

## **Patrol is boring!**

Colonel Marenta scrolled through the flight logs on her holo, searching for anything abnormal in the last five cycles. She sipped her Murrih tisane and stopped to read the previous day's scouting reports, skimming over the repeated information.

Lieutenant Commander Cody Lance stepped out of the bunk room scratching the back of his head and yawning as he lumbered toward the head. Cody nodded his head toward her and grunted something unintelligible.

Marenta's eyes followed him and narrowed slightly as she considered his grumpy countenance. She, and the rest of Inferno, were trying to keep spirits high since Lieutenant Thatcher resigned after his close call at Bunduki during Imperial Storm. Thatcher performed admirably during the exercise but eventually the stress got to him, and he opted to serve on the more serene M/FRG Phoenix in a limited capacity.

Marenta knew about the stresses of being active in the fleet, and knew that the Lieutenant Commander would just need some time to come to terms with the loss of his pal. She took another sip of her tisane as Cody came out of the head, still looking like he hadn't been sleeping well.

"Seat?" Marenta waved her hand toward an empty chair at the table in the flight room. The question earned her another grunt from Cody, but he still plopped down heavily.

"Water? Tea? Something else?" She offered.

"Espcaf." He pushed the word out like it was the hardest thing he ever had to do, clasping his fingers together on the table and letting his head droop.

Her lips quirked up slightly as she chided, "There's enough caffeine in Espcaf to keep you wired for days. Are you sure?"

"Yeah. Need it for another boring patrol." His words were a bit more clear, but still sounded rough and sleep-addled.

"Okay, Espcaf coming right up." She stood up and knocked on the table twice as she went over to the beverage station that had been appropriated from somewhere. Entering the code for an Espcaf, she put a mug in the dispenser and then turned around to face Cody again.

"You good? Need to talk?"

"Yeah. Nope."

She sighed and grabbed the mug of steaming brew from the machine and made her way back over to Cody.

"Thatcher was an exceptional pilot. I'm sorry to have seen him leave. But, you know he made the proper choice for himself, right?" She sat the mug down in front of Cody's hands as he reached out to grab the handle like the contents would make everything better.

Cody picked up the mug and took a swallow of the steaming beverage, closed his eyes and sighed. "Yes, we've spoken about it. He knew that the combat got to him and he needed to recuperate. I guess I'm just mad that he's down on Tusorix right now, yucking it up. That's why I

volunteered to stay up for the first shift of stand-down, I didn't want to run into him. I'm angry with him." He plunked the mug down on the table and started tapping his fingers in agitation. Marenta looked at him staring into his mug of Espcaf with a small frown. "Tell you what. I haven't been on patrol and I've been itching to get back into Bessie. They just equipped her with a tractor beam and I want to test it out. Care if I tag along on your Patrol?" She nudged his elbow with hers, prompting him to look up in response.

"Sure Colonel, I'd like the company." He nodded at her after briefly studying her face.

"Great! I'm going to finish reviewing these reports if you want to get ready? I'll let the Deck Chief know to have our craft prepped."

Cody's once quick-to-grin mouth twitched as he nodded again, lifting the mug to gulp the remainder of his drink down. He plunked the mug down on the table and stood, turning toward the bunk room.

"Meet you on the flight deck, ma'am." Cody put up two fingers as he walked away.

She nodded at his back with a small smile then turned to her holo, messaging the deck chief to have hers and Cody's ships prepared for launch.

A half hour later, she sat in the cockpit of "Bessie," her beloved TIE Reaper running diagnostics on her new auxiliaries. Her helmet was perched on the flight control board as she made the final adjustments to engines, weapons, and shields. The com crackled to life, with a tinney version of Cody's voice, "Ready to get this started, Colonel?"

She reached forward to activate the com control, "Ready as ever! Let's go have some fun on patrol, yeah?"

"Ha! I don't think it's that fun. Patrol is boring!"

"Well, it won't be so boring today, since you'll have me along. Plus, it's only four hours."

"Yeah, yeah. Challenge Flight Deck, Lieutenant Commander Cody Lance requesting clearance for departure?"

She picked up her helmet and buckled it in, attaching her hosing to the suit, and strapped into her seat as Challenge Flight Deck responded, "Inferno squadron, permission granted. Sound ready, Inferno."

"Inferno Two Four, ready!" Cody responded.

"Inferno Three One, clear!" She chirped immediately afterward as Cody's craft released from the docking clamps and hers lifted from the deck surface.

She followed behind Cody out of the bay and into the inky abyss of open space. The system's star reflected brightly off the surface of the planet Tusorix. Deep cerulean waters broke apart a golden land with reddish-purple foliage, causing the orb to shine like a rare gem against soft, black cloth.

"I will never stop being awed with the beauty of the galaxy." She said wistfully to Cody.

"It is pretty, but I miss action. Patrols aren't exciting." Cody responded with an almost complainant tone.

"You know, one could say we're doing our job well if there is no excitement."

She heard an immediate snort to her statement. “You know what amazes me? The size of the fleet. You never really grasp just how big it is until you see it.”

“You’re right. While we are a remnant, we have remained a considerable size. It’s astonishing, really.”

“It really is, Colonel. Let’s make our way to our patrol sector and relieve the pilot. Four hours is a long time.”

“Lead the way!” She replied enthusiastically.

They flew toward the north lateral position above a wide body of water. Marenta kept stealing glances around the planet below them and looking around the fleet orbiting the planet. A sense of pride welled in her at the home she had found.

“Inferno Two Four reporting for patrol. Any updates in this sector?” Cody sent over the coms.

“Reading you, Inferno Two Four. No activity in this sector. Firebird One Four, relieved of patrol. Have fun!”

“Oh, we will!” She jumped in to reply to Lieutenant MagnoMoose.

“Ah, Colonel, came to have fun on Patrol, then? Well, just don’t have too much fun! I’m going to go catch some rack time. Catch you both later!”

“See you in the mess later, Magno!” Cody responded.

A few hours passed with her and Cody doing a circuit and taking readings in the sector, looking for anything out of place, and making small talk or just being silent. Sometimes practicing some flight maneuvers.

The coms suddenly crackled to life with a harried sounding Lieutenant Colonel Denys Elara, “All patrols, all patrols. This is NOT a drill. Innumerable contacts have been made jumping to hyperspace just beyond Tusorix’s third moon. I repeat, innumerable contacts have been made jumping to hyperspace approximately 215,000 clicks from the surface of Tusorix. Warning has been sent to all Emperor’s Hammer personnel who are planet-side. All patrol ships: attempt to gather intel but DO NOT ENGAGE unless they start hostilities. Our scanners are unable to detect them, and we are unaware of their make or origin. Once again, gather intel but do not engage.”

Silence erupted from the coms for the barest hint of a moment and then a cacophony of acknowledgements rang out. She sent their acknowledgement back, “Copy Challenge, Inferno out.”

“You’re the ranking officer, what do you want to do?” Cody queried with anticipation.

“Stay in this sector. All the ships in the fleet have to be launching all available pilots. We are on the other side of the planet from the third moon, it makes no sense to leave. So, we’ll stay here and note any movement or interaction we have from this unknown force.” She replied firmly.

“Then what is that?” Cody shot back.

“That is movement, let’s go check for interaction.” She fell behind Cody as he made his way to the Cruiser-sized vessel. It was a dark gray-green color, with a filmy layer that looked like a soap bubble, or the film on the glasses that Chalquilla had been in. The front was sharp and came to a point, but curved down like the beak of a bird. The engines glowed a sickly yellow-purple color

from fin-like protrusions that pointed down from the aft of the ship to the sides and up to the centerline above the rear of the vessel, making it look like an aquatic creature. Handfuls of tiny craft exited the side, and looked like miniature versions of the fish-ship.

She gasped as they got closer. Their movements almost seemed like a swarm, or like an orchestrated dance as they regrouped and made their way toward the surface of the planet.

Cody slowed as he got within 1000 meters of the collection, and she heard his swear over the coms, "I can't pick up anything on my scanners, can you?"

She ran through her controls, boosting her scanner's range and sensitivity. "No, nothing. It's like they're not even there!"

The craft flew past them, each one no bigger than an escape pod, looking like tiny fish.

"They're not attacking us! I don't know what's going on!" Cody was panting into the coms.

"Let me try something." She activated her Squadron Mask, and suddenly the area surrounding them lit up with incoming laser fire that sizzled that same yellow-purple. She yanked back on her controls, "Shit, I don't think they liked that!"

"Yeah, me either. Let's get out of here!"

She dove down to follow Cody and then yelled out, "I have mask on, use an Ion Missile to disable one of the tiny ships, and I'll tractor it back to the Challenge!"

"Do you..." static came through the line, then "...think that is a good idea?"

"Well, they said to gather intel, so we're gathering!"

"Not a ship, though!" Cody huffed.

She shouted back, "Well can you dunk them or not, Cody?"

"Yes, I can do it!" Cody's voice was starting to come in choppy as he was maneuvering around the incoming fire.

"Challenge, ETA on backup for Inferno squad?" She sent back to the ship, huffing with the exertion of controlling the much fatter, slower Reaper.

"Inferno, backup arriving in 2 minutes." Challenge Flight Deck responded in a clipped tone.

"Copy Challenge." She yanked back to pull up from the most recent barrage. "Did you hear that? 2 minutes! So, dunk one of them before they're all in the atmosphere!"

"I can't get a lock! I'll have to dumbfire!"

"Fine! The little ones aren't firing at us, only the big one is. Just get one and let me tractor it!"

"Okay okay, mom! Going for that one that's at our 8, about 330 degrees, far right third row from the back."

"Got it! Dunk 'em!" She yelled as she fixed her eyes on the slimy-looking fish-ship.

"Firing... now!" Cody launched his Ion Missile at the intended target, hitting it. Blue sparks erupted from the hull of the ship and she was able to acquire a tractor target when the ship was disabled.

"Locking... locking... got 'em! Let's run!" She yanked back on the ship, pulling it behind her, still weaving around to avoid the laser fire from the cruiser ship. "Challenge, Inferno Three One has a small target craft in tractor beam, need that backup now! We're taking fire from the larger ship!"

“Heard you guys need some assistance?” A friendly voice popped in, as some X-Wings came into range.

“Yes, we have a small vessel caught in the tractor beam, and we pissed the big one off by using mask. Any distracting methods you have, please use them so we can get back to the Challenge!” Cody responded to the new pilots since she was busy weaving her vessel around evasively.

“Roger that, we’re on it!” The leader squawked back as the squadron flew toward the cruiser to buy them some time.

The laser fire pressure eased up on them and they were finally able to take a deep breath, still hauling the small fish-ship behind them. She noticed that the tiny ship was attempting to break out of the tractor beam, but didn’t have the engine power to do so.

“Colonel, I can’t see into the ship. It’s that oily green color all over. It has no windows.” Cody responded like he was having a full-body shudder just thinking about what was in the ship.

“Well, at least we caught one. I would say that’s intel well gathered, right?” She chuckled back at him, still easing her craft forward so that the tractor beam’s hold didn’t break.

“But, who’s going to file the report?” Cody responded with a mischievous tone.

“Well, seeing as how I wasn’t the one on the watchbill as having patrol at that time and you were, I would say that one Lieutenant Colonel Cody Lance is.” She belly-laughed into her coms.

“Seriously, Colonel?” Cody dead-panned in response to her humor.

“Aww, come on! I thought Patrol was boring?” She snickered.

“Inferno Three One, dock in hangar bay three. Security crew on standby with ion weapons to disable craft.”

Cody veered off toward hangar bay one saying, “Meet you in the briefing room, Colonel.”

“Same, Commander.” She replied, easing her way into hangar bay three.

She positioned her craft so that the fish-ship would be placed in the secured area, and left it disabled in the tractor beam until the security team could place ion locks on it and she could turn the tractor beam off.

“Inferno Three One, ship is secure, you may disengage your tractor beam.”

“Copy Challenge. Disabling tractor beam.” She turned the beam off, ready to re-engage it if it looked as if the fish-ship could escape, but it stayed inert on the deck.

She nosed her craft to a spot on the deck, and removed her helmet, sighing. “Home, sweet home.”

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