

With nothing holding us back and a loose but encroaching deadline set, we immediately got to work. It was quickly decided that I would remain behind while Tatnia and Vaz captained the L-2783. Our first priority was getting them ready and seeing them off, which required quite a bit of reshuffling.

Most of the naval droids in use by the other ships, especially the *Chariot*, since Calima could fly it by herself, were transferred over to the L-2783, which I had already rechristened the *Whale Shark*, since there was no way in hell we would keep calling it the *Bloody Maw*, and it really did look like one of those massive whales, opening its mouth to swallow krill. Several clones from the *Loyal Hound* also went, just barely bringing the crew size for the large carrier ship into an acceptable range.

We also needed to finish the ship's inspection. Our question and answer session with the pirate leader confirmed there were no traps, but there was no way in hell we were taking the man's word that the ship was well maintained. The crew started at the primary hyperdrive and spread out from there, visually inspecting all of the ship's core systems. The repair droids we brought were a great help with the process, letting us complete it in just over a day.

It wasn't just about the ship's physical parts either. We also went over the ship's food and water storage, begrudgingly concluding that their supplies were technically edible. When everything was finally set, inspected, and prepared, the temporary crew gathered on board and left for Omega Station.

As they left, we turned our attention back to the planet, focusing on what we could do to prepare. It wasn't a surprise to find that the reshuffling of personnel left us dangerously understaffed, with the *Loyal Hound* in particular only barely counting as active. Unfortunately, it was just something we were going to have to deal with until the *Whale Shark* returned. I made a note to discuss a major recruitment drive with Tatnia once this was all over.

While I was looking to sell the Braha'tok gunship cause I didn't want to deal with paying for and managing the repairs, we still needed to staff the L-2783. While our naval droids could pick up some of the slack, I disliked the idea of relying on them so much.

On top of that, we also might end up claiming whatever escort ship showed up with the slavers, depending on how the ambush went and what sort of escort it was. We also needed pilots to staff and train for the V-wings. When the *Whale Shark* was active and ready for service, I wanted two wings of V-wings on board, ready for missions.

With nothing but time on our hands, we started preparing for the ambush. The first thing we did was get the labor droids to start digging shallow holes in the snow and ice strategically around the ice flats. We then buried around half of our B2s in them, deep enough to hide them but plenty shallow for them to bust out of. While we had to do it randomly since we had no idea where the slavers would land, they would make excellent distractions or ambush teams should the coming ambush devolve into a ground fight.

I was hoping the inherent selfishness and cowardice needed for one being to sell another into slavery would make convincing them to surrender relatively easy, but there was no way I was going to assume it would. Hope for the best, plan for the worst.

Once we finished that, it was basically a waiting game. Some of the repair bots, a few of the clones, and Nal took it upon themselves to give repairing the Braha'tok a shot, hoping to at least get shields up and running to protect it from any wild turbolaser fire. It turns out that the pirates had already bought some of the parts needed, making the repair process go pretty quickly. Its power systems were too busted to run the weapons and the shields at the same time, but at least it could tank some stray fire.

While that work was going on, I made a rather exciting discovery.

Between learning older spells, re-reading the enchantment section, hoping that something would change, and just generally reviewing information, I was checking my grimoire once a day, at minimum. However, with a lack of free time, a lack of anything new, and a lack of old spells to learn, I slowly stopped checking it as frequently. By the time the *Whale Shark* left, and I suddenly had a whole heap of free time, it had been nearly two weeks since I had checked the book.

So, when I summoned the book, mostly to just pass the time, imagine my surprise to find that I had *finally* unlocked access to Expert-level spells. The shout of excitement echoed through the *Chariot*, reaching Ahsoka, who was down on the first deck meditating. Curious to see what was going on, she walked upstairs to find me celebrating in the lounge.

After I explained what had happened, she simply shook her head, rolled her eyes, and went back down to the first deck. I was a bit surprised she didn't ask more questions about how my grimoire worked, but I guess at this point, she was used to me just being strange.

I quickly sat back down and went over everything that I could learn, gleefully debating what I should focus on first. I had to beat down my first instinct, which was to go with something from the Destruction school, since as cool as the spells seemed, there were too many other options just to jump directly to them.

Invisibility, Grand Healing, Pacify, Conjure Storm Atronach, Paralyze, and more were available. These were all spells I recognized, and I was thrilled to see that I could learn them. Of course, there was a whole series of spells I didn't recognize, as well. For example, there was another level of the ward spell called Superior Ward, as well as what looked like a half dozen more conjuration minions to summon, including upgrades to constructs I had gotten before at lesser stages.

Restoration also had a pair of pretty potent-looking spells called Circle of Protection and Encompassing Rest. The first seemed to be a bit familiar, but I was pretty sure it had been focused on repelling the undead. This version was a barrier spell, which summoned a ten-foot radius circle around the caster, with a cylindrical ward around it. You could cast it on a spot, and

it would remain in place, or you could cast it on yourself, which would make the barrier move with you. It also made healing spells inside the area more potent.

The Encompassing Rest spell allowed me to clear a massive amount of fatigue from people all around me. It was pretty potent, with more than enough stamina replenishment to take someone struggling to move and get them ready to run a marathon.

After spending a good while skimming through my options, I spent around fifteen minutes mentally working out which spell I wanted to learn first. That was when I finally remembered that Expert level meant the spells would likely take upwards of seventeen to twenty hours to learn.

I groaned, realizing that not only did I have to work through my boredom, the actual difficulty of tuning a spell matrix and not losing concentration, but now falling asleep was an actual significant concern.

With my new realization in mind, rather than immediately attempting to start learning my first expert spell, I stood up from the couch and started going around the ship. I wanted everyone to know that I would be too busy for anything that wasn't an emergency. Not surprisingly, quite a few members of the crew were concerned about me being busy for twenty hours, though the explanation that I would be working on magic worked better at calming them than I expected.

When I was done informing everyone and setting up a temporary chain of command with Nal at its head, I still didn't jump to learning my first Expert spell. Instead, I headed to the lounge, grabbed two big packets of food, and ate them both. I was very full by the time I was done, but with any luck, that would make it easier to fast while I was working.

With that finally done, I headed to my room, sealed myself inside, and sat down at my desk. I quickly scanned through the grimoire, selecting the spell I wanted, and started the process. As usual, creating spell matrices, now four of them, was the easy part. However, even with that, that process alone nearly took an hour, since there was just so much of it to create.

Once the matrix was stable and ready, I began the grueling, horrifically long tuning process. With each one taking around four hours, I was in for a long ride.

Slowly but surely, I made steady progress, orienting lines, altering angles, and tightening turns, tuning the matrices to my own personal flavor of magic and my soul frequency. When I reached the fourth one, where normally I would be done, I was tired, my brain was fatigued, and my ass was incredibly sore from just sitting in this chair.

Still, I pressed on. I was determined to finally achieve an Expert level spell, to finally take a step further into my magical abilities. I had been waiting for what seemed like so long for this,

and I wasn't about to let my first attempt be a failure, especially when it would set me back fourteen hours.

Finally, after twenty hours of tweaking and flexing and twisting the matrices until it finally worked, I cast my first Expert-level spell. In a wave of Conjunction energy, a new [construct](#) appeared. It was just about my height, clad in robes and wielding a staff, with books and scrolls at its hip.

I could conjure a wizard construct!

I mentally commanded him to heal me, and immediately, the construct tilted his staff forward and cast Healing Hands on me, the glow of restoration magic spreading around me and sinking into my body. A quick thought and it was casting Respite, my stamina quickly replenishing. I cheered loudly, spinning around in my chair before quickly dismissing and re-casting the spell for a full fifteen minutes, acclimatizing my magic to the spell. When I was done, I conjured the construct again, using it to confirm the information that the grimoire had told me.

The construct took a good chunk of mana to conjure, but once it was, it was pretty cheap to keep going, especially considering what it was capable of. It had its own source of mana, a sort of spell heart that drew in natural energy and converted it into Magicka. That definitely caught my eye, though I really didn't know what I would do with that information. It was an incredibly versatile construct, for obvious reasons, but it was also much more intelligent than lower-level constructs. To test that, I sent a mental command for it to grab me a drink, and it actually stepped out of my room, down the hall to the lounge, and grabbed me a lom-ale from the fridge we kept stocked. According to the grimoire, it could use the information I knew, but I couldn't really get it from long processes. I could tell it to grab something, but if I asked it to make me a sandwich, it would likely just bring me back the bread.

That wasn't the only restriction, either. It was locked to Apprentice and Novice level spells, at least until I started learning Master spells, and only ones that I knew. Thankfully, that was most of them at this point, so that was fine. It also regenerated its mana kind of slowly, more in line with a normal person without enchanted items, who didn't spend so much time doing Recovery meditations.

But none of those restrictions mattered because this construct meant one very important thing. As long as I didn't die on the spot, and whatever incapacitated me didn't also destroy the construct, if I was to be injured to heal myself, or I was knocked unconscious, the mage construct could heal me up to full. After that, we could work together to heal everyone else. I was still a lynchpin in everyone's ability to bounce back after every injury, but now I had a little extra reinforcement.

I finally stood out of my chair, eager to have something to eat and finally get some sleep, only to immediately collapse forward and almost clip my head off the side of a shelf. While

healing spells might fix sore muscles, and Respite fixes fatigue, neither of those fixes a pair of dead legs from sitting too long.

"Note to self... next time, do that lying down," I mumbled, rolling over onto my back with a groan.

It took me ten minutes to get the use of my legs back, groaning and wincing as I dealt with the worst case of pins and needles I had ever had. When I finally did have something to eat, I collapsed almost immediately into my bed, falling asleep in seconds.

Over the next five days, I only learned two more spells, since each one threw me for a loop mentally and physically. The first was Grand Healing, a useful Restoration spell that let me heal everyone around me at once. It was a bit magicka intensive, but the fact that I could guarantee everyone around me was at a hundred percent, without checking and making sure, all in one spell? That was totally worth the admission price. I also finally broke down and learned an Expert Destruction spell, settling on Unbound Freezing. It was a hilariously potent Frost spell that fired a thick beam of freezing energy out of my palm. I was pretty sure it was very different from the spell I remember from the game, as I seem to remember that version being an AOE centered around myself.

Mind you, I wasn't complaining. The spell was powerful, and while a bit mana-hungry, the new, revealed section of the grimoire had quite a few ways to reduce mana costs. I would just need to learn them.

Between learning spells, I tried my best to keep myself even by sparring with Ahsoka, spending some time working and preparing for the ambush, as well as doing some light enchanting, focusing on making dexterity rings and amulets for our pilots. I also spent some time dusting up on my marksmanship, specifically with a blaster rifle. I was a pretty good shot with my blaster pistol, and I did a damn good imitation of Robin Hood with my bow. But my blaster rifle skills were my least practiced, and while I would always prefer my magic, a bow, or my pistol, shooting a blaster rifle was still an important skill.

Of course, once I started doing that, both of the ground teams, at least those who stayed behind, turned it into a competition. Nal was the best shot out of everyone, with Lieutenant Rider coming in second. Surprisingly, Dazem came in third, having stumbled into the competition by accident.

By the time the *Whale Shark* returned, everyone who had remained behind was chomping at the bit to get to the next phase of the plan.