

[Back To Part 12](#)

[Back To Index](#)

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Lair of the Blue Falcon

Chapter 13: Reflections

by [J.A. Berger](#)

In the tight confines of the speeder's rear compartment, Luke closed his eyes, shutting out the images of the two cramped figures in front and the eerie glow of the instrument panel, which illuminated the vehicle's interior. He was tired, but there was too much on his mind to allow him to sleep.

Drawing a deep breath, he called up mental pictures of the various diagrams and models he had seen of Imperial installations since his recruitment into the Alliance. The Quaylan garrison would follow the standard designs, but along smaller dimensions. There would be the maintenance facilities ground level or below. Above that would be the strength and the heart of the military encampment.

By using the waste dump as they had in the Death Star, he and Chewie had convinced Butaka they could avoid the barracks, security, and emerge, undetected, on the detention level where they would find the interrogation rooms and the holding cells. If Han Solo were on Quaylan, he would be there. Luke shivered, remembering the stories he had been told of what could, and often did, happen to men in the featureless rooms at the top of every Imperial installation.

During their trip to Quaylan, Han had said he knew what to expect if he were captured, and he would not be going into the situation unprepared. Perplexed, Luke frowned. Had Han undergone Imperial interrogation before? No, he rejected

that thought. Until the Death Star, the Corellian had led him to believe he had somehow managed to stay clear of Imperial entanglements. If that had not been more or less true, Luke doubted Han would have been able to continue his lucrative business ventures.

Mystified, Luke focused on the Corellian. The more he thought about the reckless, fast shooting spacer the more puzzled he became.

Han had admitted to having had MPRT. He had also commented that it was given to all members of organized militia immediately upon recruitment. Then, Luke reasoned, Han must have belonged to some branch of military service. His flying skills testified to extensive flight training in spacecraft other than commercial ships. His skills and expertise with the modified freighter were the complicated stratagem of a trained ace. But there were no organized militia on Corell, Han's home planet, nor had there been for thirty years, or more.

With the death of the Jedi and their allies after the Clone Wars and the crushing defeat of the old Republic, there had arisen from the ashes only the hated Emperor and his Imperial recruitment academies. Han, he reasoned, was too young to have fought during the time of upheaval; he would have been a child.

>>Luke let out a deep breath as he thought again of Han's lightning reflexes in the times they had needed them most. He and Leia had called the Corellian foolhardy, yet when he had found himself hanging back, Chewbacca had followed Han without question. Luke allowed his thoughts to move on.

The Millennium Falcon, that small, rusty hulled vessel was filled with contradictions. A sudden thought wrenched Luke to a cramped seated position. Was the Falcon's pilot hiding as many secrets as his modified ship? Luke's mind grabbed at the interesting thought and studied it carefully.

Han Solo: intergalactic mercenary, smuggler, anything, anywhere for a price; ace pilot, expert spacecraft engineer, and professional warrior. The list was as intriguing as it was endless. Luke's mind reeled with bewilderment at the implications. What else would his friend prove to be? And why, he asked himself, had two shaggy aliens joined this dangerous venture so unquestioningly? Luke sighed, his mind faltering with weariness. Of course, he reasoned, Chewbacca was a friend, a partner, but what was Butaka to the Corellian?

Remembering what little he knew of Wookiees and their strange world of Kashyyyk, Luke mentally ticked off the facts, as he knew them; Wookiees could display violent tempers and they were a race with a language very difficult for humanoids to understand. Except, it seemed in his case. He had known only two men who could understand the Falcon's copilot without an interrupter: Han Solo and Obi Wan Kenobi. Ben could have learned the language during the Clone Wars when the Wookiee Nation had been an ally...of...the...Jedi.

Luke Skywalker blinked. Jedi! He stiffened and the threads of the Force tickled his mind. The Jedi! He frowned trying to remember his conversation with Butaka on board the Jack prior to their leaving for the Quaylan base. The black Wookiee had said, 'My dialect is very old...'

Luke shook his head; no there was something else. Later. 'I do not think it is my place to explain, young Jedi.' Jedi! How did he know? Of course, Chewbacca could have told him, but when? On the way to Quaylan, perhaps...yes, he reasoned, perhaps.

Again remembering his Force sensations when he had stepped aboard the Jack, Luke sighed. He was too tired, he couldn't piece it together, but something was there, something that linked the Force within him to the Wookiees and his strange understanding of their language.

Dodonna had been surprised at the Wookiee-Human relationship between Han and Chewie. And, Luke, remembered, the general had commented that he had never heard of such a thing in over thirty years. Did that mean there had been such relationships before the Wars? He wished he had asked. He did remember Dodonna saying that since the Wars the Wookiees had kept to themselves and away from Imperial infiltration.

Luke sighed, closing his mind to all the unanswered questions. If they didn't get to the base soon, he was going to fantasize the Corellian and Chewbacca into some kind of knights on their battered titanium hulled steed, secretly roaming the galaxy with their blasters of righteousness and justice. The absurdity of the thought brought a weary smile to the Tatooine youth's face. He was tired if he was seeing Han Solo as some kind of knight errant!

The small slowly disappeared and sadness touched his features. Leia. What must she think of him? He had promised to stay in touch. "Leia," he whispered, then reluctantly put the young senator out of his thoughts. First, he would do what he could for Han Solo, than he would turn his thoughts to the beautiful young woman.

* * * *

Swallowed up in the crowded traffic of the spaceport, jolted relentlessly and totally ignored by those around her, Leia Organa steamed with half-bridled anger. Glaring at the next being who walked into her, she swore softly, but willed herself to remain passive to the odorous creature.

Threepio had fared much better. None of the shuffling crowd seemed too eager to collide with the solid frame of the droid, and the aggravating fact did little to quell the Princess' rising temper. She found herself mumbling some of

Dedonna's choice words half aloud. She smiled, thinking of the shock the rebel strategist would have shown had he witnessed her expert use of them.

Having spent most of the morning moving leisurely about the bays watching various lift-offs and numerous landings, she paused to watch in awe as one of the huge Imperial freighters touched down, the very mass of it staggering to the imagination.

"My lady, it is approaching midday, we should return to the villa."

Leia grunted softly. Hot and thirsty, she seethed with badly concealed impatience. Where in seven systems was the arrogant Corellian? And why, she continued to ask herself, hadn't Luke Skywalker attempted contact? She motioned Threepio to her. "You're right, we'll head back. But this time, you lead and I'll follow. One more accidental bump and I'm going to shoot someone," she threatened irritably.

"Yes, your High..." Threepio stopped at the murderous light that flickered across the Princess' strained features. "This way, please. Follow me."

Leia sighed, falling into step behind the droid. How Luke put up with Threepio she could not fathom. The droid was a walking, vocabulating mother hen. She was sure she would lose her temper and deactivate the mechanical long before they finished their Tatooine assignment.

In search of a nonexistent breath of air, Leia dropped her hood. After combing long, slender fingers through sweat darkened the tresses, she reluctantly returned the hood to its place. Sighing with impatience and weariness, she followed the golden droid from the spaceport.

Unnoticed, an armored figure moved from the shadows of a doorway and fell into step some distance behind the young rebel leader and her companion. The tall being moved confidently among the crowds, his interest in the young woman carefully hidden behind the smoked lenses of the visored helmet, its green and gray pain dulled and pitted with age and violence.

Over loose gray military fatigues, the being was fitted with dull green body armor protecting him front and back from armpits to groin, while a small device, embedded in the breast plate, flashed with digital life support readouts. A manual flamethrower and dart gun were fastened in place on his forearms with the controls mounted on his wrists. About his waist he wore a utility belt and storage pack for the laser rifle he carried. Braided Wookiee scalps hanging from his belt swayed ominously with each step taken. Harnessed below his knees were mobile knee dart units bolted securely in place and carried with the grace and ease of long use. Bashu Finn, the Galactic Hunter, was secure in his abilities and a man who had learned to trust his instincts.

With the Dark Lord plying the smuggling lanes in search of the Corellian pilot, he could ill afford further delays, and had been on his way to once again petition for a ship, when he had seen the young woman moving through the crowds, the golden droid at her side. Something about her had piqued first, his curiosity and then, his suspicions.

He watched her closely, his suspicions growing as graceful hands had brushed the dark, damp strands of hair from her face. Unable to distinguish her features, Finn suspected the small, delicate hands would show no calluses or dirt from the fields, their whiteness, even from a distance, denying any exposure to a twin sun world. She was dressed as a native, but she was an off-worlder.

Now, carefully shielded within the anonymity of the passing traffic, he followed her, watching with interest when she paused and entered a walled compound. He knew the villa; it belonged to the Imperial Commandant of Tatooine, Captain Tala Vito. Puzzled, he pondered the various implications of what he had witnessed. Was Vito using her as an agent? Was she his woman brought in from another world?

Finn pushed himself deeper into the shadows. If nothing else, he reasoned, she might, somehow, prove to be his ticket off the desert world. For that, he was willing to watch and wait...for a while.

* * * *

In a flash of ionized lightning, the Imperial garrison arose ahead of them, starkly outlined against Quaylan's blackened landscape. Chewie edged the domed speeder alongside the towering wall and shut down. Inside, the three occupants sat quietly waiting for the next flash of lightning to better enable them to study the four-meter high wall surrounding the Imperial installation.

Softly voicing his impatience, Chewbacca slid back the top and extracted his cramped bulk from the conveyance; Butaka quickly joined him. Standing beside the speeder, the Wookiees seemed oblivious to the discomfort of the storm, their heavy, shaggy coats ample protection against the cold wind and driving rain.

Pulling the collar of the flight jacket up around his neck, Luke climbed from the speeder, handed a coiled rope to Chewbacca, than joined the Wookiees at the massive wall.

"I'm going to take a quick check on the sentry," Luke spoke, his voice a shout in his attempt to communicate with the black Wookiee over the noise of the storm. "While you unwrap R2 and get ready to scale the wall."

Butaka nodded and reached into the speeder for an object that had been wedged at his feet. He handed it to Luke.

Accepting the macro binoculars, Luke moved away from the speeder. Keeping the wall at his right shoulder, he cautiously felt his way toward the front of the compound. Reaching a corner, he knelt in the shadows and took his first look around the massive pillar.

The sentry box at the garrison's entry gate was boldly illuminated by huge flood lights mounted atop the installation. Luke moved away from the wall. In the darkness, he circled again to the front and put the glasses confidently to his eyes. The guards, unaware of his scrutiny, were night-blinded by their own security lights.

Training the glasses on the sentry box, he counted two troopers standing watch. Past them, through the barred gates, the young rebel studied the building within the compound and was pleased by what he saw.

The garrison was circular. A tube set on end. The base rose from the ground on huge columns, half enclosed to give protection to the maintenance and storage area for the shuttles, speeders, and short-range fighters kept on active service. The area was well lit, but he could account for only a skeleton crew. Moving his glasses upward, Luke carefully studied each level of the garrison.

The level above maintenance, the barracks, was dark except for a dim light at the far corner he knew to be the security wing.

The second level of the tube was also sparsely lit. The communications level would stay active throughout the night, for although the equipment would be useless until the storm broke, there would be around the clock personnel manning the receivers.

Again the macro binoculars moved to the last level. Luke felt his heart move to his throat and form a lump there. The third floor was ablaze with light from every heavily shielded window. Whatever was happening in the small garrison was happening there.

The cold wind touched his flesh and Luke shivered. They could wait no longer. The activity on the third level warned that things might be getting uncomfortably warm for the captive Corellian.

Slinging the macro binoculars' strap over his shoulder, Luke hurried back to the protection of the wall. Hesitating long enough to assure himself he had not been detected, the young Jedi moved rapidly along the wall to the darkened speeder and his waiting companions.

"There's two on sentry with a skeleton crew in the maintenance bays; otherwise, it's quiet...except for the third level." Luke added grimly, meeting the gaze of the Falcon's copilot.

Without comment, Chewie grabbed the robe and started up the wall, quickly disappearing into the darkness. A moment later, the rope quivered. Luke took the coiled excess and carefully tied it about the R2 unit and started the small droid up the wall. The little mechanical disappeared and, a moment later, Butaka motioned Luke to follow.

Grabbing the robe, Luke climbed hand over hand, his feet walking the wall until he reached the top, than quickly descended the other side. His hand on the hilt of his saber, he kept watch in the semidarkness until Butaka joined them. With a flick of his wrist, the black Wookiee loosened the rope and coiled it over his shoulder. Ahead of them, the compound lay bathed in light.

Touching the young human's shoulder, Butaka drew his attention to one of the light standards, which had shifted in its mounting creating a narrow avenue between the converging lights. The next gust of wind moved the light again and, for a moment, the pathway of darkness increased.

A thought prickled at Luke's consciousness. Perhaps he could improve their chances.

Stepping ahead of the Wookiees, Luke directed his attention to the floodlights. He concentrated intently on the light standard and the loosened mount. A second passed, another, than under a sudden gust of wind, the mounting moved and the floodlight angled away from them. The small avenue of twilight became a pathway of total darkness leading to the nearest wall of the compound.

Luke quickly motioned his companions into the darkness, across the yard, and into the heavier shadows of the garrison wall. Expectantly they waited, but no alarms sounded.

Motioning Chewie to take the lead, Butaka stationed himself behind Luke and R2 where he could cover their backs. Moving cautiously along the wall of the building, Chewbacca held up a furry arm and they stopped. There before them was the hatch leading to the refuse chute.

R2 whistled softly, his small beep all but lost in the violence of the driving wind. Kneeling beside the small unit, Luke manually coded in his orders. Getting to his feet, he turned back to the Wookiees and shouted, "I'm having him access the garrison's security override for the chute. Let's hope they don't consider the chute a security risk."

R2 extended an appendage and inserted it into the hatch's security access. A moment later, an audible click sounded and the hatch opened. With a visible uneasiness, Chewbacca stepped into the cubical and onto the metal plates, quickly making room for his companions who followed. The last one in, Luke

drew his blaster, signaling the small droid to close the hatch behind them. They were inside the Quaylan garrison.

Moving to the override panel, R2 plugged in. A moment later, the platform started moving slowly, silently, upward.

Within the tight confines of the chute the odor immediately wrinkled the sensitive noses of the intruders, bringing to mind another chute, which had held more than its odorous refuse. Luke glanced at the uneasy Wookiee beside him carefully studying the metal plates under his feet.

"R2, lock the plates in position," Luke ordered. The platform could be moved from one level to another for large refuse removal. From the third floor that refuse would be organic, which would have to be moved quickly and efficiently to the lower levels for disposal. The metal plates on which they stood would slide back and the refuse dumped into a disposal pit somewhere under the building.

Recalling a lecture given by Dodonna, Luke tried not to dwell on the pictures he had seen of Imperial interrogation medics and their ungodly experiments conducted on political prisoners and enemies of the Empire, but his blue eyes snapped with anger and concern.

Finding the small garrison equipped with the platform did not speak well of the man in charge of Solo's questioning. The young Jedi shifted his gaze to the russet coated Wookiee as the platform moved them slowly upward; he knew the same thought had already occurred to Chewbacca.

end Chapter 13

[Continue to Part 14](#)

[Back To Index](#)