

Nevue put the ship in hyperspace, pausing for a moment as we all watched the stars fly by in the dazzling display. Eventually, after everyone had left, Nevue got up to go as well, leaving the cockpit empty save Nal and me.

It was stunning that this ship, which was more or less on the lower end of speed according to everyone, was capable of crossing a not insignificant portion of the galaxy in less than a day. I knew my companions were annoyed that the low quality of the ship's hyperdrive had added hours onto the trip, but I couldn't help but be amazed. The sense of freedom, the feeling that we could go anywhere, an "anywhere" that included other planets, felt like the freedom of my first car multiplied but a million.

It also mixed in a sense scale that probably should have been disturbing but that I couldn't help but find reassuring, somehow. We were now one small group over a galaxy of people. We were just five people out of trillions of souls throughout the known universe. We were small, just a tiny spec on the cosmic scale, and hopefully, that meant we could do our business for a while without attracting too much attention.

Nal waved me off when asked if he needed anything as I stood up from my chair. I nodded and stretched before leaving the cockpit, mentally reviewing the spells I wanted to learn. Twelve hours in space meant that I had time to learn another spell.

I plopped down into one of the seats in the lounge, my grimoire out and on the table a second later. Out of the spells on my need-to-learn list, my first instinct was to go with respite. Unfortunately, I quickly learned that it could not replace sleep. It could hold off exhaustion for a while, but the crash became more and more severe as you put more and more strain on yourself. Eventually, your body and mind would start to deteriorate under the effects

Since respite wasn't going to suddenly double the amount of time I had to get shit done, I decided to leave it for later and go for the second option, conjure flame atronach. Conjure familiar had been extremely useful when I had the chance to plan our attacks, and the only thing that kept it from being even more useful was that I kept forgetting to use it. A summon that could shoot fire, take more hits, and would be immune to fire seemed like a great step up from a simple panther.

I read the description carefully, double-checking that I wasn't about to set the entire ship on fire. The flame atronachs in the game had a tendency to explode whenever they died and looked like they could set things on fire just by being close. Thankfully, with the more realistic version I had access to, they would only explode if I commanded them to. They could also control their ambient temperature to keep from burning down every building they were conjured inside. It would be warm, even uncomfortably so, but it wouldn't melt the plastic paneling off the walls.

I started work immediately, memorizing the two levels of matrices before recreating them in my arms and hand. This spell started all the way down by my elbow, the first matrix a long

stretched series of shapes, bends, and turns that took up most of my forearm. Six and a half hours later, when half of the group was asleep, I cast the spell successfully, summoning a flame atronach in a small flash of flame that didn't feel all that hot. Like my sword and dagger, the conjured atronach was not actually pulled from the planes of Oblivion, but rather a construct of my own making.

As a result, the flame atronach didn't even vaguely resemble the in-game version. Where the game had a scantily clad, metal woman of fire, mine was fully armored, with blue-licking flames coming out from every crack and gap. The metal was mostly black, with hot red edges along some of the plating. It stood on its own two feet rather than floating around with a trail of fire like a dainty nymph. Its only connection to the in-game version was that mine was also feminine, though not nearly as... obvious as the original. As I watched, the flaming atronach looked around, and I could feel a slightly more intelligent connection through the spell's anchor. I was pretty sure that it was enough that I could give her more open-ended directions, and she would be able to figure out what I meant.

The atronach walked around for a bit, following my mental commands. I also told it to patrol around the area, and the construct proceeded to walk around in a small circle, unable to do much more in the cramped space. After a few seconds, I dismissed my summon, the construct disappearing in a flash of heatless flame and crackling magicka.

I let out a long breath I didn't even realize I was holding, letting my mana refill before casting the spell again, repeating it several dozen times before finally stopping. I was tired, sore, and hungry, but I had learned my second apprentice spell, and it was an impressive one. I quickly ate something to quiet my complaining stomach, continuing to practice the spell while I ate. When I finally stood up, I used healing to soothe my aches before immediately heading off to kick Nevue out of my bed. I had been nice enough to let him sleep a bit extra while I finished my spell, but now I desperately needed to sleep.

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I woke up to someone nudging my shoulder and a voice talking. I rolled over in my cot to see Miru standing by my bed.

"What was that?" I asked, rolling over slightly so I wasn't straining my neck.

"I said Nal just set up our sonic shower in the corner. You might want to clean up a bit," She said, cutting me off when I opened my mouth to ask a follow-up question. "The one upstairs is tiny, and only half works. And yes, we are almost there. Just another twenty minutes before we drop out of hyperspace."

I nodded and slid to the side of the bed, sitting up and rubbing my face. I had no idea how long I had been asleep, but I could feel that it wasn't enough. I stood and stretched, using a healing spell to soothe a slight tightness in my back. Miru had one hand on the ladder when I called out.

"Hey, what happened to my jacket?" I asked. "I assume my armor was a lost cause, but did the jacket survive?"

"Uhh, last I saw it, Nal was pulling it off you after... to better get at your injuries," She responded, faltering for a moment before continuing. "Check by the bay door? That's where the sonic scrubber is anyway."

I nodded and turned, heading to the front of the cargo bay. The sonic shower was indeed set up in a corner, but I wanted my jacket first so I could wash it with the rest of my clothes and myself. I spent about five minutes looking for it, finally finding it jammed up behind a crate. It took a few minutes to get it out, but when I did, I was pleasantly surprised.

Because I had been wearing the jacket open, the blaster bolt had hit my armor on the uncovered parts. There was singing around the inside lining, and a bit of the material was noticeably stiffer than it had been before, but other than that, the jacket was still in good condition. I was smiling about my good luck until I realized that if the coat had been closed, I probably wouldn't have had the massive burns on my stomach.

I put the jacket on and stepped into the open-air sonic shower, feeling the pulsing waves clean me and my outfit. I spent a few extra minutes ensuring I was as clean as possible before turning off the transportable unit. I pulled my jacket off as I made my way to the ladder, doing my best to work the stiffness out of the one spot, nodding when I was moderately successful. I once again donned my jacket and climbed the ladder, making my way to the cockpit. Everyone else was already waiting, meaning I was stuck standing as there were only four seats.

"What's our ETA?" I asked.

"About ten minutes," Nal responded, looking back at me. "Where was your jacket?"

"Tucked back behind a crate," I said, looking down at it for a second. "On one hand, I'm glad it survived. On the other getting shot would have sucked less if I had been wearing it correctly."

"It's just a jacket. You should have been wearing it closed to protect yourself," She said, looking at me while shaking her head.

"It looks cooler open," I responded as if that was the only necessary response. "Though I'll need to pick up some more armor soon, do you think—"

Before I could finish my sentence, Tatnia cursed while Mire smiled and held out her hand. Tatnia put a small credit ingot in her palm while giving me the stink eye.

"Really?" She asked, crossing her arms and shaking her head. "You couldn't have waited until we were landed to remember your armor?"

"It saved my life. I've been fighting the urge to put it back since I woke up," I responded. "Did you guys seriously bet on me forgetting to ask about my armor?"

"We would have stopped you from leaving without it," Miru assured me before reaching down beside her chair and pulling out my old armor, which looked undamaged. "The plates are replaceable, and Nal got extras, so I put it back together."

"Oh, well, thanks," I said before quickly pulling off my jacket and pulling the armor back on. "Not sure how I feel about the betting, though."

"I had faith in you, Boss!" Miru said with a smile, giving me a thumbs up.

"I was going to show you the super cool thing that I learned, but I'm not sure I'm up for it anymore."

"Cooler than shooting lightning from your hands?" Miru asked, getting a chuckle from Nal.

"I think so," I said with a smirk before turning and walking out of the cockpit, Tatnia and Miru following after me.

I focused for a moment before casting conjure flame atronach a few feet in front of me, the now familiar armored summon appearing in a flash of magic and heatless flames. The summon remained motionless, even as Miru gasped and Tatnia's hand went to her hip, fingers around her pistol grip before she finally stopped.

"What in the hells is that?" She asked, voice sounding tense. "That can't be safe, Deacon. It's on fire!"

"It's called a flame atronach. It's kind of like an artificial elemental," I explained, though I wasn't sure if she understood that any better. "It's a better version of what I did on our first job. Remember my familiar?"

"That four-legged, see-through thing that chewed that guy's throat out?" Tatnia asked, sounding nervous as she walked around it. "Why is this one better?"

"It takes more energy to make, but it can take a lot more hits as well. It can also throw fireballs and do the same flame spray that I can do," I explained. "It can also explode if I tell it to."

Before they could ask anything else, the atronach jerked and faded into blue flames and crackling energy, disappearing in half a second. I spent a few more minutes explaining its capabilities and how it could be useful, as well as reconjuring the atronach when Nal wanted to see it. He seemed to approve and, as always, took my growing abilities in stride as if it was entirely normal for someone to be doing magic.

By the time I was finished showing off, and Tatnia had confirmed I wasn't about to melt a hole in the deck, it was just about time for us to drop out of hyperspace. We all made our way back into the cockpit, just in time for the streaking, brilliant light show outside the cockpit window to compress and normalize.

From our perspective, we were now flying above Thila, the large planet below us. Immediately Nevue guided us "down," the ship making its way into the planet's atmosphere. The planet's surface was riddled with canyons and mountains, massive on a scale that was hard to fathom as we flew over them. Some of the mountains were big enough that we could see them from orbit and spiking above the horizon, several dozen mountain ranges casting shadows over the valleys and canyons. We continued to fly, tension rising among us as we waited for something to happen.

After about five minutes of descending into the atmosphere, static cracked on our communication, which Nevue had apparently been keeping on. It seemed to rise and fall at random intervals, but after listening to it for a few minutes, Nevue nodded as if he had received a message. It took me a minute to realize that there must have been some sort of code in the rising and lowering of the static, like a Morse code equivalent.

Nevue adjusted our course, angling the ship down at a steeper angle and swooping a bit until we were pointed to a different location. After another few minutes, we stopped, clearing a particularly large mountaintop. On the other side was a deep valley, at the bottom of which was a surprisingly flat area, some sort of lowered mesa. As we got lower, we began to see cutaways in the side of the mountain, revealing hangar bays filled with ships, both starfighters and larger freighters. These bays had been completely hidden from above, and as we stopped in front of an empty one, I could see that they also had camouflage doors that would make them even harder to spot.

Nevue, with Nals help, guided the ship into one of the bays, landing on the carved stone floor after about two minutes. He then depowered the ship completely, the interior now dark save a few safety lights.

"Alright, let's try and keep this from devolving into a lightshow," The Zabrak rebel said as he stood up from his chair. "Don't make any crazy sudden moves, and keep your hands away from your blasters. Let me do the talking, at least at first, and then you can introduce yourself."

Already I could see people pouring out of the entrances into the once-empty bay. Dozens of armed soldiers took cover behind crates, boulders, and other equipment, all of them focusing their weapons on the ship. Two heavy blaster cannons were set up quickly by the entrances, each with two rebel soldiers manning them. These were obviously not useless slaver goons either. Each and every one of them was focused and ready.

We all made our way down to the full cargo bay, stopping by the still-closed bay door. Nevue gestured to the thick door, and after a moment, I reached out and slapped the controls, the door slowly lowering, revealing the carved-out hanger bay and the soldiers waiting for us.