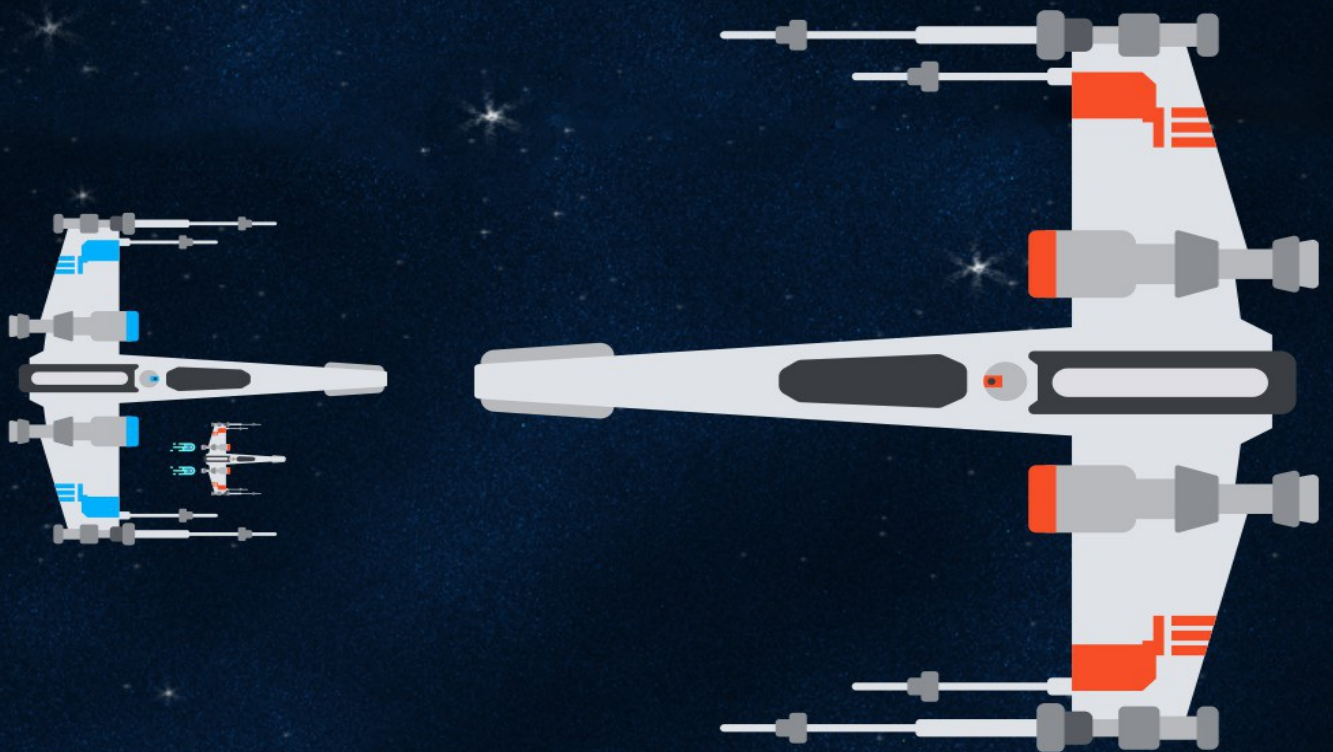


CASTELLUM



SHAUNAK GADKARI

In a dark alleyway on the Science Cruiser Lemeno, there was a young man poking and prodding at a dark box...

Alton was confused. Wasn't there supposed to be a mem-chit in that slot? He sighed, possibly for the tenth time that day. The Lemeno was a good ship, but sometimes he'd wonder that maybe he shouldn't have taken the job as Junior Communications and Electrical Technician. There were so many things wrong with the electrical wiring of this ship, his former electrical instructor would have had a heart attack. As another blast of hyperspatial turbulence shook the walls, he silently promised himself that he'd get off this blasted cruiser as soon as he arrived back at Delta 3927A-X. If he arrived back, that is.

Setting down his tool case in one of the shafts, he stomped back to Command in his heavy engineer's clothes. The 'good' lift was already taken, so he had to wait for the regular one, hoping it didn't require maintenance. One problem of being a 'junior' rank was that everyone expected you to help with everything electrical. If the lift was broken, he didn't want to be the one to go through masses of electrical wires to find the one that was frayed. Thankfully, the lift arrived and only had 3 holes in it, and they weren't that big anyway, so Alton stepped in when the doors opened. The lift only stopped once, and after a quick punch of the lift's side by a man in Human Resources, it was going again (Alton could think of a million different reasons why a punch to the lift would be a bad idea but it worked).

Just as he stepped out of the lift, all the lights on the Bridge Deck went out.

On the bridge of the Lemeno, the command staff had bigger problems than no lights.

Second Lieutenant Barnes was scanning seemingly-empty space with the Lemeno's old QASAR arrays for signs of obstructions (the Lemeno was a science craft after all) when her console started beeping rapidly. She looked at its screen and immediately started shouting.

"Captain! We're detecting a ship approaching on long-range scanners. It appears to be a Galaxy class, scratch that, Nebula class vessel. It's weapons are powering up and targeting us!"

The captain, Admiral Stacksbridge, immediately took action in accordance with protocol. Because the Lemeno was not a military ship and only had minimum weapon capabilities (for worst-case scenarios), the first appropriate thing to do in the event of a hostile encounter was to hail the vessel. The captain knew this and issued an order to his Senior of Communications, who should have been sitting at the comms console. However, he wasn't.

"Lieutenant, where the hell is my SoC?"

First Lieutenant Fiddlerman scrambled to track SoC Camerino down using his implanted locator. She didn't like what she found out.

"Captain... he's stuck in one of the lifts. There was an electrical fault and both the lifts have shut down. But we can try and get another member of the crew at his console."

"Alright. Quickly! We can try and get Camerino's junior. I think his name is Alban, no, Alton. Hopefully he's not stuck in that lift too..."

"The system's locating him now... he's just on the Bridge Deck, sir!"

"Go get him!"

"Yes, sir."

Alton was just accessing ship records to find out what happened to the lights when a woman in uniform walked around the corner and, seeing him, started running. Normally this would prompt Alton to start running too, but he recognised her.

“Holly? What are you doing here?” Alton exclaimed. Holly was a Lieutenant and should have been on the bridge!

“It’s Lieutenant Fiddlerman, Alton, and you’re needed on the bridge. Now!”

This was when Alton started running. When a senior officer gave home commands, he followed them. Also, he really liked being on the bridge.

When they arrived at the bridge’s entrance *Lieutenant Fiddlerman* briefed him on what was happening. “There is a hostile ship approximately one AU from the Lemeno and closing. As per protocol 9934.24, since SoC Camerino is absent, you are required on the bridge to hail said hostile ship due to Protocols 817 and-”

Alton was getting confused. He and long orders didn’t go together. He decided to ask the Lieutenant for a shorter explanation. He got one.

“Bad ship. Weapons armed. Hail them. Got that, Simpleton?”

Alton gulped. But he confirmed the order and tried to walk confidentially into the bridge. The captain was relieved to see him.

“Oh, thank God you’re here! Lieutenant, go to your normal station. Junior, get to Camerino’s console! Open a hailing channel, all frequencies! Do it NOW!”

Alton walked over to the console and looked down at the screen. It showed him a number of things; that the enemy ship was able to receive communications, the Lemeno was able to send signals, and finally, that it was ready for his command. He cracked his knuckles. He had trained for this. He was ready. Deftly, he sent a series of commands to the *Lemeno*’s communications unit. He informed command that the hailing channel was ready. “You should be able to send messages in three, two, one!”

The captain was ready to send one hell of a message. “Unknown hostile. Please disengage weapons and slow down. This ship does not mean any harm.”

They received no reply. The captain tried again. “Unknown Nebula-class hostile vessel, please disengage weapons and slow down. We do not mean any harm!”

Still, no reply. “Junior, keep on repeating that message. In the meanwhile, both Lieutenants parse and store data from all of our external readers.”

Just as the two officers were leaving the bridge, they heard it. The reply. It wasn't alien, or guttural. It was just a normal human voice.

“Uhh... sorry, civilian ship, we thought you were part of the rebellion. Powering down weapons now. We will come to a stop 0.025 AUs from your position...”

Second Lieutenant Alyssa shouted confirmation of what the message was saying: “Captain! Their weapons have powered down and they have slowed to a stop.” But the Captain had more pressing matters to attend to. “Rebellion? What rebellion?”

The person talking immediately stopped. “What do you mean what rebellion? The one going on right now of course! Don't you tune into holo-broadcasts?” The captain paused. “I'm sorry, Unknown Vessel, our ship isn't equipped to dilly-dally around while there's work to be done! Now, please tell us, what rebellion?”

The other ship's messenger toned down a bit. “I'm sorry, sir. Information on the ongoing Motus Rebellion is being transmitted now.”

Taking note that Motus meant ‘uprising’ in Latin, Alton informed the captain of incoming data. The captain told him to accept it. Alton transmitted the info to a spot on the Lemeno's storage banks. Barely after the captain had opened the file, he exclaimed out loud; “WHAT?”. This prompted almost everyone on the bridge to access the file themselves, and for a while the bridge was filled with exclamations of surprise and anger. Alton started to read the information. What he could summarise was: a rebellion had broken out on Titan (the human home base after Earth became uninhabitable) and most of the administration was dead or held captive. As such, all communications with Titan were destroyed and no ships could communicate with human command. Apparently this was why the hostile ship (which was known as the *Hydronax*) thought the *Lemeno* was hostile, without confirmation from command they could not tell whether the *Lemeno* was friendly or not.

But now they had a bigger problem; they couldn't return to or communicate with Titan and there was a rebellion coming their way. The *Lemeno* couldn't

stay a science vessel and keep on analysing rock samples.

The *Lemeno* needed to bulk up.

First things first: the defence systems. The *Lemeno* was equipped with a Vortex B-class defence grid, that could stop lower-grade missiles. However, that would be next to nothing against ships like the *Hydronax*, which most of the rebels had. So they coordinated with *Hydronax* engineering staff to bring a few redundant rail guns on board the *Lemeno*. Alton and the rest of the engineering crew aboard the *Lemeno*, wearing space-suits, helped fit them on the outside of the ship. The *Lemeno* now had (more) advanced weaponry. Now, they needed better shields and an upgrade to their defence system. Replacing the whole defence grid would take too long, so the *Hydronax* simply wirelessly transmitted updated defence software to the *Lemeno*'s defence system. It wouldn't hold against more advanced artillery fire and smart missiles, but it was the best they could do apart from hope that the enemy didn't have full control of the more advanced cruisers yet. Shields were a bit harder to upgrade, and staff of the *Lemeno* held a meeting to discuss the problem. The captain asked "What do we currently have?" Alton replied, "Just a Gamma class shield generator?" Gamma class shields were the minimum shield class required by regulation for science vessels to have equipped. However, if they wanted a chance of surviving, they needed to get to Omega-2 class.

After some discussion, they came to a conclusion; it was impossible to upgrade the *Lemeno*'s shield system. However, somewhat ingeniously, the *Lemeno*'s staff came up with a solution. Although the *Lemeno* could not upgrade its own shield system, there was a one already upgraded just beside them, on the *Hydronax*. Although taking the *Hydronax*'s shields would render it almost useless, it was possible for the *Hydronax* to increase their shield distance, as to shelter the *Lemeno*. Essentially, the *Hydronax* would become an escort ship. However, being an escort ship to a science vessel *did* have its perks, as the 'escort' would now have top-of-the-range sensor arrays at their command. Science cruisers were designed to go light on the weapons and defence grid, but heavy on the tech. And, for her time, the *Lemeno* certainly was 'heavy'. Her QASAR arrays and long-range sensors made her a valuable resource to the *Hydronax*, especially during a time of rebellion. Also, since the *Lemeno* didn't need her shield generator anymore, the Captain gave it up to be disassembled. After a day or so, the *Lemeno* and *Hydronax* were officially finished with repairs. The *Lemeno* was guided close to the *Hydronax*, and held position as the *Hydronax* powered up its shields. When

they were powered, both ships (now joined as Resistance Fleet *Castellum*) informed their crew via an announcement of their future plans.

“Attention, all personnel. The *Castellum* is now prepared for our mission. We will continue as a fleet to the e5-H2f4 waypoint, where we will try to make contact with the command staff stationed there, and try to acquire supplies. In case of encounter with a hostile ship, we are to keep away from the vessel and not engage. Remember, people, we are *not* a hostile vessel.”

This announcement was followed soon by another one:

“Attention, all personnel. Engines are now ready for burn, and shields are fully powered. Diagnostics have returned positive results, and both ships will ignite plasma crystals in a few minutes. All crew report to action stations”. There were more announcements detailing crew locations and assignments, until the countdown started.

“... 60 seconds until ignition ...”

“... 15 seconds ...”

“... 10 seconds ...”

“... Three seconds, two seconds, one second, primary drives ignited.”

The whole fleet felt a series of bumps as the ships slowly started accelerating and manoeuvring to get the fleet en route to the waypoint. When they were on the way and at an appropriate speed, the fleet stopped accelerating and let momentum drive them. The crew started running more diagnostics but everything seemed to be fine. That is, until they saw the attack carrier.

Attack carriers (of class Galaxy and higher) were specifically designed for attack situations. They were meant to pack as many weapons as you could fit. If this attack carrier was hostile, Fleet *Castellum* didn't stand a chance. The *Lemeno*'s sensor arrays first picked it up around half an AU from the fleet, and the command staff almost had a heart attack when they found out. They got the message out to the rest of the fleet, immediately did an emergency stop. However, they did not yet know whether the ship was hostile or not, so they decided to give it a chance. They hailed the ship, being sure to power up all weapons first.

“Hostile ship, please state your intentions.”

They waited for a reply. Nothing. No sign their message had been received.

“Repeat message. Hostile ship, hostile ship, please state your intentions.”

This time, they got a reply. It wasn't human, though. They got a reply that sounded like a machine. There were so many beeps and squeaks, it sounded like their speaker had broken. But the command staff on both ships knew what it meant.

The specially encoded digital audio file was an authorisation key for members of the Human Space Alliance. It showed that the enemy ship was on their side! There was an audible cheer by the command staff of both fleets, and they scrambled to contact the attack carrier.

“Attack vessel, we have received your transmission and confirmed that you are friendly. This is the Science Vessel *Lemeno* and Small Attack Vessel *Hydronax*. We are refugees in need of supplies and a safe position. If you are willing to supply them, please confirm and we will manoeuvre to your position.”

They waited for a response, which they got. “Vessels *Hydronax*, *Lemeno*, we are willing to provide supplies. Please manoeuvre to 425:812:906 for our shuttles to board your ships.” Everybody was relieved. They would be saved! Just then, Alton (who had been at his station) walked into the bridge to ask what the commotion was about. When somebody explained to him, he paled.

“Do you really think this ‘Attack Vessel’ is friendly?”

Everybody nodded. The Captain explained that they transmitted the secure ident code.

“Is everybody on this ship insane? Anybody who was or is part of the Alliance can do that! And the rebellion ships are piloted by people who *used to be part of the Alliance!*”

Now it was the bridge's time to turn pale. That could have been any ship, and they had just given away their position...

“Captain! I'm detecting a power surge from the vessel's weapons! Confirmed, they are powering weapon systems and manoeuvring to attack position! Also Captain, we're reading strange transmissions going to and from the unknown vessel, decoding now...”

“Oh God, Captain. The vessel... it's the rebellion's base of operations!”

The ship was visibly moving to aim its forward missiles at the fleet. The command staff looked through the possible scenarios and confirmed that they, indeed, were doomed.

“Captain, we do not have enough weapons capabilities to engage the ship!”

“Captain, we cannot manoeuvre!”

“CAPTAIN!”

The captain blinked. He had just been mentally saying goodbye to his family. But Alton looked optimistic and seemed to have an idea. So he let him speak.

“Captain, this fleet has something the rebel attack vessel doesn’t, and that’s an advanced science vessel, the *Lemeno*. We may be able to use our QASAR arrays to fire an ion pulse. It would disable their shields.

“Well, what are we waiting for? Just do it and fire all of the *Hydronax*’s ammo!”

“But it would disable our shields too.”

“Well, damn it. We’re dead.”

Indeed, it seemed dire. But Alton had a plan. “If we do it immediately, Captain, we have the element of surprise on our side. We won’t have that if we wait and be destroyed.”

The captain thought it over. Would he take the risk? With shields, the fleet had a small chance of surviving, but without, they would go down.

The only option was to take the rebels down too.

“Alright, let’s do it. Alton, inform the fleet of your idea. We want the *Hydronax*’s weapons powered and ready to launch. Also, tell both Camerino and Lieutenant Barnes how to create an ion pulse. Quick, let’s go!”

And so the plan was put into action. The whole *Castellum* fleet was informed and standing ready. The *Lemeno* received confirmation from the *Hydronax* that their weapons were ready to fire. They configured the QASAR arrays to fire an ion pulse. They just needed confirmation from *Lemeno*’s Captain. They got it. “Alright, crew. We can do this. We *do not* die today.”

And that was it.

The ion pulse fired as expected, and the split second shields were down, the *Hydronax* fired. 72 inbound ballistic missiles, 13 more smart ones, able to evade defence systems. All rail guns began firing at crucial spots on the enemy’s hull, and destroyed everything in their wake.

After the *Hydronax* ran out of ammo, they left the enemy wounded, and unable to fire or shield. But it was not enough. The enemy would get their shields back up. They would get their weapons online. It was a matter of time.

Until the *Lemeno* started firing.

It had very low-grade weapons, no smart missiles, and rail guns made to hold off an enemy, not destroy it.

But destroy them it did.

The ship lit up like a Christmas tree from the inside, and broke apart. The main structure cracked, then splintered. The crew of Fleet *Castellum* were overjoyed, and celebrated so loudly one of the members swore they could hear it from across ships.

They had done it. By destroying the rebel base, Titan would be saved, along with humanity’s base of operations.

“Lieutenant, set a course for Titan. We’re going home.”