

Not long after, Vaz agreed to join us in trying to break out, and we reaffirmed that finding a solution to the collars was our most important task, we climbed into our bunks and slept. I could have used the respite to let us plan a bit more, but at this point, there wasn't much of a reason to. We woke up, and from there day was the same as before. We ate, got herded down to the mine, and spent the entire day working before being escorted back up to the prison area.

During our work shift, when Vaz was dropping off a load of stones, Tessa caught my attention.

"Deacon... would that armor spell you mentioned be enough to protect you from..." She started to ask, finishing by miming an explosion from her neck.

"At the I'm at now? No, I wouldn't trust," I responded, shaking my head. "Maybe at the next one? That's a pretty risky maybe, though, so let's call that plan 'We are fucked anyway, might as well try it.' I would have to learn it first, and I don't exactly have the most free time."

She nodded in understanding, the topic dropped for now as Vaz returned. Eventually, we would show her some of my abilities, but for now, we needed to make sure she was actually on board, not just pretending to be so she could eventually sell us out. The shift dragged on and on after that, and I spent most of it mindlessly working, my brain focused on how we could get out, trying to put together a plan from what little we knew.

My first instinct was to just try and cut it off. If we were careful and didn't cut anything important, there was a chance we could remove it without disturbing any sensors inside the device before it could realize it was no longer around someone's neck. I had access to a blade that could, hypothetically, cut through the metal in the form of my summoned bound dagger. I might have to practice with it for a few days, maybe adjust the matrix a bit, but I was pretty sure all of my bound weapons could get that sharp.

When we finally arrived back at the prison block, the three of us sequestered ourselves back in our cell, I brought up my idea.

"Do you know what kind of anti-tampering stuff the collars have?" I asked after sitting on the edge of my seat, the still-wet form of Vaz sitting on the floor. "Like if we started messing around with it?"

"I know of several who have attempted to remove their collars, none of whom succeeded," She responded. "One managed to knock himself unconscious trying to smash it open, while the others failed but were quickly taken away and punished for attempting."

"So they knew someone was trying to tamper with it? But then why not just remotely knock them out...?" I asked, mostly just trying to puzzle through the conundrum out loud. "Were they taken away immediately? Or once the guards got a look at them?"

"A mixture of both." She answered after a moment of thinking

"Fuck, that doesn't tell us anything," I said, shaking my head. "We-"

"Wait! The ones that were taken immediately... were they trying this out in the open?" Tatnia asked. "Like in view of the cameras?"

"I... cannot say for sure," She admitted. "My instincts tell me you are correct, that those taken immediately must have been spotted by the surveillance. However, the memories have blended together. Others might remember better...?"

"Letting people know what we are planning is a bad idea," I said, shaking my head. "And there is no way to ask about how tamper-proof the collars without people realizing what's going on."

For a long moment, I thought to myself before eventually letting out a sigh, not liking the conclusion I had reached but realizing that there weren't a lot of options. I needed to go out on a limb.

"We need more information. That is the key. If we don't start canceling out some variables and finding the real information, we are going to be stuck here forever," I explained, reaching up and fiddling with the collar.

"How do you suggest we do that?" Vaz asked, watching me curiously.

"Right now, our biggest variable is whether or not the collars have sensors that tell people when they are being fucked with," I said, standing from the bed and getting down into an awkward position. "The fact that they could do visible damage to it tells me that whatever explosive inside is stable enough to not go off being hit. So..."

I sat down by the bed, putting my neck and collar against the hard metal edge. With any luck, this would keep me from getting hurt since all of the force would be going through the collar and into the bed, rather than through the collar and into my neck.

"Wait, what are- No. No, we are not testing it out on you, Boss," Tatnia said, shaking her head, grabbing my arm, and pulling me back up. "Don't be stupid. What happens if you're incapacitated? We lose our powerplay."

With me standing out of the way, Tatnia started taking my place, putting her collar against the edge of the bed and looking up at me and Vaz.

"But... Fuck, alright," I said, shaking my head. "I'm a lot less confident about me hitting the right spot than I was about you hitting the right spot though."

"Allow me then," Vaz said, putting her hand on my shoulder. "I am confident I can hit the collar without harming her."

I looked at her for a moment before nodding and standing aside, still watching closely, chewing my lip. The canine-esque humanoid stood over Tatnia, lining herself up, settling into some sort of trained stance.

"Not enough to break it," I reminded her. "Just to test if they know when we are fucking with it. I'm worried the bomb will go off if it's actually removed, especially if the lock itself breaks."

Vaz nodded wordlessly before focusing on Tatnia and her target. She seemed to settle even more before bringing her clawed hand down on the collar, slamming the side of her palm into the metal band. She struck it three more times, each time the bed letting out a muffled metal banging, the collar itself letting out a much more dulled metallic clunk. After the fourth blow, she stood back up, coming out of her stance.

"That... wasn't fun, but it wasn't nearly as bad as I thought it would be," Tatnia admitted, shifting and standing up from the awkward position. "Now what?"

"Now we wait," I said, stepping around Vaz to examine Tatnia and, after that, her collar, inspecting it for visible damage. "It's slightly warped, but nothing else noticeably wrong beyond that. You definitely hit it hard enough to rattle any sensors fit might have for being fucked with."

We sat around the cell, waiting nervously for anyone to come and take Tatnia away. After an hour of uninterrupted waiting, we finally called it and climbed into our beds. It appeared that no one had noticed what we had done, but we wanted to play it safe.

The following day, we were all walking on eggshells, mentally, if not physically. We were all hyper-aware of every look the guards sent our way, wondering if somehow they would notice the nearly invisible amount of warping that Vaz had inflicted on Tatnia's collar. As the day went by, our tension slowly receded, replaced by a sliver of hope. If whoever was controlling the collars couldn't tell it was being fucked with, I felt a lot more confident about messing with them to try and get them off. Not that I would risk sparks, not when it could set off whatever explosives were inside them.

When we finally made it back to our cell, all three of us were tired and sore, so we quickly ate in silence. By the time we were done, we had recovered enough to talk about what we had learned.

"They showed no signs of knowing we had tampered with Tatnia's collar," Vaz said, folding her ration bar wrapper up before throwing it out of the cell.

"Yeah... That's a good sign," I said. "That means if we manage to take it off, there is a chance they won't know until we start fucking around."

"Unless the bomb goes off," Tatnia pointed out.

"The fact that these other people did visible damage to their collars and it didn't go off, or even tell the people controlling them that something was up, tells me their system isn't as foolproof as they claim," I said, leaning by the entrance to the cell, facing inwards. "It's still a possibility...But I think the explosives are set up to be triggered, not trapped. Its a risk, but.... let's go with it for now."

"The rest of the crew could be coming for us," Tatnia pointed out. "Not saying we shouldn't take the risk, just pointing out it's an option."

"I'm sure they are looking for us, I'm just a lot less sure if they are already coming for us," I responded. "I don't doubt their ability or drive, just how they could possibly know where we are."

"So we risk it?" Tatnia asked, and I nodded in confirmation.

"Yeah, we risk it."

"While I understand your sentiments, you're talking as if you already have a way to remove our collars," Vaz said, her canine features carrying her confusion well. "Do you have a way?"

"Yeah, he has a bit of an advantage," Tatnia said. "A few tricks up his sleeve...."

Tatnia trailed off, the silence hanging in the room for a second before she looked at me with a confused look on her face.

"Aren't you gonna...?"

"I'm waiting for you to spoil it like you did last time," I responded, crossing my arms with a raised eyebrow.

"Really, Boss? You're gonna do that now?" She asked, shaking her head. "Fine, I won't say anything."

I stared at my crewmate for a long moment before eventually adding and uncrossing my arms, turning to look at Vaz, who looked bewildered at what we were talking about.

"Right, so-"

"He is a space wizard!" Tatnia said in a stage whisper, cutting me off again, just like before.

Unlike before, though, I immediately got back at her by charging a low-powered spark spell and zapping her leg, like I had before, while still on Nar Shaddaa. She cursed and stumbled onto my bed, her leg giving out for just a split second. She immediately sat back up, giving me an annoyed look. I turned to look at Vaz, who was staring at me and speaking in a language I didn't understand. She had fallen into a combat-ready stance, her claws ready to attack.

"What was that?" She asked tensely, which slowly released as neither Tatnia nor I made any violent moves. "What did you just do?"

"As annoying as she might be, Tatnia was right, I am a wizard. A mage, more specifically," I explained. "I can do magic."

Over the next twenty minutes, I showed off a bit of my abilities, making sure to only use things that were easily hidden and didn't make too much noise. I finished off my little show by healing the blisters and burns on the hands of the humanoid from handling the mediara. Since she was covered in fur, no one would be able to see that she didn't have them.

"You... healed me... Just like that?" She asked, feeling her pain-free hands opening and closing them. "That is incredible. No Jedi could do that, at least not that fast."

"That's cause I'm not a Jedi," I said, tilting my head after a moment. "How do you know about Jedi?"

"My adopted father, before he was killed, was Mandalorian," She responded.

"Oh, yeah, that explains it," I said with a nod, getting a surprised look from Vaz and Tatnia. "Mandalorians and Jedi aren't exactly sworn enemies, but they really don't like each other. Their beliefs clash heavily, and they don't have the best history. Neither side is innocent, no offense, but I imagine your father taught you a bit about them in a 'know your enemy' type of way."

"I... yes, how do you know that?" She asked, looking confused. "Not many know that history."

"He does that," Tatnia said, shaking her head. "Knowing things he shouldn't, I mean. You get used to it. That said, Mandalorians have a reputation. Did your father train you?"

"Partially. My father was... not an exile, but left his covert after a difference in opinion," She explained. "He trained me in what he could but died before he could finish."

"My condolence," I said softly, getting a nod of acknowledgment in return.

"... So you are not a Jedi, but a mage. How will your magic help us?" Vaz asked after a moment of silence.

"Well... I think with the right application of cold..." I said, spraying a frostbite spell across the wall. "And a bit of leverage...."

I charge up my summon-bound battleaxe spell, a large double-edged axe appearing in my hand. It was just over four feet long, with a [simple axehead](#) and very little detailing beyond some simple accents and shaping in the handle. It looked a bit like the Stalham battleaxe from Skyrim but without the weird material. As always, it was also translucent and glowing light purple with wisps of the same color flowing.

"You're not thinking of using that to cut it off, are you?" Tatnia asked, suddenly very nervous, her hand going up to her neck. "Cause if you are, I take it back. You can go first."

"No, all healing spells in the world wouldn't make me feel comfortable swinging this thing at any friend's neck," I said, shaking my head. "The weapon end isn't the important part. The handle is. Just a bit of old school magic called simple machines and the humble lever."

While Tatnia looked at me like I was crazy, Vaz reached out and took the axe from me. The glowing bound weapon had plenty of charge to last for a while without me recharging it. Vaz shifted her grip before trying her best to break the glowing weapon. When she failed, she nodded in satisfaction.

"I do not know how cold you're capable of getting the collar, but if it is sufficient... it could work," She said, passing the weapon back to me, starting slightly when I just dismissed it.

"Alright. Then the only thing that's left is to talk about when and where," I responded. "I would just assume we do it here, but I'm open to all arguments."