

## THE HAN SOLO TRILOGY

By A. C. CRISPIN

### The Paradise Snare

This book is dedicated to my friend, Thia Rose.

When we were twelve, we swore we'd always be best friends . . . . .  
and, more years later than we like to count, we still are.

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Writing in the Star Wars universe is like becoming a part of a community-or, even, a family. The writers are encouraged to read each other's books, and there are dozens of nonfiction and technical books devoted to the characters, hardware, planets, and so forth. Writers trade information and tips back and forth, and generally help each other out. Thus, many, many people helped me with this book. With the caveat that any mistakes readers may find are my own, I would like to thank the following Kevin Anderson, who gave me my first chance to write in the Star Wars universe. Kevin and Rebecca Moesta also helped with information about the Star Wars background and characters, as well as hand-holding, encouragement, and sage advice. Michael Capobianco, fellow writer and significant other, for brainstorming, research help, intelligent advice, and fixing dinner when I was too busy writing to even realize I was hungry. Thanks, dear. Bill Smith and Peter Schweighofer of West End Games for helping me figure out answers to such odd and esoteric questions as, "What does Han wear for underwear?" They "unstuck" me from quandaries more times than I can count. Tom Dupree and Evelyn Cainto of Bantam Books for assistance, advice, and encouragement. Sue Rostoni and Lucy Autrey Wilson of Lucasfilm for the "true facts." Michael A. Stackpole, for help figuring out how to break a tractor beam, and other advice relating to ships and piloting. Steve Osmanski, for reading the manuscript and giving sage advice on "techie" stuff. As always, Kathy O'Malley, friend and writing buddy, for hand-holding and an occasional, well-deserved kick in the pants. And, of course, George Lucas, who started it all. Star Wars blew me away the first time I saw it, and it's been an honor to contribute to the saga in a small way. Thanks again, and may the Force be with you all.

one

### Trader's Luck

The ancient troopship, a relic of the Clone Wars, hung in orbit over the planet Corellia, silent and seemingly derelict. Looks were deceiving, however. The old Liberator-class vessel, once called Guardian of the Republic, now had a new life as Trader's Luck. The interior had been gutted and refitted with a motley assortment of living environments, and now contained nearly one hundred sentient beings, many of them humanoid. At the moment, however, only a few of them were awake, since it was the middle of the sleep cycle.

There was a watch on the bridge, of course. Trader's Luck spent much of its time in orbit, but it was still capable of hyperspace travel, even though it was slow by modern standards. Garris Shrike, the leader of the loosely allied trading "clan" that lived aboard the Luck, was a strict taskmaster, who followed formal ship's protocols. So there was always a watch on the bridge.

Shrike's orders aboard the Luck were always obeyed; he was not a man to cross without a good reason and a fully charged blaster. He ruled the clan of traders as a less-than-benevolent despot. A slender man of medium height, Garris was handsome in a hard-edged way. Streaks of silver-white above his temples

accentuated his black hair and iceblueeyes. His mouth was thin-lipped; he seldom smiled--and never with goodhumor. Garris Shrike was an expert shot and had spent his early years as a professional bounty hunter. He'd given it up, though, due to bad "luck" meaning that his lack of patience had caused him to lose the richest

bounties reserved for live delivery. Dead bodies were frequently worth far less.

Shrike did possess a warped sense of humor, especially if the pain of others was involved. When he was gambling and winning, he was subject to bouts of manic gaiety, especially if he was also drunk.

As he was at the moment. Sitting around the table in the former wardroom of the enlisted officers, Shrike was playing sabacc and drinking tankards of potent Alderaanian ale, his favorite beverage.

Shrike peered at his card-chips, mentally calculating. Should he hold pat and hope to complete a pure sabacc? At any moment the dealer could push a button and the values of all the card-chips would shift. If that happened, he'd be busted, unless he took an additional two and tossed most of his hand into the interference field in the center of the table.

One of his fellow players, a hulking Elomin suddenly turned his tusked head to glance behind him. A light on one of the auxiliary "status" panels was blinking. The huge, shaggy-furred Elomin grunted, then said in guttural Basic, "Something funny about the lockout sensor on the weapons cache, Captain."

Shrike insisted on "proper" protocol and chain of command, especially as it applied to himself. Unless engaged in some planetside caper, he always wore a military uniform while aboard the Luck--one he'd designed himself, patterned on the dress uniform of a high-ranking Moff. It was hung about with "medals" and "decorations" Shrike had picked up in pawnshops across the galaxy.

Now, hearing the Elomin's warning, he glanced up a little blearily, rubbed his eyes, then straightened up and dropped his card-chips onto the tabletop. "What is it, Brafid?"

The giant being wrinkled his tusked snout. "Not sure, Captain. It's reading normal now, but something flickered, as though the lock shorted out for a second. Probably just a momentary power flux."

Moving with such unusual grace and coordination that even the foppish "uniform" couldn't detract from his presence, the captain rose and walked around the table to study the readouts himself. All signs of intoxication had vanished.

"Not a power flux," he decided after a moment. "Something else."

Turning his head, he addressed the tall, heavyset human on his left.

"Larrad, look at this. Somebody shorted out the lock and is running as if to fool us into thinking it's just a power flux. We've got a thief aboard. Is everyone armed?"

The man addressed, who happened to be Shrike's brother, Larrad Shrike, nodded, patting the holster that hung on the outside of his thigh.

Brafid the Elomin fingered his "tingler"--an electric prod that was his weapon of choice--though the hairy alien was large enough to pick up most humanoids and break them over his knee.

The other person present, a female Sullustan who was the Luck's navigator, stood up, patting the

scaled-down blaster she wore. "Ready for action, Captain!" she squeaked. Despite her diminutive height, flapping jowls, and large, appealing bright eyes, Noon Dalvo appeared almost as dangerous as the hulking Elomin who was her closest shipboard friend.

"Good," Shrike grunted. "Nooni, go post a guard over the weapons locker, just in case he comes back. Larrad, activate the biosensors, see if you can ID the thief and where he's heading."

Shrike's brother nodded and bent over the auxiliary control board.

"Corellian human," he announced after a moment. "Male. Young.

Height, 1.8 meters. Dark hair and eyes. Slender build. The bioscanner says it recognizes him. He's heading aft, toward the galley."

Shrike's expression hardened until his eyes were as cold and blue as the glaciers on Hoth. "The Solo kid," he said. "He's the only one cocky enough to try something like this." He flexed his fingers, then hardened them into a fist. The ring he wore, made from a single gem of Devaronian blood-poison, flashed dull silver in the bulkhead lights.

"Well, I've gone easy on him so far, 'cause he's a good swoop pilot, and I never lost when I bet on him, but enough is enough. Tonight, I'm going to teach him to respect authority, and he's going to wish he'd never been born."

Shrike's teeth flashed, much brighter than the gem in his ring. "Or that I'd never 'found' him seventeen years ago and brought his sniveling, pants-wetting little behind home to the Luck. I'm a patient, tolerant man . . ." he sighed theatrically, "as the galaxy knows, but even I have my limits."

He glanced over at his brother, who was looking rather uncomfortable.

Garris wondered if Larrad was remembering the Solo kid's last punishment session a year ago. The youth hadn't been able to walk for two days.

Shrike's mouth tightened. He wouldn't tolerate any softness among his subordinates. "Right, Larrad?" he said too softly.

"Right, Captain!"

Han Solo gripped the stolen blaster as he tiptoed along the narrow metal corridor. When he'd wired into the sim and jimmied the lock into the weapons cache, he'd only had a moment to reach in and grab the first weapon that came to hand. There'd been no time to pick and choose.

Nervously, he pushed strands of damp brown hair back from his forehead, realizing he was sweating. The blaster felt heavy and awkward in his hand as he examined it. Han had seldom held one before, and he only knew how to check the charge from the reading he'd done.

He'd never actually fired a weapon. Garris Shrike didn't permit anyone but his officers to walk around armed. Squinting in the dim light, the young swoop pilot flipped open a small panel in the thickest part of the barrel and peered down at the readouts. Good. Fully charged.

Shrike may be a bully and a fool, but he runs a taut ship.

Not even to himself would the youth admit how much he actually feared and hated the captain of Trader's Luck. He'd learned long ago that showing fear of any sort was a swift guarantee of a beating---or worse.

The only thing bullies and fools respected was courage--or, at least, bravado. So Han Solo had learned never to allow fear to surface in his mind or heart.

There were times when he was dimly aware that it was there, deep down, buried under layers of street toughness, but anytime he recognized it for what it was, Han resolutely buried it even deeper.

Experimentally, he swung the blaster up to eye level and awkwardly closed one brown eye as he sighted along the barrel. The muzzle of the weapon wavered slightly, and Han cursed softly under his breath as he realized his hand was trembling. Come on, he told himself, show some backbone, Solo. Getting off this ship and away from Shrike is worth a little risk.

Reflexively, he glanced over his shoulder, then turned back just in time to duck under a low-hanging power coupling. He'd chosen this route because it avoided all the living quarters and recreation areas, but it was so narrow and low-ceilinged that he was beginning to feel claustrophobic as he tiptoed forward, resisting the urge to turn and look back over his shoulder.

Ahead of him, the near tunnel widened out, and Han realized he was almost at his destination. Only a few more minutes, he told himself, continuing to move with a stealthy grace that made his progress as soundless as that of a wookiee's furred toe-pads. He was skirting the hyperdrive modules now, and then a larger corridor intersected. Han turned right, relieved that he could now walk without stooping.

He crept up to the door of the big galley and hesitated outside, his ears and nose busy. Sounds . . . yes, only the ones he'd been expecting to hear. The soft clatter of metal pans, the sploooch of dough being punched, and then the faint sounds of it being kneaded.

He could smell the dough, now. Wastrel bread, his favorite. Han's

mouth tightened. With any luck, he wouldn't be here to eat any of this particular batch.

Sticking the blaster into his belt, he opened the door and stepped into the galley. "Hey . . . Dewlanna . . ." he said softly. "It's me.

I've come to say goodbye."

The tall, furred being who had been vigorously kneading the wastrel dough swung around to face him with a soft, inquiring growl.

Dewlanna's real name was Dewlannamapia, and she had been Han's closest friend since she'd come to live aboard Trader's Luck nearly ten years ago, when Han had been about nine. (The young swoop pilot had no idea of when he'd been born, of course. Or who his parents had been. If it hadn't been for Dewlanna, he wouldn't even have known that his lastname was "Solo.") Han couldn't speak Wookiee--trying to reproduce the growls, barks, roars, and rumbling grunts made his throat sore, and he knew he sounded ridiculous--but he understood it very well. For her part, Dewlanna couldn't speak Basic, but she understood it as well as she did her own language. So communication between the human youth and the elderly Wookiee widow was fluent, but . . . different.

Han had gotten used to it years ago and never thought about it anymore.

He and Dewlanna just . . . talked. They understood each other perfectly. Now he hefted the stolen blaster, careful not to point it at his friend.

"Yes," he replied, in response to Dewlanna's comment, "tonight's the night. I'm getting off Trader's Luck and I'm never coming back."

Dewlanna rumbled at him worriedly as she automatically resumed kneading her dough. Han shook his head, giving her a lopsided grin. "You worry too much, Dewlanna. Of course I've got it all planned. I've got a spacesuit stashed in a locker near the robot freighter docks, and there's a ship docked there now that will be departing as soon as it's unloaded and refueled. A robot freighter, and it's headed where I want to go."

Dewlanna punched her dough, then growled a soft interrogatory. "I'm heading for Ylesia," Han told her. "Remember I told you all about it?"

It's a religious colony near Hutt space, and they offer pilgrims sanctuary from the outside universe. I'll be safe from Shrike there.

And"--he held up a small holodisk where the Wookiee cook could see it--"look at this! They're advertising for a pilot! I already used up the last of my payout credits from that job we pulled, to send a message, telling them I'm coming to interview for the job."

Dewlanna roared softly.

"Hey, I can't let you do that," Han protested, watching the cook set the loaves into pans and slide them into the thermal grid to bake.

"I'll be

okay. I'll lift some credits on my way to the robot ship. Don't worry, Oewlanna."

The Wookiee ignored him as she shuffled quickly across the galley, her hairy, slightly stooped form moving rapidly despite her advanced age.

Dewlanna was nearly six hundred years old, Han knew. Old even for a Wookiee.

She disappeared into the door of her private living quarters, and then, a moment later, reappeared, clutching a pouch woven of some silk material that might even, from the look of it, be Wookiee fur.

She held it out to him with a soft, insistent whine.

Han shook his head again, and childishly put his hands behind his back.

"No," he said firmly. "I'm not taking your savings, Dewlanna. You'll need those credits to buy passage to join me."

The Wookiee cocked her head and made a short, questioning sound. "Of course you're going to join me!" Han said. "You don't think I'm going to leave you here to rot on this hulk, do you? Shrike gets crazier every year. Nobody's safe aboard the Luck. When I get to Ylesia and get settled in, I'm going to send for you to join me. Ylesia's a religious retreat, and they offer their pilgrims sanctuary. Shrike won't be able to touch us there."

Dewlanna reached inside the pouch, her hairy fingers surprisingly dexterous as she sifted through the credit vouchers inside. She handed several to her young friend. With a sigh, Han relented and took them.

"Well . . . okay. But this is just a loan, okay? I'm going to pay you back.

The salary the Ylesian priests are offering is a good one."

She growled her assent, then, without warning, reached out to ruffle his hair with her massive paw, leaving it sticking out in wild disarray.

"Hey!" Han yelped. Wookiee head rubs were not to be taken lightly.

"I just combed my hair!"

Dewlanna growled, amused, and Han drew himself up indignantly. "I do not look better scruffy. I keep telling you, the term 'scruffy' ain't complimentary among humans."

He stared at her, his indignation vanishing as he realized that this was the last time he'd see her beloved furry face, her gentle blue eyes, for a long time. Dewlanna had been his closest--and frequently only--friend for so long now. Leaving her was hard, very hard.

Impulsively, the Corellian youth threw himself against her warm, solid bulk, hugging her fiercely. His head reached only to the middle of her chest. Han could remember when he'd barely stood as tall as her waist.

"I'm going to miss you," he said, his face muffled against her fur, his eyes stinging. "You take care of yourself, Dewlanna."

She roared softly, and her long, hairy arms came around him as she returned the embrace.

"Well, ain't this a touching sight," said a cold, all-too-familiar voice.

Han and Dewlanna both froze, then wheeled to face the man who'd entered through the Wookiee's quarters. Garriss Shrike lounged in the doorway, his handsome features set in a smile that made Han's blood coagulate in his veins. Beside him, he could feel Dewlanna shudder, either with fear or loathing.

Two other crew members--Larrad Shrike and Brafid the Elomin--were visible over Shrike's shoulder. Han balled his fists with frustration.

If it had only been Shrike, he might've chanced jumping the Luck's Captain. With Dewlanna to help him, they might have been able to subdue Garriss, but with Larrad and the Elomin also present, they didn't have a chance.

Han was acutely conscious of the stolen blaster shoved into his belt.

For a moment he considered going for it, but he abandoned that idea.

Shrike was known for being fast on the draw. There was no way he could beat him, and that might get both Dewlanna and himself killed. Shrike was clearly in a rage.

Han licked dry lips. "Listen, Captain," he began. "I can explain--" Shrike drew himself up, his eyes

narrowing. "You can explain what, you cowardly little traitor? Stealing from your family? Betraying those who trusted you? Stabbing your benefactor in the back, you sniveling little thief?"

"But--" "I've had it with you, Solo. I've been lenient with you so far, because you're a blasted good swoop pilot and all that prize money came in handy, but my patience is ended." Shrike ceremoniously pushed up the sleeves of his bedizened uniform, then balled his hands into fists. The galley's artificial lighting made the blood-jewel ring glitter dull silver. "Let's see what a few days of fighting off Devaronian blood-poisoning does for your attitude--along with maybe a few broken bones. I'm doing this for your own good, boy. Someday you'll thank me."

Han gulped with terror as Shrike started toward him. He'd lashed out at the trader captain once before, two years ago, when he'd been feeling cocky after winning the gladiatorial Free-For-All on Jubilar--and had been instantly sorry. The speed and strength of Garriss's returning blow had snapped his head back and split both lips so thoroughly that Dewlanna had had to feed him mush for a week until they healed.

With a snarl, Dewlanna stepped forward. Shrike's hand dropped to his blaster. "You stay out of this, old Wookiee," he snapped in a voice nearly as harsh as Dewlanna's. "Your cooking isn't that good."

Han had already grabbed his friend's furry arm and was forcibly holding her back. "Dewlanna, no!"

She shook off his hold as easily as she would have waved off an annoying insect and roared at Shrike. The captain drew his blaster, and chaos erupted.

"Noooo!" Han screamed, and leaped forward, his foot lashing out in an old street-fighting technique. His instep impacted solidly with Shrike's breastbone. The captain's breath went out in a great whoosh and he went over backward. Han hit the deck and rolled. A tingler bolt sizzled past his ear.

"Larrad!" wheezed the captain as Dewlanna started toward him.

Shrike's brother drew his blaster and pointed it at the Wookiee.

"S top, Dewlanna!"

His words had no more effect than Han's. Dewlanna's blood was up--she was in full Wookiee battle rage. With a roar that deafened the combatants, she grabbed Larrad's wrist and yanked, spinning him around and snapping him in a terrible parody of a child's "snap the whip" game. Han heard a crunch, mixed with several pops as tendons and ligaments gave way. Larrad Shrike shrieked, a high, shrill noise that carried such pain that the Corellian youth's arm ached in sympathy.

Grabbing the blaster from his belt, Han snapped off a shot at the Elomin who was leaping forward, tingler ready and aimed at Dewlanna's midsection.

Brafid howled and dropped to the floor. Han was amazed that he'd managed to hit him, but he didn't have long to wonder about the accuracy of his aim.

Shrike was staggering to his feet, blaster in hand, aimed squarely at Han's head. "Larrad?" he yelled at the writhing heap of agony that was his brother. Larrad did not reply.

Shrike cocked the blaster and stepped even closer to Han. "Stop it, Dewlanna!" the captain snarled at the Wookiee. "Or your buddy Solodies!"

Han dropped his blaster and put his hands up in a gesture of surrender.

Dewlanna stopped in her tracks, growling softly.

Shrike leveled the blaster, and his finger tightened on the trigger.

Pure malevolent hatred was etched upon his features, and then he smiled, pale blue eyes glittering with ruthless joy. "For insubordination and striking your captain," he announced, "I sentence you to death, Solo. May you rot in all the hells there ever were."

As Han froze, expecting the bolt to fry him any moment, Dewlanna roared, shoved Han aside, and leaped for Shrike. The blaster's energy

beam caught her full in the chest, and she went down in a heap of charred fur and burned flesh.

"Dewlanna!" Han yelled in anguish. With a quickness he hadn't known he possessed, he dived at Shrike, hitting the captain in a driving tackle around his knees. Shrike went over backward again, and this time his head impacted solidly with the deck. He sagged, out cold.

Han crawled back to his friend, turning her over gently, seeing the great hole the blaster beam had bored into her chest. He knew immediately that the wound was mortal. No medical droid ever constructed could heal this.

Dewlanna moaned, gasped, and fought with all her great Wookiee strength to breathe. Han slid his arms beneath her shoulders and tried to ease her struggle. Her blue eyes opened and, after a moment, fixed on his.

Lucidity returned, and she rumbled softly.

"No, I won't leave you!" Han replied, clutching her harder. Tears blurred his vision, and she swam below him in a sea of brown fur. "I don't care if I get away! Oh, Dewlanna . . ."

Making a great effort, she raised a huge, furred paw-hand and grasped his arm. Han had to struggle to translate her speech. "I know," he choked, talking aloud so she'd know he understood her. "I know you care about me .

. . ." she rumbled again, "as much as you do your own children."

Han swallowed, his throat tight and aching. "I . . . I feel the same way, Dewlanna. You're the closest thing to a mother I'll ever have."

A long moan of anguish made her shudder. She rumbled at him again.

"No," Han insisted. "I'm not leaving you. I'll stay with you till .

. . . till . . .

." He couldn't finish the sentence.

Dewlanna grabbed his arm with a ghost of her old strength and growled at him urgently. "If I . . ." Han was having trouble comprehending her slurred speech, "if I die . . . nothing? Oh, you're saying that if I



don't live, you'll have died for nothing?"

She nodded, her eyes in their nest of hair holding his with all the intensity she could muster. Han shook his head stubbornly. How could he abandon her to die alone?

Dewlanna rumbled softly, faintly. "Yeah, I'm sure you'll be safe, one with the life-power," Han said, trying to sound sincere. He knew some Wookiees believed in a unifying power that bound all of existence together.

Personally, he thought this power--he'd never been able to translate the term accurately, the Wookiee word could have meant "strength," or "force," too--that Dewlanna believed in so steadfastly was just superstition.

But if it comforted her to believe in it during her dying moments, Han wasn't going to argue with her. He remembered the words she'd said to him several times. "Dewlanna, may the life-power be with you . . ."

For a moment he wished that he, too, could believe . . .

She moaned with pain. Han could see she was going fast. Then Dewlanna rumbled feebly, and again he automatically translated. "Your last request . . ." He choked, barely able to get the words out, "You want me . . . to go . . . to live. And to be . . . happy."

Han struggled not to break down. "Okay!" he agreed. "I'll go. I still have time to get aboard that robot ship before it takes off."

Dewlanna whined faintly.

"I promise," he agreed, his voice ragged. "I'll go now. And I swear I'll always remember you, Dewlanna."

She was beyond speech now, but he was sure she'd heard him. He laid her gently on the deck, then rose and picked up the blaster. Then, after giving Dewlanna one final look, Han turned and raced out the door.

His running feet resounded through the corridors of Trader's Luck; the time was past for stealth. He had to reach the docking bay, and that robot Ylesian freighter! Han had no idea when it was due to blast away from the Luck, but the loading schedule posted for the space dockworkers had listed it as being ready for blastoff as soon as the droids finished fueling. And when he'd swiped the spacesuit and hidden it, they'd just started that process.

The Ylesian Dream might be leaving any moment!

Gasping, Han sprinted for the lock, his feet thudding along the decks that had been his playground ever since he was old enough to remember.

In the distance, he could hear sleepy voices, interspersed with shouts and orders.

I can't let them catch me. Shrike will kill me. The certainty lent speed to his flying feet.

He skidded around the final turn and grabbed the spacesuit he'd hidden behind some fueling equipment. The helmet flopped over his arm, banging him in the midsection as he hastily keyed in the code he'd stolen into the airlock door.

Seconds passed The sounds of pursuit were growing louder. But surely they'd think he was headed for the shuttle deck or even the lifepods.

Nobody would guess he'd be crazy enough to try stowing away on a robot freighter--at least that's what he was counting on . . .

The lock hissed open. Han leaped inside, closed the hatch, and began yanking on the spacesuit. He checked the air storage. Full. Good.

He'd originally planned to bring along some extra air paks, but he didn't dare venture back out. The pak on the suit was good for two days. That should

be enough, unless the Dream was a really slow vessel. Since it was a robot drone, he had no way of discovering what course it would be following, or how fast it was scheduled to go.

Han grimaced. Only a desperate man would use this method of escape.

He was desperate, all right. He just hoped he wouldn't arrive on Ylesia dead because he'd run out of air.

Let's see . . . food pellets . . . full. Water tank . . . full.

Good. That was Captain Shrike again, insisting that all ship's equipment be maintained in perfect working order.

Han dragged the suit up over the arms of his ship's gray jumpsuit and closed the seam running up the front. He picked up the helmet, clumsy because of the gloves, and settled it over his head. It was mostly glassine, and he could see every direction except directly behind him.

A bank of bolos ran around the bottom rim of the helmet, giving him his vitals, amount of air remaining, and all the other information he needed to survive. Han could "talk" to his suit in a limited fashion by bumping his chin against the communications lever and giving the suit instructions concerning his temperature, air mix, and so forth.

Okay, this is it, the young man thought as he clumped over to the connecting hatch and keyed in the final sequence to equalize pressures between the lock and the Ylesian Dream. He could faintly hear a hiss as the air was pumped out of the lock. The Dream, being a robot, didn't need air to operate. The ship would be filled only with vacuum.

Finally, the hatch opened, and Han stepped inside.

It was crowded with equipment and cargo, and the corridors were very narrow. The Dream wasn't constructed to accommodate a living crew, only for routine maintenance, and Han had to turn sideways to squeeze in. The youth was fleetingly grateful that all standard engineering was designed to function in gravity. Otherwise, he might've had to contend with zero gee, and that would have been a real pain.

He'd been outside the Trader's Luck with the welding crew in spacesuits several times since he'd been considered old enough for hazardous ship's duty, hanging in space, tethered to the ship only by a seemingly fragile umbilical. It had been kind of exciting the first couple of times, but Han didn't particularly care for weightlessness, and he'd soon learned never to look "down." Seeing nothing but space beneath his feet for light-years and light-years was enough to make his head swim.

Han clumped toward the "bridge," figuring that was where the maximum amount of room would be. He reached it in only moments--the Dream was a small ship. If her cargo list was correct, she'd brought in a shipment of top-grade glitterstim spice, and would be leaving with a cargo of high-quality Corellian electronic components that could be used in factory maintenance.

Han wondered for a moment whom Garris Shrike had paid off to be able to receive a shipment of spice. The substance was rigidly controlled by most planetary governments and also by the Imperial trade commission.

He turned sideways to enter the bridge--and froze.

What in the name of all the Sons of Barab is an astromech droid doing on the bridge? Everyone knew a droid couldn't pilot a ship by itself, so it couldn't be piloting. Han grimaced behind the glassine helmet.

This droid must be there as a sort of burglar alarm, a sophisticated communications device to help deter portside thieves or spacepirates.

Han knew that one of the reasons the Ylesian priests were eager to hire a pilot--preferably a Corellian, their ad had read--was that they'd been losing robot ships to piracy.

As he froze, hoping the droid wasn't aware of his presence, the youngman felt the Dream shudder. We're undocking! I've got to get braced for breakaway thrust!

Quickly he edged away from the bridge and headed back toward the cargo area. Finally, he found what he was looking for, and just in time. A small space that he could sit down in, just the right size to allow him to brace himself with his arms and legs.

The Dream shuddered again, and then again. Mentally, Han pictured the docking clamps falling away, one by one. One more to go, then--The ship shuddered one more time, then lurched violently. Since the Dream wasn't supposed to be manned, it could utilize acceleration patterns that were much rougher than those used in a vessel with a living crew.

Wham! Han's body jerked, then he braced himself against the thrust of violent acceleration. The Dream was undocked and away!

Mentally, Han pictured them thrusting away from Trader's Luck, out of the embrace of Corellia's gravity field. Closing his eyes, he pictured his homeworld turning lazily against the backdrop of stars. Corellia was a pretty planet, with narrow blue seas, green-brown forests, and large cities. On the nightside it glittered like a battle remote studded with lights. The hardest thrust of acceleration hit then, and Han was pinned uncomfortably against the cargo container. We've made the jump to lightspeed, he realized.

Moments later, as the ship's speed evened out, he was able to move again.

He flexed his arms and legs, wincing as bruises made themselves

felt. From the fight in the galley, he realized. The thought made him remember Dewlanna with a sudden, visceral sadness. Tears stung his eyes, and he fought them back fiercely. Crying in a spacesuit helmet was a lousy idea, since you couldn't wipe your face.

Han sniffed, trying to blink back the tears. Dewlanna... he thought.

His friend had given her life to give him this chance.

Get hold of yourself, Solo, he ordered himself sternly. His throat ached, but Han gulped, swallowed hard, then bit his lip until the urge to cry receded. He couldn't remember the last time he'd cried, and what was the point? It wouldn't bring Dewlanna back . . .

Han knew Dewlanna believed in an afterlife of the spirit. If she was right about that, then maybe she could hear him now.

"Hey, Dewlanna," Han whispered, "I made it. I'm on my way. I'm going to Ylesia, and I'm going to become the best pilot in the sector. I'll learn enough--and earn enough--to apply for the Academy, the way we always dreamed. I'm free, Dewlanna." His voice broke. We're safe, Dewlanna.

Shrike can't touch either of us, now . . .

Wedge, into his little crevice, the young pilot smiled with grim determination. I'm free, and I owe it all to you. I'll never forget it, either. If I ever get a chance to pay you back by helping one of your people, I swear to anything that's out there--any god, or life-power, or force--I won't hesitate.

Han Solo took a long, deep breath of canned spacesuit air. "Thank you, Dewlanna," he whispered.

Wherever she was now, he hoped she could hear him.

two

Ylesian Dreams When Han awoke from exhausted sleep, he was completely disoriented at first. Where am I? he wondered groggily. Memory came rushing back in swift, violent images His own hand holding a blaster.

. . Shrike's face twisted with hatred and rage . . . Dewlanna, gasping, dying alone . . .

He swallowed hard, his throat aching. Dewlanna had been part of his life since he was just a little kid, eight, perhaps, or nine. He remembered the day she'd come aboard with her mate, Isshaddik.

Isshaddik had been outlawed from the Wookiee homeworld for some crime that Dewlanna had never referred to. She'd followed her mate into exile, leaving behind all that she'd ever known--her home and their grown cubs.

A year or so later, Isshaddik had been killed during a smuggling run to Nar Hekka, one of the worlds in the Hutt sector. Shrike had announced to Dewlanna that she could remain aboard Trader's Luck as cook, since he'd grown to like the foods she prepared. Dewlanna could have gone back to Kashyyyk--after all, she'd committed no crime--but she'd chosen to stay aboard the Luck.

Because of me, Han thought as he located the water dispenser nipple inside his helmet and took a cautious sip. Then he tongued up a couple of food pellets and washed them down with another swallow. It wasn't the same as food, but they'd keep him going for the day... She stayed because of me.

She wanted to protect me from Shrike . . .

He sighed, knowing it to be true. Wookiees were among the most steadfast and loyal companions in the galaxy, or so he'd heard.

Wookiee

loyalty and friendship was not lightly given, but once bestowed, it never wavered.

He leaned back in his alcove, checking the air pak. Three quarters left.

Han wondered how far the Dream had traveled while he'd slept. In a little while he'd go to the control room, see if he could decipher the instrumentation on the autopilot.

Han's mind drifted back in time, remembering Dewlanna sadly, then as he relaxed, his mind wandered to even earlier days. His earliest "real" memory---everything else was just meaningless fragments, snatches of images too old and distorted to have any meaning--was of the day Garriss Shrike had brought him "home" to Trader's Luck . . .

The child huddled in the mouth of the dank; filthy alley, trying not to cry. He was too big to cry, wasn't he? Even if he was cold and hungry and alone. For a moment the child wondered why he was alone, but it was as if a huge metal door slammed down on that thought, shutting everything behind it. Behind the door lay danger, behind that door lay. . . bad things.

Pain, and ... and...

The boy shook his head, and his lank; filthy hair fell straggling into his face. He pushed it back with a hand that was so grimed with dirt that his natural skin color barely showed. He wore only a pair of ragged pants and a torn, sleeveless tunic that was too small. HIS feet were bare. Had he ever had shoes?

The child thought that perhaps he remembered shoes. Good shoes, nice ones, shoes that someone had put on his feet and helped him fasten.

Someone who was gentle, who smiled instead of scowled, someone who was clean and smelled good, who wore pretty clothes-SLAM!!

The door came down again, and little Han (he knew that was his name, but knew of no other that went with it) winced from the pain in his mind. He knew better than to let those thoughts fill his mind.

Thoughts and memories like that were bad, they hurt..., better not to think them.

He sniffled again and wiped futilely at his runny nose. He realized he was standing in a puddle of foulness, and that his feet were so cold he could barely feel them. It was night now, and it promised to be a cold one.

Hunger twisted in Han's stomach like a living thing, a creature that bit painfully. He couldn't remember the last time he'd eaten. Had it been this morning when he'd found that kavasa fruit in a garbage dump, the ripe, juicy one that was only half-eaten? Or had that been last night?

He couldn't keep standing here, the little boy decided. He had to move.

Han stepped out of the alley, onto the pathwalk. He knew how to beg...

who was it that had taught him?

SLAM!

Never mind who'd taught him, they had taught him well. Adjusting his features to their most pitiful, Han shuffled toward the nearest passerby.

"Please . . . lady . . ." he whimpered. "Hungry, I'm so hungry . .

." He held out his hand, palm up. The woman he addressed slowed fractionally, then suddenly looked down at his dirty palm and recoiled, holding her skirts back so they wouldn't brush against him.

"Lady . . ." Han breathed, turning with more than professional interest to watch her walk away. She had on a nice dress, soft and shiny, sort of...

glowing . . . in the harsh streetlights of the Corellian harbor town.

She reminded him of someone, with her big, dark eyes, her smooth skin, her hair-SLAM!

He began to sob, hopelessly, his small body shaking from cold, hunger, grief, and loneliness.

"Hey, there! Han!" the sharp but not unfriendly voice broke through his wall of misery. Sniffing and gulping, Han looked up to see a tall form bending over him. Black hair, pale blue eyes. He smelled of Alderaanian ale, and the smoke from half a dozen proscribed drugs, but he was steady on his feet, unlike many of the other passersby.

Seeing that Han was looking up at him, the man squatted down onto his heels, which brought him to only a little above Han's eye level.

"You're too big to cry in the street, you know that, don't you?"

Han nodded, still sniffing, but trying to control himself. "Yeth . .

.

yes." At first he lisped a little, the way he had when he'd first learned to talk. That was a long, long time ago, Han thought. He'd been talking since the cold season, and it was soon going to be cold season again. He'd been talking since . . .

SLAM!

The child shuddered again as his mind resolutely shut away all his memories of that before time. Something else surfaced, something he'd overlooked at first in his misery. Han's eyes widened. This man had called him by name!

How does he know my name?

"Whou . . . who are you?" Han whispered. "How do you know my name?"

The man grinned, showing many teeth. It was meant to be a friendly expression, Han could tell, but there was something about it that made him shudder. It reminded him of the packs of canoids that hunted prey in the alleys. "I know lots of things, kid," the man replied. "Call me Captain Shrike. Can you say that?"

"Y-yes. Captain Shrike," Han parroted uncertainly. He hiccuped as his sobbing died away. "But... but how did you know my name? Please?"

The man put out a hand as if to ruffle his hair, then seemed to take in the dirt and scritchies inhabiting his young scalp and think better of it. "You'd be surprised, Han. I know almost everything that goes on here on Corellia.

I know who's lost and who's found, who's for sale and who's sold, and where all the bodies are buried. Matter of fact, I've had my eye on you.

You seem like a smart lad. Are you smart?"

Han drew himself up, eyed the man levelly. "Yes, Captain," he said, forcing his voice to be steady. "I'm smart." He knew he was, too.

Anyone who wasn't didn't last for months on the streets, the way he had.

"Good, that's the lad! Well, I could use a smart lad to work for me.

Why don't you come with me? I'll give you a square meal and a warm place to sleep." He grinned again. "And I just bet you'd like to see my ship." He pointed up at the darkening sky.

Han nodded eagerly. Food? A bed? And especially . . . "A spaceship?

Yes, Captain! I want to be a pilot when I grow up!"

The man laughed and held out his hand. "Well come on, then!"

Han let the big hand engulf his, and the two of them walked away together, toward the spaceport...

Han stirred and shook his head. I should never have gone with him that day, he thought. If I hadn't gone with him, Dewlanna would still be alive . . .

But if he hadn't gone with Shrike, he'd probably have awakened some night in the alley to find that vrelts had chewed his ears and nose off, the way they had one of the other "alley urchins" that Garric Shrike had "rescued."

Han smiled grimly. Captain Shrike didn't have an altruistic bone in his body. He collected children and used them to turn a profit.

Almost every planet the Luck visited, Shrike loaded up a group of his "rescuees" and took them down to the streets in the shuttle. There he left them under the supervision of a droid he'd programmed himself, F8GN. Eight-Gee-Enn assigned them to their "territories" and kept track of their proceeds as the children roamed the streets, begging and pickpocketing.

They used the littlest ones, the skinniest ones, the deformed ones for begging. The vrelt-gnawed girl, Danalis, had always done well. Shrike kept her working hard for years by promising her that when she'd earned enough for him, he'd get her face fixed for her, so she'd look human again.

But he never had. When she was about fourteen, Danalis evidently realized that Shrike was never going to make good on his promises.

One

night" she went into the Luck's airlock and cycled it--without first putting on a suit.

Han had been on the cleanup crew. He shuddered at the memory. Poor Danalis. He could still picture her in his mind, handing over a day's begging receipts to Eight-Gee-Enn. The droid was tall and spindly, made from coppery-reddish metal. It had been repaired so many times that it had patches everywhere, as though the droid were wearing a much mended garment. Copper patches, gold-colored patches, steel colored patches--and one round, silvery one on the top of its head.

Han could still hear the droid's voice in his mind. Eight-Gee-Enn had had something wrong with its speakers, and its "voice" had alternated between sounding deep and unctuous, to shrill, mechanical squeakiness.

But no matter how the droid sounded, they'd all paid attention to what Eight-Gee-Enn said . . .

"Now, dear children, have you all got your territory assignments?" The copper-colored droid swiveled its head a little rustily on its pipe-stem neck, regarding the eight children from Trader's Luck as they stood ranged before it.

All of the children, including five-year-old Han, affirmed that they did, indeed, have their territories. "Very well, then, dear children," the droid continued in its deep, then squeaky tones, "let me now give you your job assignments. Padra" the droid looked down at a small boy only a year or so older than Han--"today we're going to give you your first chance to show us how helpful you can be to these poor citizens who are burdened with credit vouchers, jewelry, and expensive private comlinks." The droid's eyes glittered eerily. They were different colors--one had burned out long ago, and Shrike had replaced it with a lens scavenged from a junked droid, giving F8GN one red "eye" and one green.

"Are you willing to help out these poor, benighted citizens, Padra?"

Eight-Gee-Enn asked, cocking its metal head inquiringly, its voice dripping artificial camaraderie.

"Sure am!" the boy cried. He gave Han and the other small children a triumphant glance. "No more baby begging for me!" he whispered excitedly.

Han, who was barely beginning to learn the skills necessary to pick pockets swiftly and undetectably, felt a stir of envy. Picking pockets was easy, once you learned how to do it well. It was far easier to meet Eight-Gee-Enn's quota for a day's "work" picking pockets than it was by begging. Begging required accosting at least three marks, roughly, in order to gain one donation.

But pickpocketing . . . now, that was the best way to earn big money!

If you chose the right mark; you could gain enough in one grab to give Eight-Gee-Enn your quota before noon, and then you were free to play.

Han wondered whether Eight-Gee-Enn would give him some practice time if he hurried and begged his quota for the day before the others finished.

It was fun to practice with the spindly reddish droid, because Eight-Gee-Enn looked so funny in clothes! The droid would put on street clothes typical to the planet they were on, and then either stand still or stroll



past his student. Han had learned to relieve the droid of the concealed chrono, credit vouchers, and even some kinds of jewelry without Eight-Gee-Enn detecting his fingers in the process.

But he couldn't do it one hundred percent of the time. Han scowled a little as he trudged away. Eight-Gee-Enn demanded perfection from its little band, especially from the pickpockets. The droid wouldn't let him start picking pockets until it was sure that Han could do so perfectly, every time.

Absently, he picked up a handful of dirt and rubbed it into his hands, then smeared his already sweating face. What planet was this, anyway?

He couldn't recall hearing its name. The native people were greenish-skinned, with small, swiveling ears and huge dark purple eyes. Han had only learned a few words in their language, but he was a quick study, and he knew that by the time Trader's Luck moved on, he'd be able to understand it well, and speak it—at least the gutter argot—passably.

Wherever this was, it was hot. Hot and humid. Han glanced up at the pale, greenish-blue sky, in which blazed a pale orange sun. The prospect of spending several hours on his appointed street, whining, begging, and cajoling passersby for alms wasn't an attractive one. I hate begging, Han thought sourly. When I get a little older, I'm going to make them let me steal, instead of beg. I'm sure I'll be a good thief, and I'm not that good a beggar.

He knew his appearance was all right—he'd gotten taller in the past couple of years, but he was still underweight enough to be called skinny.

And he knew how to make his voice servile, his manner cringing and cowering, as though only desperation were driving him to plead for alms.

Maybe it was his eyes, Han thought. Maybe the secret resentment and shame he felt at having to beg showed in them and potential marks could see it.

Nobody respected a beggar, and Han, more than almost anything, had an undeclared desire to be respected.

Not just respected, he wanted to be respectable. He couldn't recall much about his life before Garriss Shrike had found him begging on Corellia, but Han somehow knew that once upon a time, things had been different.

Long ago, he'd been taught to believe that begging was shameful. And that stealing... stealing was worse. Han bit his lip angrily. He knew that

someone, perhaps the parents he couldn't remember, had taught him these things. Once, long ago, he'd been taught different ways . . .

different values.

But now--what could he do? Aboard Trader's Luck, there was one cardinal rule. If you didn't work you begged or stole. If you refused to work beg, or steal, you didn't eat. Han had no other skills to offer. He was too little to pilot, not strong enough to load smuggled cargo.

But I won't always be! he reminded himself "I'm growing every day!"

Soon I'm going to be big, in just five more years I'll be ten, and then, maybe, I'll be big enough to pilot!"

Han had discovered that when he made up his mind to accomplish something, he could do it. He was sure that piloting would be no exception.

And when I can pilot, that'll be my way off Trader's Luck, he thought, his mind slipping automatically into an old dream, one that he never told anyone about. Once he'd confided it to one of the other children, and the little vrelt blabbed it to everyone. Shrike and the others laughed at Han for weeks, calling him "Captain Han of the Imperial Navy," until Han wanted to crawl away, hands over his ears. It took all his control to just shrug and pretend not to care...

Yeah, and when I'm the best pilot around, and I've made lots of credits, I'll apply to the Imperial Academy. I'll become a Naval officer. Then I'll come back and get Shrike, arrest him, and he'll get sent to the spice mines on Kessel. He'll die there . . . The thought made Han's mouth curl up in a predatory smile.

At the far end of his fantasy, Han pictured himself, successful, respected, the best pilot in the galaxy, with a ship of his own, lots of loyal friends, and plenty of credits. And . . . a family. Yeah, a family of his own. A beautiful wife who adored him, who'd share adventures with him, and kids, maybe. He'd be a good father. He wouldn't abandon his children, the way he'd been abandoned . . .

At least, Han supposed that he'd been abandoned, though he couldn't remember a thing about it. He didn't even know his last name, so he couldn't try to trace his family. Or maybe . . . maybe his parents hadn't abandoned him...

Maybe they'd been killed, or he'd been kidnapped away from them. Han decided that he preferred that scenario. If he thought of his parents as dead, he wasn't so mad at them, because people couldn't help it if they died, right?

Han decided that from now on, he'd think of his mother and father as dead. It was easier that way...

He knew he'd probably never know the real truth. The only person who knew anything about Han's background was Garric Shrike. The captain kept telling Han that if he was good, if he worked and begged hard, if he earned

enough credits, someday Shrike would tell him the secrets behind how he'd come to be wandering the streets of Corellia that day.

Han's mouth tightened. Sure, Captain, he thought. Just like you were going to get Danalis's face fixed . . .

The child glanced up at the street signs. He couldn't read the ones in the native language, but there was a Basic translation beneath each.

Yeah, this was his territory, all right.

Han took a deep breath, then rearranged his features. A green-skinned female clad in a short robe was coming toward him. "Lady . . ." he whined, cringing his way toward her, little hand held out in appeal, please, beautiful gracious lady, I beg your help . . . alms, just one little credit, I'm so hungry . . .

The little cupped green ears swiveled toward him, then she averted her head and swept past.

Under his breath, Han muttered an uncomplimentary term in smuggler's argot, and then turned to wait for the next mark . . .

Han shook his head and forced himself out of his reverie. Time to go and check on the Ylesian Dream's progress.

Hauling himself up out of his cubbyhole, the young pilot made his way through the cramped passageways until he reached the bridge. The astromech droid was still there, its lights flashing away as it "thought" its own thoughts. It was a relatively new R2 unit, still shiny-bright silver and green, with a clear dome atop its head. Inside the dome Han could see lights blinking as it worked. It was hooked into the ship's robot controls by means of a cable.

The R2 droid must have been equipped with a motion sensor, because it swiveled its domed "head" toward Han as he clumped boldly onto the bridge in his spacesuit.

The lights flashed frantically as it "talked," but of course the sound waves didn't travel in vacuum. Han turned on his suit's communications unit, and suddenly his helmet was filled with distressed beeps, blurps, and wheeps.

"Whee... bleewheeeeep..., wheep-whirr-wheep!" the R2 astromech announced in evident surprise. Han looked around for its counterpart droid and didn't see one. He sighed. His suit's communicator would transmit what he said to the droid, but how was he supposed to actually talk to the concerned R2 without an interpreter? How did whoever had programmed the droid talk to it?

He activated his suit communicator. "Hey, you!"

"Blurpp... wheep, bleep-whirr!" the unit replied helpfully.

Han scowled and cursed at the unit in Rodian, trader argot, and, finally, Basic. "What am I going to do now?" he snarled. "If only you had a Basic-speech module."

"But I do, sir," announced the droid in a matter-of-fact voice. Its words were flat, mechanical, but perfectly understandable.

Han gaped at the machine for a moment, then grinned. "Hey! This is a first! How come you can talk?"

"Because there was not room aboard this vessel for both an astromech unit and a counterpart unit, my masters programmed me with a Basic-speech transmissions module so I could communicate more easily," the droid replied.

"All right!" Han cried, feeling a surge of relief. He didn't like droids much, but at least he'd have someone to talk to, and it might actually prove necessary for the two of them to communicate. Space travel was usually routine, and safe . . . but there were exceptions.

"I regret, sir," the R2 added, "that you are guilty of unauthorized entry, sir. You are not supposed to be here."

"I know that," Han said. "I hitched a ride on this ship."

"I beg your pardon, this unit does not understand the term used, sir."

Han called the R2 unit an uncomplimentary name. "I-beg-your-pardon, this unit does not understand--" "Shut up!" Han bellowed. The R2 unit was silent.

Han took a very deep breath. "Okay, R2," he said. "I am a stowaway.

Is that word in your memory banks?"

"Yes it is, sir."

"Good. I stowed away aboard this ship because I needed a ride to Ylesia.

I'm going to take a job piloting for the Ylesian priests, understand?"

"Yes, sir. However, I must inform you that in my capacity as a watch droid assigned to safeguard this vessel and its contents, I must seal all the exits when we reach Ylesia, then inform my masters that you are aboard, thus expediting your capture by their security staff."

"Hey, little pal," Han said generously, "when we reach Ylesia, you just go right ahead and do that. When the priests see that I fit all their requirements, they won't give a vrelt's ass how I arrived there."

"I-beg-your-pardon, sir, but this unit does not--" "Shut up."

Han glanced down at his air pak readout, then said, "Okay, R2, I'd like to check on our flight path, speed, and ETA to Ylesia. Please display that information."

"I regret, sir, that I am not authorized to give you that information."

Han was coming to a slow boil; he barely restrained himself from kicking the recalcitrant droid with his heavy space boot. "I need to check our flight path, speed, and ETA because I've got to compute how my air is holding out, R2," he explained with exaggerated patience.

"I-beg-your-pardon, sir, but this unit--" "SHUT UP!"

Han was starting to sweat now, and the suit's refrigeration unit rebedded a little faster. He struggled to keep his tones calm. "Listen carefully, R2," he said. "Don't you have some kind of operating systems program that orders you to attempt to preserve the lives of intelligent beings whenever you can?"

"Yes, sir, that programming is included with all astromech droids. For a droid to deliberately harm or fail to prevent harm to a sentient being, its operating system module must be altered."

"Good," Han said. That fit in with what he knew about astromech programming. "Listen to me, R2. If you don't show me our flight path, speed, and ETA, you may be responsible for my death, from lack of air.

Do you understand me now?"

"Please elaborate, sir."

Han explained, with exaggerated patience, his situation. When he finished, the droid was silent for a moment, evidently cogitating.

Finally, it whirred once, then said, "I will comply with your request, sir, and will display the information

requested on the diagnostic interface screen."

Han breathed a long sigh of relief. Since the ship was basically a giant robot drone, it had no controls visible on its control boards, just assorted blinking lights. But, in order to service the ship, there was a screen built into the control board. Han stepped carefully around the R2 unit and stared down at the screen.

Information scrolled across it, so rapidly no human could have read it.

Han turned to the R2 unit. "Put that data back up, and this time, leave it there until I can read it! Get it?"

"Yes, sir." The droid's artificial voice sounded almost meek.

Han studied the figures and diagram that appeared on the screen for several minutes, feeling his uneasiness grow into real fear. He had nothing to write with, and no way to access the navicomputer, but he had a bad feeling about what he was seeing. Biting his lip, he forced himself to concentrate as he ran the figures in his head, over and over.

Ylesian Dream's flight path had been set to take it in a circuitous route to the planet, in order to avoid the worst of the pirate-infested areas of Hutt space. And the little freighter's speed was set far lower than the ship was capable of, slower than even *Trader's Luck* normally traveled through hyperspace.

Not good. Not good at all. If their speed and course weren't altered, Han realized, he'd run out of air about five hours before the Dream set down on Ylesian soil. The ship would land with a corpse aboard.

..

his.

He turned back to the R2 unit. "Listen, R2, you've got to help me. If I don't alter our course and speed, I won't have sufficient air to make the trip. I'll die, and it will be your fault."

The R2 unit's lights flashed as the machine contemplated this revelation.

Finally, it said "But I did not know you were on board, sir. I cannot be held responsible for your death."

"Oh, no." Han shook his head inside his helmet. "It doesn't work that way, R2. If you know about this situation and do nothing, then you will be causing the death of a sentient being. Is that what you want?"

"No," the droid said. Even its artificial tones sounded faintly strained, and its lights flickered rapidly and erratically.

"Then it follows," Han continued inexorably, "that you must do whatever you can to prevent my death. Right?"

"I . . . I . . ." The droid was quivering now in agitation. "Sir, I am constrained from assisting you. My programming is in conflict with my hardware."

"What do you mean?" Han was worried now. If the little droid overloaded and went dead, he'd never be able to access the manual "diagnostic" controls that he knew had to be in these panels somewhere. They'd be tiny, something for the techs to use to test the robot drone's autopilot. "My programming is

constraining me from informing you . . ."

Han took one huge stride over to the little droid and knelt in front of it. "Blast you!" He pounded his fist on top of the droid's clear dome.

"I'll die! Tell me!"

The droid rocked agitatedly, and Han wondered if it would simply fall apart with the strain. But then it said, "I have been fitted with a restraining bolt, sir! It prevents me from complying with your request!"

A restraining bolt?" Han seized on this bit of information with alacrity.

Let's see, where is it?

After a moment he spotted it, low down on the droid's metal carapace.

He reached down, grasped it, and tugged.

Nothing. The bolt didn't move.

Han gripped harder, tried twisting. He grunted with effort, really sweating now, imagining he could feel those molecules of oxygen running out in a steady stream. He'd heard that hypoxia wasn't an especially bad

way to die---compared to explosive decompression or being shot, for example--but he had no desire to find out firsthand.

The bolt didn't move. Han tried harder, jerking at it, swearing in half a dozen alien tongues, but the stubborn thing didn't budge.

Got to find something I can hit it with, Han thought, glancing wildly around the control cabin. But there was nothing--not a hydrospanner, a wrench--nothing!

Suddenly he remembered the blaster. He'd left it on the floor in his little cubicle. "Wait right here," Han instructed the R2 unit, and then he was squeezing back through the narrow corridors.

Shooting a blaster inside a spaceship--even an unpressurized space-ship--wasn't a good idea, but he was desperate.

Han returned with the weapon, and examined the settings. Lowest setting, he thought. Narrowest beam. Clumsy in his spacesuit gloves, he had trouble adjusting the power setting and beam width.

The R2's lights had been flashing frenetically ever since he'd returned, and now it wheeped plaintively. "Sir? Sir, may I ask what you're doing?"

"I'm getting rid of that restraining bolt," Han told it grimly. Aiming and narrowing his eyes, he squeezed delicately.

A flash of energy erupted, and the little droid WHEEEEEPPPPED. So shrilly it sounded like a scream. The restraining bolt fell to the deck, leaving behind a black burn scar on the otherwise shining metal of the R2 unit.

"Gotcha," Han said with satisfaction. "Now, R2, be good enough to point me toward the manual interfaces and controls in your ship here."

The droid obediently extruded a mobile wheeled "leg" and rolled over to the control banks, its interface cable trailing behind it. Han went over and crouched before the instrument panel, awkward in his suit.

Following the droid's instructions, he wrenched off the top of one featureless control panel and studied the tiny bank of controls.

Cursing at the awkwardness of trying to manipulate the controls while wearing spacesuit gloves, Han began using the manual interface mode to disengage the hyperdrive. Altering course and speed could only be done in realspace.

Once they were back in realspace, Han painstakingly computed a new course, using the R2 unit to perform the more esoteric calculations for the jump that would send them back into hyperspace.

It took the young Corellian a while to lay in their new course and speed, but finally Han triggered the HYPERDRIVE ENGAGE switch again. A second later he felt the lurch as the drive kicked in. Han clung grimly to

the instrument panel as the ship hurtled into hyperspace on its new course, at a greatly increased rate of speed.

As the ship steadied around him, Han drew a long, long breath and let it out very slowly. He slumped to the deck and sat there, his legs stuck out before him. "Whew!"

"You realize, sir," said the R2 unit, "that you will now have to land this craft manually. Altering our course and speed has invalidated the existing landing protocols programmed into the ship."

"Yeah, I know," Han said, leaning wearily back against the console. He took another sip of water and then ate two tablets. "But there's no other way. I just hope I can work the controls fast enough to land us." He glanced around him at the nearly featureless control room. "I wish this bucket of bolts came with a viewscreen."

"An autopilot cannot see, sir, so visual data is useless to it," the R2 unit pointed out helpfully.

"No!" Han said, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "I thought droids could see just like we can!"

"No, sir, we cannot," R2 told him. "We recognize our surroundings by visual relays that translate into electronic data within our--" "Shut up," Han said, too tired even to enjoy baiting the droid. Leaning back against the console, he closed his eyes. He'd done all that he could to save his life, by bringing the ship to Ylesia on a much more direct route, at a faster speed.

Han drifted into sleep and dreamed of Dewlanna, as she had been long ago, when they'd first known each other . . .

Han was halfway through the window when he heard the shout behind him.

"We've been robbed!"

Clutching his small sack of loot, he kicked, wriggling, trying to squeeze through the narrow enclosure. In the dark outside lay safety.

A feminine cry of dismay "My jewelry!"

Han grunted with effort, realizing he was stuck. He fought back panic.

He had to get away! This was a rich house, and when someone summoned the authorities, they were certain to come immediately.

Silently he cursed the new vogue in Corellian architecture that had caused this luxurious home to be built with floor-to-ceiling narrow windows. The windows were advertised as being able to thwart burglars.

Well, there might be some truth to that, he decided grimly. He'd sneaked in earlier through one of the doors that led to the gardens, then hidden out until he'd felt safe in believing that all the inhabitants were asleep. Then he'd ventured out to pick and choose among their treasures. He'd been confident that he

could wiggle his skinny, nine-year-old self through those windows and make good his escape.

Han grunted with effort again, kicking frantically. It was possible he was wrong about that...

A voice behind him. The woman. "There he is! Get him!"

Han turned a little more sideways, wriggled violently, and then suddenly he was through the window and falling. He didn't let go of his sack, though, as he crashed down onto the manicured bed of flowering dora vines. Breath whooshed out of his lungs, and for a moment he just lay there, gasping, like a drel out of water. His leg hurt, and so did his head.

"Call the security patrol!" The masculine shout came from inside. Han knew he had only seconds to make good his escape. Forcing his leg to bear his weight, he rolled over and staggered to his feet.

Trees ahead in the moonlight . . . big ones. He could lose himself in them, easy.

Han half limped, half ran to the shelter of the trees. He resolved not to let Eight-Gee-Enn know what had happened. The droid might accuse him of slowing down now that he was going on ten.

Han grimaced as he ran. He wasn't slowing down, he just hadn't been feeling well today. He'd had a dull headache ever since he'd awakened, and had been tempted to turn himself in on sick call.

Since Han was almost never ill, he'd probably have been believed, but he didn't like showing weakness in front of other denizens of Trader's Luck.

Especially Captain Shrike. The man never missed an opportunity to ride him.

He was in the shelter of the trees, now. What next? He could hear the sound of running footsteps, so he didn't have much time to decide. His muscles made that decision for him. Suddenly the sack was clenched in his teeth, there was bark against his palms, and the soles of his beat-up boots were braced against branches. Han climbed, listened, then climbed again.

Only when he was high in the tree, above the range of a casual glance by pursuers, did he slow down. Han settled back on a limb, against the tree trunk, panting, his head whirling. He felt dizzy, nauseated,



and for a moment he was afraid he'd be sick and give himself away. But he bit his lip and forced himself to stay still, and presently he felt a little better.

Judging from the star patterns, it was only a few hours until dawn.

Han realized that he was going to have trouble making the rendezvous with the Luck's shuttle. Would Shrike just abandon him, or would he wait?

Far below him, people were searching the wooded area. Lights strobed the night, and he huddled close to the tree trunk, eyes closed, clinging desperately despite his dizziness. If only his head didn't throb so . . .

Han wondered whether they'd bring in bioscanners, and shivered. His skin felt hot and tight, even though the night was cool and breezy.

Dark waned on toward dawn. Han wondered what Dewlanna was doing, whether she'd miss him if the Luck left orbit without him. Finally, the lights went out, and the footsteps faded away. Han waited another twenty minutes to make sure his pursuers were truly gone, then, holding the sack gripped in his teeth, he carefully climbed down, moving with exaggerated care because his head hurt so much. Every jar, even walking, made his head swim, and he had to grit his teeth against the pain. He walked . . . and walked. Several times he realized he'd been dozing while he walked, and a couple of times he fell down and was tempted to just stay there. But something kept him moving, as dawn brightened the streets and houses around him. Corellian dawns were beautiful, Han noticed dazedly. He'd never before noticed how pretty the colors were in the sky. If only the light didn't hurt his eyes so. . . Dawn turned to day. Cool gave way to warmth, then heat. He was sweating, and his vision was blurred. But finally, there it was. The spaceport. By this time Han was moving like an automaton, one foot in front of the other, wishing he could just lie down and sleep in the road.

Before him, now . . . the Luck's shuttle! With a gasp that was nearly a sob, the boy drove himself forward. He was almost to the ramp when a tall figure emerged. Shrike. "Where in the blazes have you been?"

There was nothing friendly in the captain's grasp upon his arm. Han held up the sack; and Shrike grabbed it. "Well, at least you didn't come back empty-handed," the captain grumbled. Quickly he sifted through the contents, nodding his satisfaction. Only when he was finished did Shrike seem to notice that Han was swaying on his feet.

"What's wrong with you?"

Now beyond coherent speech, Han could only shake his head.

Consciousness was fading in and out on him like a jammed transmission.

Shrike shook him a little, then put a hand on the boy's forehead. When he felt the heat, he cursed. "Fever... should I leave you here? What if it's contagious?" He frowned, clearly struggling to decide.

Finally he hefted the sack of loot again. "Guess you've earned a sick day, kid," he muttered. "C'mon." Han tried to make it up the ramp, but then he stumbled and everything went . . . dark.

He swam up into partial consciousness a long time later, to the sound of voices arguing, one in Wookiee, the other in Basic. Dewlanna and Shrike.

The Wookiee growled insistently. "I can tell he's really sick," Shrike agreed, "but you can't kill one of my kids with a blaster set on full."

He'll be

okay after a couple of days rest. He doesn't need a medical droid, and I'm not springing for it."

Dewlanna snarled, and Han, automatically translating, was surprised at how insistent the Wookiee was being. He felt a furred paw-hand lay something cold on his forehead. It felt wonderful against the heat.

"I told you no, Dewlanna, and I meant it!" Shrike said, and with that, the captain stomped out, cursing the Wookiee in every language he knew.

Han opened his eyes to see Dewlanna bending over him. The Wookiee rumbled gently at him. Han struggled to speak. "Pretty bad ..." he conceded, in response to her question. "Thirsty . . ."

Dewlanna held him up and gave him water, sip by slow sip. She told him that he had a high fever, so high that she was afraid for him.

When Han finished the water, she stooped down and scooped the child up into her arms. "Where... where're we.." She told him to hush, that she was taking him planetside, to the medical droid. Han's head was swimming, but he made a great effort. "Don't..."

Captain Shrike . . . really mad . . ."

Her answer was short and to the point. Han had never heard her curse before.

He faded in and out as they moved through the corridors, and his next clear memory was of being strapped into the seat of a shuttle. Han had never known Dewlanna could pilot, but she handled the controls competently with her huge, furred hands. The shuttle slipped loose from its moorings, and then accelerated toward Corellia.

The fever was making Han light-headed, and he kept imagining that he heard Shrike's voice, cursing. He tried to say something about it to Dewlanna, but found he didn't have the strength to get the words out...

He next regained consciousness in the medical droid's waiting room.

Dewlanna was sitting down, with Han's scrawny form still clutched protectively in her arms.

Suddenly a door opened, and the droid appeared. It was a large, elongated droid, equipped with anti-gray units so that it floated around its patient as Dewlanna placed Han on the examining table. Han felt a prick against his skin as the droid took a blood sample.

"Do you understand Basic, madame?" inquired the droid.

For a moment Han was about to answer that of course he understood Basic, and who was Madame?--but then Dewlanna rumbled. Oh, of course.

The medical unit was talking to her.

"This young patient has contracted Corellian tanamen fever," the droid told Dewlanna. "His case is quite

severe. It is fortunate that you did not wait

any longer to bring him to me. I will need to keep him here and observe him until tomorrow. Do you wish to stay with him?"

Dewlanna rumbled her assent.

"Very well, madame. I am going to use bacta immersion therapy to restore his metabolic equilibrium. That will also bring his fever down."

Han took one look at the waiting bacta tank and feebly tried to make a run for the door. Between them, Dewlanna and the medical unit restrained him easily. The boy felt another needle prick his arm, and then the whole universe tilted sideways and slid into blackness . .

.

Han opened his eyes, realizing his reverie had turned into sleep, then dreams. He shook his head, remembering how wobbly he'd been when Dewlanna and the droid helped him out of the bacta tank. Then Dewlanna paid the droid out of her own small store of credits and piloted them back to Trader's Luck. The young pilot grimaced. Boy, Shrike had been mad. Han was worried that he'd space them both. But Dewlanna never showed even the slightest sign of fear as she stood between the captain and Han, insisting that she'd done the right thing, that otherwise the boy would have died.

In the end, Shrike subsided because one of the pieces of jewelry Han had stolen that night turned out to be set with a genuine Krayt dragon pearl. When the captain discovered what it was worth, he was mollified.

But he didn't pay Dewlanna back for Han's medical bills . . .

Han sighed and closed his eyes. Dewlanna's loss was like a knife wound--no matter how he tried, he couldn't get away from the pain, and the memories.

He'd let down his guard and suddenly find himself thinking of her as still alive, visualize himself talking to her, telling her about his troubles with the recalcitrant R2 unit--only to be brought up short with pain nearly as searing and immediate as he'd felt yesterday when he'd held her dying body.

Han swallowed another sip of water, trying to ease the tightness in his throat. He owed Dewlanna . . . owed her so much. His life--even his true identity--he owed Dewlanna for that, too . . .

Han sighed. Until he was eleven years old, his only name had been "Han."

The boy often wondered and worried about whether he had a last name.

One time he mentioned his concern to Dewlanna, along with his conviction that if anyone knew who he really was, it was Shrike.

Very soon after that, Dewlanna learned to play sabacc . . .

Han heard the soft scratch on the door to his tiny cubicle and woke instantly. Listening, he heard the scratch again, then a soft whine.

"Dewlanna?" he whispered, sliding out of bed and sticking his bare feet into his ship's coveralls. "Is that you?"

She rumbled softly from outside the door. Han yanked up his jumpsuit, sealed it, and opened the door. "What do you mean, you have exciting news for me?"

Dewlanna came in, her huge, furred body fairly bouncing with excitement.

Han waved her past him, and she sat on the narrow bunk. Since there was no place else to sit, Han settled down beside her. The Wookiee cautioned him to keep his voice low, and glancing at the chrono, Han realized it was the dead of night.

"What are you doing up now?" he asked, puzzled. "Don't tell me you were playing sabacc this late?"

She nodded at him, her blue eyes sparkling with excitement amid her tan and chestnut hair.

"So what's going on, Dewlanna? Why did you need to talk to me?"

She rumbled softly at him. Han sat up straight, suddenly transfixed.

"You found out my last name? How?"

Her answer was a single name. "Shrike," Han muttered. "Well, if anyone knows, it's him. What... how did it happen? What's my name?"

His name, she told him, was "Solo." Shrike had gotten very, very drunk, and he started bragging about how much the Krayt dragon pearl was worth, what a good deal he'd gotten when he sold it. Dewlanna asked Shrike innocently if Han came from a long line of successful thieves. Shrike, she reported, exploded into laughter at the suggestion. "Maybe some branches of the family, but this Solo?" he sputtered, wheezing with merriment, pausing to gulp more Alderaanian ale, "I'm afraid not, Dewlanna. This kid's folks were ..."

And at that point, the captain suddenly halted in midword, fixing the Wookiee with a suspicious glare. "So why do you care, anyhow?" he demanded, his momentary good humor gone.

Dewlanna answered only by covering Shrike's bet, and raising.

"Solo," Han whispered softly, trying it on for size. "Han Solo. My full name is Han Solo."

He looked up at Dewlanna, and a wide grin spread across his features.

"I like it. It sounds great!"

Dewlanna whined softly and, slinging a long arm around him, gave the boy a hug . . .

Han smiled, remembering, but it was a sad smile. Dewlanna had meant well, but her discovery that his name was "Solo" had led to one of the worst episodes of his young life. The next time the Luck was in orbit around Corellia, he'd stolen time away from his pickpocketing and burglary duties and had gone to one of the public archives to do some research.

Shrike didn't like his "rescuees" to spend any time on furthering their education. Each child aboard

Trader's Luck was given an elementary level education via the ship's computer, so he, she, or it could learn to read and count money. Beyond that, Shrike discouraged the children from pursuing higher learning.

It was partly because he automatically wanted to flout Shrike's wishes, and partly due to Dewlanna's encouragement, that Han had kept up his studies in secret. He had a tendency to ignore subjects he didn't like--such as history--and to spend all his time on subjects he enjoyed--such as reading adventure stories and solving math equations.

Han knew how important math was to anyone who wanted to be a pilot, so he worked hard at mastering as much of it as he could.

Once Dewlanna discovered what he was doing, she monitored his curriculum, making him study subjects that he would otherwise have skipped, leaving gaps in his knowledge. Reluctantly, Han tackled the physical sciences, and his story.

He was surprised to discover that some real historical battles were just as exciting as anything he'd read in adventure sagas.

That day in the public archives on Corellia, Han applied some of his newly learned research skills to learning about his new surname. The results were surprising. When Han looked up the last name "Solo" in the historical records, he was astounded to discover that the name was well known on Corellia. A "Berethron Solo" had introduced democracy on Han's homeworld three centuries ago. He'd actually been a ruler, a king!

But there'd been another Solo, more recently, who was equally famous--or, to put it more accurately, infamous. About fifty years ago, a descendant of Berethron, Korol Solo, had fathered a son named "Dalla Solo." The young man, taking the alias "Dalla Suul" in an effort to disguise his identity, had made quite a name for himself as a murderer, kidnapper, and pirate.

"Dalla the Black" had become a name to make children quake in their beds on lonely outpost colonies or tramp freighters . . .

The child Han wondered whether he was related to these men. Did royal blood run in his veins? Or the blood of a pirate and murderer? He'd probably never know, unless, somehow, he could persuade Shrike to divulge what he knew. He read about Dalla Suul's exploits as a thief, and smiled grimly, wondering if he was actually following some kind of family tradition.

Then he began checking the more recent Corellian news files and society pages in the computer. A search for the surname "Solo" brought up a name.

Tiion Sal-Solo. She was a wealthy but reclusive widow with

one child, a son. Thrackan Sal-Solo was six or seven years older than Han, in his late teens.

What if I'm related to this Tiion Solo, or she knew my parents? Han wondered. This could be my best chance yet to get away.

When he went back to Trader's Luck; Han talked it over with Dewlanna.

The Wookiee agreed with him that while it was risky, Han had to take the chance of contracting the Solo family.

"Of course," Han said, resting his chin on his fist and looking dejectedly at the table, "once I did that, I couldn't see you again, Dewlanna."

The Wookiee growled softly, telling Han that of course he'd see her.

Just not aboard Trader's Luck.

"The last time I ran away, Shrike beat me so hard I couldn't sit down for days," Han said softly. "If Larrad hadn't reminded him that he had something else to do, I really think he might've killed me."

Dewlanna rumbled. "You're right," Han agreed. "If this Solo family takes me in, they're powerful enough and rich enough to protect me from Shrike."

Han even knew something about the rules and manners required of people living in Corellian high society. Every so often, Shrike would run a major scam on rich folks on Corellia. Han had been part of the background during several such con operations.

Shrike would rent a wealthy estate on Corellia, and then set up a "family unit," to provide a respectable backdrop to the scam. Han and the other children detailed to such a "family" would be sent to live on the estate.

He'd go to a rich-kids school, and one of his jobs during the scam was to make friends with the children of the wealthy and bring them home to play.

Several times, this had resulted in valuable contacts whose parents had been duped into "investing" in Garriss Shrike's current scam.

Just a few weeks past, Han had been attending such a school--a school so well known that it had merited a visit from the famous Senator Garm Bel Iblis. Han had raised his hand and asked the Senator two questions that had been insightful and intelligent enough to make the Senator really notice him. After class was over, Bel Iblis had stopped Han, shaken his hand, and asked him his name. Han had glanced around quickly, seeing that nobody else was within earshot, and proudly told the Senator his real name. It had felt great to be able to do that.

..

Shrike recruited Han frequently for his scam operations, partly because of the boy's easygoing charm and winning smile, and partly because Han's clandestine studies made him fit into his grade level better than most of the other children. Han had also gained a small reputation as an up-and-coming swoop and speeder pilot--a rich man's sport if there ever

was one. He'd met lots of kids from wealthy families while swoop racing, and several times Shrike had managed to lure their parents into whatever scam he was currently running.

In a year, Han would be eligible to race in Corellia's Junior Championship division. That would mean big prize money--if he won.

Han both liked and disliked these assignments. He liked them because he got to live in the lap of luxury for weeks, sometimes months. Swoop and speeder racing was life and breath to him, and he got to practice every day.

He disliked these con operations because he always wound up caring about some of the kids he was ordered to befriend, and all the while he knew they and their families would be irrevocably injured by Shrike's scheme.

Mostly, Han managed to stifle any guilt feelings he felt. He was becoming good at putting himself first. Other people--with the sole exception of Dewlanna--had to come second or not at all. It was self-preservation, and Han was very, very good at that.

I still am, Han thought as he got up from the deck of the Ylesian Dream and went to check on their course and speed. The young Corellians smiled and nodded as he read the instrument readings. Right in the groove, he thought. We're going to make it.

He checked his air pak, seeing it was more than half-gone.

For a moment Han was tempted to explore the Dream further, but he resisted the impulse. Moving around would just cause him to use up his oxygen faster, and he was skirting the edge of safety as it was.

So he settled back down, and the memories came back. Aunt Tiion. Poor woman. And dear cousin Thrackan. As he remembered, Han's lips pulled back from his teeth in a feral grin that was more like a canoid's snarl. . .

Han swung down off the high stone wall and landed lightly on the balls of his feet. Through the trees he could see a large structure built of the same native stone as the wall, so he headed toward it, staying in the tree shadow whenever possible.

When he reached the house, he halted, staring at it in amazement. He'd seen a lot of rich mansions, even lived in more than a few, but he'd never seen anything like the Sal-Solo estate.

Towers festooned with creeping vines, four of them, stood at each corner of a large, squarish stone building. An ancient gardener droid moved about arthritically, pruning the bushes that grew down to the edge of a large trench filled with water. Han walked around to the side and saw, to his surprise, that the stretch of water completely surrounded the house. There was no way to

enter the place, except to cross a narrow wooden bridge that spanned the water and led up to the front door.

Han had been interested in military tactics ever since he was small, and he'd read up on them. He studied the Sal-Solo mansion, realizing it was built to almost military fortress standards of impregnability.

Well, that sort of fit in with what he'd read about the Solo family.

They didn't socialize, didn't attend charity events or go to plays or concerts.

In all the times he'd posed as a rich kid, he'd never heard anyone mention the Solo family--and the way those rich people talked about each other, he'd have heard something if they ever mingled with their peers.

Han walked cautiously toward the house. He'd exchanged his ship's gray jumpsuit for a "borrowed" pair of black pants and a pale gray tunic.

He didn't want anyone finding out where he'd come from.

When he was nearly to the beginning of the causeway, he stood behind one of the large, ornamental bushes and warily peered across the water to the house. What should he do now? Just walk up and activate the door signal?

He bit his lip, undecided. What if they called the authorities on him, reported him as a runaway? Shrike would descend on him so fast - "Gotcha!"

Han gasped and jumped as a hand closed over his upper arm, hauling him around bodily.

The person who'd grabbed him was head and shoulders taller than the younger boy. He had darker hair than Han, and was stockier as well.

But it was his face that made Han stand staring at him in blank amazement.

Han gaped, speechless, at the older boy. If he'd ever doubted that he was really related to the Solo family, those doubts died an instant death. The face of the youth who was holding his arm looked like an older version of the face Han saw in the mirror every morning.

Not that they were twins or anything. But there was too much resemblance in their features to be coincidence. The same shape of the brown eyes, the same kind of lips, the same quirk to the eyebrows . .

. the same nose and jawline . . .

The other boy was gaping back at Han, having evidently noticed the same thing. "Hey!" He shook Han's arm roughly. "Who are you?"

"My name is Han Solo," Han replied steadily. "You must be Thrackan Sal-Solo."

"So what if I am?" the other said sullenly. Han was beginning to feel uneasy about the way the boy was eyeing him. He'd seen vrelts with more warmth in their eyes. "Han Solo, eh? I never heard of you. Where do you come from? Who's your mother and father?"

"I was hoping you could tell me that," Han said evenly. "I ran away

from where I was staying, because I wanted to find my family. I don't know anything about myself except my name."

"Huh . . ." Thrackan was still staring. "Well, I guess you must be one of the family . . ."

"Looks like it," Han agreed, not realizing until he spoke that it was a pun. But Thrackan didn't appear to notice. He seemed mesmerized by Han and, releasing his grip on the other's arm, walked around him, studying him from every angle.

"Where did you run away from?" Thrackan asked. "Will anyone come looking for you?"

"No," Han said shortly. He wasn't about to trust Thrackan with anything that could come back to haunt him. "Listen," he said, "we look alike, so we must be related, right? Could we . . . could we be brothers?" Funny, but after all his dreaming about finding a family that would rescue him from Trader's Luck, Han found himself hoping that wasn't the case.



"Not a chance," Thrackan said with a curl of his lip. "My dad died a year after I was born, and my mom shut herself up here ever since."

She's kind of... a loner."

That fit with what Han had read about the Sal-Solo family. Tiion Solo had married a man named Randil Sal, some twenty years ago. The public records had carried his obituary.

"Maybe she'd know something about me," Han said. "Could I see her?"

He took a deep breath. "Please?"

Thrackan seemed to consider. "Okay," he said finally, "but if she gets .

. upset, you've got to leave, okay? Mom doesn't like people. She's like her grandfather, won't have human servants, just droids. She says humans betray and kill each other and droids never do."

Han followed Thrackan into the huge house, through rooms full of shrouded furniture and paintings draped against dust. The family, Thrackan explained, used only a few rooms, to save the cleaning droid time and effort.

Finally, they came to Thrackan's mother's sitting room. Tiion Solo was a pale, dark-haired woman, plump and unhealthy-looking. She was far from attractive. But, looking at her, studying her face, seeing the bones beneath the puffy flab, Han thought that once, long ago, she might have been beautiful. Seeing her features, a memory stirred within him, so faint . . .

Once, he'd seen features similar to hers, Han thought. Long ago, far away.

The "memory," if memory it was, was as fleeting and elusive as a drift of smoke.

"Mother," Thrackan said, "this is Han Solo. He's related to us, isn't he?"

Tiion Sal-Solo's gaze traveled to Han's face, and her eyes widened in

distress. She stared at the boy in horror. Her mouth worked, and a thin, shrill mewling sound emerged. "No . . . no!" she cried. Tears gathered in her brown eyes, coursed down the flabby cheeks. "No, it isn't possible!"

He's gone! They're both gone!"

Burying her face in her hands, she began to weep hysterically.

Thrackan grabbed Han by the arm and dragged him out of the house. "Now look what you did, you little idiot," the youth said, glancing uneasily up at his mother's window. "She'll be a mess for days, she always is when she gets like that."

Han shrugged. "I didn't do anything. She just looked at me, that's all."

What's wrong with her?"

With a muffled curse, Thrackan backhanded Han across the face so hard it split the younger boy's lip.

"Shut up!" he snarled. "You've got no right to talk about her. There's nothing wrong with her, hear me?"

Nothing!"

The blow stung, but Han had been hit often, by experts, and one thing he knew was how to take a punch and stay on his feet. For a moment he was tempted to fly at the older boy's throat, but he made himself relax. There had been genuine pain in Thrackan's eyes as he defended his mother. Han figured he might have done the same thing, if he'd ever had a mother. I have to stay here, he reminded himself. Anything is better than Shrike . . .

"Sorry," he managed to say.

Thrackan looked a little abashed. 'Just watch what you say about my mom, okay?'

The next six weeks were some of the strangest of Han's life. Thrackan allowed Han to stay with him in his rooms (Tiion almost never came into Thrackan's part of the house), and the two of them spent time talking and getting to know each other.

Thrackan was a demanding host, Han soon learned. Han had to agree with him completely, and rush to do his bidding, or he lost his temper and cuffed the younger boy. Thrackan made Han pilot him around the countryside in an aging landspeeder, and the two of them even went on a few expeditions to vacant estates Thrackan knew about, whose inhabitants were away on vacation. Thrackan would demand that Han pick the locks and disable the security systems, and then the older boy would steal whatever took his fancy.

Han began to wonder whether he'd done himself any favor by running away from Trader's Luck. Two things kept him at the Solo estate: his fear that if he displeased Thrackan, the older boy would turn him over to the authorities--thus allowing Shrike to locate him; and his hope that Thrackan would break down and tell Han everything he knew about who Han really was.

He kept hinting that he knew how they might be related.

"All in good time," Thrackan would say when Han tried to pry information out of him. "All in good time, Han. Let's go flying. I want you to teach me to pilot the speeder."

Han tried, but Thrackan wasn't very good at it. The older boy nearly crashed them several times before he mastered even the rudiments of flying the small craft.

I have to get out of here, Han kept telling himself. I'll run away to some other world, where they'll never find me. Maybe I can get adopted or get a job or something. There's got to be some way . . .

But he couldn't think of any way to get free of Thrackan. The older boy was vindictive, sadistic, and just plain mean. Several times Han saw him torture insects or animals, and when he realized that his actions disturbed the younger boy, he did it frequently. Han had never had a pet, but he tended to like furred creatures because of Dewlanna.

He missed her every day.

The situation became more and more explosive, until one day Thrackan really lost his temper with Han. Grabbing the younger boy by the hair, he dragged him to the kitchen, picked up a knife, and held it before Han's eyes. "See this?" he snarled. "If you don't apologize, and don't do exactly what I say, I'm

going to cut your ears off. Now apologize!" He shook Han hard. "And you'd better make me believe it!"

Han stared at the shining blade of the knife, and wet his lips. He tried to force out words of apology, but a huge burst of red rage welled up in him.

All the insults, all the cuffs and blows and beatings--Shrike's as well as Thrackan's--seemed to come to a head.

With a bellow as loud as a Wookiee's, Han went berserk. He slammed his fist against Thrackan's arm, sending the knife flying, and slammed his other elbow into Thrackan's stomach. The breath whooshed out of the older boy, and before Thrackan could recover himself, Han was all over him.

Kicking, biting, punching, gouging--Han used every dirty trick he'd learned on the streets to beat up Thrackan. Stunned and reeling from Han's fury, Thrackan never did recover, until the fight ended with Han sitting astride Thrackan, holding the knife to the older boy's throat.

"Hey . . ." Thrackan's eyes glittered like a trapped vrelt's. "Hey, Han, stop kidding around. This isn't funny."

"Neither is cutting off my ears," Han said. "Listen, I've had it. You tell me what you know, and you tell me right now, or I swear I'll cut your throat wide open. And then I'm leaving here. I've had it with you."

Thrackan's dark eyes were wide with fear. Something he'd seen on Han's face must have convinced the older boy that Han was so angry he would be wise not to push him. "Okay, okay!"

"Now," Han said. "Talk."

Stammering with fear, Thrackan told the story.

Years ago, Thrackan's grandfather, Denn Solo, and his grandmother, Tira Gama Solo, had lived on the fifth inhabited planet in the Corellian system, a colony world called Tralus. Those were perilous times, and roving bands of raiders and pirates threatened many outlying worlds.

The raiders never reached Corellia, but they reached Tralus. A fleet of them landed and devastated the entire colony.

"Grandma Solo was pregnant," Thrackan gasped, because it was hard to breathe with Han sitting on his chest. "And the night their town was attacked, she had her babies. Twins. One of them was later named Tiion."

Grandma Solo took her and ran away from the raiders. She managed to hide in a cave in the hills."

"Tiion," Han said. "Your mother."

"Right. The other baby was a boy, Grandma Solo said. Her husband took him."

There hadn't even been time to name them. Grandma said it was terrible.

Fires everywhere, and people running and screaming. She and Grandpa Denn got separated in the rush to escape."

"And?" Han flexed his hand slightly, and the blade moved against Thrackan's throat.

"Like I said, Grandma Solo and Tiion escaped. But Grandpa Solo and the baby boy vanished. They were never heard from again."

"So who does that make me?" Han said, completely baffled.

"I don't know," Thrackan said. "But if I had to guess, I'd guess that you're my cousin. That somehow Grandpa Solo and his son got away, and that you're the son of his son."

"Doesn't anybody know anything but that?" Han demanded, feeling desperate.

This was a total dead end--the disappointment was crushing.

"Servants?"

"Grandpa Solo didn't like human servants. He always had droids. And when Grandma Solo made it back to her family on Corellia, Great grandpa Gama had all the droids' memories erased. He thought it would be easier on her that way. He wanted her to get married again, start a new life." Thrackan struggled to take a deep breath. "But she never did."

"So what happened to your mom?"

"I don't know. She's always been afraid to trust people, and she hates crowds. After my dad died, she just wanted to shut herself away. So she did."

Han's knife hand drooped, and he shook his head. "Okay," he said.

"I'm go--" With a sudden heave, Thrackan threw him off, and then, before Han could counter the move, their positions were reversed. Han gazed up at his

cousin, knowing that he'd be lucky to live through this. Thrackan's dark eyes blazed with hate, rage, and sadistic pleasure. "You're going to be very, very sorry, Han," he said quietly.

And Han was.

Thrackan locked him in a bare storeroom for three days, giving him only bread and water. On the afternoon of the third day, as Han was sitting listlessly in a corner, Thrackan unlocked the door. "I'm afraid this is goodbye, coz," he said cheerfully. "Someone's here to take you home."

Han looked around desperately as Garriss and Larrad Shrike followed Thrackan into the room, but as he already knew, there was nowhere to run.

Han shook his head and refused to let himself think about the days that had followed. Shrike had been held back in his punishment only by the fact that he hadn't wanted to "damage" Han permanently because of his growing reputation as an expert speeder and swoop pilot. But there had been lots of things he could do that wouldn't cause permanent damage, and he had done most of them . . .

The only time Han had been beaten more severely was after the debacle on Jubilar, when he was seventeen. Han had already been bruised and sore from the gladiatorial Free-For-All he'd been forced to fight in, after being caught cheating at cards. That time, Shrike hadn't bothered with a strap, he'd just used

his fists--battering the boy's face and body until Larrad and several others had pulled him off Han's unconscious form.

And now he's killed Dewlanna, Han thought bitterly. If anyone ever needed killing, it's Garris Shrike.

For a moment he wondered why it had never occurred to him to kill the unconscious Shrike before he'd made his getaway aboard the Ylesian Dream.

He'd have been doing the inhabitants of Trader's Luck a favor. Why hadn't he? He'd had the blaster in his hand . . .

Han shook his head. He'd never shot anyone before yesterday, and killing an unconscious man just wasn't his style.

But Han knew, without being told, that if Garris Shrike ever caught up with him in the future, he was a dead man. The captain never forgot and he never forgave. He specialized in carrying grudges against anyone who had ever wronged him.

Han got up again to check their course, and his air pak. Only a few hours worth of air left, now. He did some mental calculations, while staring at the display. Close. It's going to be close. I'd better be ready to pop the cargo door on this crate as soon as we land . . .

It's going to be very, very close . . .

three

### Crash Landing

Although he'd flown hundreds of hours in swoops and speeders, Han's experience with piloting larger vessels was confined to the times Garris Shrike had permitted him to pilot the Luck's shuttle on easy runs. He'd taken off and landed, but he'd never before tried to land anything as large as the robot freighter. Han hoped he'd be able to handle it. He had confidence in his ability as a pilot--after all, hadn't he been the junior speeder champion of all Corellia three years running? And, last year, hadn't he won the swoop racing championship of the entire Corellian system?

Still, compared to the Luck's shuttle, this freighter was huge . . .

Han dozed again, then when he awoke, roved restlessly around the cabin, knowing he should be conserving his energy and his air, but unable to stop himself.

"Sir?" The R2 unit that had been so quiet for so many hours suddenly came back to life. "I must advise you that we have reached the orbit of Ylesia.

You must stand ready to make your descent and landing."

"Thanks for telling me," Han said. Going over to the control banks, he scanned the instruments, mentally calculating their descent. This wasn't going to be easy. He had no way to interface with the navicomputer, except via the R2 unit. A pilot had to make split-second decisions, at times, and in cases like that, Han wouldn't be able to wait for the R2 unit to reply.

The ship suddenly shivered, then rocked slightly.

They were hitting atmosphere, Han realized.

He took a deep breath and glanced at his air pak reading, realizing it was going to be close . . . very, very close.

Here we go, he thought, switching to manual control of the Ylesian Dream. "Hey, R2," he said tightly, adjusting his course slightly.

"Yes, sir?" "Wish me luck."

"I-beg-your-pardon, sir, this unit is not--" Han swore, and the Ylesian Dream headed down, for the surface of a planet he couldn't even see.

He could see the sensor readouts and the infrared scanners, though, and he realized that Ylesia was a world of tempestuous air currents, even in the upper layers of the atmosphere. Mapping sensors created a global portrait of the planet. Shallow seas studded with islands, and three small continents. One lay nearly at the north pole, but the other two, the eastern and western continents, lay nearer the equator, in what must be temperate zones.

"Great," he muttered to himself, locating the ship's home-in beacon.

He could use it as a guide to plan his landing. The landing field was on the eastern continent. That must be where the Ylesian colony of priests and religious pilgrims was located.

The Dream rocked wildly, swooping through the swirling air currents like a child on a rope swing. Han's suit gloves were clumsy on the undersized diagnostic controls as he used his stabilizers to steady their descent.

Trying to get the feel of the controls, Han yawed them to port, then overcompensated, sending them skittering to starboard.

On the infrared image, a huge blob of red suddenly loomed up. That's a huge storm--Han thought, using his laterals to even out their descent.

He allowed the Dream to drift a few degrees north, figuring that he'd miss the storm, then swing back south later, when he was beneath the aelstrom.

The ionized particles left in the wake of all that lightning were playing havoc with his instruments, Han realized. He gulped air, felt his chest tighten, and had to fight back panic. Good pilots couldn't afford to let their emotions get in the way, or they'd wind up dead and that would end their trip real quick, wouldn't it?

"R2," Han said tightly, "see if you can chart me those storm areas so I can avoid the ion trails that lightning is leaving. Concentrate on the direct flight path between our present location and the landing field on that eastern continent."

"Yes, sir," the R2 unit said.

Moments later the electrical storm sites appeared before him. "Give me a scaled-down version of that chart in the corner of this screen, R2,"

Han ordered. Usually it would be the navicomputer's job to "merge" the intended flight path with the geographical features and the storm cells, and to suggest an intended course, which the pilot could then implement and modify as needed.

Han had never missed having a navicomputer at his disposal more than he did at this moment.

He slowed their headlong rush fractionally, then was forced to kick in their thrusters to get them out of the way of yet another wind shear from a storm cell.

Sweat was dripping down his face now as he fought the tiny controls, forcing Ylesian Dream into maneuvers only a swoop or a military fighter could reasonably be expected to tackle. Han realized he was still gasping, and wondered for a split second whether it was from stress and adrenaline or whether his air was running out.

He couldn't spare the second it would take to check the air pak. They were now only a kilometer above the surface of the planet, coming in with a rush. Too fast! Han slowed them, using the braking thrusters roughly. Gee forces seized him, and he felt as though something were squeezing his chest in a giant vise. He was gasping steadily now, and he dared to look down at his air pak.

Empty! The status indicator was solidly in the red zone.

Hold together, Han, he counseled himself. Just keep breathing.

There's got to be enough air in your suit to support you for a couple of minutes--at least.

He shook his head, feeling light-headed and dizzy. His breath began to burn in his chest.

But they were almost slow enough now to land. He braked again, lightly, and the ship bucked suddenly. I've lost my forward stabilizer!

Han fought to compensate. Still too fast, but there was nothing more he could do about that. He flicked on the repulsor lifts and began to set her down, feeling the ship's vibration through his knees and legs as he knelt on the deck.

Hold together, baby! he thought at the Dream. Hold together--With a huge whoooooompppp! the forward portside repulsor shorted out. The Dream yawed wildly to port, hit the ground, then bounced upward. The starboard repulsor blew, and then its entire starboard side impacted with the ground, nearly flipping the vessel over.

Veham! With a hideous crunch that Han could feel through his entire body, the Ylesian Dream crashed into the surface of the planet, shuddered once, and was still.

Han was thrown violently across the cabin. His helmet impacted with

the bulkhead, and he lay there, arms and legs flung wide, dazed. He fought to stay conscious. If he passed out, he'd never wake up again.

Trying to pull himself up into a sitting position, Han grunted with effort. Waves of blackness threatened. He triggered his suit communications channel. "R2

... R2 ... come in!"

"Yes, sir, I am here, sir." The droid's mechanical tones sounded a bit shaken. "If you don't mind my saying so, sir, that appears to have been a most unconventional landing. I am concerned that--" "Shut UP and OPEN THE CARGO AIRLOCK!" Han wheezed. He managed to push himself up into a sitting position, but he was afraid he wouldn't be able to stay up. He was swaying like a drunk in a high wind.

"But, sir, I warned you that in the interests of security, all entrances would be sealed pending--" Han found the blaster he'd stuck into the outside pocket on his suit and, drawing it, leveled the weapon at R2. "R2, YOU OPEN THAT AIRLOCK NOW, OR I'LL BLAST YOUR METAL HIDE INTO ATOMS!"

The droid's lights flashed frantically. Han's finger tightened on the trigger as he wondered whether he'd have the strength to crawl to the airlock. Blackness hovered at the edges of his vision.

"Yes, sir," the R2 said. "I am doing as you request."

Moments later Han felt the concussion as air whoomped into the Dream with near-explosive force. Gasping, he counted to twenty, then, with the last of his remaining strength, wrenched off his helmet. He let himself sink back down onto the deck.

He gasped, found he could breathe, and gulped huge lungfuls of fresh air.

Warm air, humid air, air laden with smells he couldn't identify. But it was rich with oxygen, eminently breathable, and that was all he cared about at the moment.

Closing his eyes, Han concentrated on simply breathing, and felt exhaustion overwhelm him. His head throbbed, and he needed just a moment to rest.

Just a moment . . .

When Han swam back up to full consciousness and opened his eyes, he found he was staring into a face out of a nightmare. That is the ugliest critter I've ever seen! was his first thought. Only years of experience in dealing with nonhumans of all varieties made him able to control his initial reaction.

The face was broad, with two bulbous, protruding eyes, and covered with leathery grayish-tan skin. No visible ears, and only slits for nostrils.

Above the nostril slits was a large, blunt horn that was nearly as long as Han's forearm. The mouth was a wide, lipless split in the huge head.

Han shook his own pounding head and managed to sit up, noting from his surroundings that he appeared to be in some type of infirmary. A medical droid hovered across the room, lights flashing.

His host (if that was who the creature was) was big, Han realized.

Much bigger even than a Wookiee. It somewhat resembled a Berrite, in that it walked on four tree-trunklike legs, but it was far larger.

This creature's head was appended to a short, humped neck that was attached to a massive body. Han figured its back would reach his shoulders when he was standing up. The leathery skin covering its body hung in creases, wrinkles, and loose folds, especially on its short, almost nonexistent neck. The skin



shone with an oily gleam.

The four short legs ended in huge, padded feet. A long, whippy tail was carried curled over its back. For a moment Han wondered if the creature had any manipulatory limbs, but then he noticed two undersized arms that were folded against its chest, half-hidden by the loose folds of neck skin. The being's hands were delicate, almost feminine, with four long, supple fingers on each hand.

The being opened its mouth and spoke in accented, but understandable Basic. "Greetings, Mr. Draygo. Allow me to welcome you to Ylesia.

Are you a pilgrim?"

"But I'm not . . ." Han muttered, his head spinning. For a moment the name didn't connect, then things snapped into place. Of course.

He clamped his mouth shut, thinking that maybe he'd gotten a worse knock on the head than he'd realized. Vyk Draygo was the alias whose ID he'd currently been carrying.

Han had several alter egos, with proper documentation to back them up.

Ironically, he had nothing by way of ID under his true name.

"Sorry," he muttered, holding his hand to his head, hoping his slip would be excused as a result of his head injury. "I'm still kind of shaken up, I guess. No, I'm not a pilgrim. I came here to answer a job advertisement for someone--preferably a Corellian--to do the piloting here."

"I see. But how did you happen to be aboard our ship when it crashed?"

the creature inquired.

"I wanted to reach Ylesia as quickly as possible, so I took the opportunity to stow away on the Ylesian Dream," Han said. "I'd have had to wait a week for a commercial flight, and the ad said a pilot was urgently needed. Did you get my message?"

"Yes, we did," the being said. Han watched it intently, wishing he

could read its expression. "We were expecting you--but not in the Ylesian Dream."

"See, I brought the ad with me." Han reached for his jumpsuit that was hanging over a chair beside the bed and extracted the holo-cube that featured the Ylesian advertisement he'd replied to. "It says you need someone to start right away."

He handed the cube over. "So . . . Vyk Draygo here, and I'm applying for this job. I'm Corellian, and I fit all your qualifications. I just . . .

well, I wanted to say that I'm sorry about crashing the Dream. Your ship's a different model than any I ever piloted, but a couple of hours on a simulator will fix that. And I'm afraid that your atmospheric currents came as a surprise."

The being scanned the cube, then placed it on the table. The corners of the massive, lipless mouth turned upward slightly. "I see. Mr. Draygo, I am the Most Exalted High Priest of Ylesia, Teroenza. Welcome to

our colony. I am impressed at your initiative, young human.

Traveling aboard a robot ship in order to answer our ad so quickly speaks well for you."

Han frowned, wishing his head didn't hurt quite so much. "Well . .

.

thanks."

"I am impressed that you managed to control and land a robot craft.

Few human pilots have been able to react quickly enough to deal with this world's challenging weather patterns. The damage to our ship is not serious, and repairs are already under way. You landed on soft ground, which was fortunate."

"Does that mean I get the job?" Han asked eagerly. Great! They're not mad!

"Would you be willing to sign a year's contract?" Teroenza asked.

"Maybe," Han said, leaning back and relaxing, hands behind his head.

"How much?"

The High Priest named a sum that made Han smile inwardly. Even though it was more money than he'd hoped for, he was too much of a trader not to automatically bargain.

"Well, I dunno . . ." he said, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "I made more than that in my previous position . . ."

A lie, but not one they'd be able to disprove. Vykk Draygo had indeed made more than that--Han had paid well to make sure his alter ego's job record showed that he could command the highest wages. It had taken all of Han's savings, plus the proceeds from two dangerous heists that Garris Shrike hadn't known anything about, to finance those alterations in his alter ego's job record--but Han had wanted Vykk Draygo to be able to command a high salary.

Teroenza pondered that information, then said, "Very well, I can offer you thirty thousand for the year, with a bonus of ten at the end of the first six months, providing you make every assigned flight on schedule."

"Bonus of fifteen," Han said automatically. "And you provide the training sims."

"Twelve," countered Teroenza. "And you pay for the sims." "Thirteen," Han said. "You supply the sims."

"Twelve and a half, and we provide the sims," the High Priest said.

"Final offer."

"Okay," Han said, "you got yourself a pilot."

"Excellent!" Teroenza actually chuckled, a deep, booming, oddly melodious sound.

Quickly the contracts were produced, and Han signed them, then allowed a retinal scan as proof of his identity. Hope they're like everyone else, he thought, and just do a general, system-wide check of my retinal patterns.

If the priests ordered a comprehensive--and very expensive--all systems search to determine whether "Vykk Draygo's" retinal scan was unique, they'd eventually discover that it wasn't. Vykk Draygo, Jenos Idanian, Tallus Bryne, Janil Andrus, and Keil d'Tana all shared the exact same retinal patterns--which wasn't surprising, as all of those individuals were, in fact, Han Solo.

Before Han left Trader's Luck, he'd taken the precaution of stashing a small hoard of credits and complete ID sets in two lockboxes on Corellia, in case he ever needed a quick change of identity. Garriss Shrike had provided the boy with different sets of ID for each scam Han participated in, and Han had kept each set and updated them as necessary.

The Corellian knew, however, that none of his forged IDs would stand up to Imperial scanners. Before he'd be able to take the Academy entrance exams, Han was well aware that he'd have to pay out a small fortune in bribes on Coruscant to gain ID documentation so genuine that it would pass an Imperial security clearance check.

With all of the business details taken care of, Teroenza then summoned an Under-Priest, or Sacredot, as they were called, and instructed him to take Han on a tour of the complex. Han was left in private to put on his jumpsuit, after being assured that clothing bearing the Ylesian symbol--a huge, wide-open eye and mouth--would be furnished to him.

As he donned the clothes and his boots, he realized that he was sweating heavily. Hot and humid, he thought. Wonderful climate. But for the money the priests were paying, he was willing to put up with a year's discomfort. By taking this job, he'd get lots of practice flying big ships and

access to training sims. That ought to ensure that he could pass the entrance exams to enter the Academy.

The money would mean that he had the proper amount for bribes to make sure his application was processed quickly and actually reached the admissions officers. He knew from his research that without bribes it frequently took a month or more for a cadet candidate to apply, pass all relevant exams, be interviewed, and finally accepted for entrance into the Imperial Academy.

The Sacredot arrived and introduced himself as "Veratil." Han followed him down a corridor, past a large amphitheater, and what appeared to be a registration area. "Our Welcome Center," the priest explained.

Veratil led him outside. Han stepped through the door, and even before he could draw a deep breath, he was immediately bathed in sweat.

Steaming heat and humidity smote him in the face, almost like a physical blow. The air was rich with smells--heavy perfume from flowers, rotting vegetation and another odor, one he'd smelled before but couldn't quite identify.

Han stood at the top of the short ramp that led down from the building and looked up at the sky, seeing that it was a translucent blue gray. The sun overhead was an orangey-red, and looked larger than he was used to. This star must be closer to its planet than Corellia was to Corellia.

Han glanced at the shadows, seeing it was far past noon, and then glanced at his wrist-chrono. "How long

is the day here?" he asked Veratil.

"Ten Standard hours, sir," the Sacredot replied.

No wonder the weather is so stormy, Han thought. We've got a hot, wet world with a really rapid rotation.

Han looked out across the cleared area. The permacrete ended abruptly, giving way to the natural ground and vegetation. Pools of water attested to recent torrential rain. Reddish mud made an arresting contrast to lush, blue-green vegetation. The flowers hanging from the vines and trees in the encroaching jungle were huge and multicolored--scarlet, deep purple, and vivid yellow.

"This is Colony One," Veratil explained. "We have also established two new colonies for our pilgrims. Two years ago we founded Colony Two, and last winter we built Colony Three, which is still very small.

Colony Two lies about one hundred fifty kilometers north, and Colony Three about seventy kilometers south of here."

"How long has Colony One been here?" Han asked.

"Nearly five Standard years."

Han looked out across Colony One. Directly across from the Welcome Center lay the landing pad. A little freighter lay there, listing on her repulsors. That must be the Dream, Han thought, realizing he'd never seen the ship from the outside.

The Ylesian Dream was a small vessel, shaped like a fat, somewhat irregular teardrop. On her underside was a bulge where there was a gunwell, proving that the ship hadn't always been a robot freighter.

Another, larger bulge denoted the location of the primary cargo hold.

She was a graceful ship, small enough to be agile. Corellian-built, almost certainly.

Han could see massive ship dock droids working on the Dream, beginning to repair her repulsors. The ship, droids, and everything nearby was splashed with reddish mud from the crash landing.

Off to the northeast, high above even the jungle giant trees, Han could make out a glimpse of snowcapped heights. He pointed. "What mountains are those?"

"The Mountains of the Exalted," Veratil told him. "The Altar of Promises where the faithful gather each night to be Exalted lies before them. You shall see it tonight, when you attend devotions."

Oh, great, Han thought. Do I have to attend services, too? Then he remembered how much the Ylesians were paying him. Han nodded. "I'll bet it's something to see."

To the pilot's left, he could make out a large expanse of the reddish mud.

Several beings of Teroenza's and Veratil's race lolled in mudholes, tended by droids and servants of assorted species. Han recognized a couple of Rodians, several Gamorreans, and at least one human. "Those are the mudflats," Veratil said, waving a dainty hand at the mudbathers and their attendants. "My people relish our mudbaths."

"What are your people?" Han asked. "Are you native to Ylesia?"

"No, we are native---or as native as our distant cousins, the Hutts--to Nal Hutta," Veratil replied. "We are the t'landa Til."

Han resolved to learn the t'landa Til's language as soon as he could.

Knowing a language that people didn't know you knew could often prove an asset...

The Sacredot led Han around to the rear of the Welcome Center. Han's eyes widened as he took in the huge cleared area before him. Clearing that much jungle must have been quite a chore. The cleared area was roughly rectangular, and at least a kilometer on each side. The mountains were now behind and to his left, and he could see, on his extreme right, the blue-gray glitter of water. "Lake?" he asked, indicating it.

"No, that is Zoma Gawanga, the Western Ocean," Veratil informed him.

Han counted the huge buildings that lay before the mudflats. There

were nine of them. Five were three stories high, the other four were only one story. Each was easily the size of a Corellian city block.

"Homes for the pilgrims?" he asked, waving at the buildings.

"No, the dormitory for our pilgrims is over there," Veratil said. The priest waved at a massive two-story building on the far left. "The multi-story buildings are where we process ryll, andris, and carsunum.

The single-story buildings you see extend far underground, a necessity for processing glitterstim, which must be handled in complete darkness."

Andris, ryll, carsunum, and glitterstim . . . Han's nostrils flared.

Of course, that explains the odor! These are factories for processing spice!

He remembered that the Ylesian Dream had originally carried a cargo of high-grade glitterstim, the most expensive and exotic variety of spice.

The other types were usually cheaper--though they were still one of the most profitable cargoes a smuggler could take on.

"We receive shipments of raw materials from worlds such as Kessel, Ryloth, and Nal Hutta several times a month," Veratil went on. "In the beginning, the robot freighters which supplied us landed here at Colony One, but that practice soon had to be discontinued."

"Why?" Han asked, wondering if he really wanted to know.

"Two ships--most unfortunately---could not negotiate our tricky atmosphere, and crashed. So we built a space station and decided to use living pilots to ferry the raw spice material down to the factories. We used to have three pilots, but now we are down to one, and the unfortunate Sullustan who is currently serving as our pilot has been . . . ill. That is why we need you, Pilot Draygo."

It's so nice to be needed, Han thought sarcastically. "Uh . . .

Veratil .

. what happened to those other guys?"

"One crashed, the other simply . . . disappeared. We have also lost a number of robot vessels, which has cut down on our profit margin most grievously," Veratil said sadly. "Spice is a high-credit export, but spaceships are very expensive."

"Yeah," Han agreed sourly. "All those crashes would tend to put a crimp in your business." No wonder they didn't have pilots beating down their doors, he thought. Most of the experienced pilots have probably spread the word about how dangerous this planet is for pilots. . .

Han knew a little bit about the various kinds of spice, mostly from hearing Shrike and the other smugglers discuss their properties.

Glitterstim, mined on Kessel, was by far the most valuable. When exposed to light, then quickly ingested, it gave the user a temporary telepathic ability to sense surface thoughts and emotions. Spies used it, lovers used it, and the Empire used it when interrogating prisoners. Matter of

fact, the Empire claimed all the glitterstim mined on Kessel as its rightful property, which was why it was so rare and so lucrative to smuggle.

Ryll came from the Twi'lek world, Ryloth, where it was perfectly legal to mine, and was used for analgesic purposes. There were illegal applications, however, and it could be used to produce several intoxicants and hallucinogens.

Carsunum was a black spice that came from Sevarcos, and it was quite rare and very valuable. Users experienced euphoria, and an increase in their abilities--while under the influence they became stronger, faster, and more intelligent. There was a downside, of course. After the effects wore off, users frequently became listless, depressed, and some even died when the substance had a toxic effect on their metabolisms.

Sevarcos also supplied the galaxy with andris, a white powder that was added to foods to enhance flavor and preserve them. Some users claimed that the drug caused a mild euphoria and increase in sensation.

They're not mining it here, Han thought. These factories process the raw material to turn it into the finished product.

"Factories?" Han echoed. "They're huge . . ."

"Yes, and Ylesia has admirable production rates, enabling us to favorably compete with the cost of the spice shipped directly from Kessel, Ryloth, or Sevarcos," Veratil explained. "And we are the only facility that offers such variety of spice. Buyers frequently wish to purchase several different kinds of spice for their customers, and we provide that."

Han saw figures entering and leaving the factory buildings. Many humans, some nonhumans. He recognized Twi'leks, Rodians, Gamorreans, Devaronians, Sullustans . . . and there were others that were unknown to him. All the humans and bipedal aliens wore tan-colored robes that came down below their knees and tan-colored caps that covered their hair.

He gestured at the people. "Factory workers?"

The Sacredot hesitated, then said, "They are the pilgrims that have chosen to serve the Oneness, the All, in our factories."

"Oh," Han murmured. "I see."

He saw a lot of things, now, more and more clearly each instant. And he had a bad feeling about what he was seeing. These pilgrims come here to attain religious sanctuary, and wind up working in spice factories.

I smell a vrelt---a dead one.

The Ylesian sun was far down in the sky by now, almost to the horizon.

Han noticed that throngs of tan-clad workers were streaming northeast, toward the mountains. Veratil beckoned Han with one undersized hand.

"It is time for the blessed pilgrims to attend devotions and to be

Exulted in the One, render their prayers to the All. Let us take the Path of Oneness to reach the Altar of Promises. Come, Pilot Draygo."

Han obediently followed the priest up a well-worn paved path. Even though they were surrounded by pilgrims, Han noticed that no one ventured very close to them. All of the pilgrims gave Veratil deep bows, hands folded over their hearts. "They offer thanks for the Exultation they are about to receive," Veratil explained to Han as they walked along.

As they moved away from the buildings, the jungle around them closed in, until the path they were walking on was shadowed and overhung with giant branches. Han almost felt as though he were walking in a tunnel.

They passed a huge open area that was evidently some kind of swamp, because it was completely covered in huge blooms that were so beautiful and exotic that Han had never seen anything like them. "The Flowered Plains," Veratil, still playing tour guide, pointed out. "And this is the Forest of Faithfulness."

Han nodded. I wonder how much more of this I can take, he thought. I hope they don't expect me to become a convert, because they've got the wrong guy.

After a twenty-minute walk, the group reached a large, paved area that was fronted with a partially roofed area supported by three monstrous pillars.

Veratil indicated that Han should stay with the crowd of pilgrims, then the Sacredot moved on, heading for the pillars. Han saw several of the T'landa Til assembled beneath the pillars, including one that he tentatively identified as Teroenza. They were ranged around a low altar carved from some translucent white stone that seemed to glow with an inner light.

The high, snowcapped mountains made an impressive backdrop to the scene, as they towered high above the jungle. Han craned his neck, looking up . .

. up . . . the tops of the highest peaks were hidden by drifting clouds, stained red from the sunset. The

snows on the western sides of the peaks glowed crimson and rose.

Impressive, Han was forced to admit. The simplicity of the natural amphitheater, with its paved floor and pillared altar, made it seem like some vast natural cathedral.

The faithful filed into ranks and stood waiting.

Han stood at the back, shifting impatiently, hoping whatever religious service was about to take place wouldn't last long. He was hungry, his head was throbbing, and the heat was making him sleepy.

The High Priest raised his tiny arms and intoned a phrase in his native language. The Sacredots, including Veratil, echoed him. Then the

assembled throng (Han estimated four or five hundred in the crowd) echoed the High Priest's phrase. Han leaned closer to the nearest pilgrim, a Twi'lek. "What are they saying?"

"They said, 'The One is All,'" the Twi'lek, who spoke excellent Basic, translated. "Would you like me to interpret the service for you?"

Since Han was determined to begin learning the t'landa Til's language, he nodded. "If you wouldn't mind."

The High Priest intoned again. Han listened to the ritual phrases repeated by the Sacredots, then droned forth by the faithful pilgrims "The All is One."

"We are One. We belong to the All."

"In service to the All, every One is Exulted."

"We sacrifice to achieve the All. We serve the One."

"In work and sacrifice we are All fulfilled. If every One has worked hard, we are All Exulted."

Han stifled a yawn. This was awfully repetitious.

Finally, after nearly fifteen minutes of chanting, Teroenza and all the priests stepped forward. "You have worked well," the High Priest pronounced. "Prepare for the blessing of Exultation!"

The crowd gave forth a sound of such greedy anticipation that Han was taken aback. Moving in a great wave, as though they were truly One, they dropped to the pavement and lay there, arms and legs huddled beneath their bodies, in an attitude of breathless hope and yearning.

All of the priests raised their arms. Han watched as the loose, wrinkled skin that hung below their throats inflated with air and began to pulse. A low, throbbing hum--or was it a vibration?--gradually filled the air.

Han's eyes widened as he felt something invade his mind and body. Part vibration, part sound? He wasn't sure. Was it empathy, or telepathy, or did that vibration trigger something in his brain? He couldn't tell. He only knew that it was strong...

It rolled across him in a great wave. Emotional warmth, physical pleasure, it was all of that and more. Han staggered back, off the permacrete, until he was brought up short by the trunk of one of the forest giants. He braced himself against the tree, his head swimming.



He dug his fingernails into the bark, hanging on to the tree. His hands against the bark seemed to be the only thing keeping him from being swept away by that wave of warm feeling and ecstatic pleasure .

..

Han hung on to the tree physically, and himself mentally, refusing to let himself be sucked under with that wave. He wasn't sure where he found the strength, but he fought as hard as he ever had. All his life, he'd been his own person, master of his own mind and body, and nothing was going to change that. He was Han Solo, and he didn't need aliens invading his mind or his body to make him feel good.

No! he thought. I'm a free man, not some pilgrim, not your puppet!

Free, do you hear?

Gritting his teeth, Han fought that invasion as he would have fought a physical opponent, and then, as quickly as it had started, the sensation was gone--he was free.

But it was obvious the pilgrims weren't. Their bodies writhed on the stone, and muffled moans of happiness and pleasure made a soft swell of sound.

Sickened, Han looked over at the priests. They obviously weren't affected as the pilgrims were. So this is why these poor dupes stay, once they find out they're expected to work in the spice factories, Han thought, feeling a surge of bitter resentment on behalf of the pilgrims. They slave all day, then they hike up here and get a jolt of feel-good vibrations that makes even the best spice pale by comparison.

Han wondered whether he'd be expected to attend these "evening devotionals" every night, and hoped that he wouldn't. It had been hard enough to push away that rush of warmth and pleasure tonight. He was afraid that if he had to be exposed to it every night, he wouldn't have the strength, the resolution, to reject the Ylesian priests' "happy pill."

By this time, the pilgrims were beginning to get up, some of them weaving unsteadily. All of their eyes were glazed, and many looked like addicts Han had seen in spice and opal dens on Corellia and other worlds.

"Do they do this every night?" he muttered to the Twi'lek.

The alien's reddish eyes were shining with joy. "Oh, yes. Wasn't it wonderful?"

"Great," Han said, but the Twi'lek was so enraptured he missed the sarcasm.

"Do they ever not hold these 'devotions'?" Han asked, curious. "They are only canceled if there has been trouble in the factories. One time a worker went mad and took a foreman hostage, then he demanded passage off-planet. Evening devotions and the Exultation were canceled--it was horrible."

"So what happened to the mad worker?" Han asked, reflecting that the "madman" sounded completely sane to him.

"Before morning, we managed to overpower him and turn him over to the guards, thank the One," the Twi'lek said.

Yeah, I'll bet, Han thought. They couldn't stand being without their little nightly charge.

The service was evidently over.

Veratil joined Han for the walk back to the central compound. Han was disinclined to talk, and truthfully pleaded fatigue. The Sacredot, saying that he understood perfectly, showed the Corellian pilot back to the infirmary.

"You may eat and sleep here tonight," he said, "and tomorrow we will take you to your permanent quarters in our Administration Building."

"Where's that?" Han asked, pausing halfway through a bite of indifferent--but filling--reedox stew.

The Sacredot waved his arm roughly northeast. "Not visible from here, but there is a path through the trees. I will meet you back here in, say, six Standard hours? Will that provide you with sufficient sleep?"

Han nodded. He could always try to snatch a nap later. "Fine." When the priest was gone, Han dragged off his clothes and boots, realizing that he had to get something clean to wear by tomorrow, or he wouldn't be fit for polite society. He considered taking a shower before bed, but he was just too tired.

Han had always been able to set himself to wake up whenever he wished to, so he mentally programmed himself to wake up in five and a half hours.

Then, his mind whirling with images and impressions, he lay down on the narrow infirmary bunk and was instantly asleep.

It took him a few minutes the next morning to remember just who he was (Vykk Draygo, and don't forget it!) and what he was doing in this sticky-hot place. Han ventured into the shower and was pleased to find the refresher unit contained everything necessary for a human being.

He hummed tunelessly as he soaped himself, but when he lifted a foot to wash it, Han froze in surprise and dismay. Fuzzy, blue-green, mossy stuff was growing between his toes!

Alarmed, Han checked further and was disgusted to find patches starting in his armpits, at the back of his neck, and other, even more personal areas.

Cursing, he scrubbed the disgusting fungus away, leaving raw skin behind, and then, realizing he was running late, he bolted out of the shower. What kind of place is this, anyway?

When he walked back into the sleeping area, he found the medical droid waiting for him, with a new pilot's uniform draped over one arm.

The droid held a jar of slimy gray stuff in its other hand. "Pardon me, sir," the droid said. "But may I ask whether you are experiencing any . . .

. outbreaks of fungus growing on your skin?"

"Yeah," Han snarled. "The climate in this place is miserable. Nobody deserves to live in this dump."

"I quite understand, sir," the droid said, actually managing to sound sympathetic. "May I offer the contents

of this jar? It should prevent fungal growths with regular application."

"Thanks," Han said shortly, and retired to treat the affected areas.

The stuff smelled horrible, but it soothed the irritation. Then he got dressed, admiring himself in his first real pilot's uniform. The colorful patches looked quite spiffy.

Han refused to let himself worry about the pilgrims he'd seen last night.

Nobody had forced the weak-minded fools to come here, so he wasn't going to waste any time imagining their fate. He was going to take care of Han Solo--or, more accurately, he was going to take care of Vyk Draygo.

Besides, Han told himself, I'm going to be piloting for these Ylesians.

I'll have access to a ship. If I decide I don't like it, I'll just take my money and . . . vanish. What can they do to stop me, after all?

Feeling cocky, Han smiled at his reflection in the mirror and gave himself a snappy salute. "Cadet Han Solo reporting for duty, sir!" he whispered, trying it on for size. His dream of the Academy had never seemed so close, so attainable.

When Han stepped out of the infirmary, the first person he saw was Teroenza. Han nodded pleasantly to his employer. "Good morning, sir!"

The High Priest inclined his massive head. "And to you, Pilot Draygo.

Allow me to present someone you are going to be spending a lot of time with, during your employment with us." The High Priest beckoned, and Han heard someone behind him. He whirled around, and couldn't stop himself from taking a quick step back.

His first impression was of height, and the second was of sharp teeth and knife-like claws. This being stood nearly three meters tall, taller even than a Wookiee. The creature had a mouthful of needle-like fangs, and claws that looked like they could rip through durasteel. It was furred, but it wore a pair of breeches. A curved knife hung on its belt, and a holstered blaster was strapped to its thigh. Sleek muscles rippled everywhere.

The newcomer grinned, baring even more of those teeth. "Greetings . . .

." it said, speaking Basic with a pronounced lisp. "This is Muuurgh," Teroenza introduced the being. "He's a Togorian, one of the most honorable sentients in this galaxy. The Togorian reputation for honesty and loyalty is unparalleled, did you know that?"

Han looked up at the huge being and swallowed. "Uh, no . . ." he managed.

"We've assigned Muuurgh to be your . . . bodyguard, Pilot Draygo. On planet or off, Muuurgh will accompany you everywhere . . . isn't that correct, Muuurgh?"

"Muuurgh has given word of honor," the Togorian affirmed.

The High Priest folded his undersized arms across his massive body, and his mouth curved up in what

almost appeared to be a mocking smile.

"Muuurgh is going to make very sure, Pilot Draygo, that no matter where you go, or what you do . . . you will be . . . safe."

Four

Muuurgh

Han stared at the huge, black-furred creature, realizing that the jig was definitely up. Teroenza's meaning was unmistakable--step out of line, and Muuurgh will rip you in two. Han eyed the Togorian, realizing that the alien could easily do just that.

He managed to pull himself together and smiled up at the Togorian.

"Pleased to meet you, Muuurgh," he said. "It'll be nice to have real company on those long flights."

"Yess . . ." the bodyguard said, stepping closer. Han realized with dismay that the top of his head barely reached the Togorian's breastbone. The alien appeared so feline that Han was surprised to realize he didn't have a tail. "Muuurgh enjoys space travel . . ."

the bodyguard said in his strongly accented, lisping Basic. His facial fur was black, but his whiskers and chest fur were white. His eyes were a startling light blue, with brilliant green slitted pupils.

"Muuurgh goes many spaceports, the more the better."

Han had a little trouble understanding the Togorian's Basic, but he could make it out. The young Corellian wondered just how smart this being was.

Have to get to know him, Han decided. Just because he can't speak good Basic doesn't mean he's dumb. But if he is . . .

Han smiled.

"We'd thought we'd give you a day to settle in, Pilot Draygo," Teroenza said. "Move into the quarters we've assigned you, in the Administration Building. Muuurgh will show you where it is. Then, tomorrow, we'd like you to begin ferrying goods and personnel back and forth between the colonies. By the time our next shipment of spice is delivered to our space station, you will be ready to ferry that down for us. After today, I am going to order Jalus Nebl, our other pilot, to take a rest. He has been working too hard."

Han nodded. I've got to meet up with this Sullustan and compare notes.

"That will be fine. Can I . . . look around a bit? I'd like to check out the lay of the land."

Teroenza inclined his massive head. "Certainly, as long as Muuurgh accompanies you, and you follow all safety regulations while touring the factories."

"Of course," Han agreed.

Teroenza bowed slightly. "If you will excuse me, we are expecting a shipment of pilgrims to come down from our orbiting space station this morning. I have much to do as I prepare to welcome them."

Han nodded, thinking about what lay ahead for those pilgrims. He knew that mining spice was considered dangerous, an extremely unpleasant duty--matter of fact, being sent to the spice mines of Kessel was a common punishment for felons--but he knew very little about what happened to the spice once it was mined.

Well, he intended to find out. Maybe there was some way he could turn this situation even more to his advantage. You never knew . . . and it never paid to leave stones unturned. In Han Solo's book, knowledge frequently led to power---or at least to a faster escape . . .

Muuurgh led Han up a paved path through the jungle, until they reached a large, very modern building. "Administration Center," the Togorian said, indicating the building.

The "bodyguard" led Han around to a side entrance, and then down a corridor until he reached a door. "You, Muuurgh, sleep here," he said, opening the door.

Inside was a small suite consisting of a bedroom, refresher unit, and a small sitting room. Han was pleased to see that Teroenza had been mindful of the terms of the contract. In one corner of the bedroom was a fully equipped sim unit. Muuurgh walked to the door of the bedroom and waved a clawed hand at it. "Yours. Pilot sleep here."

"But where will you sleep?" Han asked.

As expected, Muuurgh indicated the sitting room. "Muuurgh here."

Great, Han said. These priests don't trust me any more than I trust them. With Muuurgh sleeping between me and the door to the outside, I'd be taking a big chance trying to sneak out at night. Just great.

"That doesn't look very comfortable to me," Han said, doing his best

imitation of wide-eyed innocence. Inwardly, he was wondering whether Muuurgh was a sound sleeper. "Maybe you should get a room of your own, so you could sleep comfortably."

"Muuurgh most comfortable when he is keeping word of honor," the Togorian said. Han stared at the catlike being. Had he glimpsed a flash of humor in those blue-green eyes with their slitted pupils?

"Muuurgh give word of honor to watch Pilot always, so Muuurgh most comfortable here." Han nodded. "Right."

He stared for a moment at the blaster in the Togorian's holster. "I had a blaster when I came here, but I don't know where it is, now," he commented. "I guess I'll need to ask about getting it back."

"Pilot not need blaster." Muuurgh flexed his fingers and the retractable claws popped out. "High Priest say Pilot not need blaster."

"But what if I get attacked by some kind of . . . predator?" Han waved at the omnipresent jungle outside the building. There were probably dozens of predators who might enjoy hunting an off-worlder, either for food or fun.

The giant alien shook his whiskered head. "Never happen. Pilot have Muuurgh, who has blaster."

"Uh . . . that's true," Han said. Mentally, he made a note to ask Teroenza for some kind of weapon. He felt naked without one, even after only having had one for a couple of days.

"So, Muuurch, shall we go exploring?" Han asked. "I don't have any baggage to unpack, as you can see."

"Explore where?" the Togorian asked.

"I'd like to tour the factories," Han said. "And this Administration Center."

"Fine," the Togorian said. "Come, Pilot."

"Right behind you," Han said, suiting his action to his words.

They walked the corridors of the Administration Center, glanced in at the mess hall, toured the guards' wing, and peeked at the priests' quarters.

When Han caught a glimpse of the Armory, he realized that the Ylesian priests must be afraid of a pilgrim uprising, because the percentage of guards to workers was high. The Armory boasted a lot of heavy-duty riot-control armament--force pikes and stun gas. The guards they met came from many different worlds. Besides humans, Han saw Rodians, Sullustans, Twi'leks, and porcine Gamorreans.

"So let me get this straight," he said to Muuurch as they skirted an area in the Administration Center that signs in many languages identified as RESTRICTED ACCESS. "The guards all sleep here most of the time? But

why don't they sleep near the pilgrims' dormitory if the priests want to make sure the workers stay under control?"

"Sleep-time not the problem," the Togorian said in his halting Basic.

"After pilgrims are Exulted, can barely walk back, go sleep right away.

Only time pilgrims get mad, angry at bosses, is before Exultation."

Makes sense, Han thought dourly. Give the addicts their fix, and then they just sleep it off until the next day. "Then the guard patro--" The pilot stopped in midword when he glimpsed something large and grayish gliding far down the corridor in the off-limits area. Han squinted into the dimness. "Hey . . . what was that?" he muttered.

"That looked just like a--" Han broke off as the object turned the corner. He started after it at a good clip.

Muuurch made a futile grab for his charge, but Han was quicker than the big alien and dodged. He jogged down the "forbidden" hallway, listening hard for the sound of footsteps, but none came.

When he reached the junction of the corridors, Han turned to stare up the one where he'd glimpsed that flicker of gliding motion. His eyes widened.

Hey, it is a Hutt! What's a Hutt doing here? There was no mistaking the identity of that huge, sluglike form reclining on its repulsorlift sled.

As he hesitated, Muuurg h pounced on him as though he were a vrelt, and picked up the Corellian bodily. Han repressed a yelp of dismay as the Togorian tucked him under one muscled arm and ran back down the corridor, until they were back in the UNRESTRICTED ACCESS section of the Center.

Muuurg h set Han back on his feet and flexed a hand under the Corellian's nose. "My people teach, everyone entitled to ONE mistake," the bodyguard said. "Pilot just have his. No more mistakes, or Muuurg h have to teach Pilot like little cub. Muuurg h has given word of honor, remember.

Understood?"

Han eyed the claws that gleamed under his nose, sharp and shiny as razors.

"Uh . . . yeah," he managed to say. "I understand, Muuurg h. Humans just get . . . curious, you know?"

"Curiosity fatal sometimes," Muuurg h growled.

"I can see your point," Han said dryly. "Or, rather, your points."

Muuurg h stared at the sharp, shining tips of his claws, then his muzzle lifted back from his fangs, and he made a low, mewling sound. For a moment Han froze, then he looked at the Togorian and realized this was the alien's form of laughter. Evidently Muuurg h had caught the joke.

Han managed a weak chuckle. "So, how about we get some food, then check out those factories, eh, pal?" he asked.

"Muuurg h always hungry," the Togorian agreed, leading the way toward the mess hall. "What means this word 'pal'?"

"Oh, a pal is a friend, a buddy, you know. Someone you spend time with that you like," Han explained.

"Yessss . . ." the Togorian said, nodding. "Pilot means 'packmate.'""Right."

"Good," the bodyguard said. "Muuurg h misses his packmates."

Han recalled Teroenza saying that his people came from Nal Hutta, the Hutt homeworld, but Han hadn't realized that that meant there were Hutts living on Ylesia. When questioned, Muuurg h confirmed that he had seen several of the "slug masters who ride on air" as he called them.

There's only one reason Hutts are here, Han thought. They're the real masters of Ylesia. After all, they dominate the contraband spice trade. .

.

Lunch was good, if unimaginative and (to Han's taste) lacking in seasoning. Still, the cook was no slouch. His or her bread was very good, Han thought as he chewed on a bite of Alderaanian flatbread. Herealized suddenly, with a pang, that it had been nearly a day since he'd thought of Dewlanna. The thought made him feel vaguely disloyal, but then he took himself in hand. Dewlanna wouldn't want him to mope and grieve over her.

She'd always enjoyed life, and she wouldn't expect Han not to, just because she was gone . . .

He came back out of his reverie to find Muuurgh watching him curiously.

"Pilot is thinking of someone far away," the Togorian observed, waving the bone he had just finished gnawing. Tiny fragments of raw meat still clung to it, but Muuurgh had cleaned it impressively, Han thought. He had to get every little bit. It required a lot of raw meat to keep that massive body going.

"Yeah," Han agreed with a sigh. "Someone about as far away as anyone can be."

"Pilot have sweetheart?"

Han shook his head. "Well, there've been a few girls here and there," he admitted, "but nobody special. No, I was thinking of the person whomore or less raised me."

Muuurgh took a huge gulp of some foamy stuff from a tankard. "Humans raise young much differently than my people do," he said. "Really?"

Tell me about your world."

Muuurgh obediently launched into a description of Togoria, a world where males and females, though equal, did not mix their societies.

Males

lived a nomadic hunting existence, flying over the plains on their huge, domesticated flying reptiles, called "mosgoths." They hunted in packs.

The females, on the other hand, had domesticated animals for meat, so they did not need to hunt. They lived in cities and villages, and it was the female Togorians who had developed all of the planet's technology.

"Well, if your people don't live together, how do you"--Han searched for a polite term--"uh . . . get together, you know, to . . . uh...

reproduce?"

"We travel to city to stay with our mates once each year," Muuurgh said.

"Between times, we think often of each other. Togorians very emotional people, capable of great love," he added earnestly. "Especially males.

Great love is why Muuurgh is here. Males of my species rarely leave our world, does Pilot know that?"

"I do now," Han said. "So . . . Muuurgh . . . when you say great love made you come to Ylesia, what do you mean? Do you have a mate?"

The Togorian nodded. "Promised mate. Someday be mated for life, if Muuurgh can but find her." The huge alien sighed, looking so woeful that Han felt sorry for him.

"What's her name?"

"Mrrov. Beautiful, beautiful Mrrov. As Togorian females do, she decided to take look at big galaxy.



Muuurgh begged her not to go, but females very stubborn."

The alien looked at Han, who nodded. "Yeah, I've run into that myself."

"Mrrov gone long time, years. When she not come home to be mated, Muuurgh so sad that he cannot stay on Togoria. Must discover what happened to her."

"So . . . did you?" Han took a sip of his Polanis ale. "Muuurgh traced her, from world to world to world." "And?" Han prompted when the Togorian paused.

"And Muuurgh lost her. Someone on Ord Mantell said he saw her boardship at spaceport. Muuurgh check schedules, find out ship had many pilgrims on board. Several ports of call for ship. Muuurgh take chance, come here, because so many pilgrims come here." The big felineoid sighed heavily and nibbled on a meat-dripping bone. "Gambleno good. Muuurgh ask, priests say no Togorians here. Muuurgh not know where else to go. Muuurgh need credits to continue search . . ." The alien swallowed a last bite, and his whiskers actually drooped.

"So you decided to take a job as a guard here, while you got enough money to go on searching," Han said, guessing at the logical end of the story.

"Yessss . . ."

Han shook his head. "That's sad, pal. I hope you find her, I really do."

"It's tough to lose people that you love."

The bodyguard nodded.

After lunch, they headed down to the factories and walked around the huge buildings. Han sniffed the air, smelling the odor of the different spices mingling. His nose tingled slightly, and he wondered if just smelling the spice could be intoxicating. He waved at the glitterstim building. "Let's go inside. I've heard about how they process this spice, and I'd like to see it for myself."

When they walked into the cavernous building, a guard stopped them and conferred with Muuurgh, who explained who Han was. The Rodian guard on duty gave them badges and infrared goggles, then waved them on in.

"Goggles?" Han said in Rodian. He understood the language perfectly, but his pronunciation was a bit laborious. "We have to wear them?"

The guard's purple eyes sparkled at hearing a human speak his language.

"Yes, Pilot Draygo," he said. "Below the ground floor, there are no visible lights permitted. You take the turbolift down. Each level down represents a one-grade increase in the quality of the spice. The longest and best fibers are processed far below ground, to eliminate any possibility of their being ruined by light."

"Okay," Han said, beckoning to Muuurgh. The two walked between aisles of supplies, to reach the platform turbolift in the center of the facility.

"Let's go all the way down and see the really good stuff," he said to the Togorian. Privately, Han was wondering whether he might be able to light-finger some of those tiny black vials. Selling a little glitterstim

on the side in a port city would increase his credit account by leaps and bounds . . .

Han pushed the button for the bottom floor, and the platform, swaying slightly, started down.

Cool air wafted up from the depths as the turbolift went down in pitch-darkness. The draft felt wonderful after the humid heat of the Ylesian jungle.

Within one floor, all light was gone. Han fumbled for his goggles, pulled them up over his eyes. Immediately he could see, though everything was in shades of black and white. The illumination came from small light inserts in the walls. The turbolift plunged downward, and Han could see the workers as they crouched over their workstations.

Piles of raw, fibrous threads studded with minuscule crystals lay piled before them.

Finally, six floors down, the turbolift ground to a halt. Han and Muuurch got off. "Have you ever been here before?" he asked the bodyguard softly.

Muuurch's neck fur was standing on end, and his white whiskers bristled beneath his goggled eyes.

"No . . ." the Togorian whispered back. "My people are plains dwellers. Not like caves. Not like dark. Muuurch will be happy when Pilot wishes to leave this place. Only Muuurch's word of honor keeps him here in wretched darkness."

"Steady," Han said. "We won't be here that long. I just want to get a look around."

He led the way into the factory. The cavernous area was filled with soft swishings, but was otherwise silent. Long tables lined the walls and were ranged in the aisles. Each table was a workstation, and a worker sat or crouched, according to his, her, or its individual anatomy, before the table. There were many humans, Han realized, sitting on tall stools, hunched over their work.

Few looked up as Han and Muuurch went up to the level supervisor, a furred Devaronian female, and identified themselves. The supervisor waved a reddish, sharp-nailed hand at the floor. "My workers are the most skilled," she said proudly. "It takes skill to measure and trim the number of fibrous strands so each dose will contain the correct amount of spice.

It is essential--but very difficult--to line up the fibers so precisely that they will all activate at the same moment when exposed to visible light."

"Is it a mineral?" Han asked. "I know it's mined."

"It is naturally occurring, but we don't know how it's formed, Pilot.

We believe it may have a biological origin, but we're not sure. It's found deep in the tunnels on Kessel, and it must be mined in total darkness, just as you see here."

"And the strands have gotta be put into these casings just right."

"Correct. Improper alignment can cause the tiny crystals to fracture against each other. If that happens, they grind each other into a far less potent--and valuable--powder. It can take a skilled worker an hour to properly align just one or two cylinders of glitterstim."

"I see," Han said, fascinated. "Do you mind if we just wander around?"

"I promise we won't touch anything."

"You may. However, please avoid distracting any of the workers while they are aligning the spice. One inadvertent twist, as I said, could ruin an entire thread."

"I understand," Han said.

The raw glitterstim threads were all black, but Han knew from hearing about it that they would shine blue when they ignited in visible light.

Han stopped behind one of the human workers and watched in fascination as the worker separated out threads of ebony-colored spice, aligning them with the utmost care. The threads curled around the worker's fingers, some of them as fine-spun as silk, but the tiny crystals made them incredibly sharp.

The worker positioned one group of incredibly tangled threads in the jaws of a tiny vise, then proceeded to painstakingly separate out the threads, until the crystalline structures were aligned. The worker's fingers moved almost too fast to watch, and Han realized that he was watching a highly skilled craftsman--no, woman. He was amazed that these pilgrims could actually accomplish something requiring this much dexterity. After seeing them last night following the "Exultation," he'd more or less assumed that they were dull-witted cretins. They'd certainly looked like it...

The glitterstim worker took out a minuscule set of pliers to untangle a particularly bad snarl. She wormed the narrow-nosed pliers into the tangle, peering intently to find the place where the sharp little crystals were caught together. The fibrous glitterstim curled around her hands like tiny, living tentacles, the sharp little crystal glimmering. The worker abruptly brought her hand back, tugging, and suddenly the snarl straightened out until all the fibers aligned perfectly.

Except one.

Han watched in distress as one sharp-studded strand cut between the woman's forefinger and thumb. A thin line of blood welled from the deep gash. Han sucked in a breath. A few centimeters deeper, and the tendon in her thumb would have been severed. She hissed with pain, then muttered something in Basic and, freeing her hand, held it to stop the bleeding.

Han froze as he heard her accent. This pilgrim was Corellian!

He hadn't even looked at her before, hidden as she was by the shapeless tan robe, her cap pulled down tightly over her goggled head. But now he realized she was young, not old. She grimaced slightly as she examined the cut. Turning her hand over, she twisted in her seat and held her hand over the floor, so the blood wouldn't drip onto her workstation.

Han knew he wasn't supposed to speak to the worker, but she wasn't working at the moment, and he was concerned. She was bleeding profusely. "You're hurt," he said. "Let me call the supervisor so she can fix you up."

The girl--she was his age, possibly younger--started slightly, then looked up at him. Her face was a whitish-green blur beneath her goggles

and cap, and seemed deathly pale in the infrared light. No wonder, Han thought, cooped up down here all

day long, no exposure to sunlight.

"No, please don't," she said, speaking Basic with that soft accent that placed her as being from Corellia's southern continent. "If she sends me to the infirmary, I'll miss the Exultation." She shivered at the thought--though it might also have been from the cold. Han himself was beginning to feel chilly, and he hadn't been down here for hours. How did these pilgrims stand it, working down here in the cold darkness all day? "But that cut looks nasty," Han protested. She shrugged. "The bleeding is stopping."

Han could see that was true. "But what about--" She shook her head, halting him in mid-sentence. "I appreciate your concern, but it's nothing. Happens all the time." With a wry smile, she held out her hands. Han sucked in a breath. Her fingers, wrists, and forearms were crisscrossed with tiny slashes. Some were old and white and healed, but many were dark weals, still fresh and painful.

Han saw small, phosphorescent spots between her fingers and realized they must be the fungus he'd discovered on himself that morning. As he watched, a phosphorescent tendril of the stuff suddenly spread, growing toward the cut between her finger and thumb. She uttered a soft exclamation and pulled it free.

"The fungus loves fresh blood," she said, evidently noticing his distaste.

"It can infect a cut and make you sick very easily."

"Disgusting stuff," Han said. "Are you sure you don't need to get that treated?"

She shook her head. "As you can see, it happens all the time. Excuse me, but . . . you're Corellian, aren't you?"

"So are you," Han said. "I'm Vyk Draygo, the new pilot. And you are?"

Her mouth tightened slightly. "I'm . . . not really supposed to be talking. I'd better get back to work."

Muuurgh, who had been watching in silence, suddenly spoke up. "Worker is correct. Pilot must let worker return to work now."

"Okay, pal. I understand," Han said to the Togorian, but then he added to the Corellian woman, "But maybe we could talk some other time. Over supper, maybe."

She shook her head silently and turned back to her work. Muuurgh motioned for Han to move on.

The Corellian moved one step away, but continued talking. "Okay, but.

. .

you never know. We're bound to run into each other, this place ain't all that big. So . . . what's your name?"

She shook her head again, not speaking. Muuurgh growled, low in his throat, but Han just stood there, stubbornly.

The woman seemed disturbed by Muuurgh's implied threat. As she fastened a bandage over her cut, she said, "We give up our names when we leave all worldly things for the spiritual sanctuary of Ylesia."

Han was feeling increasingly frustrated. Here was someone who knew this place intimately, and she was the first person from his homeworld he'd discovered here. "Please," he said as Muuurch pushed him slightly. "There must be some kind of way they refer to you," he said, smiling his most reassuring, charming smile. Muuurch growled again, more loudly. He showed his fangs.

The woman's eyes opened wide at the display of teeth. "I am Pilgrim 921," she said hastily. Han got the impression that she had spoken up to save him from Muuurch's are.

Muuurch grabbed Han's arm and began walking away, effortlessly dragging the Corellian. "Thank you, Pilgrim 921," Han called back to her, waving jauntily, as though being half carried away by the Togorian was a normal occurrence. "Good luck with those fibers. I'll be seeing you."

She didn't respond. When Muuurch finally let him go, at the end of the aisle, Han followed the Togorian obediently, half expecting a lecture from the giant being. But Muuurch seemed satisfied that Han would now obey him, and had relapsed into his former wary silence.

Han glanced back once and saw that the Corellian woman was again intent on her work, as though she'd already forgotten him.

Pilgrim 921, he thought. I wonder if I'd even be able to recognize her .

. Between the goggles, the cap, and his impaired vision, he had no real idea of what she looked like, except for the fact that she was young.

Han walked all the way around the facility, watching several other workers as they aligned threads and crystals so they were entirely symmetrical. He didn't attempt to speak to any of them. Finally he came back to the Devaronian supervisor. "So, when they've finished their work, who encases the threads and crystals in the vials?" he asked.

"That is done on the fifth floor," the supervisor told him.

"Maybe I'll just head up there," Han said. "This is fascinating, you know."

"Certainly," she said.

Okay, so they finish up the processing of the really high-grade stuff up here, Han thought as he and Muuurch ascended into the darkness. The Togorian let out a low yowl of protest when Han only took them up one floor.

"Take it easy, Muuurch," Han said. "I just want to take a quick look around here."

He wandered the aisles, trying unobtrusively to spot the place where the high-grade glitterstim was enclosed in the tiny black vials that all glitterstim users would recognize. When he reached that area, however, his heart sank. Four armed guards stood by the conveyor belt, watching the little vials as the workers brought their full baskets over and dumped them. Han felt an air current waft past him, realizing that there was a small heating unit down there, warming the chill, evidently for the comfort of the guards.

Four guards? Han peered harder into the dimness. No, hold on a second. He saw a blur of movement, but couldn't discern anything for along second.

Then, as he focused his eyes, he slowly made out oily, pebbled blackness barely visible against the black stone wall. But there were eyes in the midst of that blackness--beady reddish-orange eyes. Four of them. Han squinted, holding still, straining his vision. Then he saw two blasters, each strapped to a warty black thigh.

Aar'aa! he realized. Skinchangers!

The Aar'aa were an alien species from a planet on the other side of the galaxy. Denizens of Aar could gradually change color to match the color of the background behind them. This ability made them very difficult to see, especially in darkness.

Han had heard of the Aar'aa before, but he'd never run into any until now.

They were reptilian creatures, which explained why this section of the belowground factory was heated. Many reptiles became sluggish and dull-witted when it was cold.

Han peered into the dimness, and slowly, gradually, made out the outlines of the two Aar'aa guards. They had pebbly-textured skin, clawed hands and feet, and a small frill of skin running down their backs. Their heads were large, with overhanging brow ridges, beneath which their eyes seemed doubly small. Their faces had short muzzles, and when one of the creatures opened its mouth, Han glimpsed a narrow, sticky red tongue and sharp white teeth. An upstanding frill of skin ran from between their eyes, back over the tops of their heads, to connect with the frill running down their backs.

Despite their clumsy appearance, they seemed fast on their feet. Han decided that he didn't want to tangle with them. Although shorter than he was, they were broad in the shoulders, and certainly outweighed him by a considerable margin.

Han sighed. Scratch Plan A.

The Aar'aa aside, the other guards--two Rodians, a Devaronian

male, and a Twi'lek--looked mean, and obviously meant business. They weren't Gamorreans, so there wasn't much chance of being able to bewilder, confuse, distract, or otherwise fast-talk any of them into handing over a fortune in spice. Han grimaced and started back for Muuurg and the turbolift. And there is no Plan B, he thought glumly.

Guess I'll just have to earn all my credits the honest way.

It never even occurred to him that ferrying spice around the galaxy was, in itself, highly illegal . . .

Pilgrim 921 nibbled on a stale grain-cake and tried to forget the young Corellian she had seen earlier. She was a pilgrim after all, part of the All, one with the One, and worldly concerns such as good-looking young men were behind her forever. She was here to work, so that she might be Exulted and offer her prayers for the blessing of the One as part of the All--and conversations with young men named Vykk had no part in that.

Still, she wondered what he looked like beneath those goggles. What color was his hair? His eyes? That smile of his had made warmth blossom inside her, despite the cold . . .

Shaking her head, Pilgrim 921--I miss my name!--tried to exorcise the memory of Vykk Draygo's lopsided, heart-stopping smile. She needed to pray, to offer proper devotion. She must do penance for

separating herself from the One, lest she be cast out from the All.

Still those sacrilegious thoughts kept intruding. Thoughts . . .

memories, too. He was Corellian . . . and so was she.

Pilgrim 921 thought of her homeworld, and for just an instant allowed herself to remember it, to remember her family. Were her parents still alive? Her brother?

How long had she been here? 921 tried to remember, but the days here were all the same . . . work, a few morsels of unappetizing food, Exultation and prayers, then exhausted sleep. One day flowed into each other, and Ylesia had almost no seasons . . .

For a moment she wondered just how long she'd been here. Months?

Years?

How old was she? Did she have wrinkles? Gray hair?

921's scarred hands flew to her forehead, her cheeks. Bones beneath flesh, prominent bones. Much more prominent than they had ever been before.

But no wrinkles. She was not old. She might have been here months, but not years. How old had she been when she'd heard of Ylesia and sold all her

jewelry to buy passage on a pilgrim ship? Seventeen . . . she'd just finished the last of her undergraduate schooling and had been looking forward to going off-world to attend the university on Coruscant.

She'd been going to study . . . archaeology. With an emphasis on ancient art.

Yes, that was it. She'd even spent a couple of summers working on a dig, learning to preserve ancient treasures.

She'd wanted to become a museum curator.

As a child, history had always been her favorite subject. She loved learning about the Jedi Knights, and was fascinated by their adventures.

She'd grown up in the aftermath of the Clone Wars, and had been interested in that, too. And the birth of the Republic, so very, very long ago . . .

921 sighed as she swallowed a bite of dusty grain-cake. Sometimes it bothered her when she realized that her memories were fading, that her intelligence seemed to be fading, along with her ability to perceive the world outside. She knew that as a pilgrim, she was supposed to eschew all worldly things, to expunge from her mind and body the appreciation of fleshly pleasures.

In the old days, pleasure and having fun had been the focus of her life.

In those days, her life had had little purpose, compared to now. In the old days, she'd drifted from place to place, subject to subject, party to party . . .

And it had all been so meaningless.

Life now had meaning. Now she was Exulted. Every night, the One conferred blessing upon her, through the priests. Exultation was the way the All communicated with the pilgrims. It was a deeply spiritual experience--and it felt so good...

921 thought that she'd successfully managed to expunge all memory of Vyk Draygo and his smile from her mind, so she went back to work on her glitterstim pile--only to find herself wondering, minutes later, whether he'd really look for her, try to talk to her again . . .

921 shivered in the ever-present dank chill and tried very hard to forget Vyk Draygo and all he stood for . . .

That night, Han skipped devotionals in favor of spending time with several of the sims. This was his first opportunity to earn an "honest" living, and he didn't want to mess up. Han knew that citizens complained about how hard they had to work, and he figured that was essential for success. It was true that begging, pickpocketing, burglary, and scamming

citizens frequently required considerable time and effort, but Han knew that somehow it just wasn't comparable.

Heading for the sim station in his bedroom, Han began skimming through the system, accessing what was available to him. Teroenza had been as good as his promise, and the simulations were there. He scanned what was available, chose the sims he wanted to work on, and ordered the system to prepare several sequences. He was careful to specify "atmospheric turbulence" to be included in each training exercise.

He looked up at Muuurch, who was standing there, watching him. "I've got to work for a while," he said. "Why don't you take some time for yourself?"

Muuurch shook his head slowly. "Muuurch not leave Pilot alone.

Against orders."

"Okay." Han shrugged. "Your choice."

Muuurch watched nervously as Han put on the visi-hood, cutting himself off from contact with his real surroundings and plunging himself into a training flight that felt exactly like the real thing. The Togorian was uncomfortable with technology.

Han let himself sink into the sim, and within minutes the sim had accomplished one of its primary purposes--Han quite forgot that it was a sim. He was convinced that he was really piloting--really negotiating asteroid fields at high speeds, really piloting through the Ylesian atmosphere, really landing the craft under all sorts of adverse conditions.

The Corellian emerged from the sim two hours later, having successfully landed, flown, taken off, and performed the full range of maneuvers possible with the shuttle he'd be flying to Colony 2 and Colony 3 on the morrow. He'd also reviewed the controls on the transport vessel he'd be flying--the Ylesian Dream was being converted to manual piloting--as well as those on Teroenza's private yacht.

By this time, the short Ylesian day was far spent. Muuurch was dozing on the chair, but awoke instantly when Han stretched. Han eyed the Togorian, regretting that the alien was so alert. It was going to be very



difficult to do the nighttime prowling that he had in mind . .

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Muuurgh walked along behind Pilot, pleased that his charge had suggested heading over to the mess hall for a late supper. The Togorian was always hungry. His people were used to hunting and killing, then sharing their kill, so fresh meat was a constant part of their diets. Here, he had to make do with raw meat that had been frozen.

Before Pilot had come into his life, he'd been free at times to enter

the jungle and hunt, so he could keep his claws--and his skills--sharpened.

He missed his mosgoth, missed flying through the air on her back, feeling her powerful wing muscles propelling them through the skies of Togoria.

Muuurgh sighed. The skies on Togoria were a vivid blue-green, much different from the washed-out blue-gray color of Ylesia's skies. He missed them. Would he ever see them again, would he ever fly his mosgoth toward a crimson sunset in those vivid skies?

The priests had made him sign a six-month contract for his services as a guard. He'd given his word of honor to fulfill that contract. It would be many ten-days before he could return to his search for Mrrov.

Muuurgh pictured her in his mind, her cream-colored fur, her orange stripes, her vivid yellow eyes. Lovely Mrrov. She'd been part of his life for so long now that not knowing her whereabouts was like an aching wound inside him. Could she have gone back to Togoria? Was she back on their world, waiting for him?

Muuurgh wished he could send a message to his homeworld, ask whether Mrrov had returned, but messages sent over interstellar distances were very expensive, and sending one would add nearly two months to his time here on Ylesia.

Still . . . Muuurgh considered, then thought that perhaps on one of their trips to fly spice to Nal Hutta, Pilot would not mind if Muuurgh sent a message. The Togorian didn't really trust the Ylesian priests enough to send a message from this world.

Pilot seemed like a decent fellow, for a human, Muuurgh mused. Sly, quick, always looking for a way to get around things, but humans were frequently like that. At least Pilot had accepted Muuurgh's dominance as pack leader.

That was smart of him. He'd live much longer that way . . .

Muuurgh really hoped that Pilot would continue to be smart. He liked him, and didn't want to have to hurt him.

But if Pilot tried to break the rules, Muuurgh would not hesitate to hurt--even kill--the Corellian. Teroenza had given Muuurgh specific orders, and the Togorian would carry them out to the best of his ability.

He'd given his word of honor, and that was the most important thing in the universe to his people.

The Togorian absently groomed his whiskers and facial fur, reflecting that as long as Pilot didn't step out

of line, everything was going to be just fine . . .

five

Spice Wars The next day Han took the Ylesian shuttle to Colony Two and Colony Three.

He discovered that he really enjoyed piloting bigger ships, and his piloting was perfect. He managed to find a few extra minutes on his return run to Colony One to practice low altitude flying, swooping the shuttle so low that the belly nearly brushed the tops of the jungle trees. Beside him in the copilot's seat, Muuurch alternated between exhilaration and terror as the Togorian experienced swoops, barrel rolls, and even upside-down high-speed flying. Han was in his element, putting the shuttle through maneuvers he'd only done previously during sims. The Corellian found himself whooping joyously at the sheer thrill of it all.

For his last, best bit of precision flying, Han sent the shuttle hurtling down a river-cut canyon, skimming between the rock walls with so little room to spare that Muuurch yowled, shut his eyes, and refused to open them. Once they were soaring through open skies again, Han had to shake the Togorian's arm and repeatedly reassure the big alien that he was finished practicing for the day.

"Muuurch certain that Pilot is crazy," the Togorian said, cautiously opening his eyes and straightening up in his seat. "Muuurch flies on his mosquito at home, but not like that. Mosquitoes have more sense than to fly like that. Muuurch have more sense, too. Pilot"--the Togorian gave Han a plaintive glance--"promise Muuurch not to fly crazy again."

"But, Muuurch," Han said, carefully setting them down on the landing field at Colony One, "I've got to practice every chance I get! You

see . . ." he hesitated, then decided to trust Muuurch with part of the truth, "I sort of stretched the facts a little when I told Teroenza about my flying experience. I really am a champion pilot, that's the truth, but . . . I need to practice with this shuttle. And with the bigger ships. Sims are fine, but they can't beat the real thing."

Muuurch gave Han a long level look, then nodded. "Muuurch understands."

Pilot trusts Muuurch not to say this to Teroenza?"

"Yeah, something like that," Han said. "Can I? Trust you, I mean?"

The Togorian groomed his white whiskers thoughtfully. "As long as Pilot does not crash, Muuurch does not talk."

"Fair enough, pal," Han said with a grin.

When he and Muuurch came down the ramp from the ship, Veratil was there waiting for them in the pouring rain. By this time Han was growing used to the daily downpours, though the steamy heat still exhausted him. "The High Priest wishes to see you at once, Pilot Draygo," Veratil said.

The Sacredot led the Corellian and his bodyguard to the High Priest's personal quarters, which occupied a large part of the underground level of the Administration Center. When Veratil keyed in the security bypass codes and they walked through the huge double doors into the High Priest's personal sanctum, Han couldn't repress a low whistle of amazement. "Nice place!"

"This is the High Priest's display room," Veratil said. "He is an avid collector, and very proud of his collection of rarities."

"He deserves to be," Han said sincerely.

The room was easily ten times the size of Han's little apartment on the first floor. Display tables, shelves, and racks showcased treasures and antiquities from around the galaxy. Sculpture from a dozen worlds, paintings, and other art objects were scattered amid ornate antique weapons. Tapestries hung from the walls. Rugs of exquisite beauty were covered by protective force fields that felt squishy underfoot as Han walked on them.

Semiprecious gems adorned the collection of pipes and other musical instruments. Bottles of the rarest liquors in the entire galaxy were suspended in a gold-embossed rack.

Han's fingers literally itched for the whole time it took him to traverse the display room. If I could have five minutes alone in here, I'd be set for life--he thought wistfully as he slowed down to peer at a drrreelb carved from living ice. The tiny statue was covered with a layer of dust, which was disturbed by Han's breath. It wafted up into the air, and the pilot sneezed thunderously.