

The Reluctant Pilot

Milo sat in the Hammer's cantina after the brief skirmish against The Republic. The battle was still replaying in his mind as he locked his eyes onto his meal tray that lay on the table before him. It was only a small Republic fleet, were there more? Did we get all of them? How did they find us? Was Sai a part of the fleet? All of these questions flashed rapidly through his brain, before feeling a strong nudge against his shoulder. He looked up with an eyebrow raised, clearly annoyed that his thoughts had been abruptly cut off. Captain Omega was staring right back at him with a slight grin on his face. Looking across the table, Milo could see he also had the attention of the rest of his squadmates, all of them sharing the same grin as their captain. Omega's voice boomed out, it's honestly amazing how Milo didn't hear him the first time. "Go on, Rookie, tell them how you blasted those Rebels into dust."

Milo let out a nervous laugh as he looked to the rest of Beta, they were all eager to hear his tale. "I'm not one to boast, sir. But yeah, I got a few of 'em." Milo stoically responded with a small nod of his head. The expressions that the squadron held, told Milo that they were dying to hear the juicy details. The truth was, Milo just didn't have them, or didn't *want* to tell them. He lifted a cup to his lips, and as he was about to take a drink, he felt another nudge from his captain, this time resulting in Milo almost spilling his drink all over his fly-gear. Milo once again looked over with an annoyed look as his Captain spoke again, his thick Coruscant accent booming over all of the chatter in the cantina. "Don't be modest, Rookie. I saw you take out that corvette. You even earned your first medal!" Omega turned his attention back to the rest of the table. "While you lot were doing nothing, me and the Rook were out on patrol when we were ambushed by those- What do they call themselves now? *The Republic?*" His words were laced with hatred and bitterness as he continued. "They'll never be anything more than just a band of pathetic Rebels, and that showed today when we decimated the scum." That earned a few laughs and hoots from a few Betas.

Milo returned to his tray of "food" as Omega babbled about the mission. Milo didn't pay any attention to it as he lazily picked at his food. He never liked to think about the "after action report." Sure, he was a pilot, that was his job; To shoot things down. And yeah, he didn't mind blasting a few pirates or overzealous crime-lords. But it just felt different when he went up against Republic fighters. To Milo, they had never done anything wrong to him, and from what he heard in the academy, it sounded like they rose up due to the Empire's tyranny and incompetence. But he would never speak out loud about his objections, he actually liked having his head on his shoulders. By now, a few of his squad mates finished their trays and left to fulfill their duties. Milo followed suit as he put his tray away, and set off for the hangar.

It wasn't like he hated his new squadron, sure, they *did* get on his nerves every now and then, but it was all friendly banter, and they have saved him from turning into space dust on more than one occasion. It was just hard for Milo to relate to his team, they all shared their love and loyalty to the Empire, but his loyalty was beginning to waver. Not only that, but it was hard for him to move on from his old squadron after the battle against the Ishtari. Those blasted bugs

really handed it to his old team, he was the only survivor of his squadron. No funeral service, or anything, not even a lick of sympathy from the Empire. Instead, he was reassigned to Beta Squadron, he didn't even have time to mourn his fallen wing-mates before he was transferred to The Hammer. It all really left a bitter taste in his mouth.

As he made his way through the pristine hallways of the ISD Hammer, he gave a few nods and salutes to the grayed-clad officers and the odd patrol of TKs that were making their rounds on the ship. He also gave a nod to a certain door technician that was dressed in... Scout trooper gear? Odd, but it was none of his business, he shrugged to himself as he entered the Hammer' hangar bay. He arrived just in time to see a squadron of TIEs take off out of the ship. "Poor sods, probably on clean-up duty, I'd wager." Milo mumbled to himself, his own pronounced Imperial accent making itself clear. Milo never cared for his accent very much, he had a phase in his youth where he tried to hide his accent, but eventually gave up on it. He didn't like how *preppy* it made him sound. But, he couldn't lie, he did like how smart it made him sound.

Milo strutted over to his TIE fighter, making his way past the engineers and other pilots coming back from their patrols. He still had some time before he had to go out again. Milo ran a hand over the hull of the wing to his TIE, the feeling of cold steel clasped over his fingertips, he wiped away the dust that he had collected in the skirmish against the Republic fighters. It was a pilot's duty to check over their TIEs after a battle, and report any damage or inconsistencies with the weapons to the engineers, who would then make the repairs necessary to restore the TIE into proper condition. His hand grazed over the scratches and burn marks on the hull of his fighter. He had taken some heavy hits in the skirmish, if he took anymore, he would have been a part of the debris floating about in space.

After the engineers worked their magic on his ship, Milo found himself sitting on top of his TIE, watching the other ships taking off and coming back in, as well as the officers debriefing a trio of pilots. He sat criss-cross with his helmet in his gloved hands, the reflection in his helmet stared back with dark brown eyes. He thumbed over the smooth black paint on his helmet as he sighed to himself. In about an hour, he had to go back out on patrol, and he was dreading it. What if he encountered the Republic again? He wasn't dreading about the Republic nearly as much as he was if Sai was there with them. Sai was an old childhood friend of Milo. They both grew up together on Corellia. "Childhood friend" would be putting it lightly, the pair were nearly inseparable, much to the dismay of Milo's parents. Milo was basically nobility, and Sai was an orphan growing up in the streets of Corellia, she often spent most of her time in one of the abandoned shipyards on the planet. In fact, that's where Milo met her the first time when he was seven years old after getting lost while at a market with his mother, and she was a year or two older, and ever since, the pair got along swimmingly. They would always be tinkering with old ships, or getting into trouble with the local Republic guards. When Milo left for the Academy when he was thirteen, they were both devastated. There wasn't a day that went by where he didn't think of her. Thinking back on it, there were so many things he wanted to tell her, he even had a little crush on her.

A few years after he left for the IA, word got out of a new Republic ace sweeping through the ranks. Milo's heart dropped through the floor and went right back up his throat when he found out who it was; It was Sai. He wanted to throw up when her name came up in a debriefing, he couldn't believe it. The orphan he grew up with on Corellia was now a Republic ace, and he was on the opposite side of the war. What if they unknowingly encountered each other? What if they shot the other one down? These same questions still plagued his mind years later, and even still as he sat atop his TIE. He thought about defecting way too many times to actually count. But, everytime he asks himself, his mind bombards him with even more questions. How would I escape? What would my *father* think? Milo's father used to be an admiral for the Old Empire before it eventually fell, and was a big part of why Milo signed up for the TIE Corps in the first place. He looked up to his father, and wanted to fill his boots growing up. But now, he regretted ever being sent off to the IA. Maybe he and Sai could have joined up with the Republic together, but now, they were being pitted against each other, and for what? To restore an old tyrannical empire that he wasn't even born in? It was a dreamer's fantasy to him, yet he still flew their colors and banners, all while reluctantly, he still did.

After checking his chronomotor on his right wrist, he sighed to himself as he looked around the hangar. The rest of his squadron should be here soon as it was about five minutes until they were set to go on patrol. Soon enough, they each filtered in, giving a small wave as they went to their respective fighters. Milo hopped down from his fighter and went inside the cockpit to his own TIE. He looked down at the helmet's face once again and gave a brief sigh before slipping it on his head, letting the cushion inside envelope his head. The helmets were surprisingly comfortable. The only trade off was that it was nearly impossible to see anything.

As he clicked himself to his chair, his TIE was lifted by the grapple and set in place. He watched the rest of his squadron also be picked up as Omega's voice boomed through his comms in his helmet. "This is Beta One, standing by."

An aged and cheery voice soon followed "This is Beta Two, standing by!" Beta Two, or Erryc, was an older man, and from what Milo heard, he was born about a year before the Clone Wars ended. As it turns out, Erryc was also from Corellia. Milo had heard stories about Erryc's family; they were one of the most patriotic families to still support the Empire, even after their collapse. It often got them into hot water with the civilians and New Republic.

Another voice spoke softly through their comms. "Beta Three, reporting in." Beta Three, or Hunter, as he was known, was a quiet one, almost as quiet as Milo. He never saw much of him besides debriefings and patrols.

Finally, Milo speaks, his pompous Imperial accent bounces through the cockpit of his TIE. "Beta Four, coming in."

With that, Omega speaks once again, with a tone of snarkiness in his voice. "Alright, that's all of us. Hopefully we get to blast some Rebels." He then signals to the hangar crew below and the TIEs were released and flew out of the hangar one by one.

The TIE roared through the inky black space, The Hammer and the planet below thankfully gave off enough light to be able to see where they were going. He never got used to

just how *small* he was compared to the ISD. It's like comparing a flea to a bantha, and the planet was... Well, an entire planet. It amazed him, he loved to fly with all of his being, it gave him a certain feeling that he couldn't describe, happiness was close, and peaceful could sort of describe it, until he came under fire. It was just, he couldn't be any happier if he was in the cockpit, it was like his home.

After a fairly short and uninteresting patrol, Beta squadron found themselves back at the hangar bay of the Hammer, by now, it was nearing lights out for Beta. They didn't have any tasks or patrols until the next day, so, they all waved each other goodbye and made their way to their respective quarters. It was here where Milo spent most of his downtime. He would often talk with his family on his holopad, as well as draw and sketch. He may not like the Empire very much, but he had a strange admiration for TIE fighters. He just thought they looked cool, plain and simple. He was also fond of X-Wings, but his holopad was often monitored by the higher-ups, if they saw a bunch of X-Wing schematics and drawings... Yeah, it wouldn't be good.

After a long talk with his parents over his holopad, he decided it was time for lights out. He liked to keep his family updated on how he was doing and other things of that nature. Despite his faltering loyalty to the Empire, he still loved his parents, which made the question to defect that much harder. His parents were Imperial sympathizers all the way. How would they react if he defected, or turned to the New Republic? He didn't like to think about it, that's for sure. Imagining their disdain for him nearly kept him up all night. But, he needed to walk in his own path... Even if it did ruin things with his parents. It was going to be one of the hardest things he will ever do, but it's something that *needs* to be done...

...He just needed to wait for the perfect time..