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## **Lair of the Blue Falcon**

### **Chapter 18: Stranded!**

by [J.A. Berger](#)

With too much on his mind to allow him to rest, Luke Skywalker sat beside Chewbacca silently watching the darkness from the viewing port of the small shuttle as they hurtled through the night. It was a race now and the outcome would depend on the storm. The longer it continued, the better their chances of getting off world before Imperials from the garrison could stop them.

No longer able to sit still, Luke joined Butaka at the front of the shuttle. Bracing himself against the back of the pilot's seat, he glanced over the black Wookiee's shoulder.

The skipper of the Stellar Jack had tuned the shuttle's receiver to Imperial frequencies and the chatter coming through was not good news. Luke dropped into the seat next to him.

"They've found the mess we left. Vader's sent a transport after us." Luke met the Wookiee's gaze. "We're gonna have to stay at full throttle if we're to keep ahead of them." He frowned at the strange look that had crossed Butaka's features. "What?"

The great Wookiee eyed the receiver. "We would not be receiving this transmission, young Jedi, unless..."

Luke swore softly, having missed the obvious. Turned to the communications console, he quickly ran the channels; they were clear. No longer did static blur or distort the transmissions; the ion storm had lifted. He returned the receiver to the Imperial network.

"We're not going to make it," he whispered.

"We have one chance," Butaka growled softly. "If we can contact my ship before she's off-world. It is your decision."

Luke hesitated. To contact the Jack they would have to break radio silence, but it might also be their only chance of getting off Quaylan. He threw a switch powering up the transmitter. "Make it quick."

Butaka transmitted a short message to his ship's call letters. The receivers remained silent. He repeated the call, then, switching to a wider band, tried once more; there was no reply. The Stellar Jack was gone.

To come so far and to be so close, Luke sighed, only a few more minutes and they might have made it. He glanced at Butaka. The black Wookiee had the throttles open, pushing the shuttle to its limit. There was nothing either of them could say. They were in a lot of trouble, and both knew it.

Butaka had the look of a being that had worn shackles and swore never to wear them again. He would die before he would allow himself to be taken. And Chewie---Luke smiled at the thought of the gentle copilot---he would die protecting Han. Thought it all, there was one underlying fact Luke could not longer deny; he was the weak link in their chain.

The impact of Han's warning and lecture aboard the Falcon was suddenly all too clear. He had neither the training nor the experience to endure what the Corellian had and still retain the secrets entrusted to him; he knew too much and could hurt too many. Because of that, he, too, could not risk capture; and the knowledge hardened his blue eyes with a maturity beyond his years.

A sudden bump under his seat and Luke pulled his thoughts away from the morbid direction they had turned. The shuttle trembled under them, shuddered once, twice, than died. They hit hard.

Thrown from his seat, Luke scrambled up. "Butaka! What was...?" He reached across his seat and tapped the fuel gauge with an urgent finger; the needle remained unmoved. They were out of fuel.

"We almost made it." Luke pointed to the computer screen. They were only a short distance from the hidden bay. The Wookiee nodded.

Moving to the back of the craft, they joined R2D2 and Chewbacca, the hatch was already open.

"Chewie, can you carry Han?" Luke inquired urgently. "The storm's lifted and we've got an Imperial transport breathing down our necks. We're going to have to hurry."

Chewbacca turned back to the reclining figure of his friend.

"I'll go first." With the saber to guide their steps, Luke lowered his head and pushed into the wind. The drifting, blowing sand quickly erasing each step he took.

Following a strange glow on the horizon, the small party pushed southward. A few minutes more and they reached the bay's outer beacons, the illumination lighting their way to Garn's hidden facility.

The hangar doors stood open, the floods ablaze, while the bay lay before them quiet and empty. Moving out of the darkness, they entered, grateful for the protection the well-lit bay offered.

Butaka moved to close the huge doors; Luke stopped him.

"Leave them open, the lights on." Glancing swiftly about to reassure himself they were alone. Luke deactivated his saber and hung it from his weapons belt. "If we can get out of here before the transport arrives maybe they'll think we left with the Jack. It might buy us a little time."

Reading the anxiety and worry in the Falcon's copilot, Luke knelt beside the unconscious Corellian and checked his vitals. He shook his head. "I'm sorry, Chewie, there's not change. He's no better, but he's no worse. We've got to get out of here and find cover." Luke climbed to his feet. "That transport can't be far behind us."

"I will lead," Butaka offered. "It's best your Jedi weapon remains dark. Its light can be seen from too great a distance now that the storm has lifted."

"All right," Luke agreed. "R2 can scan terrain for you." Allowing Butaka and R2 to move ahead of him, Luke helped Chewie lift the Corellian and settle him into his arms; then together, they ventured back into the hostile night.

Unable to match the long strides of the Wookiees and without the advantage of their night vision, Luke stumbled several times, but managed to stay on his feet, unwilling to slow their progress as the ground became rockier, more deceptive. They were gaining altitude. A moment later, they halted, surrounded by

monolithic boulders, sand scoured and pitted by the millennia. Butaka, his great nostrils flared, tested the wind.

Grateful for the protection from the driving winds, Luke checked their back trail. "Judging from the distance we've come in relationship to the beacons, we've made good time."

Hearing nothing behind him, Luke turned. He was alone. "R2! Butaka!" A small beep and he moved cautiously forward feeling his way along the massive walls of granite. One step. Another. He halted in surprised amazement; he had entered a cave.

Artoo Detoo immediately activated his holoprojector and adjusted the gain to full power, bathing an area of approximately two meters in diameter with a gentle, blue-white glow. The shadows receded and Luke made out the two Wookiees only steps from him slowing easing the wounded Corellian to the ground.

"I'm going back and make sure the sand has covered our tracks," Luke said. "We can't afford to leave any sign that might lead them up here."

Butaka stopped him. "In the darkness, young Jedi, you will be unable to find what little sign we left. My nephew and I will see to the hiding of our trail." Chewbacca glanced once more at the still form on the cold floor of the cave, and then turned moaning softly.

"I know," Luke assured him, understanding the younger Wookiee's tone of voice if not his actual words. "Don't worry, Chewie, I'll look after Han. But if you happened to know where Garn might have established survival caches outside the bay, we could sure use any food or extra clothing and blankets you might find. And be careful." He added. "The transport may have already reached the bay. We don't know how long we may be here."

With the departure of the Wookiees, the silence and solitude of the semidarkness closed in around the young Jedi. His body aching with fatigue and weariness, he turned. Artoo stood close by, his infrared receptor adding to the soft glow of the holoprojector in an attempt to furnish more light.

"Bring the light over here, R2. Let's see how Han's doing."

Positioning the small droid one side of the prone figure, Luke reached for Solo's wrist. Finding the pulse point, he studied the older man's peaceful features while he counted the beats. His brow wrinkled with concern. He repositioned his fingers and checked again.

"No!" Fear engulfed the young Jedi. Solo was dying; his features pale, eyes unresponsive, pulse thready and weak, his heartbeat slow and faltering. They were losing him even as Luke sat and watched.

On his knees at the Corellian's side, Luke raised an eyelid then reached a hand into the open jacket, feeling urgently for a heartbeat. His senses keyed to intense levels of anxiety, worry, and fear, coupled with an overwhelming sense of fatigue and weariness, Luke's fingers lingered, and, amidst the confusion of dread and caring, the power of the Force surged within him.

Shocked, Luke Skywalker jerked his hand away. Thrown off balance, he fell away from the Corellian, vaguely aware of R2's urgent beep of inquiry and concern. Taking deep breaths, he forced air back into his depleted lungs, feeling the heavy heating of his own heart pounding against his chest. What had happened? It all came back in a flood of concerned panic.

"Han!"

Scrambling to his knees, Luke returned to the Corellian's side and reached for the spacer's wrist then hesitated, remembering the shock from his last contact. Gingerly, he touched the unresisting flesh. Nothing happened. He reached for the pulse point, checked it. Was it his imagination, or...no, he checked again, the pulse was stronger...

Luke sat back unconsciously rubbing his hands together, his fingers still tingling with the remnants of the shock he had received while his hand had lain over Solo's heart.

Numb, his mind no longer willing to function past the fatigue, the young Jedi relaxed allowing his senses to turn inwardly; and from deep within his subconscious came the familiar words of an old friend. *Luke*, it implored. *Reach out with your feelings!*

Taking a deep breath and closing his mind to his surrounds, Luke reached desperately for the essence of the ancient Jedi and, in so doing, touched and embraced the power within him.

*Let go of your conscious self, Luke, and act on instinct.*

His eyes open, but vacant, Luke Skywalker reached out and laid his hand gently over the Corellian's heart. Almost at once, he sensed the weak, pulsating life under his touch and centered his concentration on the laboring organ.

A comfortable lethargy washed over him, his mind adrift in a swirl of hazy half-worlds; and, in the silence, he heard the beating of his own heart, strong in its promise of continuing life. He willed its power to the other, visualizing the blood

coursing through the Corellian's veins, rushing to the heart, and pushing the drugs aside, dissipating them. Matching his own heartbeat to Han's, the young Jedi allowed the Force to take from him the strength to repel the drugs. He felt his own heart slow, then stumble and falter as his body grew abnormally cold, his hands and feet numb. Close to death, he dwelled in the peaceful serenity that accompanied a false sense of well-being.

Somewhere within him, an alarm sounded. He ignored it, seeking desperately to hold on to the deadly feeling of contentment.

*Luke! Luke! Break contact! Now!*

Rallying in obedience to the sound of Ben's urgent voice, Luke Skywalker felt the aura of the Force rise from within and drive his lagging senses away from the edges of oblivion they had so willingly sought. He allowed his hand to fall from the Corellian's breast. Unable to maintain his balance, he slumped, totally spent, next to the injured spacer. He drew one deep ragged breath, then knew no more.

Luke had no way of knowing how long he had slept, when he became aware of gentle hands stretching cramped legs from under him, allowing him to rest comfortably on the hard, granite flooring.

He swallowed several times attempting to force down the bile that rose in his throat. He was going to be sick. No, he corrected, he wasn't sick, just so physically drained that it threatened to make him sick. He forced his eyes open and they slowly focused on the towering figures of the Wookiees; Chewie's blue eyes hooded with concern, Butaka's with ill-concealed worry.

"Han!" Luke sat up, urgently reaching for the spacer's wrist with one hand, to his chest with the other.

The Corellian's features, no longer peaceful, showed the imperceptible signs of acknowledged pain; his cheeks rosy with the unmistakable glow of a building fever, but his heartbeat was steady, his pulse strong. And, for the first time since they had found him, Han Solo was showing signs of regaining consciousness.

"He's going to make it." Luke gave the Wookiees a weary smile. With one last glance at the spacer beside him, the young Jedi closed his eyes and gave in to exhaustion. Unaware of gentle hands easing him down, Luke fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

**end Chapter 18**

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