

Sacrificial

By

Justin Cawthorne

DISCLAIMER: Star Wars and its related characters/universe is property of George Lucas and LucasFilm Ltd. This story does not, nor is intended to, infringe on any legal rights of said parties. No profits are, or will be, made from this story as published. It is for enjoyment purposes only.

Outside of the above disclaimer this work of fiction is published under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 Unported License. For further details please refer to <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>

Sacrificial

"Leia Organa, former princess of Alderaan, Imperial Senator and undercover agent for the rebel alliance: you are hereby sentenced to death for the destruction of the planet of Alderaan and the murder of almost two billion innocent lives."

Leia had faced death before, on many occasions, and each time her instinct for survival had seen her through: each time she had known beyond any doubt that she did not deserve to die.

This time she hesitated.

A memory. One of the worst.

"I grow tired of asking, so this will be the last time: where is the rebel base?"

His breath *stank*. For a few moments it was all she could think about. She recoiled, unable to help herself. He would take it as a sign of weakness, but she quickly realised how she could use it to her advantage. She slumped her head further, looking down, beaten.

"Dantooine," she whispered. "They're on Dantooine."

A small lie, just one single name, enough to save millions.

He looked down at her, a victorious grimace curling behind his lips, then spoke pompously to his associate: "There, you see Lord Vader - she can be reasonable!"

Saved. Whatever the future now held for her now, at least her planet was saved.

Finally he turned away from her, she could breath again. Through the din of the control room and her own rushing thoughts his next words slammed into her.

"Continue with the operation. You may fire when ready...."

What?!

Millions dead, but once again she had survived. Only for it to come to this.

"Who are you?" she asked the stranger. The man was pointing a blaster directly at her heart.

"Does it matter?" he growled in reply.

Leia spoke calmly. The man's eyes never wavered from hers, his gun arm was as poised and steady as a mercenary's, but all the same she didn't want to make him nervous. "I think I have a right to know who's about to kill me," she replied.

For a moment there was no reaction from him, then: "My name is Baryn, Baryn Celco - survivor of Alderaan. I was offworld when you facilitated the destruction of my home planet by the Empire. Unfortunately - for you - my family were not. They died, along with all the others."

She recognised the familiar pangs of guilt and pain that taunted her whenever the murdered world crossed her thoughts. "Aren't you forgetting something? It was my home as well."

Baryn shook his head. "Not quite. You weren't born on Alderaan, were you? You were adopted by Senator Bail Organa, brought into his royal family, groomed to take his place one day, even though you didn't have so much as a drop of Alderaanian blood in your veins. You're nothing more than an impostor."

That hurt. Over the past months she had tried everything she could to numb her memories of Alderaan; she didn't have time to wallow in misery, even though the pain was always there, waiting. Now she felt the desperate, impotent anger begin to surface. "Maybe I wasn't born on Alderaan, but I grew up there, I lived my life there - just like you did. All of the memories that matter, all of the moments that made me who I am - all of those happened on Alderaan. I'm as much a child of Alderaan as you are, and I will always share the pain that you feel."

He looked at her sadly. "But you still let Alderaan die."

One word.

She could have saved them with one word: "Wait!"

Everything stops. Frozen on her one word. She could tell them where the rebel base was, the real base. Surely they would let Alderaan live then? Save her home, her family. Betray the rebellion, abandon a fight that might never be won.

Could she do do it?

Just one word?

"Who sent you?" she asked. "Are you with the Empire? A bounty hunter? One of Tarkin's surviving cronies?"

Baryn almost snorted, lowering the blaster just an inch. It was the first time she'd seen any clear emotional reaction from him, even with all that sadness and anger inside. "Do you think an Imperial agent could have found you so quickly? The Empire is mired in incompetence and bureaucracy. Half the galaxy knew where Alderaan's sympathies lay, but we were allowed to indulge ourselves, allowed to breed dissent until the Empire had no choice but to destroy us."

"You make it sound as though Alderaan deserved to be destroyed?"

He took a step closer, his anger now starting to match her own. "Believe me, I have no love for the Empire, but not all of us were born to fight. I had a family, a career - that was all I ever wanted. Now it's gone, all of it gone, and all because you and your father wanted your glorious rebellion. What right did you have to make that choice for all of us? What right?!"

"We don't fight because we choose to fight, Baryn. We fight because we have no choice."

"Semantics," Baryn dismissed.

"Where does it stop? If we do nothing how many more planets do you think the Empire would destroy, how many people would be enslaved? If we surrender our freedom then we forfeit everything. You didn't lose your family because we fought the Empire - you lost your family because the Empire thinks it has the power, the right, to decide who lives and who dies.

"Join us," Leia implored. "Join the rebellion. Make the Empire pay for what they did to your family. Make them pay for what they did to Alderaan."

For a moment Baryn looked intrigued. "What exactly do you imagine I could bring to your rebellion?"

She was surprised he was even asking. "You single-handedly tracked down one of the leaders of the rebel alliance. With all of its supposed might even the Empire hasn't been able to find us since we escaped Yavin."

He almost smiled. "I'm a survivor of Alderaan, with no known imperial contacts. All I needed to do was ask the right questions in the right places and people were only too happy to point me towards the alliance."

Leia didn't doubt it: the alliance had recently recruited huge numbers of displaced, and vengeful, Alderaanians. "Then how about it? Join the fight - the rebellion needs people like you."

"Maybe I will sign up," he shrugged. Then he raised the blaster again. "But it won't be in your lifetime."

Leia sighed, straightened her poise, and faced Baryn proudly. She understood how single-minded revenge could be; Baryn's only fault was looking in the wrong direction. Maybe he would join the rebellion, but first he was compelled to satisfy his misplaced desire for justice. If her death gave the rebellion one more good fighter then it might just be worth it.

"Then go ahead," she told him. "I've faced worse than you."

All she remembered was the darkness. The darkness of him, the darkness that lingered as hope slowly abandoned her.

The torture could have lasted for minutes, for hours, or for an eternity. There were only two things she knew for certain: he wouldn't let her die, and she wouldn't tell him anything. The

first one didn't matter, but the second was everything. As Vader filled her mind with every terror his deranged imagination could conjure up, the only thing that kept her from giving up was her determination, her certainty, that she wouldn't tell him anything.

She could sense his anger. His frustration at her silence was matched only her own desperate outrage. It gave her something to cling onto, it bound them together in a perverse manner and shored up her conviction that she would remain silent.

She wouldn't give in. She wouldn't tell him anything.

Baryn hesitated.

"Why?" he asked

The question caught Leia off guard. "What?"

"I want you to tell me why you did it - why you let Alderaan die?"

She could see the sadness behind Baryn's question. He wasn't really seeking revenge, he was searching for closure, and she knew he would probably never find it. Even though there was every likelihood that he would still kill her, she felt honour-bound to give him a truthful answer, but the right words were buried somewhere, hidden deep inside.

Finally she started to find them: "For my whole life my father brought me up to succeed him," she began. "Not only as a senator but as a leader of the rebellion. We both saw what the Empire was doing and vowed that we would fight it at any cost to ourselves."

"What about the cost to Alderaan?" Baryn interrupted.

"Even in our worst nightmares we never imagined the price could be so high. But, even now, if we stop fighting then everything that we've already lost means nothing. Surely, you must know that?"

Baryn's grip tightened on the blaster, his knuckles whitening. "I don't care."

"Then tell me what would you have done," she demanded. "Would you have saved Alderaan, but at the cost of the rebellion? If there's no one left to fight the Empire what happens to all our futures?"

"I don't have a future anymore - you took that from me!"

"The Empire took that from you, the Empire destroyed your home and your family. Join us and help restore freedom to the galaxy. The rebellion can offer you a better future than the Empire will. It's your choice: you can avenge your family... or you can just settle for revenge."

Baryn was faltering, but for now Leia was the only person near enough to blame. He clung to revenge. "You didn't answer me. You didn't tell me why you let them destroy Alderaan."

She looked at him, trying breathe calmly as the memories started coming back to life. "You can't imagine what they did to me, the ways they tortured me, trying to make me tell them

where the rebel base was. There were times... times when - they came so close, but I never told them anything. When they finally gave up and left me alone I realised I'd won: I'd beaten the Empire. There was something they could never take from me.

"Then they showed me Alderaan, told me they could destroy it with the flick of a switch. All I needed to do was to tell them where the rebel base was. But I didn't."

Leia broke off for a moment, then resumed: "I've told myself that I made a choice for the future, that the rebellion had to be saved. But the real reason I stood by and watched them destroy Alderaan was because if I had told them where the rebel base was then it would have meant that they had beaten me after all. I'd held out against the most diabolical tortures they could inflict on me and still the Empire had gained nothing. Then they stood me stood in that control room and all I needed to do was to tell them where the rebel base was and I couldn't do it - I wouldn't do it, I wouldn't allow the Empire to beat me. That's why Alderaan was destroyed."

Baryn looked at her for a long time. Then, remarkably, he laughed. "You were too stubborn?" he eventually responded. "You're telling me you didn't betray the rebel alliance because you were too stubborn to give in?"

Leia nodded.

"That's -" Baryn stopped talking. He cocked his head, listening keenly. Leia had heard something too: the sound of dry leaves rustling on the ground, a faint murmur on the breeze. Footsteps.

Baryn stepped silently next to her, pulling them both down to the ground.

"Your people?" he asked.

Leia shook her head. She had been surveying the planet as a possible location for a new base, but she had travelled alone. She hadn't even been aware there was anyone else on the planet until Baryn had confronted her, and he obviously wasn't a native. She concentrated, trying to make out voices amid the vague sounds travelling across the forest. There was almost something, but it sounded like - she felt a chill run through her as she recognised the unmistakably metallic tone of stormtroopers.

"It's an imperial patrol."

Baryn winced. "They must have followed me here."

"Maybe," Leia agreed. "Or maybe our luck just finally ran out."

She turned to him. "The rebel base is on Thila. Head directly south for two kilometres and you'll find my ship by a lake at the foot of the mountain; there's a security transponder on board, you won't get past the defences without it. Go - the alliance can use you."

Baryn took her arm: "We'll both go."

Leia released his grip, shaking her head. "No - the patrol is too close, they'll hear us. If I distract them at least you'll have a chance of getting out of here. The Empire might have been tracking me, you can warn the alliance we've been compromised."

Baryn looked due south. Through the trees he could just see the mountain rising above the skyline. He turned back to Leia.

"Very well," he answered simply. And with that he disappeared silently through the forest, Leia avoided watching him go. The last thing she wanted to do was to give the patrol any indication there was someone else around. She stood up and waited, her gaze fixed blankly on the trees ahead.

It wasn't hard to imagine the short future that now lay ahead of her. She expected the Emperor would simply have her disappear: a public execution of the last surviving member of Alderaan's royal family - leader of the rebel alliance or not - would try the loyalty of even his most willing subjects. However, the Emperor didn't suffer humiliation well, he would let her live just long enough to return the favour. It was a bleak prospect: imprisonment in a tiny metal cell, torture, a lonely death among enemies.

Perhaps she should go out fighting instead.

She pulled her blaster from its holster. It wouldn't do much damage, but she might take out an officer or two and it might discourage them from trying too hard to take her alive. She'd already spent enough time at the Emperor's leisure for one lifetime.

"Put the weapon down," a voice commanded.

She hadn't even seen them coming. Before her stood an Imperial Officer, armed, with a squad of stormtroopers surrounding him, each one with his own weapon trained directly on her. She threw her gun down in disgust, the odds were too hopeless even for her.

"Who are you?" the officer asked.

"Mara," Leia replied, looking him straight in the eye. The officer was clearly unnerved by her gaze but tried not to show it.

"Mara?" he quizzed. "We'll see about that. What are you doing out here?"

"Mineral survey," Leia bluffed. "My ship's a few clicks north of here. I didn't realise Empire had a prior claim to this planet. I'll leave -"

"You'll do no such thing," the officer cut her off. "You are now a prisoner of the Empire. We will decide if and when you are free to go."

Leia hadn't really expected anything different. She was only lucky that, for now at least, the officer didn't seem to have recognised her.

He hadn't finished threatening her, however. "It is my belief," he continued, "that you are a rebel spy. You will return with us for questioning."

He turned to the nearest trooper. "Signal the shuttle," he commanded. "Inform them we have taken a rebel suspect prisoner."

The trooper nodded and reached for his communicator. A laser blast shot through the trees and cut him down. The officer had about two seconds to register his shock before he took the full brunt of a second blast. Leia threw herself to the ground as the rest of the troopers opened fire. With no clear target in sight they were shooting blind. It took less than a minute for the entire squad to fall.

When there was only silence Leia raised her head and surveyed the area cautiously, making sure all the troopers were down. Nothing moved. Then something stirred by the trees. She grabbed for her blaster.

It was Baryn. He was badly injured, a shot from an imperial blaster had left a devastating wound in his left leg. He limped over to her.

"There's only a few people I know who can shoot like that," Leia complimented. "I only hope you didn't come back just so you can have the pleasure of killing me yourself?"

"Not exactly," Baryn grunted.

"Then come with me," she ordered. "We need to get you to a medical droid right away."

He shook his head. "It won't be long before this patrol is missed. There'll be a shuttle nearby, probably another squadron or two. You might get off the planet before they find their dead comrades, but I'd imagine they've heard the blaster fire and are on their way right now."

"So let's not waste time talking about it," Leia urged.

Baryn glanced down at his leg. "This wound hasn't been properly cauterized. I estimate I've got about an hour, not long enough to outmanoeuvre an imperial patrol and make it back to your ship."

"Then we'll stand and fight," Leia insisted.

"No. The only chance you'll have is if they have no doubt that it was me who took out their patrol and that I acted alone."

Leia shook her head. "But to do that you'll have to - "

"I'll have to let them take me prisoner," he completed. "It's the only way: if I go down fighting they'll only send out more patrols in case I wasn't alone and then you'll never get off this planet."

In the distance they heard the first sounds of running footsteps. Their time was running out.

"Baryn, I've been a prisoner of the Empire, I... " she found herself unable to go on, unable to tell Baryn about the miserable death that lay in store for him.

He smiled. It was a warm, honest smile, enough to make Leia weep for the man she would never have the chance to know.

"I have no illusions about what they have in store for me," he admitted. "But you told me to join the fight and this is my own fight. I'm doing this to honour my family, but also so you can carry on showing the galaxy that even when the Empire's taken everything, you still refuse to give in. You're the example, you're the heart of the rebellion. The rebellion needs you.

"And I understand the difference between us now," Baryn continued. "You're fighting for the future. You had no choice but to stand by as the Empire destroyed Alderaan because without the rebellion there's no future. But all this time I've been fighting for the past. I don't deserve to die for that, but you do deserve to live. And I'm afraid only one of us is going to get out of here."

One last look. The running footsteps getting closer, louder.

"Now go," he whispered.

Leia waited another beat, then started backing away. She desperately wanted to say something, but there was nothing left to be said and no time for more words. The footsteps were nearly upon them. Baryn nodded held her gaze a moment, then turned away and started walking casually in the direction of the patrol. After a few moments Leia could no longer see him. She hurried away, moving as quietly as she could, using the trees for cover. When she was a safe distance away she concealed herself under some heavy undergrowth and waited.

Silence. She had almost hoped to hear the sound of blasters, to know that Baryn had died on his own terms, but it wasn't to be. There was no chance of a rescue for him, no chance of mercy. Few people would ever know Baryn even existed.

But Leia would never forget.