

[Back To Part 32](#)

[Back To Index](#)

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Lair of the Blue Falcon

Chapter 33: An Unscheduled Meeting on Karma

by [J.A. Berger](#)

On full manual out of necessity, Han Solo fought the yoke as he roared over the barren cratered landscape of Karma. The ionization playing havoc with what little guidance the Imperial forces had been kind enough to leave him.

The smile that pulled at his mouth was not reflected in his eyes as he watched the barren landscape fly past below him. He had landed by visual before, on this same moon in a much smaller craft, when he had been no more than a child. He could do it again as long as the Falcon continued to respond to his guidance. He couldn't afford any more failures.

He glanced at his board and took a deep breath, coughed and rubbed a gloved hand across smarting eyes. Smoke had started filtering into the close confines of the cockpit. According to his monitors, the fire-fighting equipment had extinguished all in-ship fires and he was getting the after affects of its success.

He glanced again at the speeding terrain, recognizing immediately the pocked landscape with its narrow, bottomless canyons and steep walled craters. There was only one decent place to set down on the northern hemisphere and he made for it.

Relaxing a bit, when the flat plain appeared in ghostly shadows on his TFS scan, Han waited in tense expectation for any hesitation in the Falcon's backup engines; there was none. He than prepared the wounded freighter for touch down. Nothing fancy, he reminded himself, just get her down in one big healthy

piece. Han slowed the small craft and brought her into a smooth hover over the Nen'r Plateau.

He flipped a switch activating the ship's landing gear. A moment later, a flashing light on his board verified the gear had locked correctly beneath him. He sighed in relief, then concentrated on getting his wounded bird to the ground.

He shrugged weary shoulders. There was nothing more he could do except trust in Corellian luck. He could pray, he thought, then quickly discarded the novel idea. Why should any deity listen to him? Besides, he reasoned, what deity in his right mind would have any sympathy for a Corellian crazy enough to land on Karma? Cutting his engines, Han Solo allowed his fate to fall where it was accustomed to falling---in the hands of Han Solo.

The landing was harder than he had anticipated and he felt the freighter momentarily rock before settling squarely on her three-point landing gear. Slumped over the yoke, he closed his eyes, allowing his overwrought senses to slowly relax. Maybe there was a deity watching over him, he reluctantly admitted. Coughing hard, he reached over and shut down all ship systems, the consoles mere shadows in the smoke filled cockpit. He had done all he could for the Falcon; he had to get out.

Han felt his way along the corridor moving slowly toward the rear of the ship, the emergency lighting only a faint glow through the heavy smoke. He located the hatch open release more by feel, than sight, and punched it. For a moment, there was no response. Fearing that it might have been damaged in the attack, he punched it more urgently; it opened. Grateful, he slapped another control, and the ramp moved smoothly into place.

Stumbling down the sloping walkway, his body racked by coughing he could no longer control and half blinded by irritated, weeping eyes, Han fell. On his knees, he struggled to breathe Karma's thin air. Unable to draw enough needed oxygen to clear his lungs, he continued to cough, each seizure a painful reminder of newly fused ribs and still tender muscles.

Slowly, the seizures passed and he weakly struggled to his feet and moved away from the freighter, rubbing irritably at his reddened eyes. When he could again see, he searched the heavens, the darkened mass of the Imperial armada blocking his view of Kashyyyk.

"Damn!" Greatly hindered by a weakness brought on by the lack of sufficient oxygen and the stiffness of a healing wound, Han moved slowly to the rear of the Falcon and wrenched a panel loose; he cursed softly at the sight of the fused circuits and blackened remains of his life support systems.

A quick survey of the damage left him shaking with fatigue and frustrated anger. With a few back up systems he carried on board, he might be able to get the Falcon space worthy enough to limp back to Kalyyyyn. But limping would not get him past the Imperial forces and, without communications, it sure wouldn't enable him to contact base and alert them to the impending disaster that had materialized on their doorstep.

He slammed a fist into the scarred hull of his grounded ship in helpless frustration, than gasped as the muscles in his abused arm screamed in painful warning at the unnecessary abuse. Reluctantly, he massaged the wounded arm, kneading the overworked and tender muscles until the pain slowly subsided.

His attention centered on the damaged system, he drew a short, painful breath. He had no desire to homestead Karma, which left him one alternative, forget Kashyyyk and the devastation heading her way, and concentrate on his ship.

He slipped out of his heavy flight jacket and beat savagely at the sparking circuitry. The fire out, he wrapped the jacket around his hands, forced the damaged circuit boards loose and tossed them aside. "Somehow," he grumbled, "I'm going to get blamed for this, too. I know M'Fe."

The heat from the boards threatening even the protection of his impromptu covering, Solo drew back his hand. He glanced toward the ship's lowered ramp, than discarded the thought. There was no use going inside for the insulated gloves until he could jury rig a bypass and force some of Karma's thin air into the ship to dissipate the smoke.

Disheartened, he again pulled at the stubborn circuit board, lost his hold, shifted the jacket and, breathing hard, tried again. A quick wrench of his still weakened arm and the board slipped to one side and hung up. Solo leaned heavily against the landing gear, struggling to breath in the thin air. His lungs demanding more oxygen than the small moon could provide.

Light-headed and physically sick from his forced exertions, the Corellian reached a quick conclusion; he was going to have to slow down and work at a less frantic pace. He swore again at his luck and wished desperately for the respirator stored in a forward hold. Located, ironically, he remembered, above the systems, which had taken the hardest hit and would be the last place free of heat and smoke when he finally got the ship's airflow systems working.

He closed his eyes, made a mental note to relocate the respirator, than forgot about it, concentrating instead on filling his oxygen depleted system slowly until he felt the cobwebs of lightness retreat from his mind.

His breathing slow and controlled, Solo opened his eyes and groaned. Planetary light was rapidly fading, Karma's day was nothing better than a feeble twilight, but

her night could be damned uncomfortable with a cold, blackness he did not relish in his current situation.

He shivered in the thin material of his open necked shirt and looked again at the slow cooling systems. Soon he would be forced to enter the ship for warmer clothing. He had rested long enough.

A sudden flash pulled his attention to the darkening skies overhead. He moved further away from the Falcon until he had an unrestricted view of the night sky.

Another flash, heavy cruisers had opened fire. He frowned. What were they shooting at? The Imperials were still too far out to do any damage to Kashyyyk.

Focusing his attention beyond the blinding flashes, the Corellian whooped in jubilation as his eyes, grown accustomed to the darkness overhead, picked out smaller beams of return fire coming from a line of defense spread between Kashyyyk and the advancing Imperial armada.

"He did it!" Solo voiced aloud, his thoughts on the old commandant who would be directing the attack from the Kalyynn base under the protection of its camouflaged dome. "Somehow...maybe, just maybe, my transmissions got through."

"No, Solo, they didn't."

Han spun, immediate recognition sending his hand streaking toward his hip. His weapon cleared leather as the blue stun bolt caught him in the chest and took him to the ground.

Bashu Finn, badly shaken, rose from the crouch of his firing position, stunned by the unexpected move on the Corellian's part. A man, who moments before, had stood with his back to the bounty hunter and under the muzzle of his blaster, had managed to turn and clear leather before he, Finn, had been able to drop him. The Hunter lowered his weapon and moved cautiously toward the prone figure.

Disdainfully, he kicked the blaster from the senseless fingers of the unmoving hand and angrily admonished himself for the action he had been forced to take by the human's reckless move. Sliding the toe of his boot under the Corellian, Finn flipped Solo unceremoniously onto his back and, for the first time, studied the peaceful features of the man he had contracted to capture.

The Corellian was younger than he had expected, with brown hair in thick matted disarray on a smooth, unscarred forehead. Relaxed, the handsome features dispelled the hatred he had read in the snapping hazel eyes that had met his own before he had gotten his shot off. Assured of the Corellian's helplessness, Finn holstered his weapon.

It had taken him six standard time parts of unproductive searching to reach the conclusion that Han Solo had not returned to the smuggling lands or to the worlds which catered to the outlaw trade. It had been instinct and a growing desperation that had brought him to the Kashyyyk system in search of the wayward smuggler. Finn still marveled at the good fortune that had brought him out of hyperspace and into the path of the Corellian freighter. Surprised, he had turned away from a direct confrontation and the Corellian had followed.

Rounding the dark side of the small moon, he had side slipped into the path of the Imperial armada and had survived only because he had been made as an Imperial craft. Permitted an open channel, he had quickly identified himself. A swift exchange with the Imperial command and he had drifted into orbit and waited.

The Commander of Vader's Imperial armada, Akut'n Pactella, was a highly resourceful man. Finn smiled in amusement, recalling the swift efficiency with which the Ravisher had rendered the small Corellian freighter helpless, forcing her down on Karma. Even at that, Finn recalled, he had had a few anxious moments watching the wounded freighter roar over the small plateau.

Pactella had cautioned him that communications would have to be destroyed, leaving the probability of guidance and life support in danger, perhaps even the freighter's stabilizers. And, while he could not guarantee the outlaw's safe landing, he would not target the small craft's engines.

Finn glanced skyward, his helmeted visage scanning the building engagement. From the increased activity, Finn suspected the huge cruisers had released their complement of TIEs and had dropped back to cover the small one-man craft from the rear. He also knew from tracing the heaviest concentration of laser fire, that the small craft had met a wall of solid resistance. He could see no sign that the attack had reached the peaceful world that had been the Imperial target.

Alliance? From what he had picked up from his brief contact with Pactella's flagship, it was to have been a surprise attack, planned and deployed to wreak ruin on the Wookiee world before Alliance ships could rush to her rescue.

Vader had planned well and the trap should have worked, Finn begrudgingly admitted. By the Dark Lord's use of Tala Vito as his information conduit to the Alliance, there was no way the rebel forces should have expected this kind of action against Kashyyyk.

A blinding flash lit up the skies, the brilliance automatically warded off by the heavily filtered lenses in Finn's helmet; the Hunter studied the dissipating energy cloud with growing unease. The Imperial forces had lost one of their long-range interceptors. It took a superb squadron leader to employ small fighters well enough to attempt a coup of that magnitude...and success.

Worry pulled the armored being back to the unconscious Corellian. He knelt and drew back a closed eyelid, studying the pupil carefully before climbing to his feet. The stun had been light, but still one had regretted using. He wanted only one thing, to finish his contract and return with his bounty to Vader; his time was running out.

If Vader's forces could not hold against the unknown resistance protecting the Wookiee world, they would be forced to pull back and regroup. If that happened, he could find himself cut off until the battle was decided. Meanwhile, Vader awaited his return and the fulfillment of his contract.

As soon as the human was recovered enough from the stun to help him complete the remaining clause of the contract, he promised himself, he intended to leave--- and quickly. Regardless of the outcome, he had no wish to be in the Kashyyyk System when the battle was finally decided. He had seen too many battles fought between powerful and sometimes very small forces, to feel overly confident in the Imperials success in this one.

At Vader's mention of the ancient Order of the Blue Falcons, Finn realized he had not been overly surprised that some members of that order might have survived, even as he had survived the end of the Shocktroopers era. What he didn't like to consider was the sudden thought that perhaps they had not only survived, but had grown. Could the Blue Falcons be the devastating force that had stopped the Imperial advance like a solid wall of impregnable opposition before the world of their ancient allies.

His thoughts spiraled into a mass of building uncertainties. He had fought the Falcons in their prime. He knew their skills, their loyalties, and their inbred fighting abilities. But he had also witnessed the fall of the Jedi; without the one, there would never be the other. He shook his head, dismissing his fear; it had to be the Alliance.

More at ease, he fingered the trigger of the shouldered rifle. It would take more than a hotheaded, foolhardy Corellian and a Tatooinian youth, to keep Bashu Finn from completing his contract with Darth Vader.

end Chapter 33

[Continue To Part 34](#)

[Back To Index](#)