

A short conversation was all it took to decide that there wasn't much reason to wait at this point. I would have given my left arm to know the guard's schedules, shift changes, or even just how many of the bastards there were in the building at once. Unfortunately, with how strict they were with moving us quickly between the mine and our quarters, there wasn't much of an opportunity to gather that sort of information.

Given enough time, we could probably figure out some of what we wanted to know, but none of us were willing to hang around for a few months while we tried to spot shift changes and count faces while still looking innocent. Our information gathering for the last few days had gotten us little beyond the fact that the collars would not detonate or alert our wardens when we messed with them.

We waited another hour, mostly hoping to let everyone around us fall asleep. I would have waited longer, but another shift of prisoners would be returning eventually, and we needed time to work. When the time came, I hit all three of us with a respite spell, wiping away any residual fatigue and tiredness before starting the process.

When I volunteered to go first, Tatnia slapped the back of my head.

"Are you serious?" Tatnia asked as Vaz, and I started getting ready. "We just went over this. You should not be going first."

"Except I can use my oakskin to protect myself," I explained. "It will give us a better idea if this is possible for you to."

For a moment, Tatnia looked like she was about to argue with me before she cursed and stepped back. Vaz passed me a wad of foam, which I had cut from my bed with a dagger. I took it and, after a moment, let out a big sigh and stuffed it into my mouth before Vaz took another slice of foam and slid it between me and my collar. Finally, I conjured my bound axe, handing it to her with a grim nod. I dual cast oakflesh, sinking as much magic as I could into it before silently waiting for my magic to refill.

When I was ready, or as ready as I was going to get, I looked at Tatnia before raising my hand and casting frostbite, aiming it for the collar. I held it for a while, draining my mana completely as I poured frigid energy into the collar. As the metal got colder and colder, I idly thought to myself how my magicka capacity had definitely expanded since I first arrived, as I was holding the spell much longer than I could have before.

While the insulating chunk of foam between me and the collar, directly under where I was freezing, did help at first, soon it froze too. As the temperature continued to drop, I could feel the oakflesh spell trying to protect me as well, resisting the temperature drop, and absorbing the damage. Unfortunately, the spell was only at novice level, and I wasn't even that good at it, meaning it failed pretty quickly under the constant pressure of the frostbite spell.

The pain was immediate when my last line of defense snapped. It felt like a hot pan being pressed against my neck, my flesh being seared by the incredible cold. Soon I was biting into the foam in my mouth to hold back screams. When my mana was fully drained, I dropped down to the ground and positioned myself against the bed again, trying to ignore the sickening amount of pain it caused me, failing entirely, screaming and cursing into the foam.

I saw spots, my vision flickering when Vaz pushed the handle of the axe between me and the collar, grinding against the severe frostbite forming on my neck. Knowing that every second counted, she did not take it easy on me and immediately wrenched the ax to the side. Even with me bracing the collar against the bolted-down bed frame, for a moment, I was afraid that my body would be what broke before. The edge of the collar ground into my collarbone, bruising and even cutting into my skin before I finally heard a metallic crack, and the pressure disappeared.

Tatnia practically hoisted me up to the edge of the bed while Vaz pulled and bent the collar of the rest of the way. When she pulled the collar away, it yanked the foam barrier, which pulled free frozen flesh with it, almost making me black out. Thankfully I managed to stay conscious, and as Vaz tossed the collar up into her bed, I dumped fast heal after fast heal into my body, repairing the massive amounts of damage I had just done to my neck.

About five minutes after non-stop healing, my neck was just about fully repaired, though I swore I could feel the cold band of metal still burning into my flesh. Tatnia was sitting next to me, looking pale and anxious but still steady.

"Fuck... that fucking sucked," I said, shaking my head before looking over at Vaz, who was trying to look casual as she kept an eye out. "Anything?"

"No, there has been no movement," She said, turning back toward us.

"Good," I said before looking at Tatnia. "So... think you can take it?"

She let out a long breath before nodding reluctantly. She stood, and we began the process all over again, preparing Tatnia, dumping mana into the axe for Vaz, and eventually getting her into position. With the benefit of having done this already, Tatnia sat down and put herself into position before we started, and Vaz pushed the handle of her battleaxe into the gap around her neck. It was a tight fit, tighter than mine had been, but we got it to work.

With a look and a nod, I bent down and began pouring my frostbite spell into Tatnia's collar. Now that I was looking on, I could see it as frosted over, as my magic chilled the metal collar and the padding below. It didn't take long for Tatnia to tense as she started to feel the freezing energy, and not long past that for her to begin struggling to control herself. The muffling wad of foam did its job, but only barely, as I emptied my magicka reserves once again. When it was done, I stepped back, chewing my lip as Vaz made sure she was in the right position.

This time it took three tries for Vaz to break the metal collar, splitting it in the same place as mine, just where I had focused my spell. Vaz tore off the collar, and I started healing her immediately, though I was stuck with the much slower healing hands spell rather than the fast heal I could use on myself. I understood why she had been so pale before, the damage the freezing energy had done to her neck, and what my neck must have looked like as well, was grotesque, like a severe third-degree burn.

After fifteen minutes of healing, Tatnia was finally fully healed. She stood up from the bed, rubbed her neck, and shook her head, her eyes closed. She let out a long breath before turning back to Vaz and me, opening her eyes.

"That was karking terrible," She said, still pale despite my healing. "Easily the worst thing I have ever done."

"Definitely not something I want to repeat either," I agreed before looking to Vaz. "You ready?"

"I am prepared," She said, before reaching out with her hand, taking mine in a warrior's handshake. "Thank you for giving me this opportunity. Even if..."

"You earned it, Vaz, when you did something about that creep," I responded firmly.

"I suppose. Alright, let us get this over with."

We quickly got everything set up again, once again repeating the harrowing and nerve-racking procedure. This time Tatnia was manning the axe, standing above the Shistavanen, who had already closed her eyes, her large, dangerous jaw set around significantly more padding than Tatnia or I had used. With a nod from Vas, I began pouring freezing energy into the thick band of metal. When my Mana was empty, Tatnia worked the axe handle, pulling and straining against the metal. For a moment, I was worried she wouldn't be able to do it, and I started getting up to add my own strength when suddenly the collar snapped.

Vaz reached up and bent it completely off of herself, a low rumbling growl coming from her chest as she fought through what I knew was an immense level of pain. As she stood, I saw that her eyes were wide, bloodshot, and wild. For a moment, she seemed poised to jump at us before she visibly wrestled herself under control, sitting down on the edge of the bed. I immediately started to heal her, my hands glowing as my magic sank into her horrifying wound.

After another fifteen minutes, the wound was healed, though she now carried an unfortunate bald spot under where I had been freezing the collar, which continued around her neck a good way. My magic healed her flesh, but she would have to regrow her fur the old-fashioned way.

When everyone was finally freed, healed, and ready, I cast respite on us again before standing up and stretching. We were all silent, the past hour having left a mark on all three of us.

"You guys ready?" I asked eventually, getting two nods in response. "Alright, time to get this party on the road."

I took a deep breath, mentally preparing myself for what would probably be a long night of violence. When I was ready, I charged up two separate ice spikes before stepping out of the cell and destroying two security cameras, immediately charging up two more attacks and taking aim again. It took two more volleys, but when I was done, the cameras were sparking scrap. After that, all three of us rushed down to the first floor. I dual cast a lighting rune on the floor in front of the only way in or out of the prison area before joining Tatnia and Vas behind the cover of the closest stairs.

Between us running down the stairs from the top floor and me destroying the cameras, some of the other prisoners started to peek out from their cells, watching us closely. Before any of them could do anything, though, they all collapsed, like their strings had been cut.

"They knocked them out," Tatnia pointed out. "They must be on their way."

I nodded in agreement before quickly casting my armor, sinking all of my energy into it. My reserves were halfway full when the large doors leading into the prison area slowly opened, revealing three armed and armored guards cautiously stepping inside. Instantly my rune went off, a massive amount of electrical energy discharging at once. Between my talents with lighting and the fact that I had dual cast the rune, all three of the guards dropped dead the second the lighting stopped, their corpses smoking and twitching.

"Time to go to work," I said with a smirk, stepping out of my cover and making a beeline for the door.

I raised my hand and charged a lightning bolt, firing it off at the first guard I saw poking their head into the room to see what had happened. The blast of electric energy caught him in the face, knocking him back around the corner and out of sight. I put on another burst of speed, determined to step through the doorway to prevent them from sealing us inside. Blaster bolts sizzled through the doorway, one catching me in the shoulder as I ran, prompting me to quickly slide behind one of the tables for cover. I turned to check on Tatnia and Vaz, watching them take cover behind another table just a bit further back.

Blaster bolts kept pouring through the doorway, preventing me from standing and charging again. I peeked around my cover, cursing when I spotted the doors starting to slide shut. I leaned further out of cover and quickly dual-cast conjure flame atronach, aiming as close to the door as I could before releasing the spell.

My [armored summon](#) appeared about ten feet from the closing doorway, just out of view of the guards. I quickly flexed my control, guiding it to move as fast as it could, staying in cover for as long as it could. At the last second, the blue flame wreathed summon charged through the slowly closing doors. It took a single blaster bolt to the shoulder, but the spell held together, just barely making it through the doorway before it closed, sealing us inside.

I couldn't exactly see through my atronach's eyes, and what feedback I could feel was limited, but with the door now completely closed, I took a chance and ordered to find some sort of method to open the door. I could feel its limited sentience straining to figure out what I said before seeming to do *something*. Before I could even parse out exactly what it did, I could second, third, and fourth blaster bolt hit it, destabilizing its magic and destroying the summon.

Which, of course, triggered the explosion, a muffled "Whump!" reaching us back inside the prison area.

"Please have found the door controls... please have found the door controls..." I repeated under my breath before jumping up when the doors once again shuddered and began to open. "Yes!"

I charged the doors again, this time staying off to the side before peeking around into the hallway on the other side. The signs of my atronach's explosion marked the left side of the hall, a singed and smoldering circle that covered the floor and went up the wall. Inside the perimeter were two charred corpses, one of which was reaching up toward a soot-covered lever.

I pulled my head back just in time for a quartet of blaster bolts to fire through the fully opened doorway. I let out a quick breath, checked to make sure my armor was intact, and charged before casting and holding an ice spike. I whirled around the door and fired the spell, catching the last standing guard in the leg, knocking him off of his feet, the human man screaming and clutching at the massive spike of ice in his leg.

After a quick double-check to make sure there was no one else, I turned back to wave Tatnia and Vaz over, only to find them already looting the smoking corpses of the guards who died to my lighting rune. Both of them eagerly took their weapons and spare ammo. Tatnia quickly pulled on one of the guard's basic torso armor while Vaz caught up with me.

"Are you two good?" I asked, turning back to watch the hall.

"I believe we are uninjured," Vaz responded, her blaster up and pointed down the hall.

I nodded and quickly made my way to the injured and shouting guard. I covered his mouth with my hand, the older man looking at me with fear in his eyes. He started to flounder through some sort of begging routine, but I just shook my head.

"Here is the deal. You tell me how I get to the collar controls, and I don't make your other leg match this one," I explained, tapping the tip of the ice spike.

"What... why?" He asked, looking confused. "I can't."

I gripped the spike and slowly twisted it with my hand, the guard screaming and clenching his teeth.

"Okay, okay! Just please stop!" He shouted, trying to shove my hands away.

I stopped touching the spike, the man sobbing out a thank you before explaining that the collar control room was an offshoot of the security room, which was a floor up and down several hallways. I promised I would be back if he was wrong, the man staying silent until I reached out for the spike again. He frantically corrected himself, explaining that the security room was a floor down, not up. I patted his shoulder before standing, already walking down the hallway from the prison area.

"Why do we need to go to the security room?" Tatnia asked. "Wouldn't it be better just to leave?"

"If we leave now, we will have the entire facility, maybe more, looking for us," I explained. "But if the entire facility shuts down, and all of the collars turn off at once...?"

"They would have to focus on the resulting riot," Tatnia said, Vaz nodding in approval. "Alright, Boss. Lead the way."