

OPERATION: PROMETHEUS

BY CHARLES LEWIS

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Captain Naismith of the TUS Arishikage, an older Terran Union scout cruiser, was pondering the message board in his lap, when his executive officer entered the bridge.

"You wanted to see me, Sir?"

"Yes, Jim. New orders." He handed the XO the message board. "Come with me. Mr. Krishnu, you have the conn." The captain got up to leave.

"I have the conn, aye, Sir," replied the navigator.

About halfway to the captain's quarters, the XO let out a shrill low whistle, but managed to hold his tongue until they were in private.

"Are they making this stuff up? They've got to be nuts!"

"What's so crazy about it, Jim? Seems like a good plan to me." So absorbed was he in his reading that Jim Somerville didn't catch the sardonic tone in his captain's voice.

"What's so crazy about it, Sir? Well, where do I begin? We're supposed to ID a suitable target for an ambush shortly after it has transitioned from EDT into the system. Fine, easy enough. Then, they're going to send a Carthage class cruiser with fighter escort to distract it. And finally, they're going to stick some poor Marines into some experimental death traps they're calling "breaching pods" to fly over, maneuvering at drone speeds mind you, cut into the target's hull and capture it intact. The whole thing is insane!"

Captain Naismith had allowed himself the luxury of a grin while his XO ranted. Now, however, his face was quite serious. "You might call it insane. Granted, it does have the air of desperation about it. But then, we are a little desperate right now.

"Ever since Rappahannock, we have discovered that not only are we not alone in the galaxy, but some of those hostile aliens are more advanced than we are. We encountered two different groups of aliens at Rappahannock, and now we're fighting both of them while they fight each other. It's a giant mess, and we need all the help we can get.

He continued, "I'm not so sure about this whole "breaching pod" idea, but the plan is sound. The objective is to overwhelm a solitary ship with minimal damage. Once we've got control of it, we take it back to Terra and tear it apart. The R&D boys have been pulling long hours since this brouhaha started, and I'm sure they're desperate for a leg up."

"But, Sir, we've been holding our own here in Yilyia. We've even captured and held the planet. While there is resistance, we're keeping that in check and have held off these Yilyians and this other group, the MagHur ever since. We're not likely to see any of the main Boltian League ships out here as they are all tied up with the Kuisians. Thank the god of your choice for that! So what value is there to capturing a ship we can beat?"

“How do you capture a ship you can't beat? That's the point, Jim. These are ships we can beat. Often, not without cost, but we can beat them. This breaching pod concept is brand new. No one has ever tried to take control of another ship in space without at least damaging the engines or otherwise making it clear that destruction is the alternative. We need to try this out live against a real target, but we might as well tip the scales in our advantage. We're sailing into the unknown here. I suspect those Jarheads are going to need all the help they can get.”

“As for the point of this little exercise? There are two.” The Captain held up a finger. “First, we prove that this can work. This could revolutionize warfare. At the very least, it's going to stir up the tactical pot quite a bit. That could help us even the odds in the short term.” Another finger went up. “Second, even if we capture some Yilyian frigate that's been overdue for the scrap yard for 20 years, we could still learn something from it. They might do things completely different from us, even if the result is the same. Those differences could point the R&D guys in totally new directions. Remember, knowing something can be done is the hardest part of engineering. After you know something can be accomplished, the rest is just details.”

“I don't know, Sir. Still sounds crazy to me.” The XO shook his head.

“It may be, but 'ours not to reason why,' Commander. Besides all we have to do is identify the target and watch the show. At least we've got the easy part.”

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Two weeks later, the Arishikage is running silent near the known EDT entry point for Yilyian and MagHur ships coming into the Yilyia system. She's been at her post three days without cruise rotation, and the tension is mounting.

“Sir, we've got something on passives.” The sensor tech didn't look up from her panel.

Commander Somerville walks up behind and looks over her shoulder. “What we do have Erica?”

“Judging by mass, I'd say we've got a cruiser. What kind or whose, I can't tell yet. This would be a lot easier with active sensors.”

“Mm-hm. That would sort of defeat the purpose of running “silent”, wouldn't it? Any sign of escorts, or is she alone?”

Ensign Erica Lloyd eyes were still glued to her sensor console. “Not sure. The cruiser is broadside on to us. There could be an escort in her shadow.”

The XO returned to the command chair and punched the intercom to connect to the Captain's Cabin. “Sorry to bother you, Sir, but we may have a candidate.”

A few minutes later, Captain Naismith enters the bridge. While he is a proper Navy captain, his primary concern is efficiency and accomplishing the mission, so no one announces his presence. Of course, being a scout ship with long, lonely duty also tends to relax the formality. He walks up next to Commander Somerville. “What do we have, Commander?”

“Sir, sensors are picking up a cruiser of unknown configuration. At this time we aren't sure if there are any escorts, but if there are, there could only be one and it would have to be fairly small for it to be able to hide behind the cruiser.”

“Has she made the turn yet?”

“We're expecting her to turn towards the known Boltian League rendezvous areas any time now.”

“Very good, XO. Captain has the conn.” The XO acknowledged the change in command while Captain Naismith continued to give orders. “Comms, get a hold of the Mohican. Let them know that we may have our target.”

The Terran ambush group is taking advantage of an asteroid belt near the entry point to the system to hide their presence from incoming ships until the time is right. To enable the group to get the Arashikage’s message, one of the two Huron class escort carriers is in a bit more exposed position so that the Arashikage can lock onto her with a tight comm beam, to eliminate the chance of the message being intercepted and the scout cruiser being found out.

Shortly after receiving the message from Arashikage, the ambush group, composed of the Carthage class cruiser TUS Pelopponese and the Huron class escort carriers Mohican and Lakota, begins to work their way out of the asteroid field. Captain Naismith and his crew work to verify the presence of an escort for the cruiser as well as the ship class they are hunting.

“Sir, the target has finished her turn, we can see that there is one escort, fairly small,” said Ensign Lloyd.

“What do we have for a class, Ensign?” The XO continued to hover over her shoulder. If his presence so close bothered her, she showed no sign. It appeared that the only thing in Erica Lloyd’s universe at the moment was her sensor console.

“I’m 95% certain we’re looking at a MagHur cruiser and an escorting corvette. Given the distance and the fact that I’m restricted to passive sensors makes this a bit more time-consuming than usual, Sir.”

The XO turned towards the Captain. “Sir, should we go active? It looks like this is definitely going to be our target. Wouldn’t it be better to get complete information as fast as possible?”

“Negative, Mr. Somerville. Our orders require strict silence on our part. We don’t want to alert the enemy of our presence, regardless of how the ambush proceeds. Besides, we don’t know who else might be in the neighborhood that wouldn’t be able to affect the proceedings but could decide to go after us. No, our role is strictly information-gathering. As far as the rest of the system is concerned, we don’t exist.”

“I’ve got it, Sir! We’re looking at a Nilgiri class cruiser and a Zara class corvette!”

“Excellent! Comms, update the Mohican. Helm, move us in a little closer. We’ll try to stay in optimal sensor range to get as good a record of events as possible.”

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As soon as the ambush group cleared the asteroids, the Mohican and Lakota launched their fighter-drones. Three flights of Lynx heavy fighters escorted by three flights of Gecko II medium fighters raced in. Their job finished for the moment, the carriers hung back. Meanwhile, the Pelopponesus maneuvered to bring its weapons to bear on the corvette.

The MagHur ships, evidently surprised to be under attack, did not respond coherently at first. This allowed the Lynx’s to get close enough to ripple off a barrage of anti-ship missiles at the corvette. It was soon trailing atmosphere.

The MagHur quickly got organized, and anti-fighter defenses opened up in a torrent of fire. Several of the Lynx’s and a couple of the Geckos did not survive their attack run on the corvette.

No sooner did they fend off the fighters, than the Pelopponesus got into position. The corvette was quickly reduced to a shattered wreck, but not without cost. A few more fighters were zapped

as they tried to nip away at it, and the Nilgiri cruiser turned its guns on the Peloponnesus, trying vainly to help its escort.

From where they were sitting, the crew of the Arishikage thought that the plan was working. While the two cruisers traded fire, the MagHur ship seemed to be getting the advantage over its Terran opponent. However, the Peloponnesus was pulling it punches while the fighters nipped at weapons emplacements as the real goal was pursued: driving the MagHur cruiser towards the waiting TUS Temple, a Ziggurat class fleet carrier, and her load of 10 experimental breaching pods.

It didn't take long, though, for the Peloponnesus to begin suffering heavily from the fire she was taking from the MagHur Nilgiri cruiser. The Terrans began to vector away, while the MagHur ship looked for an escape route. None was to be found, as the Temple closed in and began launching the pods.

One could almost sense the confusion on the MagHur ship as they tried to identify these new attackers. The remainder of the Terran fighters formed up with the pods to deflect as much anti-fighter defense fire away from them as possible.

Evidently desperate, the Nilgiri turned away from the new threat and tried to close the range again with the retreating Peloponnesus. It would seem the MagHur intended to add to the butcher's bill before they fell. Unknown to them, though, this played into the hands of the Terrans, allowing the pods to close relatively unmolested.

Just as the Peloponnesus shuddered as several explosions ripped her apart as the Nilgiri cruiser finished her off, the breaching pods began latching onto the MagHur ship.

With the Terran carriers holding back, the MagHur focused their fire on the fighters swarming around them. The Lynx's were soon wiped out, but shortly thereafter, the efforts of the MagHur began to appear uncoordinated. The remaining Geckos returned to their carriers, as the Nilgiri began to maneuver erratically.

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Back on the Arishikage, the crew was optimistic. "I think we've got her, Sir!" enthused the XO.

"So it would seem, Mr. Somerville. Though it certainly has been costly."

Just then, the MagHur ship began to slow as her thrusters went silent.

"That's that. She's ours!" exclaimed the Commander.

"Sir, I'm picking up a massive energy spike from the Nilgiri!" interjected Ensign Lloyd.

"What? Where?" shouted Captain Naismith.

"Seems to be..." She was cut off by a massive explosion on the MagHur ship that reduced it to atoms. Of the breaching pods, there was also no sign. "...the reactor, Sir." Ensign Lloyd all but whispered the last.

A much subdued Captain Naismith sank back into his command chair. "It would seem that a very brave MagHur engineer overloaded the reactor to keep the ship from falling into enemy hands. I guess you were right, Jim. It was a crazy plan after all."

All Jim Somerville could do in response was nod and stare off into space where so many had just perished.