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## **Lair of the Blue Falcon**

### **Chapter 31: Shot Down**

by [J.A. Berger](#)

Leaving the administrative wing, his mind in turmoil, Han Solo paused to drive a balled fist savagely into the crumbling wall of the building. Drawing back to do it again, he was immediately cautioned against it by an excruciating pain radiating down his injured arm, the Corellian swore hotly instead.

Regardless of the outcome inside, while her allies stood toe-to-toe trying to decide who could offer her the most help, and with nowhere else to turn, Kashyyk waited helplessly.

He swore again.

Luke could wait for the outcome; he could not. Alliance or Falcon, both or neither, he was his own man and he would go where he could do the most good--to Kashyyk. His concerned gaze settled on the small, stock freighter standing alone among the rows of military fighters, the over sized landing pad next to the Falcon empty; the Jack already gone.

Drawing a deep breath, the Corellian attempted to reason past his anger. M'Fe was right. Kashyyk had done nothing to warrant the kind of attention Leia had described.

Solo glanced over his shoulder at the building he had just exited.

He had never had any doubts about the old man's courage or of his loyalty to Kashyyyk. M'Fe would throw everything he had against the dawn attack, but would it be enough? If it were a strafing run, their chances of stopping it were good. If they got the upper hand with a surprise counterattack, the little one-man fighters of the Blue Falcon fleet could eliminate a sizable strike force, if there were no heavy warships, no destroyers, no wide range interceptors. If...if...if...

Solo pushed away from the covered archway and started across the dark retro-scored flight apron toward the shabby freighter, strangely alien, but just as lethal and dangerous as any among the rows of small, black fighters. Han smiled proudly, reaching to his weapons' belt for the flight gloves that were customarily tucked there. His hand came away empty. Remembering the uniform he still wore, his hazel eyes darkened with barely suppressed anger. He'd been off his feet and on Kalyyyn way too long.

He reached the Falcon's main hatch and started up the entry ramp. A voice called to him and he turned, watching in amused irritation as a uniformed officer hurried across the tarmac towards him. Stopping at the foot of the ramp, the young Falcon officer saluted him smartly.

Solo, his eyes rolling momentarily heavenward, returned the salute. "What is it, Lieutenant? I was just getting ready to take off."

"Captain, your ship has been refueled in accordance with First Mate Chewbacca's orders. I was also to notify you that the base is on standby alert, Sir, and will go on defense shielding and radio silence at 1400 hours. Do you still retain our coded emergency signals?"

Solo amused, studied the young officer before him. The junior grade officer was not much more than a boy, maybe Luke's age, he guessed, but probably younger. "Have they been changed in the last 15 or 20 years, Lieutenant?"

A befuddled expression crossed the younger man's features. "I'm not sure, Sir. I...I don't believe so...Sir."

"Then I know them," Solo replied curtly. "When did the Jack lift?"

"Just prior to your arrival, Captain. She was granted clearance to return the Color Guard to Kashyyyk and to prepare for attack."

"First Mate Chewbacca, did he go with the Jack?"

"Yes, Captain. He is expecting you to follow and will contact you as soon as you have cleared Kalyyyn's defenses."

"Thank you, Lieutenant." Solo hesitated then returned the younger man's salute, watching as the young officer returned to the flight communications hangar.

"I've got to get off this damn moon." Solo palmed the security lock on the Falcon's hatch and entered the freighter. "I almost found myself understanding that stuff again." He closed the hatch and locked it into flight mode.

He glanced toward the cockpit, then angled his steps instead toward his small, cramped quarters. He was eager to shake Kalyyyn from the Falcon's landing gear, but another, more pressing matter claimed his immediate attention. He would take the time.

Entering his cabin, Solo stepped over and around an accumulated disarray of clothing and equipment strewn about the cubicle and reached for the palm controlled device on the minuscule closet behind the corridor bulkhead. The small door opened at his touch.

Damned! His supply of open necked shirts had diminished alarmingly. Digging deeper into the back of the tiny closet, he found a shirt he remembered dropping there and gratefully pulled it out.

Tearing at the buttons on the military shirt, Solo freed himself from its confines and let it fall along with the matching flight jacket. Mistaking a jacket laying next to his bunk as his own, Solo walked over and picked it up. He frowned. The jacket was stained and caked with blood. He fingered it thoughtfully.

Luke. The damned kid had taken a lot of chances freeing him and getting him to Kalyyyn. Given half a chance, Luke was going to make a hell of a fighting man.

Solo tossed the badly stained jacket onto his bunk. Too bad Kenobi had muddled the kid's mind with all those tales of mumbo jumbo. Maybe when all this was over, Solo promised himself, he would take some time to teach the boy some practical lessons in survival. The thought pleased him and he smiled.

Struggling awkwardly into the pullover while trying to ignore the complains of his wounded arm, the Corellian tucked in his shirt tail, slid his weapon's belt into place, than looked for his vest; it was no where to be seen. He sighed in resignation. Grabbing up the discarded Falcon flight jacket he'd been wearing, he slipped it back on. Feeling more like his old self, Han Solo left his quarters and hurried to the cockpit.

Dropping into the pilot's seat, he threw several switches across stations activating all systems and allowing them to warm along with the freighter's main drive. Checking the progress on the copilot's console, he smiled in satisfaction as a growing array of green indicators announced the ship's status.

He pulled himself from the pilot's seat, leaned across Chewie's console and flipped the communications systems alive, then transferred control to his master board along with the nav-computer and the rest of the ship's primary functions.

Finding his flight gloves behind his console, Han slipped them on while he eyed the various gauges, scopes, and indicators reflecting the Falcon's readiness for space. From long habit, he reached over and engaged his weapons system and pushed for full battery charge. The Falcon was ready for flight. He engaged his primaries and trimmed them to hover as the small freighter lifted gracefully.

With the landing gear retracting smoothly into the belly of his ship, Han Solo cut in the main thrusters and took the starship up; a mischievous light flickered and temptation bit him hard. Giving in, the Corellian spacer banked the freighter and brought her in over the airstrip. Sailing in at conning tower level, the small freighter buzzed Falcon Control. Her thrusters screaming in high-pitched protest, her belly skimmed the apron at foolhardy speeds and bone jarring altitude drops.

Several figures in Falcon uniforms threw themselves to the ground as the freighter passed over, Solo whooping with pleasure. Screaming past the control tower for a second time, Han pulled the Falcon's nose up, his guidance systems red lining at his close proximity to the installation. His eyes sparkling with rebellious delight, the Corellian took the modified freighter spaceward; he did not look back. Flipping the ship to full manual and reveling in the pleasure of the responding yoke, Han pushed his problems away and embraced the short diversion. He banked the ship and barrel rolled her several times before sideslipping and accelerating to just under hyper-jump speeds. The automated control board blinked then beeped as his autopilot tried to override his manual controls; he ignored it.

A moment later, his communications blinked. He thumbed his receiver control and a blast of heated Wookiee exhortations resounded throughout the small cockpit. The lopsided smile pulled at the Corellian's mouth while he waited.

"Are you finished?"

Another barrage answered the Corellian's inquiry and he chuckled good-naturedly.

"Settle down. She's fine and so am I." He hesitated. "Of course, I *know* you're not worried about *me*. But, since the Falcon's currently on total manual, I thought you might be just a bit concerned about the health of her pilot."

A screech resounded from the receiver and Han frowned. "Chewie, settle down, you just about took out my hearing. I am human, remember?"

Solo groaned. "What do you mean, you have your doubts? You feel pretty cocky sitting there next to Butaka, don't you?" Another Wookiee roar brought a grimace of pain to the spacer's handsome features. "All right," he grumbled. Reaching over, he released most of the Falcon's controls to her individual computers. A quick glance over his and the copilot's boards assured him all systems were functioning properly. The ship slowed to a more conventional speed. "Happy now?"

Chewie roared his satisfaction and the playfulness left the Corellian. "You're just upset because you missed all the fun."

A deeper voice over the comlink pulled Solo's attention away from the teasing of his first mate.

"Butaka, you've decided than?" Solo wet dry lips, his eyes reflecting his concern as he thought of the Wookiee's decision to lead his people into Kashyyyk's lower levels where the old and the very young would likely perish.

"Yeah, I think you're right." His voice softened and he tried to picture the roughed features of the black Wookiee. "I'm sorry, Butaka, I know the dangers. But if Leia's information is correct, your people can't survive on the surface."

Han Solo's haze eyes hardened as he thought of the gentle Wookiees forced into the hostile environments of the lower levels of their fertile world; among them members of Chewie's own family...his family.

Why Kashyyyk? It made no sense!

A sudden thought and his hand tightened on the Falcon's yoke. "Me? Because of me!" His brow wrinkled in barely suppressed anguish. "I brought this on Kashyyyk, didn't I?"

A negative reply drifted over the comlink. Solo swore angrily. "Somehow Vader put it together. What happened when you broke me out? Did you use the bowcasters?"

Solo needed no confirmation. He cursed himself. "Chewie, you shouldn't have let him get involved in this. What in hell were you thinking, gruesome?"

A hearty roar silenced the irate Corellian, and he sighed. "A man doesn't deserve friends like you two." His voice softened. "Butaka, I'm sorry."

Out of the corner of his eye, Han caught a sudden flicker on the long-range sensor scope. "Chewie, hold on." Han hit the broadband monitor, touched the directional finder, and waited. The scope remained empty of blips. Puzzled, he returned to his seat.

"Hey, gruesome, what in hell did you do to our surveillance systems?"

A loud protest vibrated through sensitive airways. Solo ignored it, glancing again at the negative readouts on the scope. "Well, that may be true, but they're sure in hell acting crazy now."

Frowning, Han reached out and tapped the instrument. For a brief moment, the scope was alive with blips. "Wait?"

He tapped it again and it reverted back to tracking mode.

"First I got one blip, then nothing," he explained, the lines in his forehead deepened. "That's what I'm saying, pal. Everything went to norm, than the crazy thing lit up like Tooma's Holy Day." He tapped it again. "No, I'm not on manual," he snapped. "And my eyesight's fine." Solo glanced again at the scope; everything continued to read normal. "Well, something's wrong with it."

He ran a quick systems diagnostic. "Everything checks out. There's been no burnout, the control circuitry shows all green." He reached a quick decision. "You're in landing orbit, right?" He nodded in absent-minded acknowledgment. "Okay. Keep your receiver open. I'm going to take a little side trip and check this out."

Solo flipped his headset to transmit, than banked the freighter and kicked in his retros, pulling the Falcon away from Kashyyyk and toward Karma, the world's largest and farthest moon. Immediately, the Falcon's sensors picked up and recorded the powerful ionizing influences of the moon.

Solo monitored the equipment closely as various red lights blinked on and off.

"Everything's acting up, like you'd expect."

He glanced at the long-range scope again.

"It's showing ghosts from the ionization, but no blips," Solo reported. "If that damned ionization field isn't causing it, what is? No, Chewie, you get to your family. I'm gonna make a couple of quick sweeps around Karma. If I don't turn up anything, I'll come on in." He flipped to receive for Chewbacca's reply, than back to transmit. "Okay. I'll leave the channel open, but don't wait." Solo activated his shields as he talked. "It's probably just a faulty module. Exposure to Karma's ionization field will probably blow it and that'll be that."

Banking the Falcon again, the Corellian took the small freighter into the emptiness of deep space.

Without warning, the small blip reappeared on his scope. "Chewie! There's a ship out here! A small one-two man----whoops! Chewie, she's Imperial! A scout ship! I'm going after her!"

Han knew Chewbacca would disagree with his decision, but the small ship could not be allowed to carry tales of off-world activity prior to an attack. He cut in his retros and sped after the small ship. He closed on her, immediately evaluating her sleek streamlined hull and the equipment she would likely carry; he frowned. Although small, the vessel had hyperspace capabilities; why hadn't she used them? Puzzled, he followed as the ship disappeared behind the small moon of Karma.

"Chewie! Damndest thing." He accelerated and slid into the shadow of the hunk of cratered rock known as Karma and right into the path of a huge Imperial cruiser. Automatic reflexes saved him from the first volley. "Company, Chewie! Lots of it! Warn M'Fe!"

Rolling away from the devastating turbo laser fire, the small ship that had suckered him into the trap momentarily forgotten, Han Solo no longer wondered if the scope would show its strange array of targeting blips; there wasn't anything wrong with his equipment. He fervently hoped he would still be able to say the same for himself and the Falcon in the next few minutes.

"Chewie! Do you read?" Static filled his headset.

His communications cut off by the activated jammers aboard the powerful man-o-war, Solo concentrated his efforts on keeping himself and the Falcon alive.

He had counted at least three heavy cruisers, a destroyer and several interceptors. Soon they would release their complement of short-range fighters and Kashyyyk would be at their mercy. If M'Fe didn't get his fighters aloft before Kalyynn's base was discovered, the Falcons would die in the same attack as their unprotected ally.

Pulling the Falcon up sharply, the Corellian took her into a spinning dive between two of the huge cruisers, daring them to fire as he activated his servo remote and raked their shielded conning towers with a full battery charge, in the hopes of knocking out their jammers with a lucky shot. They took the dare and returned his fire. He swore as his console lit up with various red warning lights.

"These guys have no sense of humor," he complained, directing his shields aft just in time to avert a near disaster as the small ship vibrated from a near miss.

A klaxon sounded and the sharp odor of smoldering circuitry invaded his senses and he glared defiantly at the damage readout. Again the small ship shuddered.

In desperation, Han Solo banked his ship toward the barren moon. His guidance systems and ship sensors going crazy under Karma's ionized influence.

With the engines at full power, Solo felt a surge and knew his defense mantle was failing. If he attempted to remain above the gravitational influence of Karma or attempted to run for it, he would be rendered into space dust. There was no longer any doubt; he was going down. Han desperately scanned his boards, his eyes hard with barely suppressed anger. Getting down wasn't going to be any easier than staying aloft. They had done about everything they could to him and still leave him and the Falcon in one piece.

Another flash of lights informed him that emergency systems had cut in with the fire fighting apparatus somewhere within the Falcon's holds, warning him of fire and burning circuitry in a crucial part of the ship.

A quick glance verified that communications was a smoldering ruin of fused circuitry, his defense systems shot to hell, and what guidance still worked was being badly disrupted by the ionization from the lifeless moon.

The lopsided smile pulled at the Solo's lips. And soon, he noted grimly, no life support. He sighed. "Karma, roll out the carpet, one shot-to-hell Corellian coming in hot!"

**end Chapter 31**

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