

Calling our Bluff

Lieutenant Colonel Denys Elara paced back and forth across the briefing room, obscuring the bottom of the holoscreen displaying map and ship information. She tapped her bottom lip with the middle knuckle of her index finger in a nervous repetitive motion, cradling the arm's elbow with her other hand.

Commander Dynamus followed her movements with his eyes, as did all of the pilots left on the ISDII Challenge for the first rotation of duty during shore leave. There was palpable tension in the room, that pricked at his nerve endings. The unease emanating from Colonel Impulse and the skittish abrasiveness from Commander Neko's stance only ratcheted up his stress. Waiting, they were all waiting. It was about to drive him mad, and he started thinking of ways to rile Lieutenant Colonel Tygra Shadowclaw up without getting harmed from his temper.

The door slid open and Lieutenant Commander Cody Lance from Inferno squadron rushed through the portal and stopped in front of LC Denys, rendering a salute.

Denys returned the salute and snapped, "Report!"

"Ma'am, while on patrol over the northern ocean grid, above Xiros Island, Colonel Marenta and I encountered a craft that was approximately the size of a large cruiser. It deployed tiny fighters, about the size of an escape pod. They flew in formation, but did not attack us. We could not get any readings from their craft, so we tried changing our scanners and frequencies, but nothing worked. They did not engage, but COL Marenta used a squadron mask, and that caused the large ship to begin opening fire on us. We were able to isolate a craft, hit it with an ion missile, and capture it in a tractor beam. COL Marenta landed in hangar bay 3 with the foreign craft." Cody stood unmoving after reporting his patrol status.

"Good. Maybe we can find out what is going on with these fleets." Denys looked back at the holoscreen displaying live ship movements.

"Fleets, ma'am? I was only aware of the one?" Cody responded, tilting his head slightly.

Denys turned back toward Cody and made a small snort, "Fall in with Thunder, we will wait for Marenta and I will provide a full briefing."

Dynamus watched Cody straighten, nod and make his way toward the Thunder pilots waiting for direction. He stood by Neko, causing her to flinch slightly and lean away. He knew that Neko wasn't unfriendly, she was just extremely shy and preferred solitude. Dynamus snapped his eyes back toward Denys as her com beeped with an incoming message. She raised her wrist and scrolled through the message.

"Colonel Marenta has docked and is on her way. Once she arrives we'll brief you. Right now all patrols are currently engaged, so the sooner you have the full picture, the sooner I can send you out to assist." She looked to the four assembled pilots standing at rest, raised her chin a bit higher and put her hands on her hips then continued pacing in front of the large holoscreen.

Dynamus looked at the holoscreen behind the Wing X Commander and studied the three different types of shapes represented on the map and the planet's surface. Challenge was displayed as a bright red triangle above a huge swath of ocean on the planet. Red dots were

floating around and interacting with a green X symbol. On the other side of the planet were the red triangles of the Hammer and Warrior, with the larger red triangle representing the SSD Avenger between them. A large blue triangle sat floating near the Avenger, with a few blue Xs moving near the planet's surface. The door wooshed open again, allowing COL Marenta to enter briskly. She stopped in front of Denys and snapped a salute, dropping her hand to start speaking before the Wing X Commander could even open her mouth. Denys turned to face Marenta with both hands clasped behind her back, rocking slightly on her feet in a nervous motion.

“Vessel successfully disabled and in hangar bay 3. An aquatic-type species exited the craft without issue. Security was ushering them to interrogation when I left to come here.”

“Good, take a seat. All of you and let's get started.” Denys gestured to the seats around the table. “We've gotten a few reports. It seems that there are two forces who are converging on this planet, and we only know the purpose of one of them. The fish-like craft that you,” Denys pointed at Marenta and Cody, “encountered are only in this one region of the planet. They were not hostile until you engaged your mask, as they probably thought that was a pre-emptive strike. We know that our craft are still engaging the large ship in the atmosphere, as most of the smaller craft have gone down to the planet's surface. Once they broke the atmosphere, we lost visual contact with them, and since we cannot pick them up on our scanners, we only assume they're the force that launched an attack on Xiros Island. This is speculation at this point, since we have lost communication with Eagle and Firebird.”

Dynamus felt everybody shift as they ingested this information, some were more matter-of-fact, and others were more anxious. He just wanted to get to the part where they were doing something. There had been way too much waiting for his liking.

Denys heaved a breath after meeting everybody's eyes, except for Neko who stared at her white-knuckled hands fisted together on the table. “As you can see there is another force near the SSD Avenger.” Denys manipulated the map so that the other side of the planet was showing. There were six large, yellow dots indicated across the landscape with red and blue Xs near the yellow dot closest to Xiros Island. “Portions of Firebird and Tempest are engaging with a small Imperial force, with unknown origins. We suspect they may be another remnant fleet, but are unsure at this time. The large blue vessel you see on the map, we think, is also working with the smaller Imperial force on the surface. The large ship has identified itself as the SSSD Despot, led by Grand Admiral Corde. We had our Interdictors working, but they have requested that we lower the gravity wells or they will fire on the planet. Orders have,” Denys stopped as another message beeped on her com. Dynamus watched her eyes shift back and forth as she paused the brief and started reading the message quickly.

“Security has notified me that the person you captured from the ships we engaged with is speaking. He and his brethren are here on the planet to take back their homeland. They brokered a deal with a figure in black who had an Imperial entourage. He claims that he and his people are trying to help their people that were left behind, and they are friendly toward the Empire. He spoke of meeting up with a water-based fleet to attack Xiros Island as well as other villages along the coast, to push the Tusorixians back from their part of the planet.”

COL Impulse cleared his throat and spoke in a firm tone, “Do we know if they attacked our people on purpose? Friends of the Empire or not, if they attacked our people...” He didn’t finish the sentence and let it hang in the air for a moment.

“Then we will establish contact with our personnel and get direction from the TIE Corps Commander, if he can be found.”

“Then what’s our job?” Cody asked, running a hand through his already tousled hair.

“We wait. We watch. And, we act. We have not encountered this force before. But, there is a reason they’re here. There is a reason they orchestrated this move when we were visiting. There is a reason why they want us to be crippled. Maybe they’re calling our bluff, maybe they’re not. As soon as we know, we’ll be ready. I want you all to prepare. Be ready to fly at a moment’s notice. I need my best pilots just in case they need something crazy done.” Denys stood from her chair, placing both hands on the table to lean forward, looking at the five pilots. “The Emperor’s Hammer will come out victorious. Dismissed.”

Dynamus stood up as the rest of the gathered pilots made to do the same, keeping his eyes on a stiff-postured Denys as she pulled her com back up to see if she had gotten any messages. Impulse looked at him, shrugged and made his way to the door. Dynamus fell in behind him as Denys’ com beeped again.

“Wait!” She barked loudly, scrolling through the messages.

Everyone turned to look at her with an expectant gaze, himself included.

“General Stryker has made contact and requested transport from the surface. Marenta, you and Cody fly a pair of Reapers down. I want the Thunder pilots to escort them. There are still active engagements with the unknown vessel in the atmosphere, and I don’t want to take any chances with getting our people back. Go, suit up Thunder and meet Inferno in hangar bay 1. I’ll message the deck chief to have two Reapers and your Phantoms ready to go.”

Dynamus snapped to attention, rendering a salute, hearing an echo of the movement from his shipmates. Everybody exited the briefing room much quicker, running toward the turbo lift. Dynamus, Impulse, and Neko stepped into one going up to their flight room to put on their gear, as Marenta and Cody got into another to make their way down to the hangar bay since they were already suited up.

The turbolift came to a stop on their deck and they hustled down the passageway to their flight room. Dynamus ran to his smaller berthing area that he shared with Commander LegionX, another Flight Leader and Thunder Squadron Executive Officer. He shucked his duty clothes and pulled on his flight suit, laced his boots back up, grabbed his vest and helmet as he left his separate stateroom.

“Move it guys, we’ve got to go get our people!” Dynamus shouted as he entered the flight room shared area.

“I would if Impulse would just stop being slow so I can grab my gear!” Neko’s chirpy but agitated voice called out from the bunk area.

“I’m not slow, you’re slow!” Impulse retorted.

“Don’t care, get out here,” he said as he finished cinching his vest into place.

Neko stomped out of the bunk area tightening her vest down with one hand as the other carried her helmet. "Ready, sir."

Impulse hopped along on one foot, still trying to tie one of his boots. "Let's go! We don't want to waste any more time!"

Dynamus watched Neko roll her eyes and walk toward the hatch, following behind her, listening to the unsteady clop-clop of Impulse as he dealt with his boots. They began to jog back toward the turbo lift when they left their flight room, leaving Impulse to hobble behind until he got his boot fully on. He and Neko reached the lift, waiting for it to arrive. Dynamus bounced his helmet off his thigh rhythmically as Neko's foot tapped. Once it arrived they stepped into the lift and hit the panel indicating the hangar bay level. The doors of the lift started closing as Impulse ran in at a full sprint, just barely making it inside.

Impulse bent over, his hands on his knees as he breathed out hard, the helmet dangling close to the deck from semi-limp fingers. "Thanks... for waiting... for me," he huffed out.

"No problem." Neko leaned against the back corner of the lift, staring at her squadmate blankly, delivering the line with no inflection. Dynamus' lips twitched and he had to bite the inside of his mouth to keep from laughing.

Impulse looked up at Neko, still in his bent-over position and made a growling noise. The lift came to a stop and Impulse backed out of the lift, keeping his eyes on Neko until he was far enough away that he felt safe to turn around. Dynamus watched the by-play with amusement as he left the lift and jogged over to his TIE Phantom Mk.I, putting his helmet on and climbing the ladder to drop down into the cockpit.

Dynamus secured his helmet and the canopy, sitting down to strap into his seat. The com crackled to life as a thin male voice spoke, "Thunder, Inferno, sound ready."

"Inferno Two Four, ready!" Cody responded.

"Inferno Three One, good!" Marenta replied.

"Thunder One Two, ready," said Impulse.

"Thunder Two Two, yup," Neko said in a deadpan tone.

Dynamus cleared his throat, "Thunder Three One, clear!"

He watched the TIE Reapers lift off from the deck and make their way out of the launch doors. Impulse, then Neko, and finally he lifted up from the docking clamps and slowly made his way out into the black of space, a huge orb of blue-green-red-purple planet illuminated on the port side.

"I'll take point. Stay about 300 meters to my rear. I want Cody and Marenta behind me on my port and starboard sides, Dynamus and Neko about 300 meters behind them. We're going to slice through this strange battle." Dynamus snorted to himself in amusement. Impulse could be tempestuous at times, and he made some dumb decisions with riling people up he shouldn't, but he was quick to take the lead and did fairly well in the role.

Cody responded quickly, "Acknowledged, falling in."

"Roger, will follow your lead, Impulse. Get us through this mess." Marenta responded immediately after Cody.

“Got it,” came Neko’s short reply.

“Roger,” he stated, coming up behind Cody’s Reaper and a little low.

Dynamus smoothly followed the craft in front of him and realized that the battle wasn’t a fever pitch. The large unknown craft was just blindly firing their weapons, almost like they were intending to come close enough to shock, but not to harm. Any shots that were launched at the craft just seemed to get absorbed by the filmy, gray sludge-like outer shell of the ship. He wasn’t sure what was going on, but it didn’t make sense. Two separate presences at this planet, and then he watched his Commander get a weird look on his face, even for a Cathar, and run off. Nobody has seen or heard from him in over a full duty cycle.

“Weirder and weirder,” he remarked to himself.

They all followed Impulse down to the planet, the land and ocean becoming more and more distinct as they got closer to breaking into the atmosphere. He looked down and saw black smoke coming from multiple spots dotted along the islands nearest the large ocean, as they hit the air, jolting him briefly from the change in air pressure. A larger, more black plume came from the East of their position, on a larger land mass, big enough to be a continent and not one of the smaller islands that they were flying towards.

Impulse angled the group more towards the northernmost plume, Xiros Island.

“We’ll fly low and slow over the villages, see what we can see. They should be signaling us, but we will have to keep our eyes out.”

**FL-ROA-SQXO/COL Marenta/Inferno 3-1/Wing X/ISDII Challenge
Raise the Flag, Fiction #2**