

[Back To Index](#)

The Best Way to Get Even

by Marcia Brin

This story was written just for fun and is not an attempt to make money or infringe on any copyrights or trademarks. Only the original ideas contained within the works on this nonprofit web site are the property of their authors, and please do not copy or link these stories to any other website or archive or print without permission of the author.

* * * * *

It had been a slow month since delivering Jabba's frozen cargo. No bounties of any special note, and that unfortunate starburst game last week had badly depleted his assets.

However, things had changed rather abruptly. He had seen her in the crowd while he was heading toward the small Imperial headquarters to check on any new wanted posters. Just a glimpse, but it had been enough. In his profession you had to be able to recognize a person after having seen them only briefly. Not just by face, but also by walk, movement, voice, carriage. A face can be disguised; a way of walking, hardly ever.

She probably felt safe here, though, in an out-of-the-way world with only a small, thinly-spread Imperial presence. A presence that, wisely, almost never entered this section of the port town. Understandable. No one here was on the way up in the Imperial hierarchy, and they intended to finish what was left of their careers alive.

He had followed her very carefully; there was no doubt *she* would recognize *him*, if she ever saw him. Of course, there would be no reason for her to suspect that he would be here, on this dump. He wouldn't have been, either, if that lead on Xzbzsh had panned out. He shrugged; there was no point in wasting his energy over lost opportunities.

Especially when such a major one had just presented itself to him. Xzbzsh wasn't worth one-tenth of what this lady was worth. The Empire would pay well for Princess Leia Organa, and it would gain him extra points with Lord Vader.

Amusing, though. First Solo, now her. He was on his way to making a sweep.

* * *

Almost too easy. It had worried him for a moment, but then, as he had realized before, she probably felt reasonably secure. After all, she had only stepped outside the small, nondescript house for a breath of fresh air, and if the Imperials avoided this section of town during the day, they did not even think of approaching it at night. She was alone, which was perfect. Let her people think she was waylaid by some nightcrawler.

A large, hulking shadow beside him started to shuffle forward, but he stopped it with a gesture. He had needed someone to carry his prize back to the Slave I, someone who would forget by tomorrow what had been done tonight; he had found what he wanted in one of the *tohareto*, the "walking dead." The figure beside him might once have been a brilliant scientist; now he was virtually an empty husk, lost long ago to the living hell of k'latroot extract addiction. An offer of a packet was the only enticement needed to obtain his help.

Moving swiftly, the bounty hunter took aim, his rifle set on stun, and fired. She crumpled without a sound.

Almost there. He kept his senses alert for the sounds of pursuit, but so far, nothing. Just a little farther to the landing bay housing his vessel, and he was home free. He would store his cargo in one of his detention cells and contact Lord Vader, set up a rendezvous point and leave this unappetizing dustball behind. He could almost feel the credit voucher in his hand.

He turned the corner into the landing bay -- and stopped dead in his tracks, only to be almost bowled over by his partner-in-crime, lumbering up behind him. He never even noticed.

His ship! By the gods, what had they done to his ship? It was in pieces! He hadn't ordered any repair or maintenance work done on it. Damn! What the hell was going on?

Gesturing to his companion to follow, he raced up his open ramp into his central chamber, a sitting area that opened into the cockpit. A quick glance took in the bad news, and he sagged against a wall. His entire control panel lay scattered across the floor. No possible way to contact Vader or jump planet. And no chance of getting repairs started until the morning. He checked a small panel on the wall. Damn and double damn. They'd disconnected the controls to his detention cells. He couldn't lock her in any of them now; he'd have to tie her to one of the bolted-down seats in the antechamber.

There would be no way to get to Vader until his panel was repaired. Only the rebels, the Imperials, and a few other ships would have communicators powerful enough. The rebels -- obviously -- were out, and he was not about to spread word of his catch either to Imperials who might see it as a chance to reverse their political fortunes or to his greedy fellow jungle denizens.

He would have to wait.

* * *

The interview with the port mechanic had not gone well. The technician had pulled a work order showing a request for a complete overhaul. When the hunter had, with barely controlled rage, pointed out that the order was for the ship in the bay next to his, the mechanic merely shrugged with the air of an uninterested civil servant. There was no one he could assign to it for at least one day, perhaps two: the work order had indicated that the ship's owner was in no hurry, so the chief mechanic had his people off to handle some rushes.

Fuming, the bounty hunter had made a brief check on his prisoner, now awake and glaring balefully at him, before heading for the nearest cantina. He gave her no chance to speak.

Sitting alone in a smoke-filled corner, slowly getting drunk, he wondered what had happened to his luck. It seemed to have been going downhill ever since he had delivered Solo. He began to wonder if those tales of Corellian vengeance reaching from beyond the grave might have had a kernel of truth in them.

A middle-aged man entered the cantina and stood near the entrance for a moment, squinting as his eyes adjusted to the semi-darkness. Then he began to search the tables. Half-drunk or not, the hunter's special survival instinct continued to function, at least marginally. A hunch, nothing more, that *he* was the object of the newcomer's search. He made an abrupt movement, calculated to catch the man's eye, and had his guess confirmed when the stranger headed for him.

"May I sit down, Hunter?"

He inclined his head, and the man sat down. There was a momentary silence, watchful on his part, uncomfortable on the other's, then his visitor leaned forward and began to speak earnestly.

"Hunter, you...find people. Normally, for a bounty. But I've heard you will take a commission to locate an individual. We -- my colleagues and I -- have...lost someone, and we'd like to hire you to find her."

He didn't believe this. Luckily, his ever-present helmet hid the expression on his face, but he was hard put not to laugh. He had not the slightest doubt that the man before him was a member of the Alliance -- and was trying to hire him to find the Princess! Well, why not? There was no reason why he should not profit from both sides if he could. While he did not have the slightest intention of actually double-crossing Darth Vader, the Alliance did not have to know that. He would simply insist on payment in advance -- and then hand the Princess to Vader.

So much for Corellian vengeance.

"Whom did you 'lose'?"

"A young woman, mid-20s, dark hair, dark eyes, about five feet tall, ninety pounds. Her name is Leia. She disappeared last night. Will you undertake to make some inquiries for us?"

"There will, of course, be a fee for my services."

"Of course," the man replied calmly. "Will thirty thousand credits be sufficient?"

A tidy sum, especially when no work was involved -- *and* when he had no intention of handing over his prize. He nodded at the other man.

"Sufficient. I'll do what I can. However, I will require payment now. This is not like a guaranteed bounty."

The man pushed across a credit voucher. "Agreed." Standing up, he placed a small piece of paper next to the voucher. "You can contact me there." he said, and left.

The hunter finally gave in to his laughter, fingering the credit voucher lovingly. Had he been less occupied -- or less drunk -- he might have noticed the sharp-faced man who had been watching the two of them now get up and follow the rebel, a satisfied expression on his face.

* * *

"What, Princess, you don't find it amusing? Here I am holding you prisoner, and your people hire me to find you. Another of life's little ironies, wouldn't you say?"

His captive, still tied to the seat, did not reply. Instead, she watched him for a moment, a strange, unreadable expression on her face. "It doesn't matter to you," she asked finally, "does it? What happens to your victims, that is."

"Are you asking in the general or in the specific?"

"Both."

He shrugged. "Then 'no' to both. They mean nothing to me. Including Solo."

"But Han never did anything to you. And you know what Jabba will be doing to him..." Her voice faltered momentarily. Then her face hardened. "But I'm wasting my breath, aren't I?"

Silence fell; it was she who broke it. "Where did you deliver him? Jabba has quite a number of installations scattered around this sector."

"It can't do any harm to tell you," he said, after a moment's hesitation. "You are hardly in a position to pass the information along. Jabba has a special place on Arba-3. A place where he deals with irritants like Solo."

For an instant, a spasm of pain flashed across her face, then a mask of iron control slid down, leaving her expression closed and cold. Against his better judgment, he found himself appreciating her strength and control. She had not wasted time or energy pleading with him; instead she had marshaled whatever inner resources were available to her. She would have made a good bounty hunter.

"What next, Hunter? You seem to be detained here."

"A minor inconvenience at most. By tomorrow -- the day after at the latest -- the ship will be repaired. I'll contact Lord Vader and be on my way. However, I think we'll both stay here until then. An added safety precaution."

Again, there was silence. Strangely enough, he had the feeling that *she* was dismissing *him*. Something began to stir in the back of his mind.

He was suddenly getting a bad feeling about this.

* * *

Though it never got cold on this small world, it was winter, and night came early. Shortly after darkness had fallen, the wall speaker whistled. Someone outside was trying to use the intercom. He flipped it on and a

voice at the other end stated that they were there to repair the ship and if he would be so kind as to open the ramp, two of them would come on board and fix the control panel. while the rest worked on the vessel's outer hull.

"Now?" he asked. "The port has shut down."

"Well, the boss indicated you were sort of angry at the mistake, and since it was our fault, he asked for volunteers once the rush jobs were finished." The voice held an unseen grin. "Tell you the truth, we can all use the extra pay."

Ever cautious, Fett flicked on the viewer. Five workmen stood outside, loaded down with repair equipment. The bounty hunter hesitated a moment longer, then made his decision. He moved behind the Princess swiftly and untied her.

"Try anything, and you'll be exceedingly sorry. And you'll force me to kill those workmen as well," he added, sure that the same beliefs that brought her to the Alliance would keep her from endangering innocent lives. She said nothing, but nodded her assent.

Fett hit the ramp control and leaned back against the wall casually. As soon as the ramp was fully extended, two workmen came on board, nodded at the ship's occupants and headed for the control panel. The bounty hunter turned to look at her sharply, watching for any suspicious moves on her part.

It was a mistake. When he turned back to watch the mechanics, he found himself staring down the muzzles of two blasters. One of the "workmen" called out, and his three colleagues, also armed, rushed on board, followed by four people in street clothes. One of them was the man Fett had spoken with in the cantina.

That man broke into a smile of relief when he saw the Princess. "Your Highness, is everything all right?"

"Fine, thank you." she replied, standing up. She coolly eyed the startled bounty hunter. "I'm surprised at you, Fett. With all of your vaunted instincts, didn't it ever occur to you that it was all too easy?"

After a moment, he found his voice. "Why the charade? Why didn't you just kill me?"

"I thought of that, when I first saw you -- purely by accident by the way; I was here for another reason -- but I decided that nothing I could do to you would equal what Vader would do. It's poetic justice, after

all; you *did* choose Vader as a bedfellow." Her hands suddenly curled into fists and her voice filled with ferocious intensity. "And you've earned it, Hunter. For all those people you've so casually, so indifferently, helped to destroy. And for Han Solo."

He met her blazing eyes briefly. *Corellian vengeance,* he thought grimly. *Not such an old tale, after all.*

"Why would Vader come after me?" he asked at last.

"When he arrives -- and he will shortly -- to find you don't have me, and you never called him...well, you can't play thug to the galaxy without becoming a tad suspicious. Vader tends to believe the worst of people."

"You're crazy! Vader doesn't know I ever had you..." he stopped abruptly as the realization struck. "You called him!"

She nodded, smiling beatifically, her emotions again under control. "Not me, precisely. But one of our agents sent him an official Imperial communique from here congratulating him on my capture."

"But I couldn't call him with my ship--" He glanced over at the rebels, busily repairing the control panel, and gave it up. "It will, of course, be in perfect shape when he arrives?"

"Of course. And no record of it ever being otherwise. The real chief mechanic was only too glad -- for a small fee, naturally -- to take the day off, and no questions asked.

"The icing on the cake was your meeting with Tarlo," she continued, nodding at the man Fett had met in the cantina. "A few weeks ago, for reasons unimportant now, Tarlo came under suspicion as a rebel sympathizer. I was planning to take him with me when I left, since his effectiveness here is at an end; he's constantly being followed." She paused to allow the significance of that remark to sink in.

A sound suspiciously like a sigh escaped the bounty hunter. "I presume he was being followed when he met me? And that the exchange of credit vouchers was duly noted?"

"Neat, isn't it? When Vader runs your account through ComCen, he'll find a rather large deposit. If I were you, Fett, I'd head for parts unknown."

"Which would only confirm Vader's opinion about me."

She shrugged. "It won't really make a difference. You know that. I told you before: Vader believes the worst." Leia smiled grimly. "Funny, isn't it? Your only hope of seeing old age is if the Alliance wins -- and soon."

"So it would seem," replied Fett, who then cocked his head. "You're something quite unique; I made the mistake of underestimating you. *You* raise my estimate of Han Solo."

Coldly she faced him, unmoved by his compliments. "Run, Hunter, run. Find out what it feels like." Turning on her heel, she strode from the ship, Tarlo following behind.

They walked in silence for a few moments, surrounded by the sounds and smells of the night. At the end of one of the narrow streets, with the lights of the city behind them, Leia stopped and raised her eyes to the night sky, studded with cold and indifferent pinpoints of light, the images of distant suns.

It was Tarlo who broke the silence. "Was it right, Your Highness?"

The reply was so long in coming, he began to believe she had not heard him. "Right, Tarlo? What are you referring to?"

"Revenge. *That's* what it was, Princess. It is not the Alderaani way."

"But it is the *Corellian* way, my friend. A shame you never met Han Solo. He could have explained to you about revenge."

She paused, her eyes still fastened on the stars, seeing some image invisible to him, then spoke again.

"It's the best way to get even."

End

[Back To Index](#)