

A Galaxy of Magic

Chapter 22

The ship's morning alarm was the most obnoxious sound in the galaxy. It cut through his pleasant dreams like a chainsaw, vibrating through every bulkhead until even the deepest sleeper had no hope of return. Harry awoke with a fuzzy brain and three women tangled around his body. He'd grown used to the wonderful sensation. Shaak Ti's leg was thrown over his hip, and Aayla had her arm slung across his chest. Her blue skin practically glowed in the low light of the tent. Maris clung to his back like a lifeline. Her braided hair was in his face, and her small hands gripped his side as if she might be swept away at any second.

He didn't move, not for the first few seconds anyway. He just let his mind wander and catalogued the warmth of their bodies, the soft rise and fall of three sets of chests, and the scent that lingered after a night of sex. Then the alarm blared again with three sharp pulses followed by a digital chime. The women groaned in sequence. Harry finally moved, rolling gently until he was sitting and disentangling the limbs that had attached themselves to him in the night.

Aayla cracked an eye open. "Make it stop," she rasped.

"You're the one who set it," Maris accused, voice muffled against his thigh.

Shaak Ti let her lekku flop over Harry's lap. "I vote we stay here and let Yoda take care of the ship."

"He's already awake," Harry said as he reached for the comm on the nightstand. There was a message from Yoda. "He's been up since ..." He checked the time of the message. "... five. He's been meditating for over an hour."

Aayla rolled onto her back and stretched, and her breasts pointed skyward. Her nipples were hard from the chill in the tent. "He's probably judging us."

"Highly likely," Shaak Ti agreed, propping herself up on an elbow. "He probably thinks we've gone soft and lazy."

Maris snickered. "Let him judge. Maybe he's jealous that we spend all night getting some 'exercise'."

Harry grinned, then kissed the top of Maris's head. "Let's get up. He wanted us all in the cargo bay, first thing." He paused and checked the message again. "He said something about drills."

Aayla groaned. "I'd rather spar with a rancor than train before breakfast."

Shaak Ti was already climbing over the side of the bed, her lithe body rippling with muscle. "If we're late, he'll set up an obstacle course and not let us leave until we complete it perfectly. You know he will."

"Last one there has to clean the fresher," Maris sang, darting for the shower first.

Harry watched the three women dash for the bathroom. He lay back for one more moment, savoring the last wisps of warmth from the pile of bodies that had pressed together all night. He was hard again. He was always hard in the mornings, but he willed it down and headed for the kitchenette.

He found Yoda sitting at the table, his feet not touching the floor. He was drinking what looked like an espresso, though Harry knew it was a flash-frozen coffee-like drink that they had stolen from the Clone camp on Felucia. The drink was laced with stims, and all you had to do was pour it into a hot cup of water and stir. The little green man didn't turn around, but Harry could feel his gaze anyway.

"Sleep well, did you?" Yoda asked, without looking up from his tiny cup.

Harry poured himself a cup of hot water and added a stim pack to it. The drink tasted considerably better than instant coffee. "We always do."

Yoda nodded and sipped his drink.

The three women appeared moments later, clean and dressed with towels slung over their shoulders. Maris had a splotch of toothpaste on her cheek. She wiped it away with the back of her hand and then grinned at Yoda. "Good morning, Master."

"Morning, it is," Yoda said. "But lazy, you are." He pointed his stick at the chrono. "Five minutes late, you are. Warmed up, you will not be."

Aayla muttered, "We're plenty warmed up."

Yoda ignored her. "To the cargo bay. Now. Ready for the fight against the Dark Side, you must be."

They moved, and Harry followed, letting the women go ahead. He found himself watching the interplay of their bodies and the quick, competitive walk that Aayla and Maris always defaulted to. He noticed how Shaak Ti drifted at the rear, calm and content, as if she were watching over the other two. He liked the way they moved together. It was like a single unit with three wildly different personalities.

The cargo bay had been stripped of all but the most necessary cargo. A broad open space was cleared in the center, revealing a floor of durasteel scuffed with old blaster marks and patched

with plates from at least five different scrap yards. Maris was already hopping in place and stretching her hamstrings. Aayla rolled her neck and wrists. Shaak Ti stood with her hands tucked inside her robe, meditative as ever.

Yoda hobbled to the edge of the mat and watched them. "Weapons, you will use. Not training sabers. Set the power on low, you will."

Aayla looked at Harry. "Are you going to watch from the sidelines?"

Harry shrugged with a smirk. "I love watching you move."

Maris snorted. "You can still join in. You'd be a great target dummy."

"Begin," Yoda said, and the three women sprang into motion. Harry conjured two chairs, one for him and an appropriately sized one for Yoda. Yoda gurgled out an appreciative sound and climbed into the chair, sighing in relief at the comfort.

There was no slow, respectful circling, no formal salutes, and no bows. Maris launched herself straight at Aayla, and for a second, it looked like a street fight, filled with elbows and knees. Aayla blocked her, took her momentum, and spun Maris off her feet with a perfect judo throw. Shaak Ti moved behind them, stalking them like a lioness. Her stance was low and dangerous. It was strange how much this was turning Harry on, though with Yoda present, he did his best not to outwardly show it.

Aayla's lightsaber was in her hand in the blink of an eye, and the blade hissed to life with a blue arc. Maris landed hard, rolled, and ignited her own saber. The white-hot blade flashed as she swept at Aayla's legs, forcing her to jump and land with both feet together on a crate. Shaak Ti waited with her arms crossed, as if studying them both ... which, of course, she was.

Harry watched, fascinated by the perilous dance. They all fought differently, and it was amazing how much of their personality translated to the fight. Aayla was agile and aggressive, always pressing forward. She was sometimes reckless but never sloppy. Maris was unpredictable with her feints and misdirection, her attacks coming at odd times. Shaak Ti was the patient one. She barely moved, but every step mattered, and every parry was perfectly timed. She didn't waste an ounce of energy.

Yoda didn't say a word. He just watched with twitching ears and narrowed eyes. Only when Maris and Aayla got close enough to exchange a flurry of blows did he intervene.

"Predictable, your attacks are!" Yoda barked in his warbly voice. "Change your rhythm, you must. Keep your opponent guessing."

Maris immediately broke her pattern. She jumped back, rolled to the side, then fainted left before striking right. Aayla anticipated this, and they clashed, their blue and green sabers

sparking against each other. Shaak Ti then dashed in and caught Aayla's arm with her lightsaber, forcing her saber down. Aayla yelped from the light burn as they struggled for leverage.

"Again," Yoda commanded. "This time, together."

The women nodded and reset. Harry took things up a notch by waving his hand and conjuring five large tigers. They menacingly circled the girls and roared. They looked at Harry like he was crazy, and he smirked in return. Yoda was very impressed by his powers, and he was pleased that the girls would have an actual foe to face. This time, they moved as a unit. Shaak Ti led the charge with Maris covering her flank, and Aayla darted to the side to create a triangle of attack. They coordinated beautifully. The choreography was fluid, but the intensity ramped up with every second.

Harry felt a strange satisfaction watching them work. He saw the way Shaak Ti subtly communicated with hand gestures, how Maris used her smaller frame to distract and disrupt, and how Aayla watched for patterns and exploited them ruthlessly. It was quite the sight to see.

Yoda called out corrections as they fought. "Your balance, you must watch, Aayla! Maris, too wide, your strikes are! Shaak Ti, faster ... do not wait, anticipate!"

Within minutes, all three were sweating, and their breathing had picked up. Harry noticed that the workout was as much mental as physical. Eventually, all the tigers were slain, and Harry vanished them with a wave of his hand. The next round began with renewed energy and lasted for another twenty minutes.

Finally, Yoda called a halt. The women powered down their sabers with sweat dripping off their bodies in the chill of the cargo bay. Harry handed out towels as they collapsed in a heap near the mat.

"Good, that was," Yoda said. He turned to Harry. "Thoughts?"

Harry shrugged, then grinned. "My powers rely on how quickly I can think on my feet and how fast I can process a situation. When it comes to anything physical, they'd kill me in thirty seconds flat."

Aayla wiped sweat from her brow, grinning. "You're not so bad yourself. If you ever want a rematch ..."

"The last time I sparred with you, I ended up with a dislocated finger and a black eye," Harry reminded her. "I think I'll pass."

Maris flopped onto her back with sweat dripping down his forehead. "He's chicken."

Shaak Ti tossed her towel at Maris's face. "Enough. Let him have his pride."

Yoda was quiet, and his face was unreadable. After a long pause, he turned to Harry. "Something, I noticed, last night."

Harry cocked an eyebrow. "What's that?"

"In the Force, sense you, I could not. Nor the three of them, once you entered your tent."

Harry nodded, already knowing this.

Yoda continued. "Curious, it is. Nothing like this, have I felt before. As if vanished, you had. Only upon exit, could I sense your presence again."

Shaak Ti nodded in understanding. "Yes. This is something we have discovered."

Yoda turned to Harry, his eyes piercing. "Explain, you must. What is this magic?"

Harry thought for a moment, then tried to articulate it. "The tent is ... well, it's not a regular space. It's an expanded dimension. A pocket universe, if you will. The entrance is a normal tent, but once you step inside, you basically exist outside of our normal reality."

Aayla's eyes widened. "So we're in another reality when we're inside?"

Harry nodded. "Something like that. Though it's more like we're in the space between realities. It's outside the normal flow of space. If you're not technically in the universe, maybe the Force users can't sense you there."

Maris sat up, smirking. "So when we're in there, we no longer technically exist?"

Harry looked at Yoda. "Is that good or bad?"

Yoda's lips pursed, then curled upward. "Good, I believe," he said. "Hide, you can. Hide, you must, sometimes. But careful, you must be. If not connected, lose yourselves, you might."

Aayla grinned. "That's better than the alternative, if the alternative is a blaster bolt in the back."

Shaak Ti nodded. "It means the Sith can't track us, even if they're looking."

Maris smiled and wiped her face with her towel. "That makes me feel better. There's nothing worse than having to risk life and limb just to get some rest."

Yoda stroked his chin, then looked at Harry with genuine respect. "A powerful gift, this is. Use it wisely, we must."

Harry felt the weight of Yoda's words settling over the group. They had something new. It wasn't exactly a weapon, but it still gave them an edge. It was enough to give them hope.

Yoda rapped his stick on the floor. "One more round, then breakfast. After, plans we will make."

The women groaned, but Harry could see the excitement in their faces. He watched as they took up positions and worked together as a single, seamless unit after Harry conjured a group of foul-tempered silverback gorillas.

Yoda grinned as he watched them. "May the Force be with you," he muttered, just loud enough for Harry to hear.

Harry grinned back. "May the Force be with all of us. We'll need it."

He settled in to watch the show.

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After training, they started their day with eggs, thick slabs of toast, bacon, and more stim coffee than any of them needed. The tent was buzzing with conversation as forks scraped against their plates.

Shaak Ti took her time with the eggs, her eyes distant. Harry guessed she was replaying that morning's sparring session, analyzing where she and the others could improve. Aayla watched him with a lazy, satisfied grin, her blue skin looking almost metallic under the kitchen's artificial light. Maris sat half on, half off her chair, rocking her foot and draining her mug before anyone else had even started on theirs. Yoda balanced on a stool at the head of the table, his posture perfect, and his gaze flicking between the four of them.

When the food was gone and the conversation ebbed, Shaak Ti set down her fork. "We can't stay here in space forever," she said. "And I definitely don't want to go back to Dagobah."

Maris wiped her mouth after swallowing a crispy chunk of bacon. "You hate the frogs, too?"

"Maris," Shaak Ti said, her tone soft but firm. "The Empire won't ignore the system forever. Eventually, they'll send someone out to check up on it."

Aayla nodded as she sipped her drink. "We don't know what they have for sensors. Even if we hide in the tent, they'll notice a starship parked on that mudball."

Shaak Ti folded her hands. "We need somewhere to set up ... somewhere to lay low and coordinate. The Queen wants us to find other Jedi. We can't do that if we're always running."

Harry topped up the coffee and looked at Yoda. "You've been hiding from the Empire. Where would you go if you were us?"

Yoda didn't answer right away. He finished his drink with a loud slurp and set the cup down. "Somewhere far, we must go. Somewhere barren, forgotten, and empty. For Jedi, this is best."

"Any suggestions?" Aayla said.

Yoda's ears twitched. "Tatooine."

Maris snorted. "That desert? We just left there. I'd rather live on a Hutt's pleasure barge."

Aayla smiled, but she looked at Yoda. "There's a reason, isn't there?"

Yoda nodded. "A powerful friend, you will find there. Waiting, he is." His eyes settled on Harry, then moved to the others. "Obi-Wan Kenobi. Alive, he is. Watchful, careful. Protecting a secret of great importance, he is."

Shaak Ti cocked her head to the side. "How do you know he's on Tatooine?"

Yoda grinned, and the expression was small but mischievous. "The Force tells me many things. Also, old friends talk, when no one is listening."

Aayla leaned forward. "If Kenobi is alive, he might be able to help us."

"Or get us all killed," Maris pointed out. "He's one of the most wanted men in the galaxy."

Yoda shrugged. "Hide in plain sight, Kenobi does. But the Empire's eyes are focused elsewhere, for now."

Harry looked at Aayla. "What do you think? We stayed there a while and were relatively safe."

She nodded. "Once. I think it's probably the best we're going to get for now. We can always move if we find somewhere better."

Shaak Ti drummed her fingers on the table. "Then we're agreed. We go to Tatooine, but we avoid the spaceports. There are too many eyes there. We set down somewhere remote, then look for Kenobi."

Yoda stood and hobbled for the door. "West of Mos Eisley, we should go. Near the Jundland Wastes. There, we will find him."

Aayla stood and stretched. "I'll plot the jump. We can be there in less than a day."

Shaak Ti reached for her cloak. "Let's do it quickly. The quicker we can find other Jedi, the better." The girls and Yoda wandered out of the tent and made their way to the cockpit while Harry cleaned up.

By the time he reached the cockpit, the girls were already at their stations. Shaak Ti was in the navigator's seat, Maris was at the engineering panel, and Aayla was stretching her fingers over the control yoke.

Harry took his spot behind Aayla, placed his hands on her shoulders, and looked out at the emptiness of space. "Ready?" he asked.

Aayla grinned. "Always."

Shaak Ti entered the coordinates and checked the sensor sweeps. "There's nothing near us. We're clear to go."

Aayla pushed the throttle, and the ship's hyperdrive came to life. Harry felt the slight lurch as the pinpricks of distant starlight stretched into starlines. The engines' low rumble turned into a high-pitched keening as the starlines morphed into a swirling blue vortex. They were on their way.

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Tatooine didn't look like much from orbit. It was a bruised yellow sphere, stitched with brown mountains, and lit on one side by the twin suns burning low on the horizon. He would say that it's nice to be back, but that would be a lie. The old YT-1300 circled the planet once, then swept down on a shallow, careful approach.

Harry watched the surface get closer and closer as the seconds passed. The ship rattled as they hit the upper atmosphere, and the cockpit window turned from black to the pale blue of morning. For a moment, he saw Mos Eisley. The city was a cluster of low domes and windblown towers, jammed into a distant salt flat. The whole place seemed to be in motion, crawling with tiny, antlike vehicles, and threaded with a haze of brownish smog.

Aayla piloted with her eyes locked on the screens. "Jundland Wastes are due west," she said with a confident tone. "We don't want to get close to Mos Eisley. We'll come in low and hug the canyons."

"Sounds good," Shaak Ti said, scanning the sensor readouts. "There's no Imperial traffic on this side, but the city is packed, so there's really no way to know for sure."

Harry nodded, watching the way the sunrise threw sharp shadows across the Dune Sea. Maris had her face pressed to the glass. "This place looks terrible," she said. "It's even uglier than Mos Espa."

Aayla gave a tiny laugh. "It's worse up close."

They skirted the edge of the city, kept their transponder cold, and flew west until the dark brown line of the mountains rose in front of them. The canyons were deep and narrow, lined with jagged outcrops and sprinkled with sun-bleached debris. Most of the caves were shallow, but one in particular caught Harry's eye. It was hidden behind a curtain of rock, almost invisible unless you were looking for it.

"There," Harry said, pointing to the display. "Set it down on the ridge. That cave should be big enough for us to work with."

Aayla didn't question him. She banked the ship and dropped toward the canyon wall. The ship settled on a flat slab of rock, its shadow stretching out over the edge. The engines cycled down, and everyone let out a sigh of relief. Aayla cut the power and spun in her seat. "Let's take a look."

They got out in a hurry, eager to see the new base. The heat hit them in the face, and the dry wind immediately sucked the moisture from Harry's lips. Sand ground under his boots, and the five of them made their way to the cave, using the natural rock to stay out of view from anyone dumb enough to be traversing the Western Dune Sea. The cave mouth was just wide enough for two to walk through side by side.

Maris ducked inside first, then yelped when she slipped on a patch of loose gravel. "There's nothing in here," she complained, her voice echoing. "It's just a bunch of rocks and old bones."

Shaak Ti strode in after her, sweeping the chamber with a practiced eye. "It's defensible," she said. "There's only one way in or out, and there's enough airflow to keep the temperature reasonable."

Harry explored deeper, feeling along the rock. His hand tingled. There was a natural seam in the wall, just wide enough that he could wedge a finger through. With a little push, a panel of sandstone shifted and slid open, revealing a narrow side chamber. He grinned. "There's more space than it looks," he called back.

Aayla stepped in behind him, trailing her lekku over his shoulder. "Leave it to you to find the secret room."

Maris joined them and peered into the dark. "It's tiny. You couldn't even fit a bed in there."

Harry smiled. "It will be bigger once I'm done with it."

Shaak Ti looked at him, a question in her eyes. "You want to expand it with magic?"

He shrugged. "I might as well. If we're going to be staying here for a while, I'm not living like a cave troll."

"Like the tent, it will be?" Yoda asked, jabbing loose rocks from the wall with his cane.

"Yes. I'm planning on making this large enough to fit the entire ship in. There are also a few more tricks I know to keep us safe. It'll take time setting this all up, though," he told them.

Aayla smiled and nodded. "You get to work, and we'll monitor the area," she told him.

Harry smiled, and they went back into the ship. Harry immediately grabbed his datapad and began creating rune clusters with his engraving software. If he was going to do this, then he was going to do it right.