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## **Lair of the Blue Falcon**

### **Chapter 17: The Hunter Acquires A Ship**

by [J.A. Berger](#)

Activity increased at the Mos Eisley spaceport as shadows lengthened and the twin suns began their daily voyage toward the horizon. Within the heavy shadows of an empty bay, a tall figure leaned armored shoulders against clay walls, his gloved and moving leisurely to increase the oxygen and airflow of his life-support to meet his body's needs for comfort. Bashu Finn idly watched the small figure in brown robes, the golden droid at her side, once again return to the spaceport's directory.

He had grown accustomed to her routine, making it easier for him to watch from afar. Finally, he had taken up his vigil before the directory where, on the hour, postings were entered for each bay; all arrivals and departures noted and checked against Imperial clearances. From there, he could estimate almost to the minute how long it would take the young woman and her strange companion to first check the postings and then the ships.

A klaxon sounded and he stiffened. Startled, the young woman stepped away from the directory.

From the entryway of the Port Master's office, her eyes wide with alarm, she watched, the golden droid standing protectively between her and the open corridors.

From above the spaceport Finn heard the healthy roar of braking thrusters and a large shadow of an incoming ship passed overhead momentarily blocking out the twin suns and throwing the portals of the bay into heavy shadow. The alarms continued.

The sound of marching feet striding at double time pulled the Hunter's attention from the doorway. An Imperial detail, rifles at ready, marched by him, headed down the corridor. Above him, the shadow of the descending starship passed, and he heard her servos engage; the ship was preparing to land. He glanced back toward the Port Master's office. The woman could no longer be seen, only her droid stationed before the directory assured him of her presence.

So, he reasoned, she had no wish to be seen by the detail, a natural enough reaction. He knew of few who openly welcomed Imperial interest if they could avoid it. Still, she *was* a guest of an Imperial commander. Why would she openly fear those who would have to report directly to him Vito should she be harmed in any way?

The ground beneath his feet vibrated, signaling the landing of the hovering ship. Relatively certain that the young woman would be there when he returned, he moved out of the shadows and into the crowds; their curiosity, like his own, moving them in the wake of the descending ship and the Imperial detail rushing to meet it.

Shouldering his way through the crowd, Finn joined the detail assembled before an empty bay. He nodded to the lieutenant who had stepped forward in recognition of his authority.

"What do we have?" Finn asked, observing through visored eyes the blackened outline of the swiftly descending ship, a freighter. He stiffened. She was Corellian.

"A Corellian freighter closely resembling the one that blasted her way out of here..." the Imperial officer shouted over the noise of the landing spacecraft.

"Not the same?" Finn inquired, watching the hydraulics engage and the ship's three-point landing gear settle comfortably under her.

"If so, her registry and call letters have been altered. Our automated security systems recognized her hull configuration and set off the alarms," the Imperial explained. "When hailed she transmitted on an Imperial channel and carried clearance codes apparently approved by Lord Vader himself. Still, I thought it worth checking out."

Behind the visor, the Hunter frowned. "Call letters and registry aside, she *is* the same ship; I recognize the blaster scoring on her sides." He unslung his rifle. "And if the Corellian is aboard, he will not escape me again."

The Lieutenant remained wisely silent.

The freighter touched down and settled comfortably into the docking bay, her engines screaming lustily. Idling down, she hummed in healthy contentment before her systems, one by one, were shut down.

The detail entered the bay.

Standing to one side, Finn watched the hatch open and the ramp on the starboard side lower into place. He programmed his rifle to full charge, flipping the toggle to heavy stun.

Following his example, the Imperial cautioned his detail to set all weapons on stun. In the silence of the bay, rifle bolts were set and engaged. A movement at the open hatch and the detail moved forward, forming a semicircle around the bottom of the ramp.

A moment later, a human stepped from the ship's interior; he halted in shocked surprise, and then slowly descended to meet the advancing Imperial welcoming party.

It was not the Corellian. Finn's hand moved away from the trigger, but the weapon remained trained on the stranger while disappointed curiosity moved him closer. "Where is the owner of this vessel, human?"

CheLdo Garn blanched, recognition clear in his eyes. *I am* the owner." Reaching to a vest pocket, he paused, uncomfortably aware of the weapons pointed in his direction. "I have ownership papers. I was merely reaching for them. I am unarmed."

"Move with care, human," Finn cautioned softly. "Mistakes have been made over far less."

His hand shaking, the man pulled forth a document packet. "I am CheLdo Garn, citizen of Quaylan in the Dacteen asteroid belt. My Imperial freighter's license and ship's registration are all here."

The Imperial lieutenant stepped forward accepting the offered packet. He scanned them; then, at a motion from Finn, handed them to the armored being, his eyes never leaving the uneasy human.

Finn examined the credentials closely, his hand tightening on the documents as his shielded eyes settled on the name of the issuing officer: Darth Vader. He looked up. "Where were the these papers issued, and when?"

"On Quaylan, night before last, Tatooine time. They are in order, are they not?" There was a touch of panic in the human's voice.

"How were you able to obtain rights to this ship? And where is her former owner?"

Garn ran a nervous tongue over dry lips. "She was honestly acquired in payment for services rendered. Her former captain is now in Imperial custody under the command of Lord Darth Vader."

So the dark lord *had* beaten him to the Corellian. Finn studied the human carefully, wondering what role the man had played in the capture. "Was the Corellian taken unharmed?"

"Yes. He was in binders when I lifted off, along with another, a Tatooine youth, by his dress. They were to be taken to the Quaylan base for interrogation. That's all I can tell you." He shifted uneasily. "Now, if I could have my papers, I would like to finish docking and see to the servicing of my ship."

Finn returned the documents.

"I will see that the vessel is cleared of all charges," the Imperial assured Garn. "You should not be bothered again." His business completed, the officer nodded to Finn; then ordered his detail to shoulder their weapons and marched them out of the bay.

CheLdo Garn stood shifting uneasily before the Galactic Hunter. "Is there anything else?"

"No, human," Finn replied softly. "However, I hope the price you paid for this ship does not prove to be more than you can afford."

A touch of fear crossed the human's face.

Finn turned and left the bay. He had been too long away from the young woman. There would be time enough to mull over the news acquired from CheLdo Garn after he had returned to his vigil.

\* \* \* \*

Waiting until the detail had moved out of sight, Leia eased out of the doorway and joined Threepio. "Let's see what all the excitement's about." Together, they drifted into the flow of traffic moving in the direction of the incoming ship.

Reaching the bay, but unable to see the ship for the Imperials blocking the entrance, the Princess moved out of sight and waited. If the ship *was* the Falcon, she could ill afford endangering herself by exposure. A stern glance at the golden droid kept him silently at her side.

Her impatience had grown to anger well before the detail shouldered their weapons and exited the bay. Whatever the troops had thought to find, they had obviously been disappointed.

"Princess!"

Before she could object, a golden arm encircled her small waist and pulled her further into the shadows. Her eyes widened. Coming towards them, following in the wake of the departing detail, was a tall, armored figure. Despite the heat of the bays, the young woman shivered. In silence, they watched the being stride past them and disappear among the crowds moving toward the portals.

"Threepio, don't call me that...please," she pleaded, her voice not much more than a whisper, her words lacked the venom they had held earlier.

The golden droid blinked in a very human-like way and lowered his arm. "It was not intentional, Mistress, I assure you," he explained. "But my memory banks recognized that strange being as a member of the shocktroopers who fought during the Clone Wars. I did not think it advisable to be seen by such a being."

"Yes," she mumbled, recalling the strangely armored figure. "You're probably right." She turned away from the tall android and glanced at the now quiet bay. "He's gone. Let's see what he was so interested in."

They moved out of hiding and back into the crowded corridors.

At the bay, Leia halted, her eyes wide in surprise as she gazed at the Millennium Falcon. Swiftly scanning the starship's familiar contours, the princess searched for any damage to the ship's graceful lines. Except for recent, but superficial carbon scoring, the shabby freighter looked fit.

Catching a glimpse of an unfamiliar figure at the refueling station, she motioned the golden droid quickly back into the corridor; she followed.

The vessel *was* the Falcon, but the spacer who had been servicing the freighter was a stranger. Who was he? Where was Han? And Luke? Her patience wearing thin, she swore softly. The questions continued to pile up ahead of the answers.

A moment later, the stranger exited the bay and headed down the corridor. She turned her back until he passed, in her robes, she was just one of many and went unnoticed.

"Threepio, follow him. When you can get him alone, tell him your mistress would like to charter his ship. Offer him some unreasonable figure. Anything. Just get him back here. If he's a friend of Han's, he can be bought," she added hotly, recalling the Corellian's price for her rescue. "And, hurry. I'll wait here." Threepio nodded, nervously clenching the packet of credits Leia had thrust upon him. "Yes, of course, huh...Mistress."

The golden droid tottered into the crowds and was soon following the spacer closely. Breathing a silent prayer, Leia hurried back to the Falcon's bay.

\* \* \* \*

The young woman was not where he had left her when Bashu Finn returned to his vantage point. Unsure of what to do, he waited; his patience rewarded when, a few moments later, her golden droid hurried past. It was the first time he had observed the woman's separation from her android companion. He briefly contemplated following the mechanical then dismissed the idea.

He stepped into the corridor and hurriedly retraced his steps, getting there in time to see the familiar figure in brown robes entering the bay he had just left. From across the way, in a shadowed corner, he watched and waited, his curiosity mounting.

This was the first time he had actually seen the woman interested in a particular ship. Was this the ship she had been waiting for? If so, why hadn't she detained Garn who had been there only moments before? Had she missed him in the crowd or had it been the Corellian she'd come looking for? Impatiently, he waited.

\* \* \* \*

Leia Organa moved across the bay to the Falcon. The ship's hatch open, fuel lines hurriedly attached to her hull, the small starship stood alarmingly vulnerable, as Han Solo would never have left her. Finding the situation strangely irritating, Leia shook off the feeling and mounted the ramp. She entered the silent vessel and closed the hatch behind her.

Strolling purposefully down the darkened corridors, she stepped into the small lounge. Everything there was the same as the last time she had been aboard, except the three dimensional game board was empty and the small inner cabin was carefully swept clean of any personal items. Her eyes snapped with cold suspicion.

She crossed to the high backed chair at the computer bank and patched into the cockpit's navigational controls. The small screen immediately lit, displaying a set of navigational vectors.

Mentally retaining the figures, Leia cleared the screen and tapped in her scalar calculations for the vector product. Again figures flickered to life across the board, giving her both arrival time and distance traveled on the starship's last completed trip; figures that would not have remained had Han Solo flown the Falcon into Tatooine. She shut down the computer, thankful for the stranger's carelessness. It would make her search that much easier.

Leaving the lounge, she stepped again into the corridor, this time headed for the cockpit.

Taking a seat at the pilot's station, she brought the cockpit computer on line. Calling up the star charts, she scanned the menu, then asked for the last chart accessed. The screen rolled then settled, showing the Dacteen System. The displayed coordinates entered, the navigational equipment lit up with hyperspace designator and time vectors.

Again Leia cleared and reprogrammed; and, a moment later, the ATDT information appeared. She shut down the computer, mulling over her findings. She'd been lucky. By keeping the ATDT obtained from the lounge computer in mind, she had programmed the equipment for a trip from Dacteen to Tatooine. The figures when compared had closely matched.

Another thought pulled her to her feet. Rising on tiptoe, she pulled the ship's med-a-kit from its bracket, thumbed the catch and quickly scanned the contents before closing and replacing it. The wound sealant and a partially empty vial of pain reducer bore evidence of recent use.

If Han had been wounded during lift-off, as the used medical supplies seemed to indicate, the Dacteen Asteroid Belt, located well within the corridors of the smuggling lanes, would have been a logical place for him to head. But where, between the belt and its accompanying worlds, would he have landed? And why would he have given up the Falcon?

She sighed in exasperation. Regardless of the reasons, according to the ship's records, the Falcon *had* gone to the Dacteen System. And, true to his habits, Han Solo had carefully erased the ship's memory banks. But the new pilot had made the same trip back and had left the vectors in the computer.

She turned and retraced her steps down the corridor. Pausing before Solo's weapons cabinet, she helped herself to a blaster, which she quickly concealed beneath her robes. She had found out all she could from the ship; the rest of the information she wanted would have to come from the Falcon's new master.

Leia had stepped from the ramp when she heard Threepio's intermittent activating coupler announcing his return. Filing a mental note to see that the droid got a good lube bath when they returned to base, she turned away from the ship. She forced a smile and moved forward to meet the golden droid and the smiling human who followed him.

He was pleasant enough looking, she admitted begrudgingly, although a little older than the Falcon's rightful owner and several inches shorter.

"Lady LeAnna?" He ventured, stepping forward. "I'm CheLdo Garn."

"Captain Garn." Leia extended a hand in greeting, her eyes flashing immediate dislike as the human brushed her fingers with his lips.

"I'm pleased to make your acquaintance," he stammered. "I'm truly sorry to have kept you waiting, but your mechanical had some trouble reaching me with your message. I understand you need transportation off world as soon as possible."

"That's correct, Captain." Leia smiled seductively. "I have tried other vessels, but most have already contracted or are unwilling to take passengers. I had about given up when you landed. It's very important or I would not have bothered you so soon after your arrival."

Leia watched the man closely, his expressions easily read as his eyes traveled the lines of her body. "I assure you it's a short trip and Threepio was instructed to offer you satisfactory payment for the flight."

"If it's a short trip, it is indeed a satisfactory amount," he replied softly, his eyes alight with the pleasure of her company. "Where were you headed?"

Leia rejected several destinations before she settled on a world only a short distance from Tatooine. "Dantooine."

A flicker of interest touched the human's eyes. "I heard the Empire had closed Dantooine until rumors of an Alliance base there could be substantiated."

"That's true," she acknowledged. "But it has been reopened for some time now. My father, High Governor Packeena, is the Imperial Commander there. He wishes my return at once." Leia saw surprise in the man's face as a new light of respect pulled him away from his contemplated advances.

"I had assumed you were native by your robes," he fumbled.

"I've been visiting a family friend, Captain Tala Vito, Commander of the Imperial base here on Tatooine. I'm sure you know of him."

"Yes, yes, of course," he stuttered.

Leia smiled at Garn's obvious distress.

"Couldn't Captain Vito find you transport?"

The unexpected question warned the former Alderaanian Senator to choose her next words carefully. The man was no fool. "Captain Vito had some trouble here the other night and several of his ships were destroyed, still more damaged." She explained. "I could not impose by asking. But I must leave soon. My father's expecting me and I cannot keep him waiting."

"When did you want to leave?"

"By eighteen hundred."

"That soon?" Garn glanced from the young woman back to his ship. "I'll have to finish refueling and get Imperial clearance. I'd planned on finding a reliable copilot before I shipped out again. She's really not a one-man ship."

"It's a short trip," she reminded him impatiently. "Hyper drive will not be necessary."

Suspicion touched the stranger's features. "How did you know she had light speed capabilities?"

"I've been around ships my whole life, Captain. I know that most vessels of this size are easily handled by one pilot...unless she carries hyperspace capabilities." Leia improvised. "You just said she wasn't a one-man ship."

"Yes, yes, of course," the suspicion left his voice.

"I'll put in a call to Captain Vito and inform him that I have found a ship and see to it that your clearance is given top priority." Leia remarked, knowing he could not chance Imperial retribution by refusing her. "I'll be here for lift off at eighteen hundred hours."

He agreed reluctantly. "I can have her ready by then if you can get me clearance."

"I'll contact the Captain right now," she assured him. "I'll leave my mechanical in your care until I return." Leia swept Threepio a warning glance then hurried from the bay.

Bashu Finn, having witnessed her brief conversation with Garn, followed the young woman until she paused before a bank of communication outlets.

While she waited for one to become available, he moved past her and paused at the next empty bank. A hurried glance told him she was already keying in the receiver's number; he coded in his Imperial override.

"I have your call tapped," an electronic voice informed him. "The receiver of the call carries an Imperial priority lock, which I cannot override; however, I can tap you into the transmitter."

Finn gave his acknowledgement and a moment later he heard the young woman's voice for the first time.

"If you can arrange clearance, we can lift off at 1800 hours."

Finn, from his outlet, watched the woman pause and glance nervous about, obviously reassuring herself that the conversation had not been overheard. Her robe's hood still shielded her features from sight.

"No, some stranger by the name of Garn brought her in. According to his ATDT, he flew in from the Dacteen System." She hesitated, listening. "I don't know. But he will. Once we clear Tatooine, I plan on relieving him of command. One way or another," she promised, "he'll tell me what I want to know. I'll contact you if I can later." She paused again before answering. "No, don't risk it. I'll contact Jan as soon as I have something concrete. Thanks again for everything." Closing the conversation, she whispered, "May the Force be with you...always."

Finn cut his connection, watching as the young woman coded out her clearance and started back toward the bay. Finn did not follow.

Turning on his heel, the Hunter hurried from the docking facilities, winding his way through the familiar byways to the villa he had watched earlier.

He had no doubts regarding the receiver of the woman's call; he had guessed even before he had attempted the tap and had been refused. Vader had given him Imperial clearance and almost Carte Blanc when he had contracted for the elusive Corellian. With the authority he carried, there were few who had priority and only one on Tatooine--Captain Tala Vito, Imperial Commander of the Tatooine garrison and also, it seemed, an undercover agent for the Alliance.

From her conversation with Vito, the woman was almost certainly linked, in some way, to the Corellian. And, with a ship and a little luck, she just might lead him to an easy reward. Especially, he reasoned, if she should somehow succeed in freeing the spacer from Vader's clutches. If not, he contemplated eagerly; he just might be able to turn his recent knowledge concerning Vito and his connections with the Alliance into some ready cash. His prospects for reward had greatly improved.

Reaching the villa, he entered the garden and coded in his admittance request. Seconds later, footsteps announced someone's approach. The door opened and Tala Vito stood before him.

"Finn! What do you want?" He stepped back and the Hunter moved into the coolness of the officer's quarters.

"I want a ship, Vito," Finn stated simply. "Now."

The Imperial Commander stood unmoved, his pale blue eyes only partially able to mask his uneasiness. "We've already been through this, Finn. The situation has not changed. I have no ships available."

"I think you will make an exception, Captain," Finn suggested. "This time."

A flicker of worry touched the blue eyes. "What do you mean?"

"Perhaps Lord Vader would be interested in a recent house guest of yours. A certain young woman who plans on hijacking an Imperial registered freighter and possibly attempting to free an Imperial prisoner."

Vito looked at the man in surprise, his stunned expression past hiding. "Go on." Hardness had touched his voice.

"I'm sure you *are* familiar with the situation, Captain," Finn continued. "The situation involving one Han Solo?"

A flicker of uncertainty crossed the captain's features. "I know he's wanted by the Empire for questioning. And I know he all but devastated my fleet when he blasted his way out of port last night. Beyond that, Finn, you have me at a disadvantage."

"Excuses are unnecessary, Vito. Your politics are your business, not mine." Finn paused, meeting the puzzled gaze of the man before him. "As long as I get a ship. Now!"

Tala Vito felt the tension knotting within him and he glanced across the room to his chronometer. It was 1800 hours. Leia Organa had left Tatooine aboard a vessel with hyperspace capabilities. A thought touched him. "All right. You have it. Docking Bay 42. My own scouting vessel. It's fueled and ready for lift off."

"Contact your maintenance team and clear me," Finn ordered. "I have no intention of being stopped when I get to the ship."

Vito shrugged. Moving to his communications outlet, he ordered the clearance and coded its completion before turning back to the shocktrooper. "She's ready and you've been cleared."

Finn moved to the door then paused, turning back to the tall man in Imperial uniform. "You play a dangerous game, Captain. Perhaps it's time to clear the board." He activated the door lock; it opened.

Vito showed no sign that he understood.

Looking directly at the officer, Bashu Finn whispered, "May the Force be with you."

Fear flickered momentarily in the blue eyes, than quickly subsided. "It is, Finn. Always."

Vito watched the tall figure exit his quarters and the door close behind him. He sighed. Did Finn know who Leia was? No, he didn't think so. IF Finn had known, he would never have allowed the young Senator to leave Tatooine. The reward for the young rebel leader was far greater than the one the Hunter sought for the outlawed Corellian.

He slowly shook his head; worry etching deep lines in his sun darkened forehead. He should leave, but he knew he would stay until he could be of no further use to the Alliance or until Finn blew his cover. Then, if still alive, he would make his decision.

A smile touched his lips. It would have been interesting to see the expression on the being's features, had that been possible, when Finn attempted to take the small two man scouting vessel into light speeds. He'd had the small ship grounded for sometime awaiting parts for the hyper-drive systems. If Finn planned on catching up to the Princess and her hijacked freighter any time soon, he was in for a very unpleasant surprise.

**end Chapter 17**

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