

## Far Off on Another Planet

### *Star Wars II: 1978*

Leigh Brackett wandered around the empty screening room. The movie everybody else had seen last year shimmered on the wall behind her. She couldn't watch anymore. She didn't care about the kid whining all his lines through his nose, "Threepio, Threepio, where could he be?" This Skywalker punk was no interplanetary hero, no Erik John Stark. He falls into a trash heap with no better ideas than to cry out for his anorexic dandy of a robot.

And she was supposed to make a second blockbuster out of this?

Brackett left the flickering film and the hollow screening room. It was too lonesome to play down there. She set off up the hallway, looking for that little frog of a man who'd hired her for this job. His eyes twinkled when he told stories of the sequel. Somewhere in that sparkle lay the key to unlocking this new screenplay.

Three doors down from the screening room, Leigh turned into George Lucas's office. It was paneled in Philippine mahogany and contained an expensive leather couch, matching armchairs, filing cabinets, and a desk. Lucas's secretary roosted in Lucas's thick leather office chair, legs kicked up, dirt from the soles of his shoes floating down onto the blotter.

"Where's George," Brackett asked.

Lucas's secretary popped a pistachio into his mouth and started chewing and talking at the same time. "Gone to the impound lot."

"What got impounded?"

"His car." Munch. Munch. Munch. "I guess the Force wasn't with him today."

"Why didn't he send you to get it? Aren't you his lackey?"

Another pistachio popped into that gaping yawp. “He don’t let me drive his Bianchina.”

Brackett held the secretary’s gaze for a brief moment, then, quick as a jungle cat, swatted his feet off the desk and sent him spinning in the chair. “Bounce, kid,” she said. “I got writing to do.”

The secretary scampered out of the office. Leigh brushed the dust off the blotter and pulled the typewriter close. She fed a sheet into the roller. Since Ed had passed the year before, putting an end to their thirty years of marriage and the force field that had kept illness out of her body, the only thing she could do was write. Writing chased the cancer through her bloodstream, kept the cells that hadn’t mutated in fighting shape. The sickness would win. Sooner rather than later. Until it did, she wrote TV pilots that wouldn’t be produced and pulp science fiction devoid of Big Thinks. And now this: the sequel to the biggest movie running.

Before typing, she dug into Lucas’s bottom drawer in hopes of finding a bottle there. Howard Hawks always had a bottle. Writing went smoother with it around. And, let’s face it, with Howard around. This Lucas kid was different. Where she expected to find a bottle she found a ukulele. “This, that, or the other,” she said to herself, lifting the uke from the drawer. “As long as it loosens the fingers.”

Lucas’s ukulele had an internal cold to it that Brackett couldn’t make sense of. It was like the uke had been stored in a faraway ice planet where night brings death and rebels bunker against impending doom. The sound was off, too. These Big Fellas with their Big Ideas and their tin ears. Brackett hummed an A and tightened the top string into tune. From there, it was short work to get the other strings to sound right.

Cold or not, the ukulele felt good in Leigh's hands. It had one of those strong, vibrant necks that was pleasant to graze her thumb against. Brackett plucked a few notes and let the cold and sounds take her to that icy world.

### *The Big Sleep: 1945*

From the beginning, when Hollywood needed someone to write like a man, Brackett was the woman they called. It started with Howard Hawks when the Big War was still running. He had ol' Bill Faulkner scribbling away on a script for *The Big Sleep*, and all Bill could do was talk about the stains of sin and the crimes of history. So Howard phoned Leigh's agent, balked when he found that Leigh was a woman's name, but sent for her anyway.

She showed up with her brown curls bouncing under a beret. So young then. She looked nice. She looked very nice indeed. The soft wool of her dress was gathered and bloused, so that her full sharp curves were hinted at rather than seen, and the way the whole thing was cut made her look taller and slimmer. Howard took one glance and said, "Jesus, what are you? I was expecting a truck driver or a broad. You look like a God damn Howard Chandler Christie painting."

Maybe Brackett was a tangle of nerves inside, but she'd be damned if that came out. "Mister," she said, eyes locked on Hawks'. "We both know you didn't hire me to play tennis."

Howard smiled. "Well, at least you can spar." He ushered her down to Faulkner's bungalow. Bill was a contract writer. A 9:30 to 5:30 guy. The most important writing he did every day was his name on the time card coming and going.

Howard barged in without knocking. Bill's secretary, a wavy-haired beauty in wide-legged trousers and monochrome flats, popped out of her chair. Loose papers scattered about her

feet. She held out her hand to greet Howard and Leigh. The ink stain on her right middle finger glistened in the Hollywood light pouring in from the doorway.

“Meta Carpenter,” Howard said, with a nod to the secretary. “Used to work for me. Now I can’t pull her out of Bill’s bungalow.”

Leigh shook Meta’s ink-stained hand.

Meta said, “Charmed.”

Bill remained seated on a Baltimore fancy side chair. He wore a tweed coat pockmarked with cigarette burns, ashy slacks, and a bow tie tilted to tickle the left side of his chin waddle. He played something intricate on a banjolele. It sounded gothic and classical, but also somehow contemporary and new. Leigh felt yanked out of her body and into the universe of Faulkner’s song. It was all off. She’d built enough worlds to know. The composition may be brilliant, but the tempo wavered out of time signatures and the floating bridge had floated upwards, sabotaging the little instrument’s intonation.

Meta rescued Leigh from her trance. “The little banjo is on loan from Ray Chandler.”

“It’s lovely,” Brackett said, less about the instrument than about the way the secretary’s aristocratic twang breezed into the song.

Hawks had no time for any of this. He snapped, “Bill!”

Faulkner struggled to lift his gaze from the weight of his heavy eyelids. He seemed to live behind a wall eight feet thick. “Howard,” he said, slow and soft, as if the name had too few syllables so he’d necessarily drag each one through its own airburst.

“Put down that God damn little toy and meet your new co-writer, Leigh Brackett.”

Leigh stepped forward to greet Faulkner. Bill leaned the banjolele against a tin trash can. He grabbed a copy of Chandler’s *The Big Sleep* and flipped to the middle page. “Should you be

agreeable to a simplified collaboration of this endeavor, I propose we divide our labors equally. I'll bay the front half of this bear while you come around and assault from the rear."

Leigh turned to Hawks for a translation. "He'll write the first half; I'll take care of the second?"

Faulkner blocked Hawks' reply by grabbing both halves of the cheap paperback and struggling to tear it down the spine. The glue held strong and the pages, while fluttering like butterflies gathered in a net, refused to rip. Faulkner grunted and pulled, but proved no match for the pulp. Leigh wondered if everyone was embarrassed, or just her.

Howard barked, "Enough of this nonsense. Meta, tell Leigh what she'll write. Let's get this show on the road."

It took eight days to write the script. Bill went on a bender for three of them. Meta signed his time cards for him. Leigh worked in the adjacent bungalow, on contract from Howard and not from the studio. As long as pages were typed, Howard didn't bother with hours. Late mornings and long lunches flew just fine. Leigh's only restriction was the ten o'clock curfew her mother insisted on. Brackett could've written it all at home, and faster, but for her aunt constantly interrupting, asking time and again why Leigh didn't write something nice, something *Ladies Home Journal* would buy. It was worse than the screams from Bill and Meta in the bungalow next door. At least Meta could stand on her own, give Bill as bad as she got, happy to scream, "Your wife," whenever something needed breaking.

On the eighth day, Bill stopped by Brackett's bungalow for tea. Meta stayed behind to type up pages from an opening scene between Philip Marlowe and General Sternwood. Faulkner brought his banjolele along. Leigh took it from him with all the gentleness of an Army doctor

extracting a Mauser slug from a GI's thigh. She strummed a tune, simple and sweet and with enough empty spaces between notes for her to slide the floating bridge into place and tighten the slack skin. When the sound was right, she handed it back to Bill, knowing his ear would never know the difference.

### *Star Wars II: 1978*

Lucas peered up at the screen. The light from a gunfight in an intergalactic saloon splattered across his face. Something about his fascination with his own film was totally inhuman. His bright, intent eyes showed a curious mixture of intelligence and what could be madness.

Leigh sat next to him and finger-picked the icy ukulele. She played along to the score of the film. This was her favorite part. The intergalactic saloon band knew only one song. The repetition of it left light years of space for her to improvise in. Brackett had sat in this screening room with this film so many times that the score had taken residence inside the twisted channels of her ear. Her ukulele improvisations had become the newest and freshest part of the film.

And here it was, Leigh would think when she wasn't thinking about the sequel. Here was her art in a nutshell. The form was rigid, intractable, beyond her control. But what she could do in those tiny pockets of silence between notes, it was Big. Even if only she heard it.

George would tap his foot along with her ukulele. He'd never address it directly. She'd doctored enough scripts, done enough contract writing to know how to be invisible, how to contribute things that seemed to grow in place rather than be created by someone else. So when George heard the ukulele, Leigh was sure he heard it as something that he'd thought of first, that had been there all along.

And George was a sweet kid. At the beginning of the movie, when the whiny hero was still in his desert home, George had asked, “Recognize this place?”

“Sure,” Leigh said. She’d been to Arizona, driven over from Lancaster. Her and Ed passed through this very patch of dunes on the way to Tucson for one of those Hawks movies. *Rio Bravo* maybe. Or, no. *El Dorado*.

“It’s your Mars,” George said. “Exactly how I pictured it when I read your stuff in *Planet Stories* as a kid.”

George’s hand gripped tightly around the arm of the theater chair. Leigh patted his wrist, felt the tendons tighten under her fingers. “It’s perfect,” she said.

But it was not perfect. None of it was perfect. She could feel the sickness thicker in her blood with every day in the screening room. Most times, when the ukulele got too cold and the film seemed to stretch across eons, she could up and leave. Get back to writing, which was what she was being paid to do, anyway. Lucas kept insisting she watch the movie. She couldn’t make it through. Even with George right next to her in this cozy screening room.

Silent as cats except for the gentle rattle and whisper of tiny pills in a plastic bottle, Leigh took some of the medicine the doctor prescribed to her. The pills wouldn’t cure anything. They wouldn’t even take away the pain. They would just make her feel a little better about the final scenes in life she had left. Leigh swallowed a small handful with a gulp of water. It settled into her stomach like the distillate of all the sweet wickedness of the world.

George was now perched at the front of his seat, his arms wrapped around the seatback in front of him, his knees nearly touching the carpeted floor. As flashes of a laser battle flickered across his face, she pictured him as an ancient, a trainer of old screenwriters and young Jedi knights alike. She’d call him Minch. Luke could carry all of her frustrations with Minch’s Force.

Artoo could be her cancer, beeping and whirring as a constant reminder that he wasn't happy with any of this.

From another room, Lucas's secretary called the boss away. George, legs asleep, wobbled out of the screening room.

Brackett settled back into her chair. Her last thought before drifting off to sleep was her first rule of writing: the guy who signs the final check has the final say.

### *El Dorado: 1965*

Howard and Leigh were back in Tucson. The wintertime desert felt worlds away from the Ohio ranch where Leigh and Ed did their writing in adjoining studies, Mars to the Venus of her marital home. The distance apart was mitigated by the script she'd written for *El Dorado*. It was her finest work yet. It wasn't tragic, but it was one of those things where John Wayne dies at the end. Hawks said he loved it. The studio loved it. Wayne loved it. "All it needs," Howard said, "is a little polish on it."

He flew Leigh and Ed out to Los Angeles for this polish. Ed took up residency in their home in Lancaster. Leigh followed Howard from LA to southern Utah to Tucson. "A little polish on it," Leigh knew, could mean anything from rewriting damn near the whole thing to just rewording dialogue enough to make a man out of a Mitchum or Wayne. She brought along her traveling typewriter. Lightweight, speedy keys, always at the ready.

Good thing, too, because "a little polish on it" this time meant taking the finest thing she'd written and turning it into a remake of *Rio Bravo*, which she'd written already.

The waning sun streaked the mesas a blood orange on the outskirts of Tucson. Gaffers and grips rolled cords and folded screens. Camera men packed their lenses and stored the dailies.

Robert Mitchum headed off for the nearest bar, looking like nothing more than a tin badge pinned to a drunk. John Wayne loitered around the director and the writer, waiting to petition for an extra line or an extra one after that. Howard said, “I need some new lines.”

Leigh felt it coming like a sap to the back of the neck. “I wrote you new lines,” she said. “What you want is some old ones.”

Howard swatted Leigh’s words away like so much desert dust gathered into the fibers of his slacks. “It’s where the girl comes into town...”

“Which girl?” Leigh asked. “Angie Dickinson?”

“Sure. Angie. Whatever the hell her name is,” Howard said.

Duke interjected. “Angie’s not in this movie. The girl has to be Charlene or Michele.”

“Charlene. Michele. Angie. What’s the difference? The girl comes in on a stage and blah blah blah. You get it Leigh?”

“I get it.” The desert seemed to have drifted into Brackett’s mouth. Grains of sand ground into her back molars. “I wrote the damn scene eight years ago.”

Duke looked down at Leigh from a perch that felt about eight feet above her. “That’s right,” he said. “If it was good once, it’ll be just as good again.”

Leigh stomped off to her trailer, lines for Angie or Charlene or Michele racing through her head. She typed with a view of the sunset spectacular out her window. She wrote until the dark shut down.

### *Star Wars II: 1978*

Leigh dropped off the first draft of the sequel with Lucas. George wore no mask between himself and his excitement. If he’d had a tail, he would’ve wagged it. “I can’t wait,” he said,

short of breath like even the words took him away from the reading he wanted to do. “I’m going to read this right now.” His eyes didn’t rise from the page to address Brackett. She watched his glance dart across the words. This must have been what a young George looked like when his new issue of *Super Science Stories* arrived in his Modesto mailbox, when he raced inside and tucked himself into his father’s oversized armchair and read “The Citadel of Lost Ships.” Leigh gave herself a few moments to indulge in this fantasy, to think of all the boys and men so excited to swallow the pulp that she and Ed had been grinding out for most of the middle of this century. When the moments passed, she remembered the most important thing.

“Um, George, honey,” she said. “There is the matter of my check.”

Brackett’s words ripped Lucas from his ice planet and back to this dark mahogany office. He gulped air against the bends. “Yes. Yes,” he said. “Of course.” He reached into the bottom drawer of his desk, extracting his ukulele. A paycheck was woven into the strings. “I know you played it to help yourself write,” he said. “Take it. Take it and the money. It was always too cold for me, anyway.”

Leigh stuffed the check into her purse. The check itself was the size of all checks. The number on it was large enough to take care of her for the rest of her life, a span of time she knew couldn’t be more than a few weeks. She cradled the ukulele in her arms. It was preternaturally cold as it had always been. George’s mind jumped into hyperspace. He landed on the ice planet before Leigh could say goodbye.

She headed down the hallway. Lights had been extinguished. Night awaited outside.

Leigh knew she’d written her final work. It was better than the *Star Wars* that had come before it. Brackett—whose heroines had never simpered or fainted, melted or whimpered—had taken a lot of the princess out of Leia. She’d given the character some of the old verve Brackett

had given Bacall back in the war years. Maybe that dancer's daughter could do something with those lines. She'd given Han Solo a father who could teach him how to be a man. She made Luke, the whiny little blond kid, into a real hero, one who could best Darth Vader in hand-to-hand combat at the end. And the scenes with Minch were the best. Leigh was certain George would love them.

Of course, she also knew that some younger version of a Brackett would come along and put a polish on her screenplay. There was no telling how much of a polish, what would get shined up and what would get shined off. She only knew polishing would occur.

Brackett held the cold ukulele close to her breast, chilling the metastasized blood inside. "I'll be there soon, Ed," she said, pushing the studio door open.

She stepped into the starlight.