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Lair of the Blue Falcon

Chapter 11: Converging Forces

by [J.A. Berger](#)

It was a strange sensation to be awakened by silence, but it was only Han Solo's first; the second was a dull throb of pain that resounded throughout his being. He cautiously opened his eyes. Bare walls. He blinked and his vision cleared, but did nothing to change the bleakness of his surroundings, nor the recognition that followed; he was in a detention cell. He closed his eyes knowing the scene was not likely to change. He opened them again testing his theory, than sighed in disappointment; the wall remained solid.

He lay on his back, half on, half off, a hard sculptured bunk molded into the wall of the featureless room. Frowning, he attempted to focus on the events prior to his awakening. And in a flash of pain, memory flooded back; he had been betrayed. Past the parting cobwebs, past the anger, he forced his mind to remember; the landing on Quaylan, the ion storm, and the mind numbing surprise at finding the hidden base alive with Imperial stormtroopers and the ominous presence of Darth Vader.

Luke! He had watched the boy disarmed and taken from the bay. He had no way of knowing the young Jedi's fate beyond that. Swearing softly, he brushed all his fears for the youth aside and concentrated on his surroundings.

There were no soft moan of engines around him, nor the familiar vibrations that would have placed him aboard a starship; therefore, he reasoned, he was probably still on Quaylan.

The barren world of Quaylan had once boasted of beautiful and prosperous cities, but they had long been abandoned and fallen to ruin. The few that had survived were mere landing facilities or primitive camps used by off-worlders and men like himself who considered the "useless world" a refuge, a place to regroup before taking to the dangerous byways of the smuggling lanes. And there had been no Imperial garrison, of that he was sure. CheLdo could not have maintained the bay if the Empire had moved....in.

Realization hit hard. So that was why he had been betrayed. Han Solo groaned. What better place for a small Imperial outpost. He should have seen it coming with the recent interest the lanes had afforded the Empire.

Having faced the reality of an Imperial garrison on the tiny planet, he next questioned its location, finding the logical answer with little effort. The best docking facilities with the most direct flight path to the lanes would be Mineral City, the ancient capital of the planet. From there the Empire could monitor and eventually paralyze the lanes with only a few ships and a small contingency of troops.

>>Regardless of the size of the Imperial facilities, every garrison was manned with a Death Squad. Within that detail would be men highly trained in interrogation and terror that excelled in the finer points of torture. Han had no misconceptions of what awaited him; he could expect the Empire's best...or worst.

He turned his head and bright patterns of swirling colored lights flashed before his eyes and the room spun; he grimaced. It hurt! He ceased moving and everything settled back into its proper place.

Gritting his teeth, he sat up. Hesitantly, he touched gentle fingers to his throbbing temple; the pain increased. He moved his hand away. Okay, he concluded, his head had lost at least one round to Imperial boots, but what about the rest of him?

Taking a deep, painful breath, he shrugged out of his vest, then his shirt, and carefully examined his ribs where a lot of his pain originated. Probing deeper, he gasped, his vision blurring. Easing up, he grimly finished his self-examination. With the exception of one or two broken or cracked ribs and colorful bruising, he had survived the beating he only partially remembered. However, the mounting pain that continued to wash over him was not limited to his upper body, nor had the weakness he had encountered upon regaining consciousness subsided; warnings he could no longer ignore. He eased back into his shirt and vest.

Gingerly and with a great deal of misgivings, he straightened his right leg and blanched. This, he concluded, was the cause of his weakness and nauseating pain. Unhappily, he stared at the dried, encrusted blood on his dark trousers. He

had no memory of the blows that had discolored his body, but the brutal blow to the blaster burned flesh was still all too vivid.

A gentle probing through the material and he found the shattered seal, but no signs of fresh bleeding. Without a means of cleaning and dressing the wound, he left it alone. With that decision made, he grimly dismissed his injuries; there were other preparations to be made.

A humorless smile pulled at the corners of his mouth. The Imperials were in for an unpleasant surprise if they thought information would be gotten from him easily. Even more surprised, he mused, when they eventually found out he did not have the information they thought he had.

* * * *

"I should never have allowed Master Luke and R2 to leave without me!" See-Threepio lamented aloud. The protocol-human-cyborg relations' droid and counterpart to R2D2 walked hurriedly along side the small, poorly dressed, cloaked and hooded woman.

"We'll find them," Princess Leia Organa snapped in irritation, pulling unhappily at the rough material of the womp-rat brown robes she wore, her face flushed from the heat of the desert world's twin suns.

"Tatooine is a very large world and Mos Eisley, the planet's largest space port, has an on-world population of..."

"I don't need a geography lesson, Threepio. Just shut up while I try to figure out where we are."

"Shutting up, your Highness."

"Don't call me that!" She hissed, looking quickly over the motley traffic in which they mingled.

The metal man blinked visual receptors in an all too human manner. "As you wish, your...Royalness."

"What?! What did you say?" Flushed, first with surprise then anger, Leia stopped and turned to face her mechanical interpreter.

See-Threepio tilted his smooth, humanlike head to one side. "You did not wish me to address you in the more formal and proper protocol of your station. Therefore, I have been programmed to substitute less recognizable, but proper terminology when addressing you such as..."

"Don't say it," Leia glanced hurried about, than motioned the tall droid to one side, allowing the traffic to pass them. "WHO programmed you?" She immediately motioned him to silence. "Never mind."

"If I have offended you, your Worshipfulness..." See-Threepio blinked, picking up the building anger in the small woman. "How should I address you, Princess?"

"I'll think of something," she hedged. "Meanwhile, if you ever refer to me again as as..." She glanced hurriedly around them, "...what you called me. On my word, I will pull out your energy transducer by its pointed red wire! Understand?" She motioned the droid to silence before he could answer her and quickly added. "And disregard ALL programming Han Solo instigated into your memory banks!"

The tall, golden droid sensing the gist of the young woman's hot-tempered comments, continued on in silence.

Keeping the hood of her robes far enough forward to hide her face yet not forward enough to arouse curiosity in those she passed, Leia Organa hurried on. Another planet hour and off-worlders and citizens alike would seek shelter from the mid-day heat. She could ill afford to draw attention to herself by wandering the streets during the world's rest period.

Reaching the end of the dusty thoroughfare, See-Threepio touched the young woman's robes and pointed a golden finger toward an enclosed dwelling ahead of them. Recognizing the villa, Leia reward the golden robot with a refreshing smile.

Turning her back to the traffic, she entered the sheltered veranda with its formal garden, closing and latching the small gate behind them.

"Welcome, Leia. Had I known the time of your arrival, I would have met you."

Leia turned; and with a warm smile and arms out stretched, she moved toward the middle-aged man dressed in Imperial uniform who stepped from the villa's doorway to meet her.

"Captain Vito, it's been a long time."

"Too long, my dear." He took her offered hands, bowing gallantly over them. The silver at his temples had started a slow migration into his dark, thick head of hair. His eyes, the gray of tempered steel, warmed as they touched the beauty of the young woman, the laugh tracks at the edges deepening with the anticipation of her company.

"I hope I have not compromised your cover by my visit."

"Think no more of it, Princess. Your presence here can cause no more danger than I live in daily." He smiled warmly. "Besides there are several advantages to a small garrison, the most important being there is few with authority higher than mine. Please, come in. You can rest while I prepare drinks and bring you up to date on what I have learned."

Leia followed the Captain into the thick-walled villa. "How long has it been now, Vito? Two, three years?"

"In Alderaanian time, about that, yes." Helping her out of the heavy cloak, Tala Vito showed her to a seat. "In Tatooine time," he chuckled, "I still have trouble figuring it." He sobered. "Besides, it matters little to me...now."

"At one time, " Leia commented softly, "you longed for the day you could put this all behind you and..." Her voice trailed off.

"Go home," he finished. The old pain sparked anew in his expressive eyes. "That was true, once. When there was a home---a family--- to return to. Now?" He shrugged. "I only want to do what I can, for as long as I can, to put an end to the Empire and its death and destruction of peoples and worlds...like Alderaan."

A silence fell over the room, each remembering their losses and the end of a world they had shared.

"Enough of that," he voiced softly. He walked across the room and pressed a button in the wall to expose a well stocked bar. Turning his back to her, he mixed a couple of drinks in silence, giving them both a chance to forget.

Returning, he handed her a small goblet and took a seat. "We can be thankful that Alderaan was the only world lost to the Death Star. Which, I believe, my dear, brings us to the reason for your visit."

"Captain Vito, Sir, have you found Master Luke and R2D2, my counterpart?"

Tala Vito glanced up in surprise.

Having spoken, See-Threepio moved out of the shadowed garden to stand beside Leia Organa, both worry and unmistakable concern in the droid's electronic voice.

"Wh...what?"

Chuckling at the Captain's startled expression, Leia nodded toward the android. "Captain, this is See-Threepio, my huh...interrupter." Her smile was impish. "He's programmed in Bocce and over a million other galactic languages."

"I see." But the puzzled look on Tala Vito's face belied his simple statement.

"Have you learned anything else since your rendezvous with our carrier?" She pressed.

"Yes, in fact, I have," he replied. "This morning I received the duty reports detailing the freighter's unauthorized lift-off, along with the fleet damage and casualty reports." Vito shook his head in amazed disbelief. "The Empire lost a full cruiser which was vaporized by a sister ship during an attempt to prevent the freighter from leaping to light speed. Another was badly disabled and is on waivers for six planet months for refitting and major repairs. From the Mos Eisley base fleet, I lost five TIEs and crew, along with two others disabled beyond repair." He smiled. "Our cause cannot afford to lose pilots of this caliber, my dear."

"I don't intend to lose him, Captain, nor his gunnery mate," Leia assured him.

"Then you still believe Skywalker was aboard Solo's ship?"

"I'm even more convinced after hearing your damage report."

"This is the young man General Dedonna feels has a fledgling's control of the Force," Tala Vito stated with obvious interest. "The one who was found in the company of Jedi Master Kenobi?"

"What else can you tell me, Captain," Leia asked, avoiding his questions. "Anything that might help us locate Solo and Skywalker?"

"I fear I've saved the most distressing news until last." His gray eyes met her dark ones with cold seriousness. "The Emperor has placed Darth Vader in command of the star destroyer, Ravisher. He's currently patrolling the smuggling lanes around Quaylan in the Dacteen Asteroid Belt." He paused reading the cold disdain in the young woman's eyes at the mention of Vader. "The Empire has established a new garrison on that old mining world, hoping to slow the traffic in the smuggling lanes. Solo's been seen there often in the past which, I suspect, had a lot to do with Vader's decision to see to the activation of the new outpost himself."

"Has he reported anything from there?"

"I've heard nothing, nor do I expect to. His power within the Empire is growing. I understand he now answers to the Emperor alone. However," he hesitated, "I fear you may not have heard about our most recent complication."

Leia sighed. "As if Vader isn't enough. What else, Captain?"

"Vader has hired a little extra help in the event he can't get his own hands on the Corellian."

"Bounty hunters." She guessed. "Yes, we intercepted information that the Empire has placed a sizeable bounty on Solo."

"That's true enough," Vito admitted. "But not bounty hunters, Leia. I'd wager your communiqué mentioned, 'the Hunter', not the hunters. Vader has hired Bashu Finn, the Galactic Hunter, to track down and bring in Han Solo."

"Finn," the young Rebel leader whispered softly.

"Yes. Finn is by far my biggest concern. He's no fool, Princess. And he's very good at what he does." Vito watched the young woman closely. "He has almost succeeded once, the next time..."

"He was at the bay when the Falcon lifted?"

Vito nodded. "Street talk has it that he was not only there but that he may have hit Solo before he was able to blast his way off Tatooine. I can't confirm it, but I know Finn's reputation; he doesn't often miss."

Leia put her glass down. "Then the possibility of Solo having been wounded is more than a rumor?"

"Yes," Vito admitted. "But he was still able to out-fly half my garrison which is a good sign that he may not have been ass badly wounded as reports indicated." He slowly shook his head in wonderment. "The next meeting between Finn and Solo could be very interesting."

"A confrontation we must avoid!" Leia contested hotly. "The Alliance cannot afford to lose men to the likes of Bashu Finn!"

"Don't underestimate him, Leia." Vito cautioned. "He's a very dangerous man. Very dangerous."

"Where is Finn now?" She asked.

"Fortunately for Solo, Finn's stuck here on Tatooine. He had joined the engagement above the planet when the Exciter blew, badly damaging his own ship. It's going to be sometime before she's space worthy. Meanwhile, Finn has been petitioning for a ship. So far, I've been able to put him off. But he's getting impatient. It's only a matter of time before he contacts Vader and, when he does, I suspect, I will be ordered to release a ship to him."

Thinking over all she'd learned, Leia ventured a desperate question. "Tala, you know this sector of the galaxy better than anyone. Where would Han Solo have gone?"

"Usually, I would be able to make a fairly educated guess," he stated honestly. "But Corellians---like Solo---who work the lanes. They have the ability to just flat disappear when the notion takes them." Seeing the disappointment cross the young man's face, he smiled. "However, the Corellian's a determined bastard and his home base of late has been Mos Eisley. If he's alive," his smile revealed even white teeth, "he'll be back."

end Chapter 11

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