

A Galaxy of Magic

Chapter 25

Tatooine's twin suns were already high in the sky by the time Harry and his companions left Anchorhead behind. He kept his speederbike at a steady distance behind the battered landspeeder. The old landspeeder's engine howled in protest under Shaak Ti's aggressive driving, which made Harry chuckle. After a quick stop in Anchorhead, the speeder was loaded down with supplies that they had gotten at a great deal. The scorching wind ripped past Harry, dragging hot lines of sweat down his neck, and every minute he scanned the horizon, expecting trouble.

He didn't have to wait long. A blinding blue bolt suddenly rocketed down toward the landspeeder. From the upper ridge of the plateau, a sniper's shot sizzled down and would have cored Aayla through the heart if her hand hadn't darted to her belt. Aayla's lightsaber snapped to life with a shiss, and she caught the blaster bolt on the blade without even flinching. The deflected bolt ricocheted off a nearby rock, searing a glowing trench in the sandstone. The landspeeder bucked from side to side as Shaak Ti jerked the controls, throwing up a wall of dust.

Harry's eyes traced the origin of the shot to a cluster of shapes on a high ridge, barely visible behind a pile of jagged boulders. There were three Tusken Raiders, shrouded in their filthy wrappings. They were hunched behind a makeshift barricade and already racking their rifles for a second volley.

"Take cover!" Aayla shouted, and Maris ducked low, clutching the side of the speeder.

Harry didn't hesitate. He pressed down on the accelerator, lifted his left hand from the speeder's controls, and focused his will, even as the wind threatened to rip him from his seat. The surge of magic was like a pressure wave moving through his chest and down his arm. The spell blazed forth from his palm in a coil of spiraling blue-white energy. The Blasting Curse hit the boulder dead-on. The rock exploded into a hail of lethal shards, and the concussive force sent two of the Tuskens ragdolling backward. The third Raider was caught by the edge of the explosion, and he tumbled off the ledge and landed with a sickening crunch on the rocks below. Harry winced at the state of the raider. His back was clearly snapped in half, and his arm was twisted in a very unnatural way.

Aayla made eye contact with Harry as he sped closer, and she nodded her head in gratitude. She gestured with her saber to the top of the next rise. There were more figures up there, and another blaster bolt cut the air, barely missing Maris's head. Maris yelped and flattened herself along the speeder's hull.

Shaak Ti drove the landspeeder through the kill zone in a series of lurching zigzags, and the rear end fishtailed wildly. Harry pushed the throttle on his speederbike and matched their speed,

keeping parallel as the dust and debris flared around them. He could see the tension in Aayla's jaw as she gripped the side of the speeder, ready to leap out if things got worse.

Maris pointed up ahead and called out in a strained voice. "They're setting up a barricade before the next canyon!"

"Harry, clear the route!" Shaak Ti shouted over the roar.

He nodded and stomped on the accelerator. His shirt flapped wildly in the wind, and he couldn't help but love the feeling of adventure. As he crested the next rise, he saw what Maris had warned about. There were three Tusken Raiders scrambling to roll a pair of rusty durasteel drums across the narrow path. Two more were setting up a heavy repeating blaster. Its barrel was already swinging toward the oncoming vehicles.

Harry barely slowed. He reached out with both hands and felt the familiar thrum of power. He cast a rolling pressure wave ahead of him. The drums tumbled out of control and smashed into two of the Tusken Raiders, sending them flying. The heavy blaster was swept off its tripod and smashed into the leg of one of the shooters, who howled in pain and vanished down a slope. The last two turned to run, but one was caught by the landspeeder's fender as Shaak Ti barreled through at full speed, sending him spinning off the edge in a cloud of torn rags.

Harry could hear Maris whooping in delight, and Aayla's laughter rang out, muffled by the wind. Still, there was no time to relax. The terrain was only going to get worse from here.

He checked over his shoulder and could see that the landspeeder was keeping pace. Shaak Ti was driving with an intensity that bordered on mania, and Aayla and Maris were scanning the ridgelines for movement. Aayla's saber was still lit. She wasn't going to take any chances.

Harry pulled ahead, banking his bike over the next embankment, and scanned the horizon. The plateau narrowed as it approached the somewhat flat peak, and the space between the ridges was just wide enough for a trap. As Moody had always said, "Constant vigilance!"

He pulled up just in time and waved his hand, blowing the sand away and exposing the mines. With a quick flick of his wrist, he detonated them harmlessly, and the explosions sent up geysers of sand a dozen meters high. The brief pause gave the landspeeder time to catch up, and Shaak Ti brought it to a halt beside him.

"Nice work," Shaak Ti said with a smile. "Those landmines are nasty. But the danger's not over yet. A Hutt cartel operates a checkpoint near the city. They've got sensors and airspeeders."

Aayla wiped sweat from her brow and leaned over the side of the speeder. "No problem. Harry, can you drive ahead and tell us what you see?" she asked, handing him a communicator. Harry took it and shoved it in his saddlebag.

Maris smirked. "He'll do more than that. He'll probably take out the whole checkpoint himself."

"None of that," Shaak Ti warned with a chuckle. "Tusken Raiders are one thing, but the Hutts have the resources to make our lives miserable. It's best to sneak by if possible."

Harry grinned, enjoying the excitement of it all. "I'll scout ahead and let you know if it's clear." He took off again, and the speederbike tore up the sandy ground beneath him.

A Galaxy of Magic

Harry slowed the speederbike to a crawl and let the cloud of dust die down before stopping just shy of the plateau's edge. He kept low as he killed the engine, still half-expecting another sniper bolt from one of the surrounding mesas. Thankfully, the Tusken Raiders seemed to have gotten the message. Harry and his crew weren't to be messed with. He checked the horizon, then reached into his saddlebag, pulled out the battered communicator Aayla had given him, and slipped it into his pocket. Harry then pulled out a pair of macrobinoculars from the saddlebag and crept to the rim of the plateau.

From here, the scrubby, sun-baked rock fell away in a sharp drop toward the next valley floor. Harry spread out flat on his stomach, hugging the edge so his silhouette wouldn't stand out against the sky. He winced as his stomach came into contact with the scorching hot rock. He pressed the macrobinoculars to his face and peered downward, sweeping across the foot of the clearing.

The checkpoint was exactly where Shaak Ti had said it would be, but even from a kilometer away, Harry could tell these weren't Imperial troops. The setup was too haphazard, and the defensive perimeter too casual. Instead, a crew of what looked like hired muscle clustered around a collection of prefab shacks and a sensor array that gleamed dully in the sunlight. Harry counted a half-dozen burly men and women in ragged armor. A couple of them were carrying what looked like slugthrowers, and the rest carried mismatched blasters. They clustered in the shade, passing around a jug of something that made one of them double over in a coughing fit. A bright yellow landspeeder was haphazardly parked against a rock, and three battered speederbikes were nearby.

But the real threat was the sensor array. Even with his limited technical knowledge, Harry recognized it as a military-grade scanner. He could see the array's dish rotating every few seconds, and every so often, a flicker of light would dance up and down the mast as the system swept the valley. He followed the cable down to a control shack guarded by a pair of men with their blasters out, but they were more interested in their card game than anything else.

He pulled out the communicator, clicked it on, and kept his voice low. "Aayla, I've got eyes on the checkpoint."

Her slightly distorted voice came back instantly. "What's the status?"

He gave her the rundown and told her about the muscle, the sensor array, and the lack of an Imperial insignia. "It's just what Shaak said. It looks like a Hutt operation," he told her. "But that scanner is a problem. It's really big, and I don't think there's a safe way to sneak by. They'll spot us before we're even halfway down the trail."

Aayla's reply was a soft curse. "We'll be there in two. Hold position and keep watching."

He nodded, then realized she couldn't see it, so he said, "Understood," and cut the line. He kept the macrobinoculars scanning, moving from the checkpoint to the flanking ridges. He saw no evidence of any hidden reinforcements, but he did spot a couple of tripwires and what looked like a small minefield made of jury-rigged explosives surrounding the checkpoint. There was no subtlety in how the thugs had rigged it. There were bare wires, crude warning signs, and a few skulls-on-pikes for dramatic effect.

Harry considered trying to sneak through anyway, but the scanner would pick up the speeder's engine the instant he got close. Even his magic might not help much if they had heavier weapons in the shacks.

The sound of the approaching landspeeder echoed up the slope, and soon enough, the battered vehicle rattled to a halt beside him. Aayla was the first out, vaulting lightly over the side and crouching next to Harry. She took the macrobinoculars from his hand, and their fingers brushed for a second. Aayla shot him a sexy look before taking the macrobinoculars from him. She adjusted the lenses and then focused on the valley below. Shaak Ti and Maris followed behind her. Both moved quickly and cautiously. They didn't want to get spotted. Maris settled beside Harry, and he could see that her face was pink and sweaty. Harry cast his entire group with Cooling Charms, earning several quiet thank-yous.

Aayla let out a low whistle. "That's a serious sensor," she said, passing the macrobinoculars to Shaak Ti.

Shaak Ti adjusted the focus and studied the scene. She shook her head. "We'd never make it through without being seen. Even if we detoured for kilometers, they'd just catch us out in the open."

Maris leaned over the edge and squinted. "Are we sure these are Hutt thugs?"

Aayla shrugged. "They're not Imperial. And if the Hutts are running this, they'll want a toll, not a fight."

"Can't we just sneak around? Is there a long way we can take?" Harry asked. They needed a lot of things for their cave, and they didn't have the funds to just hand over to the local Hutt.

“Not with that scanner active,” Shaak Ti said. “It’s got a perimeter alarm. The moment we trigger it, they’ll lock down the whole ridge. And even if we win, the Hutts will send bounty hunters after us. As for the long way ... We’d have to go all the way around the Great Mesra Plateau, and that would take all night.”

“I definitely don’t want to travel at night,” Maris quietly said, and everyone agreed.

Aayla smiled, but it was thin and distracted. “Let’s think. We can’t go around, and we can’t fight our way through. I guess our only option is to pay the toll. What do you think, Harry?”

He thought for a second, then shrugged. “I’d just break the scanner.”

Aayla’s eyes glinted. “Do you think you can do that?”

“Not from here,” Harry said. “But maybe if I got closer. I can try to disable it without being seen.”

Shaak Ti frowned. “If you get spotted, they’ll open fire.”

Harry grinned. “I’ll just be extra sneaky.”

Harry took a breath, stood, and pointed his palm directly at the scanner. He didn’t bother with a spoken incantation. He just focused on summoning the tall sensor array.

The effect was immediate and spectacular. The sensor array bent toward him, and Harry stopped summoning it. It whipped back into position, dangerously rocking back and forth. Through the macrobinoculars, they could see the thugs running over to check on the array. Harry summoned it again, pushing more magic out of him. The entire mast buckled, then exploded in a burst of blue-white arcs. The broken array cartwheeled through the air. The concussion was enough to flatten two of the thugs, and the rest tumbled out of their chairs in panic. The mast slammed into several shacks, and the control shack instantly caught fire, belching out a spray of burning debris that rained down across the checkpoint.

“I guess that’s one way to handle it,” Aayla said, laughing.

Harry smirked in response. “I never liked toll roads.”

Maris bounded up, quietly cheering. “That was brilliant!”

Shaak Ti frowned at the burning remains, appraising the damage. “We should move. The Hutts will send someone to check on this place, and we shouldn’t be anywhere near it when they do.”

Aayla nodded, already ushering everyone into the vehicles. “Let’s take a side trail and put some distance behind us.”

They piled into their rides and peeled off the plateau, leaving the burning checkpoint behind them. Harry took the lead, following the faint track that curved down into the flatlands.

A Galaxy of Magic

Mos Eisley was ugly, dirty, and smelly, but at least it was bustling and lively. The city was a sprawl of domes, towers, power cables, and tattered tarps to help protect from the heat. Unfortunately, nothing could stop the heat. The twin suns baked the city until even the air shimmered. Harry could smell the faint stink of too many sweaty people packed together.

He pulled up to the outskirts and let the speederbike idle as he waited for the girls. The bike vibrated between his thighs as he watched the landspeeder follow him down the access road.

The city gates were nothing but a pair of sandstone archways. There were no guards and no checkpoints. A pack of hooded Jawas watched him from a shelter, jabbering away in some strange language. The landspeeder pulled up next to him.

"It smells even worse than I remember," Aayla said, scrunching her nose.

Shaak Ti cut the repulsors and glided to a stop beside Harry. She leaned out and shaded her eyes. "Remember ... No one here is our friend."

"We'll be in and out," Aayla replied. "I know where to go. First, we need a generator. After that, we can hit the hardware market."

Harry looked around at the traffic. Most of it was old battered swoops, junk landspeeders, and a few herd animals hauling carts. Here and there, a flashy luxury speeder prowled the side roads. Kids played in the gutters, and street vendors hawked noodles and fried fungus from carts.

He wiped the sweat from his forehead and waved his hand over his body, magically cleaning the dirt and sweat away. "Where to first?" he called over.

Aayla pulled out a datapad and scrolled through the list. "Our best bet for a generator is the junkyards on the north end," she said. "The inner city scrapyards are always picked clean."

Shaak Ti grunted in agreement. "If we get lucky, maybe we can find a military-grade unit."

Maris groaned and shielded her eyes from the blazing suns. "Let's hit the scrapyard and get it over with," she said. "This heat will be the end of us."

Harry led the way, letting the bike easily slide through the first ring of traffic. The landspeeder followed with its repulsors stirring up a thin cloud behind them. They wove between grunting Banthas and old women selling roasted grubs on skewers. Harry shuddered at the thought.

The further in they drove, the wilder it got. Harry spotted a Deathstick dealer loudly proclaiming that he had the most potent product in the city. A group of off-worlders in ceremonial robes yelled at a herd of Banthas blocking an intersection. The Banthas were in no hurry to move, and the off-worlders were clearly not used to being ignored by livestock.

Harry zipped around the Banthas and nearly took out a drunk bar patron stumbling out of a cantina. As they passed the half-collapsed cantina, a group of humans and Rodians brawled in the dirt lot out front. Harry saw a woman in Mandalorian armor calmly eating a sandwich as she watched the fight. Aayla noticed, too.

“Who do you think is going to win?” she called out.

“Whoever fights dirtiest,” Shaak Ti said without missing a beat.

They took a right and headed for the north district. It was quieter here. There was less foot traffic and more heavy machinery. The buildings were lower to the ground, blocky, and sun-bleached.

The scrapyard was a field of ancient starship hulls, broken droids, burned-out speeders, and shipping containers stacked three stories high. The perimeter was ringed with electrified wire and several battered gun emplacements, though only one looked like it would actually fire.

Harry rolled to a stop and waited for the landspeeder. It glided to a halt behind him, and Aayla and Shaak Ti got out, stretching their limbs and squinting in the heat.

Maris checked the time on the datapad. “We’re making good time,” she said. “Let’s just hope they have what we need.” She jumped out of the landspeeder and joined them.

Aayla read the sign above the gate. “Jattus’s Scrapyard – Credits Not Accepted.”

Harry glanced at the security setup, then at the half-destroyed hulls in the main lot. The girls headed for the front gate. Harry followed at a distance, surveying the area.

Behind the perimeter fence, a giant humanoid with mismatched cybernetic arms was using a forklift to stack torn-up speeder hulls. A vendor stand at the edge of the lot sold cold drinks and meat skewers that looked like they had been carved from something still twitching. The main office was a prefab with a door that barely hung on its hinges. A battered astromech droid patrolled the yard, squawking at anyone who got too close to the high-value salvage.

The girls didn’t get far before they were met by a very large, green Twi’lek. He was enormous. He was so fat his gut nearly touched the ground. His skin was a sickly olive that glistened in the heat. He sat on a crate and barked orders at the droids in rapid-fire Huttese. When he saw the women approaching, he gave them a wide, fake smile and oozed to his feet.

"Welcome," he said in a gravelly voice. He gestured to the open lot. "We got power cores, we got heat sinks, we got used thrusters. You want, you buy. You break, you pay."

Aayla stepped up with her hands on her hips. She answered in flawless Huttese. She laid out their needs. The Twi'lek nodded along, then squinted at her. He pointed at Harry, then at Shaak Ti, and made a joke in Huttese about how Twi'leks loved having "pets." Aayla replied with a phrase that made the Twi'lek laugh until he wheezed. Harry ignored the insult. He decided it probably wouldn't be good to set this idiot on fire, so he followed Aayla's lead and played along.

Maris wandered over to the pile of cores and started poking through them. Shaak Ti looked at the battered pile, then at the Twi'lek. "Do you have anything military grade?" she asked. The Twi'lek just winked and jerked a thumb toward a locked shed. She grinned.

While the girls looked for a suitable core, Harry wandered. The yard sprawled out in every direction, with mountains of junk sorted by type. He stepped over a nest of live power cables and looked through all the junk. The place reminded him of the Room of Requirement, only it was full of broken crap.

A dirty R2 unit zipped past, dragging a tangle of wire. Harry watched it go, then walked over to a tall stack of repulsor platforms. Most were cracked or stripped for parts, but one caught his eye. It was a heavy-duty hovercart. The entire bottom was caked in mud and grease, but the frame was fairly straight. The cart's power readout was dead, and the surface was scored with what looked like blaster scars.

He crouched, poked at the controls, and tried to imagine what the thing had been used for. "Hey," Harry called over to the Twi'lek in Huttese. "What's the deal with this hovercart?"

The Twi'lek glanced over and shrugged. "It's no good. The last owner fried the repulsors. It's only good for scrap."

"Does it have a power cell?" Harry asked.

The Twi'lek shook his head, and the rolls of his neck wobbled hypnotically. "The cell is damaged. It's good for parts, not for hauling."

Harry squinted at the cart, then at the price written in grease pencil on the side. It was so low he almost laughed.

Harry smiled and called back to the Twi'lek, "I'll take it."

"Take two," the Twi'lek said. "Get a discount."

"One's enough," Harry replied, walked over, and paid the man. The Twi'lek grunted, then went back to haggling with the girls.

Harry ran his fingers along the seam of the chassis, then closed his eyes and whispered a quick spell. It wasn't anything fancy, just a gentle Repair Charm to coax the internals to right themselves. He felt the power lines fuse, the logic chips repair, and the crack in the power cell heal shut. He suddenly heard a faint hum. The status lights flickered once, then blinked solid blue.

Harry pushed the controls, and the cart lifted off the ground, smooth and silent. He maneuvered it with one finger, steering it across the lot like it weighed nothing.

Meanwhile, the girls were still haggling. Aayla and the Twi'lek went back and forth in Huttese, and the conversation was getting faster and more heated. Maris rummaged through the pile, pulling out parts and setting them aside in a stack. Shaak Ti had already moved on from the generators and was sizing up what looked like a portable shield emitter, examining the connectors and mumbling to herself.

Harry ignored them and kept pushing the cart. He ran it in a loop, testing the repulsors. It cornered like a dream. He checked the underside for any cracks or leaks and found nothing. The repair spell had done its work.

When he wheeled it back around, the Twi'lek blinked in surprise. "How did you fix that?" he demanded.

Harry shrugged. "I'm just lucky, I guess. I've got good hands. Just as the women," Harry said with a smirk.

The Twi'lek muttered something under his breath as Aayla came over and examined the hovercart. "This was a good find," she said.

Shaak Ti gave the cart a once-over and nodded in approval. "This will make hauling the equipment back home a much easier task. Good job."

Harry smirked. "That's exactly what I was thinking. We can load everything on this and pull it with the landspeeder." Aayla smiled and pecked his cheek, further annoying the ugly male Twi'lek.

They loaded the generator and the pile of parts onto the hovercart. It held the weight with ease. Harry guided it to the speeder. Maris and Shaak Ti walked ahead, laughing every time they heard the Twi'lek cursing in the background.

Once the cart was hooked onto the back of the landspeeder, the group climbed into their vehicles. Maris rode shotgun this time, and Shaak Ti drove. Aayla jumped into the back and pulled Harry down by the front of his shirt. Her lips pressed against his, and Harry eagerly returned the kiss.

“Enough of that. Let’s get going. We still have the list to complete, and I want to be back home by sundown,” Shaak stated, and Harry pulled away. He jumped onto his speederbike and started it up. They left the blubbery Twi’lek muttering to himself while counting his coins.