

“Two Sides”

by Katie Zajdel
thumper@coronasquadron.com
<http://www.coronasquadron.com>

Disclaimer: *Star Wars* is not mine.

The pilot briefing room in Echo Base was disorderly and, like everything else on that planet, cold to the bone. The breaths of the assembled Rogue Flight pilots condensed in the freezing air before him. He felt alone there at the front of the group without Narra beside him. "Thank you all for coming," Luke Skywalker said, pain etched on his face and permeating his voice.

The small, cordoned-off area of the hangar on the Star Destroyer was spotless and precise and, like almost every other shipboard hangar, somewhat chilly. The polished metal uniform insignias of the assembled 181st Fighter Group pilots glinted in the light as they stood before him and the Honor Guard in perfect formation. Colonel Derricote was there beside him. "Thank you all for coming," Soontir Fel said, his voice strong and proud.

"There's no easy way to say this," Luke continued. Those words instantly grabbed the other pilots' full attention, and the background rustling and restlessness stopped. His gaze swept over all his friends— Wedge, Dak, Wes, Hobbie, Zev, Tenk, Tarrin, Tycho, and more— and Luke fervently wished he could spare them from this news. "We just got word that Renegade Flight and the supply convoy they were escorting were ambushed by the Imperials at Derra IV." He paused, not wanting to say the next words. Finally he did. "There were no survivors."

It wasn't easy to say some of the words with the same pride he'd mustered before now that Fel was thinking about that alien admiral, but he continued, unwilling to show that weakness. His gaze swept over the memorial holos of the few 181st pilots who had been lost, and Fel wished he could spare their families from this news; however, they would take comfort in the fact that their sons had died bringing honor and glory to the Empire. He turned back to the assembled survivors, of which there were many. "All of you performed admirably at Derra IV in the fight against the Rebels. We're here today to honor these men who gave their lives at Derra IV in the service of the Empire. They gave the greatest sacrifice to the Emperor in his quest to rid the galaxy of those who would destroy order and harm others."

It had been quiet before, but it was completely silent now. Even the sounds that usually and easily echoed off the icy walls were extinguished, creating an uncharacteristic and eerie stillness. Fidgeting stopped as the Rebels' unconscious movements were forgotten or perhaps made impossible by stalled thought processes. Luke let his words sink into the minds that he knew tried to deny them and keep them out. The pilots' normalcy had just been shattered into millions of pieces that could never be made whole again.

Tycho took a breath at last and asked, "What happened?" The unspoken question behind his words was easy to detect: what did we miss that allowed this to happen?

Luke shook his head regretfully. "I don't know. We're having a very hard time getting details." Mostly, though, he wished he knew the answer to Tycho's unspoken question. It would be up to him to figure it out quickly, too, so this could never happen again. Without Narra, everything was on Luke's shoulders now.

The respectful quiet from the assembled Imperials lingered as Fel's words died off, though the background sounds of the operations taking place in the rest of the hangar never quite ceased. Some of the din echoed off the metal walls, but Fel tuned it out. He was pleased to see that the noise didn't distract any of the others either. The pilots and Honor Guard remained perfectly still; fidgeting during a memorial service was very much frowned upon.

All in all, though, this was almost another normal day. Everyone here knew how this went. There was the solemnity in recognizing the loss of their squadron mates, but today there was also underlying triumph for the decisive victory over the Rebels.

Now that Fel's introduction for the service was complete, he stepped back. Colonel Derricote took over the main part of the ceremony.

Now that the silence had been broken everything else seemed to come rushing out, and Luke unconsciously flinched a bit, caught off-guard by the onslaught he sensed from Rogue Flight. The Force around him grew instantly saturated with raw and uncontained despair, emptiness, anger and even fear from the loss of their good friends. Matching words came soon after.

Luke listened, let them vent and tried to answer questions when he could. He wanted to fix all the problems, but he just didn't know how. He was still reeling from the loss himself.

And then Hobbie piped up. "Now what are we going to do?"

The Rogues quieted and looked to Luke.

It was another answer he didn't truly have, but they needed *something*. "We have an entire base to protect on our own, and without that convoy's delivery, fewer supplies to do it with," Luke said. "We're going to work with General Rieekan to figure out how to do it in the most efficient way until we can get... replacements." That word left a bad taste in his mouth. Renegade Flight could never be "replaced".

Fel's face remained impassive, matching the professional air of the service as well as the stoic expressions of the rest of the 181st.

He listened as Derricote waxed poetic about the fallen pilots, but the words had little meaning. Fel had learned long ago that the rampant attrition TIE Pilots faced meant that getting too close to squadron mates was just asking for trouble. Now he held most of them at a distance,

especially the newer pilots, with only a select few such as Turr Phennir allowed to become friends. This way, memorial services lost most of their sting, and Fel couldn't afford to get too wrapped up emotionally in things. He had a job to do.

Derricote eventually began to bring the service to a close, and he addressed the pilots when he said, "Some of you may be wondering what's next, what we're going to do now." The 181st looked to him, and he continued, "Shortly we'll be going back to Imperial Center, where we'll be honored with a ceremony for our exceptional work at Derra IV." Derricote beamed with pride, and the pilots' faces brightened. Fel's did too in spite of himself.

Luke sighed as he looked at the pilots. Derra IV was a name none of them would ever forget.

Fel smiled as he looked at the pilots. Derra IV was a name none of them would ever forget.

The End

Revision A
1-30-11