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## **The Corellian Mutation**

by [Martie Benedict O'Brien](#)

"Let's not fall to haggling, Solo," said D'Kota Lee.

"Who's haggling? Just seems like someone who scored a couple of yards of gomelinite might offer a friend a fair transport fee."

"Don't forget, that friend has his own couple of yards."

"Since when did that have a bearing on the matter, Lee? Come on, let's hear something that sounds better.

Han Solo leaned leisurely back against the warm, plastex wall of Chance's sauna, stretched lazily and pretended to be possessed of such ennui that his eyes simply would not remain open a moment longer. The other professional haggler yawned hugely. "Actually, I'd rather take Elil home in style ... one of those big commercial cruise ships..."

Solo opened an eye and regarded the red-headed pirate critically through the humid mist. "Falcon's not stylish enough for you, huh, Lee? Those liners may be fancy, but they'll take hell's own time getting you anywhere."

Kota Lee made a broad, placating gesture. "You know I'm doing you a favor as it is, offering you this charter."

Solo's wry smile quirked the corner of his mouth. "A favor? At three thousand credits? That'll maybe cover my expenses on a run to Voola. Why don't you just wait till they outfit your new ship?"

"Cause the lady wants to go home NOW. You know the ladies, Solo."

Yes. Han Solo knew the ladies. "Then make it worth my while, friend."

Kota stood up and went through an elaborate regime of getting the kinks out, ignoring for the moment the Corellian who was waiting with professionally concealed interest and a good deal of amusement to see what offer the wily pirate would come up with next.

Lee sighed with uncomplicated animal pleasure at his muscle tone. He turned to Solo at last, hands on hips, "You in pretty good health, Captain?"

Han remained lazily supine. "Guess so, Lee. Everything works." "Good. If you fly me and Elil to Voola, you'll need all your strength." He was smiling that enigmatic smile Han had come to know and mistrust.

"Hazardous duty?" Solo inquired politely.

"You might say, so." The smile became a grin. "It's mating season."

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She was a fast ship, all right, the Millennium Falcon. Her captain enjoyed a fondness for her verging on the romantic, and he occasionally thought of her in terms of feminine personification more intimate than he might be willing to admit. But Han Solo was a spacer, and a Corellian besides, and that made him definitely a breed apart.

At her captain's bidding, Solo's lady of the void split the atmosphere for Voola, the thunder of her passage and the roar of her high gravity drive surrounding her slender ellipsis.

Solo recalled the dazzlingly awesome natural architecture of the planet from his first and only visit. As they flew high in the windy expanses, great twisted spires of rock thrust up toward them, fingers of stone and soaring chalcedony bridges that spanned vast curves of sky.

Mists hovered thickly at their roots, roiling gently and sometimes drifting high like white plumes on the updrafts. Ivied cliffs jutted above the gleaming sculptures of wind and weather, angular bastions against a mauve sky.

It was a beautiful and wild country, this ancestral home of the Talathi Voolans, the elegant winged women about whom legends proliferated. Han Solo was at the moment, however, getting the real story from a Talathi herself, D'Kota Lee's woman, Elil.

"No, there have been no menfolk among us for generations," she said. "A plague it was, that struck only the Talathi-an, the proud covey sires."

The sadness in her soft, musical voice touched Solo. He had come to know her better since that first friendly encounter when her innocence of human anatomy had occasioned a faintly bawdy exchange which had delighted Chewbacca. Solo had also come to admire her greatly and be charmed by her ingenious moods and unquenchable gaiety.

"No men? But then how...?"

"When the time for mating is, not just the pleasure bonding," and she glanced tenderly at Lee, "but the special time for insuring the species, we take lovers from among the Darss of the Savannah country. I find this practice has been spoken of abroad and has given us a reputation of sorts."

"Not entirely undeserved," Kota put in, and Blil trilled demurely.

"But our offspring are all female," she continued, "and so few can fly. Some born from the last few matings will be gliders, those who can travel the wind currents, but no new flighted ones, alas. And some small nestsisters will never soar the skies at all."

Her voice sank to a murmur. "Perhaps it is as well. There are hazards for those who would spread their wings on the Voolan wind," and only Kota saw the brief compulsive gesture of her right hand as she whispered "Enruki-an."

He was used to Talathi superstition, most of which had an innocent energy to it, like spectral stories passed around in furtive whispers through the darkened creche, but he had heard of Enruki-an before. Enruki-an. The Devil.

Chewie phrased a question which D'Kota Lee translated.

"Yes. The Jaban sent us a Master Geneticist from Blaykls Planet years ago. He studied us, tested our people--this was long before my time--and pronounced our case hopeless. They say he went away in despair. And we devolved little by little from our proud heritage. But," and she brightened, "our time of mating is still a time of high festival and fine pleasures. The Darss will come from their farms to be fought over, and much love will be made." She leaned forward and put a hand on Solo's shoulder, a three-fingered graceful hand with iridescent nails which matched her rioting plumage. "You will be made most welcome, Friend-of-Lee, most welcome, indeed."

Chewie made a pointedly ribald remark to his captain, and Han found his sense of pleasant anticipation, which had been dampened somewhat by Elil's tale of the sorrows of her people, return full force in the festival aura of hospitable license. R and R among the Talathi of Voola was something Han Solo was looking forward to with keen delight. The land was sloping up ever higher now. At El il's direction, Solo took a more westerly course into the heliotrope wash of a lavish sunset.

Ahead lay a massive escarpment, its dominant feature a wind-chiseled promontory like a free-form fortress. It rose strange and start-edged against the vibrant, glowing sky behind, a granite monolith barring the way.

"Mist Eyrie," said Elil. "Home."

Solo brought the Falcon, dwarfed to insect size by the immensity of Mist Eyrie, about in an easy arc, setting her gently down on a sheet of table rock at the monolith's base. Something landed on her hull with a soft, rustling thump. Then another.

"Gliders," commented Elil.

Solo looked up through the transparent canopy to see several young grinning faces peering at him with curiosity, their plumage downier, fluffier, less brilliant than Elil's adult feathering. Teenagers, he guessed.

"You coming, captain?" asked Lee, observing Solo was still grinning back at the little quail. "Reception committee's waiting." "Huh?" said Solo. "Come on, smuggler. Meet my inlaws."

Han made several minor mental adjustments, a thing he did instinctively. A stubborn, but surprisingly flexible man he was; and he survived and had been known to succeed by just such unconsciously natural realignments of attitude to fit the moment. In the privacy of his thoughts, Chewie called his partner 'Cat Thinker,' a Wookiee compliment of high order.

'Cat Thinker' flipped several switches, ending the shut-down-lock sequence. "Let's go!" he said, and the group moved aft, down the ramp and out into the cool, breezy Voolan dusk.

On the canopy, the adolescent gliders giggled.

As the party made their way across the landing area, toward the ritualistically positioned Talathi contingent, Han ventured a few questions.

"The tall one is Nest Mother, a titular appellation..." Han registered a statuesque woman, her bright green plumage seeming to coruscant in the wind. She wore a long, dark tunic not unlike Elil's and her arms were bare. Her wings, which Han guessed would be quite majestic at full span, were folded in repose at her back. "Almad, she is called. At her right and lefthand are Timm and Cedwealmy nest sisters, and behind them stand..."

Han had, quite inadvertently, quit listening when Elil named Cedwea. They were close enough now that he could see her eyes, and the look in them made him miss a beat as he read there a flash akin to startled recognition, followed swiftly

by a rush of communication. Solo would have said it was love, though the idea was absurd. He dismissed it at once as romantic fancy born of the colorful twilight and the exotic aura of the bird women. And then Cedwea half-lifted her hand in greeting and smiled at him.

Only once before had Han Solo been accosted and held captive by the love in a woman's eyes. The bittersweet memory seldom haunted him, but he felt it now as the wonder of instantaneous knowledge rolled over him, leaving him open and sensitive.

"Too much sunset," he muttered. "What were you saying?"

"I said be hush! Almad would welcome you formally," Elil answered in a low voice, then added in a whisper, "The less formal festivities will begin later." She chirruped a laugh.

But Solo found it difficult to concentrate on the hospitality being extended to him and Chewbacca, Friends-of-Lee, for his eye kept straying to the alluring, amber-plumed Cedwea. And each time he stole a glance at her, it seemed that she was looking at him as well, and the sense-heightening between them became palpable, as though at the distance they touched. And the touch was sweet.

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Like the interior of a bell, Mist Eyrie harbored a vast cathedral-like hall at its base. Many echoing meters upward, it rose until, narrowing, its hollow dome became a wide flue, a chimney of rock. There above, reached by a winding staircase that circled the hall in many dizzying steps were the nests, living quarters scooped out of the stone which gave off the main air shaft on long corridors.

Here below was the gathering place. Already it was full of laughter and color, the scents of exotic perfume, and more exotic food and drink. D'Kota Lee, with his brightly plumed hat, blended in nicely with the array of swaying feathers. His arm about Elil, he strolled through the crowd picking up a retinue of fascinated adolescent gliders who whispered and giggled in his wake.

Han, with Chewie beside him, stood still amidst the swirling scene trying to take it all in.

The Talathi women moved like a kaleidoscope of iridescent colors their crests and feathered manes bright and lively in the torch light, silken tunics shimmering like jewels, their eyes a gleam. And among them were the Darss, brawny farmers from the Savannah come for the festival. Already several were ascending the long circular staircase with Talathi women, and though many were pleasing to the eye, their garments cut to enhance their well-muscled physiques, they looked

unmistakably to be men of the soil, and Han didn't wonder they sired flightless offspring.

There was rustle at his elbow. He turned. Cedwea stood beside him and she ventured to put a hand on his arm. "Be welcome, Han-friend-of-Lee, and," she inclined her head toward the Wookiee, "Shewbagga-friehd-of-Lee. Much jealousy will arise, and I shall be challenged most fearfully this evening, but I wish to annex you for myself."

Han wasn't at all sure he understood what she meant, but her nearness was delightful. He smiled down into those eloquent eyes. "The pleasure's mine, Cedwea," Han told her.

He wondered how long they might have stood there, gazing at each other. Her hand was creeping up toward his shoulder, her lips, parting, and he was thinking through the swelling wave of desire building inside him, Something's happening here ... when the crowd laughed and applauded with one voice.

Turning, they saw a sight.

At the hall's center lay a pool, fed perhaps by an underground hot spring, for its surface steamed and rippled, warming the rooms' interior and giving off a pleasant mist. The heated air above it, combined with the drawing properties of the air shaft, created an updraft, and it was here in the buoyant currents that a group of gilders began a dance. A song arose, the Talathi words sounding strange and beautiful as they echoed through the hall, and Talathi musicians with stringed instruments, bells, drums, and flutes played a lively, primitive tune. There was clapping in time to the heavily accented rhythm, as the gliders spread their wings to catch the air currents and, hands moving in an intricate pattern, circled slowly above the pool. Knees slightly bent and tucked beneath them, they let their upper bodies sway with the beat, crest streaming, wings lifting and descending lazily. It was as graceful a thing as Han had ever seen.

He said as much to Cedwea, the spell between them broken for the moment by the innovation of the dance.

"It is a song of mating. They will sing and dance much tonight, and do other things as well. Are you hungry? I would see to your every comfort."

While Chewie stayed to watch the dancing, Han and Cedwea found themselves a space in the shadows where couches had been drawn back out of the torchlight and, with wine to hand, they set about restoring the spell. The Talathi woman was slender and fragile-looking, her skin a pale bronze. Her features were not lovely in the conventionally feminine way Han was accustomed to interpreting, but she was alluring, enigmatic, her eyes and lips like the

representation in an ancient painting. Yet her lilting laughter and her speech, rich with suggestion and seduction, belied any mystery or gravity.

Holding her hand against his cheek and looking into her eyes, Han knew his first impression had been correct. She loved him, or something remarkably close to it. Love at be damned first sight.

She said, "When I saw you there, debarking your craft--she is named for a flighted thing, is she not?"

"Falcon. A hunting bird."

"Yes, I knew. I knew as I first saw you. You are like the Talathi-an of old, a proud master of the sky."

Somewhere, thought Han, there is a big party going on. But nothing was registering on his senses except Cedwea. Slowly, he drew her to him. Their lips met. He slid a hand into the downy warmth beneath her wing. Holding her gently there, he stroked the soft plumes that, like another woman's hair, drifted in golden profusion about her face and shoulders. Their kiss deepened, becoming a thing of pleasure and passion.

"I challenge Cedwea for the right to this male!"

A strident, raised voice. They looked up, a bit dazed and sense-muddled. A young Talathi woman stood before them, arms akimbo, her stance challenging. Han looked at her blankly.

"Griss, you are most irksome," Cedwea sighed. "I give you one chance to withdraw quietly or I shall pin your wings to the wall."

"I invoke the right of challenge," insisted the tall, scarlet Griss. She seemed haughty, confident, and for a moment Han felt a sharp twist of fear in the small of his back. But Cedwea put a hand to his shoulder lightly and said in a bored, almost contemptuous tone, "This should take but a moment. I told you we would be annoyed with challenges. Griss is an impetuous loon, but she will sleep with a Darss tonight. If her wounds permit," Cedwea added with a dark glance for the benefit of the haughty Griss.

Quickly the golden Talathi rose to face the challenger. She removed her formal robe and revealed a short saffron tunic beneath and, to Han's amazement, a long dagger strapped to her slender thigh.

"Tari-a!" Cedwea cried, and her wings spread in one awesome rush to an eight-foot span. She leapt upward...and kept going, soaring magnificently above the

crowd, the torchlight flashing off her wings like fire as she circled. Han had never seen, or even imagined, such a thing before.

She repelled back against the air currents above the pool where the dancers had scattered at the sound of the ritual battle cry, maintaining position, awaiting her adversary.

Griss cast a quick look at Solo, read nothing but hostility there, and shrugged. "it is my right, out-worlder," she said unsheathing her knife.

Han kept silent. The erotic festival of an alien people was no place to make social faux pas, he counseled himself wisely, though his inclination was to sit on Griss until she cooled off.

The red-plummed Talathi turned from him abruptly, took several running steps and bounded upward, flashy, more swift and incisive than Cedwea.

Han wondered how serious this confrontation could become, but there was no one nearby to enlighten him, all revelers having drawn into the room's center to watch the duel. Han joined the group, located Kota, and said sideways, "What the hell's this business, Lee?"

Kota replied in kind, "Weeding but the unfit, as I understand it. They're not usually to the death, but they can get messy. That's Elil's sister, you know, the gold one who took a liking to YOU."

"Feeling's mutual," Han muttered. He was vaguely uneasy at the possibly dire turn events might take, and yet the spectacle was so enthralling, he found himself caught up in the excitement and violent beauty of the fight.

Griss attacked first. The crowd shouted as she dropped her right wing and dove inside Cedwea's guard, slashing at her side. Cedwea twisted with smooth agility and the stroke went wide, Griss continuing through and arcing into a roll, her wings spreading to counter her momentum. Cedwea backed off, preferring to treat Griss' attack as merely another feint, the subtle insult of which was not lost on the crowd.

Griss shifted her knife hand to hand, holding Cedwea's eyes. Before she could attack, however, the golden Talathi back-flipped, dove and struck with astonishing speed, her legs bent and tucked, only to flash out at full stretch, the bright plumage about the lower leg and ankle flaring. She caught Griss unprepared with a stunning blow to the mid-section.

Staggered, the scarlet Talathi doubled over and plummeted. But once again her wings drew her up short of the pool.

"Pel-a celcit! The first touch is mine!" Cedwea sang out. "Do you yield?"

For answer Griss beat the air with her wings and the steam swirled and plumed as she streaked upward again, a red flame. Her knife flashed. Cedwea's glittered in reply. With a ring, they came together, locked at the guards.

The combatants turned slowly, feet seeking an advantage, their arms and shoulders exerting pressure, bearing them first one way then another as each, in turn, gained a momentary ascendancy.

Suddenly, Griss lunged forward. Cedwea went flat out upon her back and the crowd roared. Solo found his grip was tight on his blaster. Lee put a hand on his arm. "Wait," he whispered. "Watch."

And Han saw that the golden one was not injured at all, but was descending rapidly, her huge wings driving her down against the air currents and pulling Griss with her, the seemingly superior position now one of awkward attempts to retreat upward and disentangle from the adversary.

A knife dropped with a splash into the pool. Cedwea's. Han could now see both of the woman's hands about the wrist and shearing guard of her opponent's weapon, mastering the attack, pulling, inexorably pulling her down.

Griss struggled, her scarlet wings fighting desperately for altitude but failing against the stately power of Cedwea's momentum. Meter by meter they descended until they hovered above the surface of the pool, the beat and swish of their wings stirring the water and fanning the crowd like a gale.

Abruptly Cedwea folded her left wing flat, hurled her body to the side and, at the same second, released her hold on Griss' knife. With a flurry, the red Talathi pitched head over heels into the pool. Cedwea completed her roll and rose quickly to avoid the splash. She hung above the humiliated and drenched Griss and said, laboring a bit for breath, "Tari-a celcit! The man is mine! Talathi-an celcit!" And softer, for Griss alone, "Too much wine, nest cousin. Dry off before you catch an ague." There was a momentary lull, then the musicians took up their melody again and the onlookers moved off to reinvestigate the laden tables and commodious couches.

Griss, her waterlogged wings spread upon the pool's surface, looked up sullenly, then she grinned. "May you have a joyful night, victress," she said.

Han had not completely gathered the gist of the encounter, but he found now that his blood was singing. Exhilaration and desire alternately pulled at him. Filled with awe at the beauty and grace and sheer animal vitality of Cedwea, he wanted nothing more at the moment than to possess her and make what he saw and so highly admired his own.

"They're something else, aren't they, Solo?"

"I shouldn't admit this, Lee," Han replied, "but I would have paid to see that. Transport fee, or not."

"And the night's still young, smuggler. The night's still young." Han was hunting around for a suitably flippant rejoinder when Cedwea landed beside him.

"Congratulations, Sister," said Elil.

"A fair fight," the golden Talathi agreed. Turning to Solo, she smiled. "Captain of the Falcon, I have bested a flighted Talathi for you. I have won the right to..." she paused, the ritual banter in her tone mellowing in the warmth of his eyes, "...to share pleasure with you."

"There they go again," Lee said softly to Cedwea's sister. He inclined his head and led his Talathi woman discreetly away on his arm.

"Two Talathi-an at one festival. It seems incredible..." she was saying as Han and Cedwea continued to stare hungrily at each other. Cedwea whispered, and even in the rush of music and voices which surrounded them, Solo could hear her quite clearly. "I have a very nice nest," she said. He would have bet his last credit on it. "Will you walk up Mist Eyrie as the Darss do?" she asked, "or will you fly ... with me?"

Gently, in the sweet flame of his need, he drew her to him and kissed her mouth. "Tonight," he said, "I'll fly."

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High, high above the main hall, through the labyrinthian corridors of hollowed stone where the Talathi dwelt, in a softly lit chamber of dusky colors and welcoming comforts, Cedwea embraced her lover for the first time.

Han kissed her again and again, touching her forehead with his lips, then her eyes, her cheeks, her smooth, gleaming throat where he lingered thirstily, his tongue tasting her flesh.

His hand found the cord that secured her tunic and he unfastened it, then slid the light silken garment down over her breasts to drop with a scarcely heard susserance at their feet. She sighed, her head back, pressing her body against his and feeling the intensity of his need. She had a fine woman's body, slender and willowy, smooth and warm to his touch, with the delightful surprise of soft down rather than the usual feminine adornment between her thighs. His touch made her moan, and she trembled.

"I am afraid," she whispered against his mouth.

"Why afraid?" he asked her.

"I have never wanted love this much. This ... strongly." Her fingers slid inside his shirt, worked at the fastenings. They melted into another kiss as she explored his chest and shoulders, his belly, his muscles tensing with pleasure at her caress.

Beneath her wings, he held her firmly, imprisoning her against his body. She made him release her only for the second it took to slip his shirt and vest off to join her tunic on the carpet. Then she nestled against him once more.

"Don't be afraid, Cedwea," Han murmured. "I would never hurt you. Only give you pleasure."

"Yes, pleasure," the Talathi sighed, "soon, soon."

Her hands moved between them, freeing him from the confines of his jeans, and she whimpered, somewhere between joy and a desire so strong she was unable to articulate it, stroking him, loving him.

They were still standing, Han not only reluctant to let her go, but unsure of how, when it came down to it, to take a woman with wings on her back. Now Cedwea assumed the initiative.

Gently, she eased him back until he sat on the edge of her resilient sleeping surface, then she knelt, removed his boots and slid his jeans down and off. He let her make the moves.

"The legends tell us," Cedwea whispered as she indicated that he was to stretch out upon his back at ease, his head and shoulder pillowed by soft cushions, "that of old the Talathi made love in the freedom of the air, drifting on the high wind-tides in the joy of their union."

Han was mesmerized by her soft, breathy voice and the dark blue depths of her eyes as she knelt above him. Desire for her was at a fever pitch and yet he waited, unwilling to break the delicate, heady mood and mar her loving choreography with impatient lust.

"But I would share the soul of the Talathi with you tonight, Falconmaster," she continued, and she spread her magnificent wings and they lifted her momentarily so that, when she descended, it was astride his body, her knees embracing his hips, her hands delineating the beauty of his face as she framed it gracefully, leaning close to speak his name. Slowly, she eased herself down and back, a tender impalement, an exquisite violation. Then her wings lifted with a whisper ...

and lowered, and lifted again, and she moved only a few centimeters in a vertical pattern, but a blessed few centimeters.

In the alien darkness of her wing-shadow, it was the most incredible sensation he had ever experienced. Han did not know how long he could take it, but at the moment, forever seemed too short a time to enjoy this subtle sensuality.

She called him Talathi-an, then just -an, and finally it was his name she cried out in her beautiful anguish. But when her joy became insufferable, filling her world, and she poised on the verge of that sweet death, Han matched her cadence and quickened it. He circled her waist with his hands and held her to him, then drew her down into his embrace as the rich flow of their bodies' fulfillment merged in a moment of supreme bliss.

Some breaths later, when the tremors of the flesh had quieted and Han found himself lying back, spent, and full of quiet happiness as he stroked her trailing, feathered mane, he heard Cedwea ask him, "Han, are there any of your race, any Corellians, who have wings?"

"No," he answered, sleepy and amused, "not a one."

Cedwea snuggled against him in muzzy contentment. "They should," she said.

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He awoke smiling, until he remembered that she had decided to go for a morning flight, a thing she thought to do while he slept. He eyed the gently rumpled sleeping surface next to him, cold and empty. It gave him no great pleasure. Solo rolled over and tried to go back to sleep, but something was nagging at him, one of those touches of prescience he had become accustomed to dealing with over the years, and which he seldom ignored. He called it intuition.

Sitting up, he glanced around the room. And then, hunched over, arms crossed on his knees while he willed sleep away, he knew for a certainty that something was wrong.

Solo dressed quickly and slapped on his leather gun trick, making fast the tie-down with businesslike economy of motion.

In the intoxicating euphoria of the previous evening, he had 'flown' up to the nests, his arm encircling Cedwea's slender waist. Now he came to the end of the main corridor and looked down twenty meters into the pool. There were, however, the stairs.

In places they hung out over nothing, shelving in a vast spiral without railing. Solo took them quickly, meeting a few gliders and unflighted Talathi along the way.

Cedwea? No. Cedwea had gone flying perhaps. Cedwea? Left the Eyrie before dawn.

Han wasn't exactly worried. Not yet, at any rate, though the not-right feeling had intensified within him. He decided to look up Almad.

She was at breakfast when Solo found her, and she invited him to join her. "You spent a pleasant night, I trust?" The matriarchal Talathi eyed him with dignified good humor.

"Thank you, yes. Your, ah, hospitality here leaves nothing out."

Almad nodded, satisfied, "Have some loopits," she suggested, handing him a plate.

"Almad, I'm worried about Cedwea," Han looked at her directly, letting his prescient sense guide him.

The Talathi Almad put down her cutlery. She was very still. "And why would you worry about Cedwea?" she asked finally.

"She went out to fly, I don't know--hours ago. She should have been back by now. We had ... plans." Solo looked up, frowning, at pains to make her understand the nagging sense of doom building in him. "It's hard to explain, Almad, but I've got a bad feeling about this. Something's not right."

Almad seemed to have gone pale beneath her fine bronze skin. She looked away abruptly. Then, more slowly, reluctantly, back to Solo. She shrugged. "She is late. The wind took her fancy."

"No." Han stood up. He leaned across the table, very serious, determined that the Nest Mother should understand him. "Something's happened to Cedwea. You've got an idea. What is it?" She made an inconsequential gesture. "No, dammit! I want to know. Do your people just disappear? Do you have enemies?"

"What?"

"You are a man of intuition? You have salpor--the foresight?" Her question was strong with portent.

"I make good guesses, Almad." There was an edge to his voice.

The Talathi woman looked down at her hands. "if you are right, if your fear is real ... then it may be that Cedwea has gone to Black Eyrie."

"Black Eyrie? What's that?"

Almad was staring fixedly at her hands, her thumbs hooked, palms rubbing together. Her voice dropped. "It is a place of Enruki-an, a place of great evil. No one has ever returned from Black Eyrie. It is where the Devil lives."

Han felt an icy finger of fear caress his spine. Though he wrote most of this off as primitive superstition, there was obviously something at the dark, malignant core of the Talathi fear, probably something worse than any Devil. "Why would Cedwea go to Black Eyrie," he asked softly.

Almad shrugged again. "She would not go there. But sometimes ... sometimes an unwary flyer will be caught. The Harpies, they seek out the lone flyers...we have seen them." Her voice broke.

Solo could see her horror and distress were only too real. He had no comfort to offer. A cold, hard knot was tightening in his gut. Presently Almad mastered herself. She met Han's eyes. "It may be that we worry needlessly, of course..." she began when there was a commotion at the door behind her. Solo looked up.

Out of a swirl of plumage and raised voices, Griss burst in. "Nest Mother," she cried. "Harpies! The Harpies have taken Cedwea!"

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Her high-gravity engine throbbing, the Millennium Falcon lifted off from the base of Mist Eyrie. She sliced into the sky with urgent speed, drive field flaring in her wake.

Han Solo was trying, with cold precision, to control not only his ship but the wave of anxiety threatening to overwhelm him. He fought it down, commanded his hands to the task of flying without tremor.

Beside him, Chewie was silent, competent. He felt the fear radiating from his friend but chose not to intrude upon its tension with empty conversation, merely handling his co-pilot's duties with dexterity. Solo had thanked the powers that be on more than one occasion for a partner who was not only a good pilot and tough fighter, but also sparing of phrase. Chewie's only comment, when appraised of the situation, had been a query as to how soon they would leave for Black Eyrie.

"More westerly now," said Elil, and Han banked smoothly, sailing his ship between the cliffs and spires, perilously low so that Elil could guide them by sight.

As Almad, Griss and the other Talathi had stood helpless in despair and confusion, Elil had stepped forward. "I will guide you to Black Eyrie," she said, though her voice was unsteady and Han could see the horror of, the place black in her eyes.

It was worse now. She seemed almost frozen with dread the closer they came to the place of evil. Yet Solo supposed the bit of a wider galaxy she'd seen, spacing with her pirate husband, had made it possible for her to offer to guide them at all.

What Lee thought was always difficult to tell. He was silent and composed though Han had the feeling he was doing some heavy computation behind that bland expression.

As though to take her mind off her fear, he said to Elil, "That geneticist the one the Jabans sent you from Blaykls Planet long-ago, who was he?"

Elil shrugged, distracted. "I don't remember. Ah ... Baleron, I think. Yes, his name was Baleron."

"Could be the same," Lee muttered. "They tell a story about a Baleron who claimed to have discovered an elixir of life, a longevity drug or something. They booted him off-planet and he disappeared. They said he was crazy as a kowealt." He laughed shortly. "Supposing Baleron really did discover something like that, it'd make him about five hundred years old now."

"Wait, slowly." It was Elil, her voice trembling. Han brought the Falcon to a hover. "There. Between the white pillars. Can you see it?"

Han could see it. He drew a deep breath and let it out slowly, a man steeling himself for a confrontation with evil.

Black Eyrie was a tower of stone rising half-a-thousand feet from a chaos of broken land at its massive base. It was thick, bending crookedly here and there as though shaped in primal times by some god gone mad, and pierced in places by gaping holes so that the sky shone through, livid splotches on its obsidian face. Tiny figures, winged things, were wheeling about the spire, darting in and out of the jagged rents in its side. It was a nightmarish thing, a malevolent faery dream.

"Enruki-an," said Elil and made the sign against evil. "Those flying things..." Han said.

"They are Harpies. Wicked, without feather or plume. Naked bat wings and eyes of fire." She shivered. "They have taken my nest sister. Alas for Cedwea!"

Han was feeling the hunger to kill--a savage, primitive anger aimed at bat-winged monsters who had taken the beautiful, laughing Cedwea to this place of horror. He was glad to let hatred replace the fear. He welcomed it. Nurtured it. Felt it flow through him, calming the tremors and giving a keen edge to his perceptions.

"Elil, why do the Harpies take Talathi?" he asked.

"No one knows. They just do. No Talathi has ever returned from Black Eyrie to tell."

"One's going to this time."

"Elil, did the Harpies take Talathi-an?" asked Kota Lee, and again Han got the impression Lee was onto something.

Elil looked puzzled. "I do not know," she replied. "But I believe the Talathi-an were gone, dead by the plague before the Harpies came to hunt us. Does it matter?"

"It might," said Lee.

Chewie suggested a plan of action would be in order, and Han heartily agreed. He eyed the hideous monolith with speculative care. "It's an Eyrie, right? Hollow? Or at least labyrinthed. Would Harpies need stairs?" he wondered out loud.

"I think there'll be stairs, Solo," Kota put in. He was leaning forward between the two pilots' seats, as though by acute attention he might uncover the mysteries of Black Eyrie.

"Lee, you know something. Give."

"Don't know a thing, smuggler, but I have some ideas."

Han shrugged. "Okay, we'll look for stairs. Just me and you, Lee."

He half-turned. "I want Chewie and Elil here. Falcon's Harpie-proof. Did the job myself." He winked at Blil who managed a small smile. They made a few more tentative plans and Han and Kota stowed away a few items they thought might be useful while they waited for the cover of darkness. As the sun set behind Black Eyrie, the great holes became pits of flame and eyes of fire.

The night was unrelieved, but for the far-off glitter of stars, a handful of jewel grist tossed on an infinite black baize.

"Corellians have good night eyes?" asked D'Kota Lee. "What's the matter, am I stepping on your feet?"

The two men talked lightly as they made their way over the uneven ground on the valley floor, more part of the process of nerving down than because they had much to say. Gunmen both, and professionals in lines of endeavor not known for

offering much tenure, they were used to hazards, though the unknowns and variables of this situation made it wildly unpredictable.

They broke off their bantering as they noticed the land beginning to slope up, and small gravel slid and crunched beneath their boots. They halted.

High above them, a vast chimney darker even than the sky, hung Black Eyrie, its crazily writhed enormity full of danger and unguessed horrors.

With Han in the lead, they began to work their way around the base of the Cyclopean tower.

After they had completed perhaps a third of their circuit, they found what appeared to be a door, a rocky crevasse which led into the black interior. Turning sideways, first Han, then Kota eased through the stony slit. Unlike Mist Eyrie, there seemed to be no central chamber here. Touching the walls, they gained the impression of a corridor, narrow and low, winding its way into the heart of the rock.

"No echo," Kota remarked softly.

"The hollowed out parts are probably higher up where they fly... Ow! Shit!"

"What is it?"

There was a pause, then, "Steps." The corridor ended in a flight of steps hewn out of the rock.

"Ah, yes, those steps," said Lee and Han could hear the enigmatic smile in his voice as he started up.

"How'd you know steps," asked Han, beginning to climb.

From behind him Lee answered, "I got a feeling someone in this place doesn't fly.

They had climbed perhaps an hour, hugging the wall. Their course turned first this way then that as they felt their way up, and then the steps ended a platform. The walls opened out on all sides and the claustrophobic closeness of the stair gave way to a feeling of air and space. All was silent.

"Try your flash, Solo," Lee suggested.

Han felt around behind his back and unclipped a small rhodium illuminator, pulling back its metal cowl a few centimeters to expose a faint glow within. As the oxygen rich atmosphere touched its element, the glow became more pronounced. Meter by meter the blackness retreated.

Kota whistled.

They stood on a lip of rock thrust out over nothingness. The far wall could not be seen across the immensity of the chasm before them. Behind them were the stairs they'd ascended.

Han turned slowly, gazing up and around at the sheer-sided, hollow enigma of Black Eyrie. "There's got to be a way to get higher. If Cedwea's here, she must be up there somewhere," he said.

"I'd be inclined to agree with you. If my theory's right, this can't be the end of the line."

"It may be the end of the line for you, though," said a third voice. Both men whirled at the sound, Han flashing his blaster out with blinding speed and Lee cross-drawing both his weapons with a terrifying, fluid precision.

Standing in the doorway to the stairs, and illuminated by the flash Han still carried, was a tall, pale figure, saturnine and cold. Han could see no weapon in the hands relaxed at his sides, no hint of violence in either his posture or his composed features, yet the voice was heavy with death.

Kota was staring at the apparition with a mixture of wonder and recognition. Slowly, he nodded, a man with his theory confirmed. "Baleron," he said.

"You know me?" asked the death voice.

Han was too startled for a moment to speak, looking from one man to another, finally fixing on Baleron, at the center of whose chest he was leveling his gun.

"I know OF you, let's say. You're holding up well for four hundred and ninety, or thereabouts."

Baleron laughed, a sound totally devoid of mirth. "My little secret," he said, "and now, of course, yours. Though the knowledge won't give you pleasure for long."

He stared at them with undisguised dislike, though he seemed at pains to cast a veneer of sardonic humor over his hostility, a lunatic lightness. "Breaching the sanctity of my domain, are you? Intrepid adventurers in search of secrets?" Baleron laughed again, his risibility tickled by some bizarre subjective fancy. "I fear you won't learn much here. I, however, welcome the opportunity to increase my store of genetic knowledge..." He paused. A pale hand strayed to his cheek and he frowned as though he would recall an image from the past.

"Where's Cedwea?" Han's voice was harsh, controlled.

Baleron shifted his inward gaze to the Corellian. "Birds?" he laughed maniacally, then, "Shakka!" There was a rush of wings, thick leathery wings, from out of the dark.

"Cover him!" Han yelled to Kota, whirling to fire as the Harpies descended in screeching fury.

Horrible parodies of the Talathi, they were emaciated, gray-skinned women with mouths wide and fang-filled and eyes that flared red. Their long talons reached out to rend flesh.

Han fired. The nearest creature took a laser-bolt in the throat, toppling backward in the air and plummeting into darkness. But more dove out of the shadows, hundreds it seemed, until he and Lee were born down by the sheer weight of numbers, their weapons useless as they were pinned and held savagely by the screaming Harpies. Han was thankful when someone finally clobbered him, and he gratefully lost consciousness.

He came to in what could only be a laboratory, with the pale rose-gray flush of Voolan dawn painting a high eastern window. There were fragile containers of various sizes and shapes and arcane functions covering the surfaces of several tables. A bank of computers possessed the north wall, strangely out-of-date computers, of a make Han had never seen. They appeared to be long-neglected; but the alchemists' array on the tables seemed to be in daily use, spilled powders and half-full jars scattered here and there among the beakers and tubes.

All this Han noted in his first rapid gestalt of the room, for he found immediately that he was bound securely, manacled in fact, to the west wall.

And beside him sat Cedwea.

When she saw he was awake, she said softly, "My Talathi-an. Are the Harpies grown so puissant that they can bring down the mighty Falcon?" Her voice was husky, and she wet her lips.

"Not the Falcon, maybe, but a lot of them can sure slow down a couple of spacers." He paused, feeling a weight of strong emotion inhibiting him. "Cedwea," he said at last, "have they hurt you?"

"Not yet. Nothing has been done to me save this frightful trussing to the wall, though they've given me nothing to drink."

"I wish I had something to give you."

"It's no matter." She leaned back against the wall with a sigh. "Soon, you will not wish to share anything with me. Not water. Not speech. Not love."

"Cedwea, what's happening here?"

She turned to smile at him with her abundant affection, but it was laced with such sadness Han could not imagine a grief, not even death, great enough to author such a look. "I am to become one of them," she said. "One of who?"

"A Harpie. I am to become a Harpie."

Han closed his eyes and saw again the malignant, reeking women with bat wings, talons reaching for his face. It didn't seem possible that the gentle, humorous Talathi could alter in so terrible a transmutation. "How?" he asked.

"It is Baleron. This master of Black Eyrie. The Devil." Cedwea closed her eyes. After a moment, she began to recount the legend of Black Eyrie, now made fact by the grim reality of Baleron's madness.

"Long ago, he came to us as a scientist, after the death of our menfolk. There was something, something he found in his tests, a glandular secretion I discover now. Combined with other drugs, it became a philter which would halt the aging process in humans. Only the Talathi produce it.

"He left to interest his colleagues in his findings. They sent him away in disgrace, and he returned to Voola. It was many hundreds of years ago. He had gone mad, you see, and all his desire was to lengthen his own life." She fell silent.

Han prodded, though the sorrow of the tale, and his guesses at the turn it would take, filled him with anger.

Cedwea continued. "He lured Talathi to this place--they trusted him then--and by force he took from them the tiny drops which would insure his life. And in taking them, he took from them their souls. He took from them their gift of death. The Harpies. They wither and shrivel into hideousness, but they do not die. And now he lives, and the Harpies live, and you die."

She had stopped often to moisten her lips while she told what she had learned from the boastful Baleron. Now she slumped wearily against Han's shoulders and tears wet her cheeks.

"Cedwea..." There was more he wanted to say, much more, but it would wait until he had got them both out of this dream of madness. "Cedwea, where's Lee?"

Before she could answer, the door swung open and D'Kota Lee entered, followed by Baleron and a phalanx of Harpies. Han stood up.

"The glandular secretions of a Urangan male should prove interesting for my comps," said Baleron, indicating the dust-covered machines. And Han wondered

if the deranged Baleron still fancied himself a man of science, still clutched at that feeble fantasy of the past to give meaning to the insanity of the present.

Kota stared impassively at the transparent containers before him. His twin holsters were empty. Solo thought he could see a Harpie hefting one of the pirate's custom blasters awkwardly.

"And you," Baleron turned to Han. "we shall drain you as well, and see what our comps come up with. What race are you?"

"Corellian, you sonofabitch, and I'll burn your fucking computers first."

"Oh, indeed!" Baleron seemed still full of good humor on this bright Voolan morning. A rising breeze stirred the air inside the laboratory.

"Destroy my comps, will you?" His smooth, pale face broke into a laugh, mirthless as always. Han could smell the madness in the room.

At his side Cedwea stood up, marshaling her strength, determined to match her beloved in courage, though it might be her final gesture.

There was a moment of silence, and into that brief pause, D'Kota Lee said, "Well, Han, it looks like Baleron here heard about the Corellian mutation."

Solo hadn't the faintest idea where Lee was going, but he noted that the Urangan gunman was on his feet and unbound and it might be profitable in any case to follow him. "Yeah, must have," he replied. "Damn! Guess you can't keep secrets like that from a gene mixer."

"How'd you hear about it Baleron? Stuck here on Voola all these years?" Lee asked.

"Hear about what?" Baleron looked puzzled, but there was the beginning of an interested gleam in his pale eyes.

"The Corellian Mutation, of course!" Lee sounded impatient. "Why else would you want Solo? Gods' grins, Han, the poor bastard sure missed a lot up in his tower."

"Tell me about the Corellian Mutation," Baleron commanded, motioning the Harpies back, and Han could see clearly now not only both of Lee's blasters but his own as well in bony gray hands. He wondered if Harpies were handy with powered weapons. Talathi were definitely not. Lee knew this. Han wondered if Baleron knew it too.

"Well," Kota began, hitching around to sit on the nearest table, "it's like this..." and launched into a tale worthy of the best bullshitters Han had ever heard.

"...and so," Lee concluded, "they all became smugglers, every damn Corellian--a whole planet full of them--women, kids, dogs, I guess. They all look just like Solo, too, kinda scruffy, kinda cute. The Jabans have put out a huge reward for whoever can isolate the genetic factor responsible for it. Huge reward. Baleron, I swear, they even carry the same make blaster, that Kletts-Rushak 460 there..." Kota pointed and Baleron made the great mistake of turning to see.

Like a snake striking, D'Kota Lee unleashed a move from his relaxed slouch that brought him across the space between them in an instant. His corded arms flashed and Baleron was in a deadly clip lock. Lee jerked him back, the arm at his throat like a steel band.

"Now," to the Harpies, "guns on the table, girls, or I kill him."

The hold on his throat was so tight, Baleron could not speak, but Han saw the fury in his expression. He hoped Lee would end it quickly, but the gunman waited until the nervous Harpies had placed the guns on the indicated table. "Now, outside."

All but one of the gray wretches moved to the door. The other stood indecisively, looking from Baleron to the guns. "Don't try it," cautioned Lee, but she did anyway, snatching at one of Lee's heavy lase-guns and pointing it in Han's direction.

Solo thought later he'd never seen such speed in his life, the way Kota flung himself and Baleron into the Harpie's line of fire.

The blaster whined. Baleron cried out in pain, then Lee released the clip lock and heaved the flailing body at the startled Harpie. She fired again, point blank into Baleron's chest. The others screeched, wings flap-ping, springing at Lee, as Baleron crashed to the floor crushing the armed Harpie beneath him.

"Get your hands clear!" Lee shouted and Han held his chained wrists as far out to either side of his body as he could.

"Duck!" Solo commanded Cedwea, who cringed away to the left as Kota dove for the two remaining blasters. He raked the attacking Harpies with a wide angle shot and they fell smoking, their dark blood leaching slowly from the hot wounds.

Then Lee steadied his aim and burned off Han's imprisoning manacles. Han knelt and held Cedwea protectively as Lee freed her in like manner. "There's more coming, friends," Lee reminded them. He stepped lightly over the bodies on the floor and slammed the door shut. But they could hear the rustle and cries of many Harpies, hundreds of years' worth of Harpies, heading up the tower from below.

Han was already on the comlink. Holding Cedwea, who clung to him, he raised Chewbacca. "Get over here!" he demanded. "We're near the top ... uh, look for wherever the Harpies congregate and shoot as many as you can. Wait a second ... Lee?" The Urangan was pulling himself up to the window in the eastern wall. "Lee, how far is down?"

"Quite a drop, smuggler," he replied over his shoulder. "Great morning for flying, though."

"Cedwea," Han asked gently, "can you fly? Are you strong enough?"

"Yes. I will fly with you as I did the night of the festival."

"What about..."

Kota dropped to the floor at Han's side and took the comlink. "Elil, I need a lift," he said brusquely and flipped off.

"She was awful scared. D'you think she'll do it?"

"She'll do it for me," Lee replied in a manner that closed the subject. He looked around quickly. "Solo, I think it's about time for that detonator you brought along ... look at this, will you?"

Kota had leaned down to retrieve his blaster from the dead Harpie's hand and to do so, he had rolled the body of Baleron over. Death had done what nearly five hundred years of life had not. "That's better," Kota commented. "A man should always look his age."

Cedwea recoiled from the hideous corpse, very little of which was now recognizable as a man at all.

Harpies began to scream at the door as Solo planted his detonator.

"D'you suppose some of these chemicals are incendiaries?" he wondered outloud.

"We'll hope for something pyrotechnically correct," Lee told him.

"Lee!" It was Elil, standing in the high window framed against the glow of morning. "I am terribly afraid! Please hurry!"

"Right with you," her pirate husband answered, swinging up to join her on the ledge. "Coming, you two?" He encircled his Talathi's waist and they dropped from sight.

"The window, quick!" Han shouted. Cedwea spread her wings and leapt as the Corellian scrambled up over the equipment. The door gave way, and suddenly the room was full of Harpies. "Now, love, now!" he cried, and together they stepped out into the air.

There was a drop, then the great golden wings caught the wind and they were airborne. Ahead the sun flashed off Eli's sleek plumage. Harpies followed.

Han could only trust to Cedwea's superior speed, but his extra weight held them back and the scream of pursuit came ever closer. Suddenly, Cedwea cried out in terror as a Harpie fastened itself to her ankle. Han burned it, swearing under his breath as the horrible creature dropped away. But another took its place.

"Han!" Cedwea panicked. "Han, I'm so afraid!"

So, if the truth be known, was he. Lase-gun heating up, he tried to pick off as many as he could as she wheeled in the air, but there were so many! They began to drop.

"Never give up," he chanted. "Goddamn never give up!" and he clutched her ever tighter as they fell.

Then, somehow, incredibly, the attack halted and the Harpies screeched away in terror. Lase-bolts streaked past them, precariously close but guided by a sure-handed, a fur-handed, aim, and then they tumbled onto a familiar metallic surface and Han Solo was home again.

The upper hatch opened and a ridiculously plumed hat popped into view. "Care to come in for a drink?" D'Kota Lee asked.

"A double for me, and a triple for the lady," Han answered. "Come on, lovely," he said softly to Cedwea, helping her toward the open hatch of the slow-moving starship.

They were inching across the Falcon's hull when the detonator decided to do its thing. There was a muffled 'whomp', then something louder, and finally a rending boom. They stared in awe.

It was as though the mouth of Hell had opened. The upper half of Black Eyrise exploded outward in a scintillating burst of fragmented stone. Then great flames belched up from the jagged remains, and with the flames, came a terrible fountain of living death: Harpies, hundreds and hundreds of Harpies and pieces of Harpies, blown upward in flames and arcing down in burning destruction.

Han held Cedwea close, and they watched silently as the horror of Black Eyrise came to its ruinous end. And when it was over and only the smoke and riven

stone remained, Han said, "I don't know, honey, what do you think? Was that pyrotechnically correct?"

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It was some time before Han Solo could get back to Voola, his line of work providing erratic vacation schedules at best. But one spring afternoon found the Millennium Falcon setting down gracefully on the table rock landing area at the foot of Mist Eyrie.

The rangy spacer strode down his ship's boarding ramp and asked the first Talathi he met where he might find Cedwea.

"Ah, Cedwea!" she smiled. "That fortunate young woman trains her fledgling on the ledge above." She pointed up the rock. "There are stairs for the unflighted," she offered.

Han nodded his thanks and started up, the longing to see Cedwea which had been a soft glow within him for many months now becoming a bright spark of joy.

Fledgling, huh? He grinned, wondering who the lucky Darss had been. And then something she'd said at their parting came back to him. She had told him that she could not fly with him now, could not go off-planet for even a short trip, not for many months. Elil would understand, she'd said. He hadn't pressed her, but had promised to return when he could. And here he was.

Han stepped out onto the dizzying ledge, always at home as long as he was in the freedom of the sky.

Cedwea stood with her back to him, wings folded. She wore a short everyday tunic of a pleasing ecru shade. Before her, suspended in the air, was a fluffy little package Han recognized as a Talathi baby no more than a year old. The little one was chubby and covered with a fine chick's down, cuddly-looking and clumsy, but its stubby wings fanned the breeze with surety and it turned and flipped happily at its mother's direction.

Han watched a moment in silence. "She's beautiful," he said at last.

Cedwea turned, her smile lighting and warmth kindling in her eyes. "My Talathi-an! Han Solo, beloved!" she cried, and they embraced.

She leaned against his shoulder, holding him in wordless happiness, and Han felt a great peace descend on him. There was a special magic to Cedwea, and Han knew he would not forget this moment high on the crest of Mist Eyrie.

"I didn't know you had a child," Solo said, watching the tiny Talathi cavort. "She's flighted, I see."

"Oh, yes," Cedwea agreed. "It is an honor and a joy to bear a flighted offspring."

She was smiling, but there was something else behind the smile Han could not read, and as he looked at the baby, all russet fluff, he thought the face, even in the soft contours of youth had not the Talathi look. A beautiful face in its way, but more serious in its aspect than the alluring gaiety of the other young Talathi he'd seen, and he wondered if this small one was not in some way a disappointment to her mother. Presently Cedwea released him and said, "Come, you must meet Solonai."

Solonai? Solo-nai? "Cedwea, are you telling me..."

"Of course, Talathi-an! I knew before you left that we had made a child, and I could not leave the Eyrie then."

Han didn't know what to say. He supposed he had a few children somewhere, but he had never met one of them. A traveling man doesn't often have that opportunity.

Cedwea took him by the hand, and in the strength of her grip, he felt the importance of something coming, and he knew a strange thing had happened, though what it was only Cedwea could tell him.

She caught at this thought and answered to it, "Yes, my beloved, an odd sort of occurrence you would call it. Here, Solonai," Cedwea called, and the fledgling wheeled buoyantly and came to land in the crook of her arm.

"Solonai," said the golden Talathi, "this is Han Solo. This is your father."

The baby peered curiously at the spacer. Han reached out and put a finger to its rounded cheek. Even if he had thought of anything to say, he could not have said it at that moment.

He glanced at Cedwea and was suddenly held still by her expression. Love and wonder reached out to enfold him.

"Han Solo," she said, "this is Solonai, your son."

**end**

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