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Lair of the Blue Falcon

Chapter 30: Storm Clouds Gather

by [J.A. Berger](#)

Han Solo wearily excused himself from another curious group, eased into the lengthening shadows of the assembly hall and entered the adjoining gardens. Now and then, glancing furtively over his shoulder to assure himself that he was alone.

Sighing with weariness, he found a shadowed bench and gratefully sat down. He reached up and released the top button of his tunic, than glanced around guiltily, but when none of his order seemed to have noticed, he slowly relaxed. It felt good to be outside again and, at least momentarily, out from under M'Fe's probing gaze.

Dark hazel eyes flashed with frustration, he would not have relished going up against the Corellian in his prime.

Gently kneading the stiff, sore, muscles of his right arm, Solo watched small groups spill out into the gardens, their numbers increasing as more and more took advantage of the spring-like weather. It wouldn't be long until someone saw him and the questions and congratulations started all over again.

He groaned at the thought. He had found the congratulations embarrassing and the questions strangely unsettling, especially those dealing with the aftereffects of the Sealing; questions to which he had no answers. Closing his eyes, he tentatively drew within himself. Another day like today and they'd have him half believing in the mumbo jumbo Kenobi and M'Fe preached.

He glanced about the garden, allowing his mind to wander, luxuriating in the warmth of the day and enjoying the clear blue skies overhead. The place had always brought out the worst in him, he reminded himself, and as soon as Chewie got back from his charter with some ready cash, they would shake the dust of the small moon from their landing gear and return to the stars where they belonged, before the old man could get his hooks into him any deeper.

A tall, white-haired figure moved into his range of vision and the Corellian involuntarily stiffened, then breathed a little easier when M'Fe was drawn into conversation with a group of Falcons just outside the hall.

Given a momentary reprieve, Solo climbed to his feet and glanced quickly about. He was trapped. He had reached the back wall. The only other way out of the walled compound was through a locked security gate or back through the garden, which would take him right past the old Commandant.

"There you are. I was wondering where you disappeared to."

Han spun, his right hand moving from long habit to his holster, the weapon partially drawn, before his surprised senses registered the familiar voice. "Luke, don't do that!" He dropped the blaster back into its holster. "Ever!"

"Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you. Besides, you shouldn't be so defensive. Kalyynn is probably one of the safest places either of us could be at the moment."

"That's easy for you to say. Now." Solo snapped at him in smarting irritation.

"It's over." Luke reminded him, seeing the haunted look behind the hazel eyes of his friend. "What you say we forget it."

"Yeah, sure." Glancing over Luke's shoulder, Han groaned.

The Falcon leader had moved away from the group and was looking their way.

"Luke," Han pleaded, "do me a favor."

Skywalker smiled at the tall Corellian. "You want me to distract M'Fe long enough for you to get out of the uniform."

A stunned look crossed Solo's face. "How did you...?" He gazed with open suspicion at the blonde youth.

"You can relax, I can't read your mind," Luke reassured him chuckling easily, "Just your expression. You look miserable."

Looking past the Corellian spacer, Luke saw M'Fe headed in their direction.

"But you'd better hurry or you'll never make it. He's heading this way."

"I owe you."

Solo turned. Moving quickly past a large group of Falcons, he put them strategically between himself, the young Jedi, and the approaching Falcon leader, than hurried through the garden. He entered the hall, pausing briefly, and then edged toward the double doors. A few minutes later, he emerged from the building to find himself once more before the small white chapel.

Han stopped, gazing speculatively at the huge double doors, unable to dismiss the recent happenings or the memories the old chapel evoked within him. Still puzzled and mildly uneasy, he turned away.

The soft pleasant breeze of Kalyynn's approaching darkness brushed invisible fingers through his unruly hair, lifting it, parting it momentarily, before allowing it to fall forward into its familiar disarray.

"Captain, excuse me."

The soft, halting words of a familiar voice, brought Solo swiftly back to the present. He swore silently for having hesitated before the chapel. Then, with a heavy sigh, he turned to face Leia Organa.

At the sudden recognition, several expressions flitted across the young woman's face. All of them, Solo decided, boded no good. A mischievous glint reflected in the rebel senator's dark eyes.

"Han!" A smile touched her full-lipped mouth and the young woman subjected the tall Corellian to careful scrutiny, leaving Solo to fidget uncomfortably while he awaited the barb he'd grown to expect from the young Alderaanian.

"Go on," he encouraged. "Say it and it over with."

Her eyebrows rose. "What is there to say? You've left me absolutely speechless." She shook her head admiringly. "However, I will admit you do that uniform full justice. Could I have been wrong? I was under the impression you ran the other way when orders and obligations got too close," she fenced lightly.

"Nice."

"You enlisted?" Leia interrupted, in surprised disbelief.

"I'm not that crazy, Sister!" Han snapped, his irritation mounting.

"Oh, I get it." She nodded knowingly. "Enlistment or death, right? You would never of done it other wise."

Solo squirmed, the young rebel's words striking a little too close to the truth. "Well, Princess, there's a lot you don't know about me." Something sparked in the Corellian's eyes and the young woman blushed and looked away.

A roar tinged with surprise and pleasure pulled the Corellian's attention away from the beautiful Alderaanian as he was crushed in a full embrace by his first mate.

"Hey, Chewie! Easy pal!" Han grimaced in pain from the still tender ribs. "I thought I gave you a job to do. Have your eyes gone so bad you can't read star charts any more? Solo teased his copilot lovingly, feasting hungry eyes on the familiar bulk of his friend.

Chewie gruffed softly, stepping back, his attention settled on the uniform. The Wookiee tilted his shaggy head to one side and studied Solo carefully without speaking.

"One word, gruesome, just one word," Solo warned lightly, "And we're quits." He sobered at the look of worry, which had replaced amusement in the small, blue eyes of the Falcon's first mate. He frowned. "What is it?"

"Trouble," Leia answered. "That's why we came back."

"What kind of trouble?" Han's voice was tight with expectation.

"Just before we left, I got word that Vader was building an attack force on Tatooine, do you remember that?" She watched him closely.

"Of course," Solo snapped. "I'm not likely to forget, seeing as how I was more or less accused of sending them your way."

"I apologize for that," she interposed softly. "It turns out it's not an Alliance base in dancer." She glanced from Solo to the Wookiee, her eyes dark with worry. "They're headed for this system. According to our Tatooine source, we can expect them in less than twelve planetary hours, Kalyyyyn time."

"Here!" Solo stared at her in stunned disbelief. "Why here!?" This is one of the oldest systems in the galaxy. Its worlds are barren, lifeless except for..." He stumbled to a halt, his unspoken suspicions verified by the unmasked concern reflected in Chewbacca's gentle eyes.

"It's not Kalyyyyn, is it?" No one spoke and he let out a stream of Corellian exhortations that left him breathless.

"Kashyyyk," he whispered. "They know." Anger touched his voice. "This ain't about you and me, pal...or Luke." He quickly added. "It *is* about Quaylan. Has to be. This is coming too quick after our escape." His lips thinned. "The Jack. They must have made the Jack from evidence left at CheLdo's bay." His fear for the beautiful, emerald world of Kashyyyk naked in his eyes, Solo was filled with anger and deadly intent. "Chewie, find Butaka. He's in the hall or maybe the gardens by now. The two of you round up the Color Guard and get them to the Jack. She's docked at the central pad. You should have seen her when you landed."

Chewie nodded.

"Get Butaka alone before you tell him. He's not going to be real happy about this," Han commended unnecessarily. "Otherwise, keep it quiet. There could be a panic should word get to Kashyyyk ahead of us."

Chewie agreed, his eyes once more settling on the Falcon uniform.

"There's no time, pal, but everything's find. See." Solo tapped the holstered weapon resting comfortably on his right thigh. "I'll fill you in later." He reached a hand to the Wookiee's arm. "I'm counting on you, gruesome. Get the clans home and help them prepare for an attack."

Solo turned back to the Princess. "You're sure about this raid?"

"I'm sure."

He nodded his acceptance. "Okay, Chewie, get going. There's a lot to be done and not much time to do it. Leave the Falcon and I'll follow you as soon as I know M'Fe's plans."

Chewie moaned a soft question, eyeing Solo intently.

"Of course the Falcons will fight. You needn't worry about that. M'Fe would never turn his back on Kashyyyk." Han assured him. "Now get going. If you run into Luke, point him towards the council chambers and tell him to wait; we'll be there shortly."

Chewbacca growled his understanding and shouldered past them, heading toward the chapel where remnants of the color guard stood collecting and sheathing their banners.

"Come on, we've got to hurry." Han grabbed Leia's hand before she could answer and started for the adjoining building.

The young woman, forced into a stumbling trot to keep up with the long legged strides of the tall Corellian, made no attempt to pull away.

Entering the crowded hall, they slowed to a walk.

"What's going on?" She asked, speaking loudly over the gentle roar of conversation around them. "What are they celebrating?"

"Some primeval ritual that's going to change the order of the universe," Solo snapped impatiently, dragging her relentlessly through the throngs of uniformed me. "Nothing important."

Desperately, he searched the various groups, looking for the white-haired Commandant he had sought to avoid only moments before: M'Fe was not to be found.

The discomfort of his uniform forgotten in the growing fear of precious time lost, Solo stopped to question various officers, rudely ignoring the admiring and questioning looks drawn by the breathless Alderaanian at his side.

"Han, where are we? Who are all these men?" Leia gasped, her questions going unanswered as she was pulled relentlessly on. She stumbled after the Corellian, unable to free herself from his grip.

Stepping outside, they halted.

"Han, can you see him?"

"Yea," Solo gently steered her toward a huge tree and two robed figures standing beneath its heavily leafed branches.

"Luke!" Leia called out breathlessly, recognizing the Tatooine youth in the white robes of the Jedi Knights. "What are...?"

"Leia," Luke smiled in pleasant surprise. "What are you doing back here?" He stiffened. "Something's wrong." He glanced at the solemn features of the Corellian at her side. "Han?"

"Not here," Solo voiced softly. He turned to the old man. "I suggest we adjourn to the council chambers. Now."

Recognizing the seriousness of Solo's expression, M'Fe nodded curtly. "This way. We can leave through the security gate. No need to upset the others."

* * * *

"You say your informant has reported the strike as a show of force?"

"That's the information he was given," Leia reported, nervously pacing the length of the room. "But the extent of the military buildup and the way the information was filtered to him has led us to believe that something more is planned. I fear his warning may have come at a great risk to his cover."

Leia Organa turned to meet the attentive gaze of the old man seated at the head of the council table.

"I know the Empire's strengths, Commandant," she continued, "And I know Vader's relentlessness. If he feels a show of force is necessary to bring a world to its knees and into proper Imperial alignment, I can assure you it will not be a gentle lesson." She hesitated, sensing M'Fe disbelief. "Our informant feels it unlikely that Vader will stop at a mere show of force. I agree with him."

M'Fe shook his head. "Kashyyyk's neutrality under Imperial rule has made her virtually a blackballed world; a prisoner, my dear, in an otherwise dead system. The Empire would gain nothing by attacking her."

"All the more reason for them to come down hard," Leia snapped in irritation at the old man's condescending attitude towards her warning.

"I'm sorry, Princess, while I certainly understand your concerns, I think you are over reacting; due, in part, I'm sure, by the recent annihilation of your own planet."

M'Fe got slowly to his feet and faced the young woman. "Your own informant reported a show of force, I can see no reason for the Empire to expend unnecessary weapons or manpower on a world of so little importance. However, we thank you for the warning and we will be prepared."

"What are you going to do?" The softly spoken question came from the back of the room where Han Solo stood, his shoulders braced against the wall, his arms folded.

"A show of force will likely mean a dawn strafing run over one of Kashyyyk's major population centers," M'Fe calculated, meeting Solo's questioning gaze. "Our fighters will intercept and turn the Imperials back at the outer moons."

"Fighters! They look more like...like the drones that were used before the Clone Wars converted...no cannibalized...into bullet-shaped coffins." Leia straightened before the old man. "Before I left base, I issued orders to assemble an *attack* force. I'm pulling in cruisers and long range interceptors, everything we have with heavy armament and hyperspace capabilities. The fleet was to leave as soon as pre-flights were completed."

"Ignoring the frown that had appeared on Luke's features, Leia plunged on. "Unlike you, M'Fe, I feel there is more than ample reason to expect something more. I expect nothing less than a full annihilation run and my fleet has orders to stop it at all costs. *Before* Kashyyyk becomes another statistic. As you, yourself, pointed out," her color heightened. "Like Alderaan."

Solo threw an uneasy glance in the old man's direction. M'Fe stiffened; his ancient blue eyes alight with barely controlled anger.

"We thank you for your warning, Princess," he repeated coldly. "But I will remind you that we have not *asked* for your assistance in this matter."

"And if it were Kalyyyn awaiting attack, with a fighting force at least partially capable of defending her, I would have formally offered our assistance," Leia replied with equal coldness. "However, Kashyyyk is a neutral world, peaceful, and all but helpless against the power Vader is preparing to throw at her. Based on your *battle* experiences of the last thirty years, I did not deem it necessary to ask for your approval or your assistance. This base's past silence speaks for itself," Leia replied. "However, I have offered our help to Chewbacca and, on behalf of his world, he had accepted."

"Kashyyyk is our ally," M'Fe whispered, his eyes afire with anger, his features pale. "The Order will protect her and her people as we have in the past."

Solo straightened, his eyes darting from M'Fe to the hot-tempered Alderaanian. Without interrupting, he shot a silent warning to the young Jedi across the room from him.

Luke nodded uneasy understanding before stepping hesitantly up behind the young senator. "Leia, let's sit down."

The Princess waved Skywalker away, her eyes locked in angry reproach with those of the old Falcon leader. "There's no time, Luke. And I'm not going to sit back and watch Kashyyyk destroyed while others continue to avoid the reality of this situation."

M'Fe's eyebrows raised, "Oh? And what, my dear, is the reality of the situation?"

Leia drew a deep breath. "M'Fe, don't get me wrong," she plead in earnest. "I am impressed with your Order's ability to have survived undetected for all this years. But your training facilities, techniques, and ships have not kept up with the advances necessary to take on the firepower that Vader will lead against Kashyyyk. Kashyyyk *needs* our help. Help you cannot provide."

"Indeed." The word was spoken in a voice cold with insult.

Han Solo groaned, briefly closing his eyes to the unavoidable. Opening them, he shot Luke a 'do something quick' look, before he edged toward the end of the table and the angry confrontation that was building rapidly before him.

"You have sat here on this small moon for over thirty years within the protection of a dead system and the friendship of Kashyyyk while the rest of our worlds have been under the suffocating stranglehold of the Empire," Leia fumed.

"*You* had the Senate," M'Fe reminded her curtly.

"The Empire has dissolved the Senate," Leia snapped, again brushing Luke's warning hand from her shoulder. "The Empire has destroyed the unity of the old Republic worlds, taking from them the protection of the Jedi and obviously the bravery of the Blue Falcons." She paused, fiercely choking back tears, which threatened to betray her emotions. "No one could wish more fervently for the old ways than those who have given their lives for the rebellion. In all these years, M'Fe, what have you given? What have you done, but wait?" Leia moved away from Skywalker, meeting the stormy countenance of the old Falcon with open contempt. "I cannot change the probability of your involvement, M'Fe. You and this decadent society can fight, or not. I don't care," she spat contemptuously, unaware of Solo's angry departure from the room. "But I am going to protect Kashyyyk. The Alliance will not allow her---or her people---to fall under Imperial guns."

Leia turned and walked purposefully to the closed door. "Come on, Luke, I need some fresh air."

Luke caught her at the door, his hand closing over hers on the control panel. She released it at his touch.

Keeping his voice low, Luke turned his back to the proud old man who had made no attempt to stop them. "Leia, for drat's sake, cool off. This isn't like you." He glanced over his shoulder, then back to the young woman. "It can't end like this. Please, you must try again."

"I can't reason with him, Luke," she whispered, her voice still tense with irritation. "He's so arrogant, so damned bullheaded."

"He's Corellian," Luke whispered urgently, suppressing a smile at the soft groan that escaped Leia's tightly pressed lips.

"Corellian! Why didn't you tell me?"

"I was trying," Luke said. "So was Han."

She looked around. "Where is Solo?"

"He left just after you stuck your foot in your mouth," Luke teased.

She groaned again, welcoming the young Jedi's physical presence between her and the old man across the room. "And I all but called him a coward," she moaned in obvious embarrassment.

Luke repeated urgently. "We can't leave it like this."

"No," she agreed softly. "We can't."

"Why don't you step outside and give me a few minutes with M'Fe. Then maybe try again."

"All right," Leia agreed, touching his cheek with a gentle hand. "May the Force be with you."

Luke chuckled, a touch of crimson momentarily staining his cheeks at her jest. "Thanks."

Smiling in apology, she let herself out, quietly closing the door behind her.

* * * *

"That was quite a performance, your Royalness."

Leia jumped, her oversensitive emotions still raw from the heated exchange with M'Fe. "Han!"

"That was a diplomatic disaster if I ever saw one." Turning his back, Han Solo started down the empty corridor.

"Wait!" Leia hurried after him. "Where are you going?"

"I'm getting out of here before the fireworks start."

"Han!" With an urgent hand on his arm, she stopped him. He turned. Misreading the expression of pain on his face as anger, she released him. "Help me, Han. You know M'Fe. He'll listen to you. Make him realize I'm bringing my fleet here to help Kashyyyk, not to undermine his position of authority or friendship with her people."

"Uh, huh, Princess. I've been at odds with the old man for most of my life. You got yourself into this, as I see it, you can get yourself out. But I will tell you what I've learned during those years; he won't back down, he never bluffs, and...." He started back down the corridor.

The young woman lengthened her stride to keep up with him. "And, what?"

"...And his loyalty to this Order *and* to Kashyyyk are above question." He finished. Stopping, he turned again to face her, his hazel eyes dancing with barely controlled anger. "Leia Organa, if you hadn't damned near called that old man a coward to his face, you could have had him eating out of your hand..." For a moment, the hazel eyes softened as he reached to lightly trace the outline of her lips with a gentle finger. "Like you do every man who meets you." The heavily enforced barriers snapped back into place and Solo dropped his hand to his side. "Now I suggest you get back in there and mend some fences before M'Fe eats Luke alive."

Solo left her, continuing on down the corridor.

"Han, where are you going?"

Solo stopped once more and turned, looking up the hallway towards her. "To Kashyyyk. They need all the help they can get while they wait for their allies to quit fighting among themselves and start fighting *for* them."

Leia sighed, her overwrought senses chaffing from the verbal abuse. She glanced again down the corridor finding it strangely empty without the handsome Corellian's presence. He was right, she reluctantly acknowledged, feeling the heat rise in her cheeks. "And I still resent it," she thought. "Why do I let him get under my skin this way?"

She turned and retraced her steps to the closed doors of the council chambers. "Corellians! The curse of mankind..." Somewhere within her consciousness, down deep, she throttled the soft words that had formed there '...and womankind'.

end Chapter 30

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