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Hunting the Hunter

by [Martha Wilson](#)

His name was Emil Arandu and his titles were many, though the one he was generally known by was Lord of the Sith. It was the only one he had spent any effort obtaining. Watching the glowing blue-white images of the moons of Ord Mantell on *Imperator's* viewscreens, however, he wondered if he had thrown away even that honor. Amusing notion, to think of that title as an honor. Especially after his last, ill-fated audience with the Emperor. *But at least I've chosen my position*, he thought. *And not even Darth Vader can claim that.*

"Very good," Arandu said, and the tension eased a bit on the bridge. The calmer he was, the calmer they were; he had never subscribed to the new Imperial tradition of dire, often fatal punishments for minor or imagined mistakes. It had always seemed rather obvious that a Sith Lord having a psychotic episode on the bridge was not conducive to good crew performance. *Pity no one had ever managed to convince Lord Adarin of that*, he thought. It was mainly due to Adarin and his ilk that mental instability among the Sith was such a legend.

Sitting back from the crew in the Admiral's observation seat, Arandu had a good view of his people as well as their consoles. They feared and hated the Emperor like the capricious god he was and respected nothing but strength. They survived mainly by luck and trust in him, and in the dark side. If trust was the right word for it.

"My Lord," Corin looked up suddenly. Arandu heard the excitement in the young man's voice and didn't need to look at the screens or touch the Force to know what he was about to report. "It's *Slave I*. We have him."

Discipline held, but the hate in the air was palpable. They wanted Fett almost as much as he did. "Easy children," Arandu said. "The Bounty Hunter isn't going anywhere. Not this time."

Corin gave the orders and *Imperator* rolled gracefully on her axis, leaving the concealment of the planetary debris and heading to intercept *Slave I*. The Imperial ship had lain there in hiding a long time, and now the waiting had paid off. If she could regain her velocity before Fett's sensors picked up her approach, she would have no trouble catching their quarry. She was a good ship, the *Imperator*. She had begun her career as an Admiral's courier in the Imperial Second Fleet. She had speed, grace, and style, and Arandu had taken her because he wanted her, as his habit had been in his youth, before he learned patience.

Standing beside him, Erin shifted in a way Arandu's heightened senses read as uneasy. *Yes, you would be anxious, would you not, my only surviving son?* Sometimes Arandu thought he had not learned patience very well. To distract himself, he asked, "Seneca, you have the report from Ord Mantell?"

"It's arrived and is in translation now, my Lord." The officer at the com-suite answered. Instead of scanning the report on vidscreen and listing the particulars, as would have been standard procedure with anything else, he waited for a hard copy and left his station to hand it to Arandu.

The Sith Lord looked over it quickly, and even Erin knew better than to read over his shoulder. To see what he would do, Arandu announced, "Fett lifted from Mantellport on Ord's fifth moon. He had priority clearance ST 321."

Erin said, "It was Vader."

Arandu looked up at him. The curly-haired, handsome boy appeared honestly angered, and there was not a hint of relief in his voice, or fear. Either he was a better actor than his father would have believed possible, or the news had truly meant nothing more to him than that. *Or has it never occurred to you that your mother's family could have hired Fett out of revenge, or their own twisted concept of honor?* "He could have obtained that clearance from anyone high in the Imperial circle. He could have obtained it from me. At one time, anyway." He folded the hardcopy thoughtfully. "Even if the Dark Lord did sanction Fett's actions on Ord Mantell, there is no proof he employed him on... that other occasion."

"We have all the proof we need," Erin protested.

"We?" Perhaps Erin counted too much on his position as the only living Arandu heir. It had been a mistake, believing a blood alliance with the Tagge family would benefit Arandu's position. It had been an even worse mistake sending the

woman back, but the damage had been done. It wouldn't have made a difference as Erin had always been weaker than Arandu's other two older legitimate sons, and the question of a half-Tagge inheriting a Sith Lord's position and properties would never have come up. But now Julean and Benedict were dead, and... If only Erin didn't look like his damn Tagge mother.

Erin read the danger sign there, but still pressed the point. "He traffics with that scum. Who knows what..."

"Erin..." Arandu began with deceptive mildness.

An alarm went off on one of the consoles and a nav-tech reported tensely, "My lord, quarry is altering course, increasing speed. He's running."

Military long range sensors, Arandu thought. Another gift from Fett's Imperial benefactor. "Battle ready. On range use the tractor beam."

It was too soon. *Imperator* was gaining, but her mass was much greater than the light raider craft. The nav-tech shook his head. "No good. We're losing him."

"Kitar," Arandu said. She was the best of his young force-trained. "Track him."

The young woman responded immediately, relaxing completely and tilting her head forward in concentration. The dark side surrounded her at once, coming to her call easily.

"We're gaining at point six, point seven." Another nav-tech reported. Then, "Not enough. He can still make hyper before we're in range."

Kitar's face was white, perspiration beading her forehead. She had fixed her mind on the ship racing ahead of them and the strain of maintaining that link would be terrible. If *Slave I* went into hyper and *Imperator* did not follow immediately, the shock might kill her. Arandu said, "Tractor?"

"Still too far, lord."

Arandu started to rock forward, to stand, to reach Kitar and add his power to hers to follow the hunter's ship into hyper. *Too much power, stretched too far, and she'll die*. He fell back into the chair, knowing what he had to do. "Get my fighter ready." He stood and strode toward the lift, Erin on his heels and Corin already relaying the order to the launch bay.

When the elevators doors closed, Arandu boxed Erin's ear hard enough to knock him against the wall and said, "Learn not to argue with me simply to hear yourself talk, Erin."

The boy gasped, straightened up. "Yes, father. What are you going to do?"

"Catch a bounty hunter."

They arrived in Imperator's compact bay and Arandu's fighter, a TIE modified for boarding action, was being lowered into launching position. The Sith Lord tossed his cape in Erin's direction and took the helmet the crewman held ready for him. He put it on and said into the voice-activated comlink, "Corin, you understand what I'm doing."

"Yes, my Lord."

"He knows he's being followed, so it's likely he'll make a short jump to a system he considers safe somewhere in this sector. You shouldn't have any trouble tracking me. If you do, I'll find you."

"Yes, my Lord." Corin already sounded more confident.

Arandu climbed up into the fighter, activating the controls with easy familiarity. The smallship lifted on repulsars and Erin and the bay personnel scrambled for the elevator. Arandu drew on the Force and found Kitar's link with *Slave I*. It was a tenuous, red-silver line of light stretching tighter and tighter, near to breaking. Releasing Kitar, he severed it and followed it back, forging his own link.

As the fighter dropped free from the bay, he could feel the strength of Fett's craft pulling him in the proper direction. He checked instruments only by habit. It occurred to him that he had left his responsibilities in terrible disarray, if he died. No one was trained to take his place, for no Sith Lord trained a successor. It was too easy to envision that successor killing his Lord for the power, but a dark side force sensitive had to be ambitious to survive. It was a dilemma Arandu would one day have to face, but he didn't intend to die this time.

Yes, he's going hyper now. As he readied his own ship for lightspeed a thought not his own intruded into the link.

May the Force be with you, father.

It always has been, son, he answered. He hit lightspeed, and the stars disappeared.

Han Solo found himself laying face down on hard, cold deckplates. He didn't remember falling. His blood was lay in his veins like congealed jelly, and it was the most interesting sensation he had ever encountered. If only his nervous system was functioning he'd be able to tell if he liked it or not.

Memory was returning, but he refused to examine it just yet. *Let's take this one thing at a time*, Han decided. As he saw it right now, he had two options: he could lay here and have hypothermia, or get up and find out where the hell he was. The Corellian tried to push himself up and discovered his legs were opting for the hypothermia.

Gradually, sensation penetrated and he realized he was sprawled on the deck of a cold, dark ship's hold, and the deep thrum of the engines told him they were in hyperspace. He'd been hit by some high-powered stun weapon. *Trouble*. He managed to drag an almost numb hand over his right hip to see if his blaster was there. It wasn't. *Yeah, trouble*. Circulation was returning and soon he was able to lever himself to his feet, leaning on the bulkhead.

The hold was small and too dirty to be Imperial, and that only left one strong possibility -- a Bounty Hunter. So Jabba had really done it. *Tatooine may be a nice place to do an occasional piece of business but I'm not interested in dying there*, Han thought wryly. Now, time to arrange a surprise for whoever was doing the driving.

Prying open the access panel for the cargo hatch left his fingers bleeding a little, but it bared the circuits that locked the hatch. *Dumb bastard should know never to lock an old smuggler into a cargo hold*, he thought, carefully manipulating the familiar mechanism. He had been working on these type of circuits since he was tall enough to reach the door of a skyhopper.

Much of his immediate past was fuzzy, but he remembered the disaster. He'd been caught, netted like a runaway Kessel miner by some damn bounty hunter on the fifth moon of Ord Mantell. He had gone there to meet a rebel agent who needed a quick way offplanet. Chewie had stayed on the Rebel Base, not happily. There was still a civil warrant out for him in the Mantell system, a relic of one of their earlier adventures there. Han hadn't been thrilled with the situation himself; he'd grown too used to working with a dependable back-up. No help for it, he had gone alone to the pick-up only to find a couple of downport nasties waiting for him instead of the agent. He'd put them away easily enough and had been in the process of making a cautious exit over the roof when the sky had fallen on him, in the form of a stunweapon.

Whoever had pulled the job had done it right, using the two downporters as decoys while setting up for the real capture. It didn't bode well for the immediate future -- his own and the Rebellion's. The hunter had known where Han was supposed to meet the rebel agent, which meant that unfortunate was probably not only exposed, but dead, too. It had been a bad set-up, implying Imp cooperation. *Would have worked, too*, Han thought. *If I didn't have an abnormally high resistance to stun, I'd still be unconscious.*

Abruptly the engine changed pitch, and the hold rocked gently. *No*, Han thought, badly startled. *We can't be there already.* He worked faster, refusing to let it shake him.

After a few frantic eons the panel sparked and the hatch slid open. He was almost blinded by the light in the companionway and had to hesitate a moment to get his bearings. Han stepped out into the cramped and dirty corridor and heard footsteps echoing ahead. *Must have been an alarm somewhere tied into the cargo hatch. Now what, back into the hold? When hell freezes... Hah!* He glanced up and saw the crosswork of piping and conduits just below the corridor's ceiling. Adrenalin gave him the strength to pull himself up onto the piping, and he balanced there easily, feeling a little light-headed. He stopped breathing, held absolutely still.

Then the Bounty Hunter rounded the corner. *It's worse*, Han thought. It was Boba Fett, armed with a two-handed shortbore blast rifle. Han would've recognized that walking piece of slime anywhere; that Shocktroop armor was a legend. *Or a horror story*, the Corellian thought grimly. Jabba the Hutt must have wanted to make an example of Han badly, to ruin his own reputation by hiring such a hated killer. Rumor said Fett dealt with the Empire, and that fit in well with the theory Han had about his capture. The Hunter moved with such complete, arrogant assurance that if Han had been a Wookiee, the hackles on the back of his neck would've risen.

Fett stopped at the head of the corridor, staring at the open hatch, or at least that was the direction his helmet was pointed. Whatever went on behind that visor was anybody's guess. Han hoped it was fear, urging him mentally: *Sweat over it. Make a mistake.* The hunter came forward, slowly. "So you've broken out of your cage, Corellian? Very foolish. You're not quarry anymore, you're cargo. I am a professional, but I do not tolerate trouble from cargo."

Han didn't move. Fett was going to have to hit a lot closer to home than that before the Corellian got mad enough to give up what little advantage he had. Fett was so close now Han could smell a faint odor of old death from the scalps attached to his armor.

"You're mine now, to sell to whomever I please. Soon you'll find it easier not to resist the inevitable." The Bounty Hunter took the last needed step and Han dropped out of the piping like a gundark out of a tree.

Even with his augmented armor, the Corellian's sudden unexpected weight knocked Fett to the deck. Han had the satisfaction of hearing the Bounty Hunter gasp as he hit the floor, but Fett recovered too quickly. They grappled, and the Corellian's advantage didn't last long as Han found himself being forced slowly backwards. He made a last ditch effort to wrest the rifle away, but felt his fingers slipping on the warm metal. *I'm not going back into that hold alive, dammit.*

Then everything turned upside down and Han's sense of direction twitched violently. He was flung away from Fett and back against the bulkhead, stunned for an instant. Fett had been tumbled back down the corridor and lay in a pile of armor. Han got to his feet, stumbling, knowing the gravity had fluctuated. *What the hell?* There was the sound of straining metal somewhere forward, and Han realized it was the sound of another ship locking onto the *Slave I*.

Then Han saw the blast rifle, laying where it had fallen a few meters down the corridor. He dived for it, but his reflexes still weren't back to normal and Fett moved too fast. The desperate pirate froze in a crouch, one hand on the rifle, eyes on the wrist laser the Bounty Hunter had leveled at him. *It would almost be worth it,* Han thought, *for just one shot.*

"You're only making it more difficult for yourself, Solo," the soft, gravelly voice said. The soulless metal visor might have concealed any emotion.

"Then you better shoot, Fett," the Corellian snarled back at him. "If you think you've got it rough now, you haven't seen anything yet."

Before Fett could reply, the wail of an intruder alert alarm screamed through the ship, then was abruptly cut off. The Hunter's armored head jerked at the sudden noise and Han snatched the rifle. Fett ducked back around the corner before he could fire and, even through his rage, Han managed to keep from wasting an energy bolt.

He got to his feet and checked the weapon's charge. The power unit had cracked in the fall and now stood at quarter-full, unable to recharge itself. Swearing, he set it on low power to conserve what was left of the charge and started cautiously up the corridor. It just wasn't going to work. Fett could hit the intruder control from the cockpit and take out Han and whoever had locked on. *Uh-huh. So why doesn't he?*

Han made his way up the corridor, cautiously checking the compartments on either side. The ship carried only a little less tonnage than the *Falcon*, but poor design still made her seem crowded. Han would've bet she was Mandaloran

make, and they never had learned how to put a ship together. This section was dusty, and seemed almost unused. There was the usual random clutter any ship accumulated, but no personal effects. No other weapons he could see at first glance either. Did Fett live in that armor? Reaching the end of the forward companionway, Han saw the hatch to the forward quarter was down and sealed.

Just then an explosion rocked the ship. Han stumbled and grabbed for a stanchion, barely managing to keep on his feet. *What the hell is he doing?* The Corellian ducked into a side hatch and found a big compartment with storage lockers, old grey acceleration couches lining the walls and best of all a systems instrumentation console. He punched up the monitor function and set it for a ship's status report, then stared at it for a moment, trying to believe what it was telling him.

The forward quarter of the ship, with the cockpit and hyperdrive, was gone.

Arandu forced open the airlock into the lower companionway just in time to see the hatch at the forward end of it drop and seal itself. Still, he stepped inside, letting the lock cycle close behind him.

He activated his lightsabre, the blade's red glow standing out brilliantly in the drab surroundings, and looked up and down the corridor. A trap? With the opposite end unblocked? It made little sense. Moving up the corridor, he tried the hatch control and was unsurprised to find it jammed. Hiding himself in a cockpit was not exactly an intelligent action for a man in Fett's position. The Hunter might mean to use the intruder control system, but Arandu had been able to disconnect it with the Force before entering the ship.

An explosion, loud and close, and Arandu leaned on the bulkhead as the ship rocked. He leapt to the airlock, hit the vidscreen. The concussion had blasted the TIE from its moorings, sending it spinning away into blackness.

Over the com-system's allship channel in *Slave I's* cockpit, Boba Fett said, "Very impetuous, my Lord. You've trapped yourself on my ship." He allowed himself one thin smile. "Do you wonder what that explosion was? I jettisoned the stern quarter. I have things to accomplish while you die of lack of oxygen here. Of course, my last bounty has escaped and is armed on the ship with you. I'm sure the two of you will have much to discuss.."

On the aft screen, Fett watched the hulk of the stern quarter recede. It was an elliptical shape, and had been attached directly beneath the cockpit, between the gun emplacement and the hyperdrive. The force of the abrupt separation had given it some acceleration, pushing it deeper outsystem, so he plotted its position and trajectory carefully. Over the comlink, he said, "I'll be back when the atmosphere is gone, or the life readings drop to half. You can decide for yourself which one it will be." He cut the link and corrected *Slave I's* course, making ready for hyper. Destination set, Fett reflected on the situation, adding up pluses and minuses like a tactical comp.

He disliked running, but an enraged Sith Lord was not something he was prepared to deal with, especially if he was already occupied with an escaping Corellian pirate as well. A mistake that, but he couldn't have known the Corellian would have such a high resistance to stun. He wouldn't make the error of believing Solo less dangerous than his reputation claimed again.

Arandu might kill Solo. Jabba wanted his smuggler alive, not dead, and Fett would be paid nothing for the trouble and danger of tracking him down.

But Solo might kill Arandu. A Sith wasn't invincible, as Fett well knew. Even a Sith Lord could be killed. Such things had happened before.

And then Fett would have Solo, and the credit for Arandu's death. Quiet credit, of course. His contacts in the Empire would pay well for news of that event, but would naturally prefer it to be kept under cover. Sometimes the Hunter regretted taking the commission that had led to Arandu's vendetta on him, but it had been worth it. The hunt was, after all, everything.

Time would tell which bounty he would collect. On pirate or Sith Lord or both, the material gain was actually quite irrelevant in the face of the victory itself. There was even a way to accomplish it without risk to himself. Fett enjoyed risk, but he was not a fool.

Slave I sped away, leaving the drifting hulk behind.

The Hunter expected a rage, no doubt. Arandu deactivated the sabre and replaced it on his belt. He felt no great need to conform to anyone's expectations.

He had plotted and schemed so long, fencing with fools and bureaucrats until he had forgotten how to win an open fight. *You've lost for the moment. That's all. Accept it.* The game could hardly be won in a single move, and Fett would be back. Eventually. Yet it was hard to accept that his long wait had been for nothing. Temporarily outmaneuvered by a bounty hunter. What would the Dark Lord say of his best student now? In the sudden quiet he realized the air circulation systems had stopped.

The comlink on the lock's board began to blink. Arandu activated it. An unfamiliar voice said, "Hey, it's me, the last bounty. I heard Fett. Come up to the to the portside compartment if you want to talk this over."

Arandu considered a moment, then turned back down the corridor, wishing he had time to indulge in a little recrimination. His side had begun to ache, as it always did when he made a mistake. It was an old wound, when Lord Lan Adarin had slipped past his guard and stabbed him in the left side during a "practice" combat. And why was he thinking of Adarin the Crazed now, of all times. Well, Sanja had pointed out that he could never resist a shot at his old enemy. If his aim had been better, Sanja might still be alive.

He found a ladder tube and climbed into the upper area. There at the end of the corridor was an open hatchway. Arandu listened on several levels, not all of them physical, and heard nothing that would seem to indicate a trap. He stepped forward into the hatch of the compartment.

There was a young Corellian standing beside the console, holding a blast rifle. Arandu read sudden hate in that narrow-eyed look, fear, surprise, and a dozen other things. Arandu stared back at what might be his death and held very still, trusting to luck, too battle-weary at the moment to think of anything else.

The moment passed. Arandu saw the change, the slight relaxation of the hand on the weapon, but no less in those dark eyes. *He has control. Interesting.* The Sith Lord stepped through the hatch. One game was as good as another.

Han had been working with the unresponsive console, trying to coax something besides blank readouts out of it. Before the link to the ship's computer had failed, he'd managed to discover they were in a system not far from Ord Mantell. Fett had pulled a neat trick in making off with the better part of the ship, leaving auxiliary holds and compartments behind. Yet it still seemed like the act of a very fearful being, and that Han couldn't understand. Boba Fett was supposed to be the most ruthless killing machine this side of the Cron Drift, so what scared him so silly he dumped half his ship and a good bounty? Planning to come back when the atmosphere dropped enough to make resistance hopeless made some sense, but the part about one of his unwilling passengers killing the other seemed foolish. Attacking one another would hardly be a survival-minded act under the circumstances, in Han's opinion anyway.

He didn't hear anything, but some change in the room made Han look up at the hatch. At first he saw an Imperial pilot. Then the man stepped into clear light, and Han knew he was in more trouble than he had ever been before.

It was an older man, mainstream human, maybe forty-five standards old. He was a few centimeters taller than the Corellian, strongly built, with greying hair and not unhandsome features. His grey eyes were colder than Han would've believed possible, even after a career spent in the less wholesome parts of the inhabited galaxy. He was wearing a lightsabre resembling Luke's, and the Imperial symbol was impressed in silver on the right breast of his black uniform.

A Lord of the Sith, old enough to be one of the fallen Jedi who followed in Darth Vader's wake of terror. The servants of the Emperor, who left death, fear, and destruction where ever they travelled in the galaxy.

Fett's reasons for running away had suddenly become crystal clear, and Han knew what the hunter had meant by the "my Lord" stuff on the comlink.

Years of survival in a very rough environment kept Han from starting a firefight then and there. Backing away warily, he forced himself to think first. He could see partial blast armor beneath the padded surcoat, and a low power bolt would never penetrate on the first shot.

Besides, a sabre could deflect blaster bolts, and that would mean sure suicide. And the Imperial just stood there, watching him calmly.

So Han relaxed his hold on the rifle and said, casually, "So you're the uninvited guest."

"And you, I take it, were invited though unwilling." The Sith Lord moved further into the room, not taking his cold eyes off Han. "You were right, one shot would not have been enough."

"Good observation," Han answered, a cold sensation crawling up his spine. He hated being read so easily. Fett had called this guy... Arandu? It had been a Lord Arandu who had closed down Alliance operations on Rampa a year or so ago. The Rebel survivors still told horror stories... That Arandu had also been responsible for putting down the uprisings in the Hammeriad Systems and keeping order for the Sector Governor Essada. Apparently Arandu was better at large scale repression than Lord Tion, though not quite as feared as Vader. But there was something else, something recent. "You read minds too?"

Moving carefully, Arandu took one of the chairs. "Not entirely," he answered. "Anger is always easy to sense. It's an emotion with which I have had some experience."

Noting the stiffness in the man's movements, Han thought the Sith Lord might not be as implacable as he looked. He was stuck on this hulk, so the damn confident bastard didn't have all the cards. "So you're trapped here too."

"My fighter was blasted loose from its moorings after the separation, but I'd rather not discuss it."

"You knocked out the intruder control though, right?"

"I turned it off before I boarded."

From outside the ship. The Force, Han thought. *Oh, boy.* He rested one hip on the edge of a console, pretending to hold the rifle carelessly and seem unconcerned because appearances were everything, and said, "So the mass murder business is slow and you're killing time, so to speak, by chasing Bounty Hunters." A deliberate provocation perhaps, but the man was watching him and smiling and giving up information like it was nothing.

"So to speak," Arandu said, not appearing to be provoked. He looked around the compartment in mild distaste. "I have personal reasons."

The name clicked suddenly and Han said, "I remember now. I have heard of you."

"Really?" Elegantly amused, Arandu smiled up at the ceiling and asked, "And what did I do to merit my fame?"

"You disappeared." It had been in a recent report from a rebel-sympathizing ex-senator from the Imperial Capitol World. There had been some kind of violent schism among the Lords of the Sith, and it had ended with one of them being declared an outlaw by the Emperor. Rumor -- everything about the Sith Lords was rumor, nothing was ever certain -- had said the renegade was Vader's first pupil. The Sith Lord's name had been Emil Arandu. *Wonderful. Well, the Alliance High Command wanted to know more about him, but I didn't mean to be the one to do it for them.*

"And you are a Rebel, for only a Rebel could have access to that sort of information." Arandu didn't seem to care if Han knew his background or not. "Which gets us exactly nowhere in our little stand-off, and does not change the fact that it will soon become very difficult to breathe in here."

"So what's going to change that fact?" Han asked, thinking *he's wrong about that; I'm no rebel*. It was a good thing he hadn't accepted the commission from General Dodonna; sitting around chatting with a Sith Lord was probably enough to get you court-martialed in the Alliance. He didn't think he could stand another court-martial.

"I confess I don't know."

Stand-off.

Suddenly Arandu said, "I'll trade you something of value -- knowledge of Fett's activities on Ord V, in exchange for something it would cost you nothing to give up."

This was a trap, but it was an attractive one, with the bait possibly the fate of the missing Rebel agent. No harm in asking, Han decided. "What would cost me nothing?"

"A name."

"Whose?"

"Yours."

Han held quite still a moment, weighing it. Fett was loose somewhere with a source of information about the Rebellion. And neither one of them might get out of this alive to use anything they knew. "All right."

"Fett was given a list of suspected rebel operatives in the Ord Mantell system. On at least one of those names, he took action, killing the suspected agent after possibly obtaining something he wanted from him."

And Han had a very good idea what that something had been. So he'd done it with high Imperial backing. What the hell was Fett up to? "Who gave him the list?"

"That is something I would like very much to know."

At least Han wasn't guessing anymore. It helped, a little. Then he saw Arandu was waiting expectantly, and felt cold all over. *Superstition. All he can do is look up my record in the Corporate Sector Authority.* And some things became irrelevant once you helped blow up an Imperial battlestation. "Captain Han Solo."

"Captain of..."

"You didn't pay for that."

"Very good." Arandu laughed. He hated easy games, even if he was only playing them to pass the time. He had hunted Corellian pirates for a whole standard year once, and had developed a measure of respect for their determination, courage, and especially their cunning. He could see the stubbornness in this young Corellian that he had so admired in those long-ago enemies. When he had finally captured some members of the band he had ordered quick executions, refusing the Imperial Shocktroops their unwritten rights to amuse themselves with low status prisoners. He said, "I've really no intention of attacking you. I've no reason to..."

"Unless you want to bring Fett back," Han pointed out pragmatically. This was no time for a game of I-know-you-know-and-you-know-I-know-but-we're-not-going-to-tell-each-other.

"There is that." Arandu weighted his next words with the Force, just enough to lend them a little extra emphasis. "You have the same reason to be rid of me, unless you want to revenge yourself for some past action of the Empire." He saw the slight change in Han's expression and knew he was on the right track. "But if anything, that might make the Imperial High Command... grateful to you," Arandu said. And smiled.

Han stiffened involuntarily. "What..." He stopped, cursing his own vulnerability. The Sith Lord didn't know a damn thing, he was just fishing for an edge. *Even if I was just thinking about... No, cancel that right now.* Arandu couldn't know about Han's past; he'd covered his tracks too well. The Sith Lord just knew where to insert the knife and how to twist it, but it still rankled Han that he could be caught out so easily. He could still look inside himself and see a coldness there that might never leave. It was ice on the walls that had been around his heart since the abortive end of his so-called military career. *You do these things to yourself, Solo. That's the sad part.* Everyone involved with it was dead so when was it going to end? When the Empire died? When Han died?

But a weapon was only a weapon if you let it be used against you. Han looked right into those cold eyes and said simply, "You're right."

Arandu acknowledged the victory with a nod. He had recalled the Shocktroop Colonel had protested when he had been denied his prisoners, so Arandu had had him executed along with them. That Colonel never had learned to play the game. *Concentrate on the present, clever old man, it's someone else's move now.*

Watching the Sith Lord's expression carefully, it occurred to Han that Arandu did things as if he was fighting a duel, with thrust and parry moves that might have been more at home in an Imp war council. Or on a blind sabacc table for lifestakes. "So what makes it so vital that you get your hands on Boba Fett?" Han bid on his instincts, as he always did, and said, "Revenge, maybe? What did Fett have to do with getting you kicked off the Capital World?"

"Kicked off?" Arandu said, eyebrows lifting. "But it is an honest question." He leaned forward. "Fett was employed by someone very high in the Imperial ranks. Someone who had access to certain information, such as where the noncombatant members of my House were quartered when I had been called to attend the Dark Lord on the Capital. Fett was directed to lead an assault on this place that I believed secure. He left no survivors." A terrible destruction, but costing more than lives. His two sons, his other children had died in that disaster, and with them any hope of the future he might have had. And Karel, Sanja's daughter, the one he regretted most... *They could have left me Karel. A girl-child is not such a dangerous thing. As far as they knew.* He shook his head. "Fett had refused my efforts to determine who purchased his services, but he will tell me eventually."

"So you left the Capitol World," Han said, thinking *it scared the hell out of me to give him my name, and he's telling me all this without a second thought.* That worried him more than anything, that Arandu could reveal so much of his motivations without fear; it seemed to imply that Han wasn't going to be around long enough to do anything with the information. Either that, or the Sith Lord really just didn't care.

"For all practical purposes. Only one of my colleagues would have reason to strike at me in this manner. So I removed myself from the center of events and now work at making things... inconvenient for the person I suspect."

It got very quiet for a while and Han watched Arandu, turning the matter over. The thought that the Sith Lord would surely kill before too much longer was only crossing his mind six or seven times a minute; Han supposed that meant that he was getting used to him. The air was starting to thicken, reminding him that time was running out. No help would be coming from outside. Chewie would look for

him, when he didn't come back to base, but even if his co-pilot could trace him out here, it would be far too late.

And the *Falcon*, back at Mantellport? Docking fees would come due, and Port Authority would impound her, and when nobody came to get her out of hock, check her registry. He'd lose her for certain. *Dammit, Solo, why do you have to get so attached to things?* He'd be more than lucky to get out of this with his neck intact. He didn't want to be taken by Fett and he didn't want to die. When it came down to it, he just plain didn't want to lose. But that was the draw, unless something changed the odds.

Just as if Han had never killed an Imperial, or shot up the Dark Lord's TIE fighter over the Death Star, he said, "Why didn't you try to kill me, to bring Fett back?"

"Fett predicted that I might." Arandu looked at him. "It's always dangerous to do what others predict, in my position."

Oh, lovely, Han thought. He persisted, "If Fett did come back when only one of us was left, he'd be prepared."

That got Arandu's attention, "Yes."

"Unless there was still two of us here." *This is so crazy it even scares me*. Now he knew how Chewbacca must have felt when confronted with one of Han's off-the-wall inspirations. But he would've bet anything that this was a man who didn't want to lose either. He was betting everything.

"In a very roundabout way, you're suggesting we cooperate."

"Unlikely as it sounds," Han said, thinking, *Don't hand me that, you bastard. You've been hinting at it since you walked in the hatch. You just want me to be the one to suggest it*. "How much does your revenge really mean to you?"

Arandu stared at him, long and hard. Some part of Han wasn't surprised by the light mental sensation; not a pressure, but more like a probe. More years ago than he cared to remember, Han had been taught how to resist a probe droid. This was almost easy compared to that. The Corellian said, "If you want to know if you can trust me, you'll never do it that way."

The Sith Lord looked away.

Han felt cold. The Force again. Luke had gotten them out of a couple of rough situations with simple levitation and other tricks, but Han had never known him to do anything like that. Arandu had been searching more for emotions, intentions than information, and that wasn't half of what he could do if he wanted to. Han waited, pretending a patience he didn't have.

It seemed like a long time before Arandu looked back. "And what is your concept of honor?"

"I keep my word, if I give it. What about you?"

"I believe in honor."

"I'm sure you voted for it at the last election, but do you practice it?"

The Sith Lord smiled. "Let's say I will on this occasion."

Muscles tight with tension, Han waited in the topside corridor, flattened up against the wall below the circular airlock in the ceiling. He couldn't even pace anymore; the returning ship had docked minutes ago, and he was forcing himself to be silent. They didn't have access to any scanners, so there was no telling if it was the returning *Slave I*, or if the hunter had called in friends. *What the hell is Fett waiting for, an engraved invitation?*

Han checked the blast rifle again. He'd searched the ship thoroughly, but hadn't found any more weapons or charge packs. He had six shots left on low power, maybe, and that wouldn't have any effect on armor. If he switched to high power he'd only have one or two, but that wasn't the way the plan worked. The plan. If he lived to tell anybody about this he was going to have difficulty convincing them that Han Solo had actually suggested himself for bait in a trap set by a Sith Lord. *Maybe I won't tell anybody*, he thought.

Suddenly there was a clang from the lock and Han lifted the rifle, bracing himself. It was the first dead run down the short corridor he was worried about; if they got him then... Make noise, Arandu had said.

The lock cycled open and Han whooped like a madman; squeezing off a low power shot at it as he dashed back down the corridor. Scrambling down the ladder tube he heard a confused babble of high-pitched wailing behind him and couldn't believe his bad luck. Gank Killers.

He reached the end of the companionway and turned back, aiming at the end of the ladder.

The Gank dropped out of the tube almost before Han could react. It was a bipedal lifeform with leathery, light brown skin. The head was narrow and insectoid, with wide, expressionless yellow eyes. It was thin to the point of emaciation and its stick-like arms and legs appeared to be held together by nothing but sinew. But the strength and speed in that weak-seeming frame were infamous, and with their primitive nervous system, they were able to withstand an incredible amount of damage and keep fighting. Han snapped off a shot aimed right between those terrible eyes and missed completely as the Gank ducked out of the way with fluid grace.

Two more dropped out of the tube and Han dived through the hatchway into the hold. They didn't follow immediately; probably waiting for the others, since they preferred to attack in groups. Han backed across the hold, facing the hatch, feeling like doing a little screaming for real, this time. If Fett had three Ganks, he had a whole string, and a symbiont too. Ganks were sold off their homeworld in strings of six with a symbiont controller. They went mainly to prisons and slavers; no one else was nasty enough to want them. Through implants in the brain and spinal column, the symb could be controlled by the owner over any distance com signals could travel. Fett might not be in the ship that had latched on to them; he could simply have sent the string in his place. *No wonder he was so damn sure of himself when he took off*, Han thought.

The low-charge warning pulse was tingling in the rifle's grip, telling Han nothing he didn't already know. The low power bolts wouldn't do jack, he decided, thumbing the toggle and shifting it to high power to give him one good shot. There was no other exit from the hold, of course, and no cover. *Dammit, Arandu, hurry.*

Han fired almost before the Gank leapt through the hatch. It was blown back against the bulkhead, its upper chest one ugly wound. The second Gank dove for the Corellian and he swung the rifle, cracking it across the head. As it fell away from him the third tackled him around the waist, slamming him to the floor. Another Gank joined it and they pinned his arms and dragged him to his feet. The others gathered around, clacking at each other. Two were armed with disruptors and the others with inert-bladed knives.

Fett's voice said, "It's over, Corellian." The symb stepped into the compartment and Han stopped struggling to glare at it. Larger than the others, it had the computer-linked enhancer that gave its owner control standing out from its skull. The yellow eyes held blank inhuman malice, and it was armed with a needlebeamer. Fett's voice was coming from a receiver-amplifier set-up in the creature's throat.

"What happened to Arandu, Solo? Did you kill him? Where is he?" The symb moved to stand over him.

With an expression of pure contempt, Han said, "Why, Fett? Does he scare you? You're not even on that ship up there, are you? You're too much of a coward to do your own cleanup work."

"If he's dead, how did you do it? Tell me, Solo, or I'll save Jabba the trouble of breaking you."

I can't stall forever. Han did a quick headcount of Gank and realized he could only see five. The one he had shot, two flanking the symb, and two holding him. Then he saw the long, spidery Gank hand trailing out of the hatch. A flaccid, dead-looking hand. Not all the Gank had made it into the compartment. *Yeah, I think I found Arandu.*

"Solo, I always get what I want," Fett hissed angrily.

"I don't think so," Han told him.

The symb blinked slowly, as if its master sensed some danger but couldn't quite pinpoint it.

"This time, I think," the Corellian continued, "you're gonna get what you deserve."

Another gank dropped before Han realized Arandu was already in the room. The Sith Lord moved so quickly, his lightsabre destroyed the symb's enhancer before the creature could react. It staggered away, dropping its needlebeamer and making a high-pitched keening sound. Their controller injured, the others wailed in confusion, but still moved to surround Arandu. They circled him, chittering at each other for courage, and then attacked together. Han had seen Kenobi use a sabre very briefly, and watched Luke practice, but he had never seen the archaic weapon used with such a deadly graceful economy of motion.

He had little time to marvel at it, as one of the Gank released him to go after Arandu. Han used the sudden leverage to wrench backward, slamming the other Gank against the bulkhead. It bounced off and shoved the Corellian away, hard enough to knock Han off his feet. Han rolled into the fall and came up with one of the others' fallen blades. The Gank was already rushing at him and had no chance to avoid the knife as Han inserted it underneath the creature's ribcage. Panting, the Corellian got to his feet and looked around.

The other Gank were all dead, or close enough to it for government work -- the hold looked like a charnel house. The symb, which had recovered and managed to catch up a disrupter, was being stalked by Arandu. Without Fett's directions, its movements were abrupt and jerky. As Han watched, the Sith blocked two energy bolts easily and said, "Can you still speak through your creature, Fett?"

The voice was faint and raspy. The speaker was about the only part of the symb's hardware that still functioned. "How did you do it? The sensors..."

"A deep trance. Your sensors didn't read my life signs because I had none. A simple trick to catch a simple creature."

"More of your tricks." It was a snarl.

"At least my tricks work, Fett. You are an amateur in this game, as well as a poor player. I'll still be using your kind as pawns long after your head has gone to adorn some pirate's trophy wall."

"Words." Somehow, Fett managed to convey his sneer through the symb's throat speaker. "Your so-powerful religion didn't help you when I collected the bounty on your woman."

Han backed against the wall out of the way, able to guess how Arandu was going to react to that one.

Arandu stopped playing with the symb. Suddenly he was all Sith Lord, and there was nothing left of the courtly Imperial noble. He attacked in earnest, shearing off the nozzle of the disrupter and driving a powerful cut straight for the symb's head.

Then Han saw the last living, badly wounded Gank lifting a short metal rod from its weapon belt and fumbling at it. A light started to glow on the device and Han recognized a detonator. Not hesitating, Han attacked the creature, grappling with it, trying to force it to drop the explosive.

Han hadn't stopped to think, and had forgotten the Gank's strength. Even badly wounded, the creature twisted and managed to throw him off, but it dropped the rod. The charge was still armed, and this was a lower hold in the ship; it would blow a hole right through the ship's skin. Han scrambled to his feet, reaching for the detonator, then saw the Gank wasn't going for him. It had found the symb's needlebeamer, and was aiming for Arandu.

These things just don't let up, Han thought. Yelling a warning, the Corellian dived for the Gank. The creature saw his motion, jerked toward him and fired. The energy bolt struck Han in the left side, just above the hip. The Corellian collapsed on the deck, smelling charred flesh and ozone. Through shock and pain, he saw the symb had fallen and Arandu had seen the last Gank. Casually, the Sith finished it off before it could do any more damage.

Han tried not to pass out. The detonator hadn't exploded yet, but he couldn't seem to get the strength to drag himself toward it.

Suddenly Arandu was beside him, putting a hand under Han's arm to pull him up and Han gasped, "No, the detonator..."

"Hmm?"

"The last one had a detonator, armed it, over there..."

"Oh, that."

Something in his tone made Han expend the effort to look up at him. "Yeah, that."

"The detonator is no longer armed. The charge is quite dead."

The relief was almost too much. "But you didn't touch..." *Oh, of course. No problem.* "I thought you said mechanisms were difficult."

"Difficult, not impossible. You might consider thanking me."

Han closed his eyes and counted ten. Then twenty. Then he thought *I learned to reason with Chewie. I learned to reason with Luke. I can learn to reason with anybody.* He opened his eyes. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." Arandu pulled the Corellian to his feet, shouldering his arm. Han found himself leaning on him heavily; the first shock was fading and the pain was becoming intense now.

As Arandu helped the Corellian through the hatch, he said thoughtfully, "Your warning saved my life. I'd be interested to know why you bothered."

So would I. Han couldn't see his face, and that bothered him. Mainly to give himself time to think, he said, "Just got caught up in the excitement, I guess."

Arandu didn't answer. Han must have blacked out then, because the next thing he knew the Sith was helping him up into the Gank ship. It was a small lighter, almost the size of a shuttle. It looked disused, and the cockpit was attached to a small crew area. Nothing like a base ship. Fett had some kind of a base, in this system or near it. The Gank string must have been quartered there. Arandu released Han and the Corellian sank weakly into one of the acceleration chairs, pulling open the burned tear in his shirt to look at his wound. It was a small puncture-burn that might have been made by a small white-hot rod. The heat had cauterized it so there was no bleeding, which was one small mercy.

The Sith Lord had headed for the cockpit and when Han looked up he saw him working at the com suite. Sending a message, a hyperwave message, to his people. *Oh, no.* Han doubled over, trying to think past the pain. Leia should never

have taken him into her confidence, when he got into damnfool situations like this. An enterprising sort could buy his way back into the Empire with what Han knew.

Arandu came back into the crew area and stood over him, looking thoughtful. The Corellian looked up at him, his face tight with pain. "Well?"

"I owe you a life," Arandu said, still thoughtful.

"Yes," Han answered. There was an airspanner on the console to the right, which he carefully didn't look at. It was a long tool, sharp-edged. Han didn't think he had much chance of doing fatal damage to Arandu now, but he could make the Sith Lord kill him outright. He wasn't a Rebel but damn him if he'd let himself be used by the Empire. *You are a dead idiot, Solo, to think that this little deal could last one minute more than was convenient for him.* "So what does that mean to you?"

A moment passed while Han felt the power in the room. Then Arandu, with a preoccupied half-smile, said, "It depends."

Han could feel the probe again, the push of the Force at his mind. He resisted it, but with the pain distracting him it was much harder. Arandu was playing with him. Han said bitterly, "I don't believe you can do it." *Whatever it is you're trying to do.*

"Disbelief is not a strong wall, especially when it isn't true disbelief, but cooperation for certain things is occasionally necessary."

Han stared, his fingers digging into the arms of the chair. Just then an alarm on the com board in the cockpit began to signal an incoming transmission. Arandu looked toward it, half-turning away. The Sith Lord distracted for one instant, Han lunged to his feet and grabbed for the spanner.

The deck came up and hit Han in the face. He couldn't tell if the Sith Lord had struck him or the ship had exploded, but there had been a terrible intense shock, leaving him numb and helpless. For a long, long moment he knew his heart had stopped and he was dying, and it was all for nothing. No difference made to anyone, and his whole life from the beginning seemed like just borrowed time.

Yet at the last instant when the darkness was descending, something inside him refused to get go. He tried to push at the cold deckplates with arms that didn't have the strength for it, to look up, to say something that might make it all not quite so useless, but it just wouldn't happen.

Through the roaring in his head he heard the Sith Lord say, "I did tell you I owed you a life."

The darkness came down around him, then nothing.

It felt like a hangover. *I thought I was dead. I knew I was dead.* Han managed to sit up and lean against the console, then realized that while his body ached unbelievably and his head was worse, there was no pain at all from the needlebeamer wound in his side. He tried to rationalize that for a moment, then gave up.

He pulled his shirt up and looked. The scar was three or four days healed, medcenter-healed with new, very tender skin where the charred flesh should be. Except there was none of the customary look of bacta healing. Three or four days. Han had been unconscious one hour thirty, maybe a little more. He struggled to stand up, looked at the console. Same date, one hour twenty-seven later.

He stood there a long time, not even bothering with all the elaborate explanations there might be for the impossible. The old bastard had just done it, that was all. Probably for spite.

Arandu was gone, though Han couldn't have said exactly how he knew. The ship felt empty all the way down to her metal bones. He checked the cockpit and found the comp had logged an outgoing transmission all right, but had no record of anything incoming. It was simple enough to tell the computer to set off a commset alarm, though.

Han shook his head. Arandu had needed him distracted, just one bare instant, and he'd cooperated wonderfully. Sith Lords just didn't do things like this. They didn't cooperate with Corellian pirates, and they didn't pay them back for saving their lives. Not so that it could be proved in court, anyway.

Han did a systems check and found an escape pod missing. Sensor suite had detected the ion trail of a larger starship that had temporarily matched speeds with the Gank ship, then gone hyper. Simple enough. Arandu's people had arrived, he'd taken an escape pod out to meet them and together they'd all gone Fett-hunting.

Well, good luck, Han Solo thought. *Or whatever.*

Han searched the Gank ship thoroughly, then put on a breath mask to go through the now airless hulk of *Slave I*. There was nothing unusual, no clues to Fett's identity, though Han figured that would become a matter of only academic interest once Arandu caught up with the Hunter. *I hope he does take Fett out of circulation*, Han thought, climbing the ladder back up to the Gank ship. *Do us all a favor.*

He sealed off the hulk of *Slave I*'s cargo hold and jettisoned it, then plotted a course hyper for Ord Mantell. He could sell the Gank Ship there for enough credit to get the *Falcon* out of impound before they checked her registry, and have enough left over to buy Chewie a souvenir.

Then he'd decide how much of what happened to tell the rebels. There were some things he definitely wanted to leave out, like that sensation of darkness coming over him when he thought he was dying. It might be the Force, but he suspected that it didn't have anything to do with Kenobi's teachings. No, he wasn't telling Luke about that.

He'd tell them about Arandu, of course. It would be dangerous not to, and it might not be the last time Han heard of him. He didn't know why he was so sure of that. He didn't think he wanted to know.

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