

Explaining everything to Nevue took about an hour, during which he ate two full meals. He listened with rapt and analytical attention, absorbing everything we said. Thankfully everyone seemed to pick up on my first hint, leaving my special abilities out when describing everything. When we were eventually done, he looked at each of us before settling on me.

“So, you're targeting slavers to make enough money to buy your own ship and leave Nar Shaddaa?” He asked, continuing when I nodded. “Why not just steal a ship and be done with it? Just pick one and grab it. You're clearly willing to get your hands dirty...”

“Because we don't want to be common criminals,” I explained with a shrug. “Slavers are acceptable targets as far as I'm concerned, but we would rather not make off with some random hauler's lively hood. An unlikely scenario, I know, but still one we want to avoid.”

“It wouldn't be too difficult to find someone who deserves it,” He countered. “A little research, and you'll find most of the people on this planet are rotten in some way. You don't last very long here if you aren't.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” I responded. “This is how we are doing it, and it's worked so far. I'm not here to start a criminal enterprise or get rich quick. Once we have enough resources to get the fuck off this planet, we will, but I'm not willing to compromise my own beliefs to do that. Slavers are as good a target as any, and we get the added benefit of occasionally freeing some people.”

The Zabrak man was silent for a while, occasionally lifting his hand to touch the bandage on his neck, rubbing the spot with a wince. Eventually, we started talking around him, chatting and passing the time. After a while, he spoke up again when there was a gap in the conversation.

“So what happens to me?” He asked, looking at each of us before settling on me.

“You're free to go,” I explained, ignoring the fact that I had pointed this out a few times during our earlier talk. “We needed an excuse to get our credits mixed with theirs, but now... Well, we can give you some money, maybe enough to get off-world, but that's it, really.”

“And what if I don't want to go?” He asked. “If I want to stick around, steal from the slavers, get off world on your ship. Would that be possible?”

“I...” I started to talk, only to trail off and reconsider what I was going to say. “You don't have anything to go back to?”

“I might, but I've been missing for half a year at this point. A few more weeks won't mean much to them. Besides... you guys did free me from slavery,” He pointed out with a slight smile on his face. “I figure I owe you some help.”

We explained the general outline of the plan for the next free days as we waited for the credits to move from the market. Tatnia, of course, wanted to know if he would be of any use to us.

“I have some training with blaster rifles, and I know some hand-to-hand,” He explained vaguely. “Standard Zabrak education includes some combat training... To help those with a natural talent for violence find their calling early. After that... Well, I ran with a group that got into some fights. I’ll be able to hold my own just fine.”

“How did you end up here?” Miru asked bluntly, Nal wincing next to her.

“My group was attacked by a rival faction,” He explained after hesitating for a moment. “I was injured and had to run. Unfortunately, on the way to our regroup location, I passed out in the wrong neighborhood. I woke up with binders on my wrists, locked in a cramped cargo bay.”

We talked a bit more, Nevue describing what he was capable of in a very obviously circumspect way. Assuming he was telling the truth, he would be useful, but I could already tell Tatnia would be keeping a close eye on him. When we eventually headed to bed, I stayed up for the first watch, sitting in the cockpit of the speeder truck, watching the sensors and the skies, the nocturnal travelers of the city sector fly through the air.

Slowly Nevue fit into the group dynamic. He seemed to be something of a jack of all trades, helping Miru work on the speeders and Tatnia maintain the gear we had accumulated. He seemed to know his way around the rifles we bought and claimed to have some experience with a proton rifle as well. Considering he disassembled and reassembled it quickly for cleaning, I was inclined to believe. Everyone seemed to accept him, with even Tatnia agreeing that he seemed to know his stuff, even if we were both pretty sure the group he mentioned he belonged to was a gang of some sort.

On the third day of him staying with us, I finally explained my magic to him, though I left out the actual M word. He tensed up when I first used it, watching me spray fire and summon a sword.

“Is that the Force?” He asked, shocking the hell out of me in the process.

Out of everyone I had shown my magic to, he was the only one who had mentioned the Force. I wasn’t surprised that someone had made the connection, but I was more than a bit surprised that some random Zabrak from who knows where did.

“No, it's not the Force. The Force is rarely used in such an... elemental and multifaceted way,” I explained, letting my conjured sword fade away. “That isn't to say that it couldn't be used in that way. There were a lot of lesser-known Force abilities that did some interesting things....”

As I talked, he looked at me strangely, and I realized I was talking about things that very few people knew these days, all with the tone of an expert. I trailed off and coughed awkwardly.

“That's what I've learned anyway,” I explained. “I'm sure you can imagine I did a fair bit of research about anything similar to what I can do....”

We spent most of our time waiting around the slave market, keeping our eyes peeled as I rotated the clairvoyance spell through the remaining nineteen credit ingots. I would put my hand on the dash of the A-A5, cast the spell nineteen times, and make a note of exactly where the arrows were pointing so that I could tell if they moved.

We killed time however we could, reading and chatting about our lives before being taken. I talked about my family, still under the partial lie that I was from a secluded planet with minimal contact with the rest of the world. Miru talked about where she learned her considerable mechanical and programming talents. Apparently, having a knack for something got you extra rations as a slave, especially when fostering that knack led to even greater skill. I also learned that she was seventeen, and I mentally made a note to keep her as far away from the violence as I could.

Tatnia opened up a bit about her life, finally confirming that my guess about her being a grown-up street rat was correct. She grew up on the streets of a planet she didn't care enough about to name, eventually becoming a sort of problem solver for hire. When she was twenty, she worked as hired muscle for a merchant, traveling between a handful of planets, buying low and selling high. She had been celebrating a delivery bonus, getting a bit too deep in her cups, only to wake up in binders. When I asked her why she didn't try and get her job back, she chuckled and assured me there was no way she hadn't already been replaced. Apparently, being low-level merchant guards didn't have very good job security.

Surprisingly, Nal seemed the least interested in discussing his life before being abducted. I did find out that he was just over sixty years old, which was considered middle age for a Duros. He explained that the call to adventure was an important part of a Duros life and culture and that discussing his life previous to this journey would only taint what this could become. Apparently, it was better to form a new story than simply add to the previous one. Still, he was more than happy to chat to pass the time and share the occasional anecdote and joke.

Nevue, on the other hand, wasn't really interested in socializing at all. He confirmed that he wasn't looking to stay a part of the group once we got off the planet and that he did expect some sort of cut at the end. This annoyed Tatnia, but I honestly couldn't blame him. Finding four people who meshed so well and were eager to work together for one purpose had been a fluke

that I was still shocked about. Knowing that the fifth person wasn't interested past a ride and a paycheck was honestly reassuring.

During the downtime, I was also practicing my magic nearly continuously. I had pretty much internalized all of the novice spells at this point, able to cast them with very little thought and at a moment's notice. Unfortunately, my grimoire still refused to show me any apprentice-level magic, something that frustrated me to no end. I was almost positive that the first spell to heal other people was an apprentice spell, and the sooner I got that, the sooner I could stop stressing out so much about my new friends getting hurt.

It wasn't all bad, however, because while I hadn't unlocked a new level of spells, I did learn that there was another whole aspect to the grimoire that I hadn't known existed. I opened my grimoire a few days into our vigil, checking again to see if I had any new spells to learn, only to find a passage about dual casting.

I read through the several new pages, studying the diagrams and instructions eagerly. Dual casting essentially allowed me to channel my magic through both of my hands, but instead of casting two separate spells, I would cast a singular overpowered one. This would have several effects depending on what spell I was casting. In broad strokes, however, dual casting increased the potency of the spell in several ways, making a conjured sword more lethal, a summoned creature stronger, and throwing lightning that hit harder.

This, of course, came at the cost of using just under double the magicka. Even so, it was a potent ability, especially considering that this wasn't a video game, so the increase in effect wouldn't be lost in gamified numbers. In reality, a dual cast sparks spell would penetrate armor that the typically cast sparks spell would just dance over, while in the video game, it would only do a bit more damage for a ridiculous increase cost. Ultimately, dual casting would give me a significant advantage when my magic needed a bit more kick.

I just had to learn how to do it.

Luckily I had plenty of time, and I had been practicing these spells for a while by this point. In the game, Dual casting had been a perk that had to be purchased for every school of magic, but for me, it was a technique that could be applied to any spell that was cast with a single hand.

Essentially you would draw out your magic, and instead of forming the spell matrix in your palm, you formed it in the air between your two hands. This was where the extra cost in mana came from, as forming the matrix outside your body led to mana unavoidably bleeding off. Even with the loss, drawing out both matrices over top of each other massively increased the potency of your spell.

It wasn't until I had mastered dual casting several spells that I realized this represented something significant, even more than a potency boost. The dual casting ability had been a

specific perk from the video game, and here it was offered as a technique that I could learn. It stood to reason that other perks would also be available further down the road. While I obviously couldn't remember every perk in the game, I did remember a few of them that could be helpful down the line.

Over a week passed, and four more ingots were moved out of the market, two of them leaving the planet, with the other two bouncing around the planet as they were used normally. The remaining fifteen ingots stayed in the same location, the general center of the market place or, more specifically, under the general center of the facility.

It wasn't until late one afternoon that we finally got some activity, more than two-thirds of the ingots moving through the facility. By flying around in a wide circle around the facility, we were able to locate where it was being moved to, settling on a smaller building to the left of the main building. We knew from the days spent having observed this location that this was where the transport speeders were kept.

"It's being moved to the garage," I said through the comms, sitting on the MVR-3. "I'm going to swing around back to you guys. Get ready to move."

I got confirmation back as I gunned the speeder, zipping down from where I had been parked to quickly make my way back to where the A-A5 was being kept. When I pulled into the alleyway, everyone was already on board the speeder truck save for Nal, who was waiting for me.

"Good luck," I said as we traded places, the blue-skinned alien taking the speeder bike as he was a much better pilot than me. "I'll call out their movements. Stay in contact."

The Duros nodded and pulled down his goggles, double-checking his helmet before lifting off and away. The MVR-3 had an impressive repulsorlift ceiling, which we had been using to our advantage to travel over buildings. It was probably more than a bit rude, but I wasn't exactly going to lose sleep over it.

I climbed into the cargo space of the A-A5 and started cycling the clairvoyance spell, waiting for any shifts in location. For twenty minutes nothing happened until finally, they started moving again. I started tracking one specifically instead of rotating through the group, feeding Miru the direction. She quickly lifted off, speeding out directly in that direction, Nal following behind us.

Five minutes after lifting off, we had the convoy on our site. A singular, unarmed but armored transport, with two other speeders moving in tandem. The two other speeders were armed and lightly armored, with a closed-off interior and a single turret on the back that swiveled and scanned the area.

"You see them, Nal?" I asked through the comms.

“I do. I am ready when you are.”

We waited silently, following the convoy for a few minutes before the perfect opportunity struck. The convoy pulled off of the main road and into a smaller back road, one that would make it much more difficult for them to maneuver in.

“Miru put us down at the entrance into that road!” I ordered, the ship tilting as Miru nodded. “Nal, herd them back towards us with a strafing run! Nevue, get the proton rifle. Once Nal starts laying into them, try and take out their turrets. Tatnia, same to you. We need those armed speeders down before they can hit back. I’m not looking to test the A-A5’s armor. Stay focused, everyone. We can do this.”