to in the meantime, as small and insignificant as it might be.

“Two land speeder transports are pulling up to the gate to leave,” Nal said through the coms. “Good quality. The second seems to be following the first. Both are marked with the markets logo.”

Tatnia, who was currently holding the electrobinoculars, leaned forward and scanned the front road, nodding when she spotted them.

“They don’t look armed... Miru, come take a look,” The human woman said, holding out the bulky but effective equipment.

Miru, who had been waiting in the back, stepped through the cockpit door and peered through the electrobinoculars. She scanned around before nodding as well, a smile appearing on her face.

“I recognize those models. Standard, neither of them should be armed,” She said before handing off the sci-fi binoculars. “And I don’t see any modification that would make me think that’s changed.”

“Nal, follow them. We’ll be right behind you,” I said confidently.

I looked down and tapped a few buttons, the speeder truck coming to life, vibrating steadily. I raised my hand and cast clairvoyance, an arrow appearing in my hand that was pointing right where Nal was supposed to be. After a few seconds, it shivered slightly before slowly moving, showing our friend was following the speeders.

I raised the speeder up from its spot and quickly guided it free of the parking, heading down and around the large apartment building. Following Nal as best I could while also casting the spell, we finally caught up with him after a few minutes, landing on the actual road and switching repulsorlift systems. Now that we could see Nal, I cut the clairvoyance spell and took better control of the speeder, following them from a safe distance away.

“Nal, we are in position, ready when you are,” I called out, knowing his comm unit would pick it up.

The Duros said nothing, and for a moment, I wondered if he had heard the message. Before I could say anything, though, he suddenly sped up, closing the distance between it and the slave transport speeders. He overtook them quickly, whipping the bike around and firing the speeder bike’s dual-blaster cannons, red energy spraying the ground in front of the speeders.

Both of them swerved, spinning to the side slightly while still moving forward a few dozen feet before finally coming to a stop. As they did, I pulled the speeder truck up, flying over several other speeders before landing right behind the now-stopped transports.

The second we stopped Miru, and Tatnia rushed to the cargo space, jumping out the side door and running to the transports, but not before Tatnia grabbed a blaster rifle. Mercilessly Tatnia fired a few dozen blasts of red energy into the cockpits of the transports, making sure to shoot at a proper angle to keep from damaging anything important. By the time she was done clearing the first transport, the pilots of the second were just starting to climb out when she killed them both as well.

Considering what we had watched for the last few hours, it was hard to blame her for the brutality.

Miru and Tatnia quickly pulled the corpses out of the transports, letting them fall to the street before climbing into the pilots' seats. A few seconds later, they both reoriented themselves and engaged max repulsorlift height to rise above everything in the street. We all quickly flew down the road, away from the ambush site, leaving behind four still-smoking slaver corpses on the road.