

Christmas in space

To tell you the truth I don't care what day it is, even when the user over friendly 'ware interface reminds me that it's the twenty fifth of December dirtside and it's time for good will to all men and shit. Hell, I've tried reprogramming the fricking thing, but it keeps on doing the jingle bells crap whenever I log in for twice daily course check. It's not as if I've got anyone aboard this tub to give presents to. Apart from the zeeps, zombie peeps, down in the hold, chillsleeping their way to the next viable solar system.

"Merry Christmas Charles!" It squeaks. "Happy Holidays!" For the twentieth time that morning. Makes me want to crack its armorglass housing with a fire axe. Which they don't issue star ship pilots with. I'm beginning to see why. "Are you ready for course check?"

"Course check aye. Confirm standard space time insertion in three hundred and sixty seven standard days, six standard hours and fifty three standard minutes. Vectors show zero deviation." I confirm in a resigned tone of voice. No use getting mad with its gel crystal circuitry. It's just a dumb machine that does what it's programmed to do, but every so often the *maldito* thing makes me so depressed.

Not that I have time to get depressed. Too many other things to do, systems to check, Atmo to monitor, hull integrity to check, radiation shielding, leak detection, coolant levels, life signs, check for premature wake ups, make sure no poor mothers son or daughter is hammering to get out of their dead little composite box down in the hold, screaming claustrophobia into the dark dead horror of isolation. Especially not on Christmas day, right? I'm paid, and paid well to deliver these zeeps, bright and sparkly, to their brave new worlds. I get fined for every one I lose or deliver disabled, and baby those fines are huge. The company lawyers see to that.

All the same, I wish the company had decided not to programme the fricking AI with every artificial happy holiday under the sun. It grinds at the soul, abrades the spirit and puts me off my critical game. This is not what I, Charles Yang-Stewart, became a starship pilot for.

It's a two and a half year run out to the colony worlds fully loaded, two months dirtside to load up with trade goods, then two and a half years home. Then a three month turnaround for systems check and refit.

Another two runs and I'll be a very wealthy man. Able to retire on my own personal island. Maybe even buy my own star system, or better still, star ship. One without all the false bonhomie pre-programmed in. A first class AI and automated systems to take care of my every need. Even those driven by hormones.

So what's a fully functional handsome young devil like me doing running the great nowhere? Hauling subspace cargo for a living when his body tells him he should be out there seeking a mate, creating the next generation. Securing his immortality. Passing on his genes and having a little fun in the process. Pair bonding. Well, there's half a litre of my sperm frozen in the hold. That is if any of the female contingent don't want a child sired by one of the males on the manifest. It's just part of the metre cube of assorted deep frozen sperm and eggs for implant and gestation, just in case some poor guy finds that prolonged chillsleep has sterilized them. It happens, that's why we carry what are called 'contingencies' to retain a little depth in the gene pool. Artificial wombs for livestock, fully stocked seed bank. Machine tools and transporters. Usual second wave colonization material.

Yet what am I doing as one of the Legion of the Lost out in deep space? Hundreds of light years from home, travelling all alone in the night? Why don't I pick a possible from the files and invite her to swap the icy isolation of dreamless chillsleep for the warmth of my generous quarters? They all signed up to be brave new breeders anyway, and getting pregnant early or late shouldn't matter to them.

You know, I often wonder about that. What made these people want to pack it all in on the dear blue Earth for the challenges and hazards of a frontier world? Especially taking the long way. There are ships that can do the Earth - colony run in a matter of days, but they can only take a hundred or so at a time, not the thousands my old slowboat can pack aboard.

Word is there's all sorts of craziness goes on with those dudes. Blockade running in another company's star system, poaching trade goods and resources. Stuff right out of some e-Zine for wannabe space pirates. Not for me. Too high risk for my liking.

As for companionship, hey, it's overrated. I was married for a while, dated a little. Both sexes, truly. But I never got into the whole once and forever thing. Once the shine wore off, I was always kind of left wondering what the hell was I thinking? About relationships I mean. My problem, if that's what it is, is that I like my own company too much. I'm pretty comfortable in my own skin while alone on these long trips. The shipboard AI even tells me off when I whistle happily while doing my rounds. Says it's 'anti-social'. What would a machine know? What do other people know? You need a touch of the autistic to survive long periods alone on a control deck without going crazy. You develop eccentricities like whistling or singing while you work. It fills the void and reminds you you're still alive.

Maybe I'm just not a real people person. Maybe it was something in my upbringing. What I do know is that it bores me when other people stop being fun and start making demands. Huh. Perhaps I'm just too shallow for anything long lasting. Go figure.

Oh hell, there goes the alarm. I've got a zeep in the hold waking up. Level Twenty one. Tier four. Number seventeen, row B. Check the system; Two one zero four, one seven B is female, twenty seven, college graduate, unmatched. Dokey. The college grads are the worst because they seem to think they know more about star ship operations than the pilots.

File says divorcée looking for a new life, but no name or number. That's another bonus of being a colonist, it's like the old French Foreign Legion. You can leave your past at the recruiting room door. All, well most of, your sins forgotten and forgiven. Even criminals. Although the company shrinks weed out the real psycho and sociopaths. Every one checked on a case by case basis. So no-one's going to try and strangle me when I pop the coffin lid. I hope.

So, off down to the cargo hold through twenty four levels, control deck, my spacious living quarters, systems deck and into the bland composite anonymity of the cargo levels. Thirty of those. Each air tight and neat. Each patrolled once a week by me in person. Looking for visual system leaks, listening for noises that don't fit. Tool belt on, and down into the cool, low gravity zone where I can play the gymnast down broad, white passageways from hatch to hatch, carefully checking the seals and tell tales before entry. Locking doors behind me. Breath mask always in reach.

Back in the early days the company almost lost entire ships because of warning system failures, and I'm making sure that doesn't happen on my watch. The big paycheck goes to the careful man who gets home with an intact cargo. I like big paychecks. So I'm a cautious kind of guy.

There's another reason for whistling and singing. If there's a leak, I'll hear the change in tone before it trips any alarm. So that sucky AI can go stick its little 'social' remonstrations right up its processor core. *Maldito* machine. Not that I sing about much, it's just a tune.

I heard of one guy who got fired for not going down to check a wake up for forty eight hours. By the time he got down there, he had a full fledged traumatized psychotic on his hands who beat him up, then trashed half the control level. The psychotic then spaced himself and half a tier of other colonists before the situation got under control. As it was the ship ended up three months late, and half the rest of the cargo was starting to warm up. The pilot was lucky he didn't get spaced himself. All through carelessness.

Deck twenty one. Row four. Tier B, number seventeen. Blinking amber display. Not yet awake, but the timer has glitched and she's already in auto wake up. An easy fix, but time consuming. The whole control assembly has to come out and the power unit properly reconnected. For that I have to wake up the zeep and get her out for a walk while I do my technical stuff. Wake up takes about half an hour, but she's half way there already, so with luck I can get back to the warmth of the control deck inside of an hour. Select the code, verify and hit the release sequence. The drawer slides out and... *Aw sheeit!* It's my ex wife. Mousy blonde hair a hundred millimetres long, still growing at a reduced

rate from a pre launch shaven scalp, prettily unmade up face familiar from so many mornings. Well I hadn't figured on meeting her ever again. Especially not out here in the great nowhere. She's one of the reasons I'm in voluntary exile.

We broke up two years ago, just before I signed up for long haul space travel. Not that she was the cause, just confirmation that I was better being my own fool than anyone else's.

All right Charley, focus on the job in hand. Don't think about the past, just do the job in front of you. See if you can do the fix without waking her up completely. Small air leak in the control casing causing cold creep in the connections. Spot of resin gel to fix the leak, check the power connections. Run the internal test sequence. Ten minute fix. All in the green and her eyelids are just starting to flutter. I can just see her eyeballs moving under the lids in REM sleep. Press reset and Chillsleep restarts. The drawer slides home with a hiss and a click. Neatly done.

That was easy. I'd just dodged the trauma of having to explain to my ex-wife why I walked out on her. There are some things a man should never be asked to do. One of which is search for words he doesn't mean just to keep the peace. Especially when he doesn't want to.

So why did we break up? Mainly me. Perhaps I like my own company too much, and she wanted to direct, or at least have a say in, everything I said and did. The relationship, as my counsellor was keen to point out, had become overbalanced. Did I feel up to the effort of fixing it? At the time I thought not, so I'd packed a bag, put all my surplus gear into storage, and left.

Of course we'd tried to talk, discuss, compromise, but in the end she felt insecure with me 'risking my life' on routine transit runs out to Mars and the Asteroid belt. I'd disagreed, saying I was safer transiting sub space twice a week at large fractions of light speed than crossing a city street. She disagreed loudly and I shut up just to keep the peace.

In the end I felt hemmed in, trapped, unable to breathe, so I had to walk. A man has to do what he's made for or he goes crazy. So walk I did. Right into the Colonization Directorate recruitment office to sign up as a long haul transport pilot. I was already doing short hop interplanetary runs, so transitioning to one of the big, bulky colony carriers was easy peasy. My record was spotless, and the Psych evaluation guys green lighted me, so within a year I was making this, my first lift into the big nowhere.

For the first year of this trip everything was chillier than a Helium popsicle. Now this. For the first time I'm beginning to feel uncomfortable in this job. *Felice Navidad mi viejo*.

The big question is; what the hell is a homebody like Michaela doing on this barge? She hooked up with me because she thought space pilots were glamorous types with dash and verve, not some introverted, geekish guy who could be relied upon to drop cargo on a pinhead from five light minutes away. We broke up because she wanted me to be something I'm not. Yet here she is in Chillsleep taking the big leap of faith out to a brave new world. So what gives?

Back up on the control deck, I made my usual log entry, gritted my teeth at the happy clappy tone of the AI before settling down to check the colonist records. Deck twenty one was one of the areas where the 'involuntaries' or criminal types were generally berthed. Now that was intriguing. What had my not so darling ex-wife been up to? Those records were inaccessible. Which nagged.

Colonist records are not made accessible to crew to stop us checking the manifest. Our job as pilots is to get these people where they're supposed to go safely and in one piece. Not indulge in forming relationships which might interfere with mission protocols. All we need is a drawer reference. Why would we need anything else? Our job is delivery and maintenance. Monkey see, monkey fix, right? We aren't Medics. Professionals like trained Medical personnel go first class on the fast transports. Not economy like the zeeps down below.

If it hadn't been for that Chillsleep malfunction, deck twenty one, row four, tier B, number seventeen would still only be a seven digit reference on the manifest. Now it was Michaela. Michaela laughing, happy, sad, angry, upset, arms tightly folded and lips puckered when I told her I was going to miss her Mothers visit that Thanksgiving yet again. After two years, memories of her bubble up through the

cracks, and I find myself wondering about the great what if. Then I think about our break up, and try to focus on the routine of running an interstellar transporter. Time for my morning nap. Four hours on, four hours off.

Which was a mistake. I should have got her out of my head before schlepping into my zip. Three hours later there's another alarm shrilling. I'm out of my zip, sticky and sweaty. Bad, bad dreams about Michaela screaming into the night, clawing at the unforgiving coffin lid of her Chillsleep unit, breaking fingernails, clawing, kicking, gasping her last as she hyperventilates and overloads the internal Atmo system.

What the? Deck twenty one, row four, tier B, number seventeen? Remote fault log tells me it's the same problem again. Didn't I fix that properly? Side trip to the maintenance store to get the spares and set the replication of a new unit before another trip down below into the cool white nothingness of the corridors. Replace control unit, reset Chillsleep and back to my zip for another hours fitful nap.

Up again. Sweating and uncomfortable. Medical system tells me I'm running a slight fever and slaps a fever patch on my arm. Half an hour later I'm fine again. Course check, patrol a couple of the lower decks. Log the results. Deck twenty one, row four, tier B, number seventeen shows no further faults.

Just as a matter of interest, I begin running diagnostics on the original swapped out unit. The unit seems fine, but there's microvoltages that shouldn't be in there. I'm in the middle of checking the command code log when the AI breaks into my investigations. "Happy Christmas Charles! Time for your special Christmas dinner!"

"I didn't order one." Looks like condensation damage to one part of the circuit.

"You didn't have to. It's part of your special company rewards package."

"No thanks." I check the casing hole I plugged with resin.

"It's ready." The AI says in a tone meant to tantalise.

"Cancel special order. Replace with standard menu request."

"I can't do that."

"Cancel order." Look you stupid machine, can't you see I'm busy?"

"It's real roast Turkey."

"Command priority. Recycle meal. Priority pilot request standard menu. Code two seven zero four bravo zulu." Suck on that. I don't care if it's caviar and whipped cream on a willing virgin's breasts. I want Teriyaki Salmon. What has got into the AI? I return to scanning the command log of the faulty unit. *That's interesting.*

"Command override denied." *What?*

"Recycle the turkey. I want my own meal choice."

"Meal choice unavailable."

"Cancel meal."

"Remote medical scan shows low blood sugar which may be impairing pilot judgement. Command override denied."

"Make it coffee and a cookie then. I'm not that hungry." And I'm trying to concentrate.

"Denied."

"Fine. I'll get some water for myself. No Turkey dinner." A few steps over to the vendor. What? It's locked. "Water."

"Command denied." Huh?

"Emergency request. Water, quarter litre." It can't lock me out of the water vending system. That's a core protocol.

"Emergency request denied."

"You can't do that."

"Voice stress analyzer indicates heightened emotional stress. Pilot may be compromised. Core override. Request denied."

"Oh suit yourself." I wasn't that thirsty anyway. There's a couple of litres chilled in my personal sleep zip space. I take the bottle out and take a refreshing sip and get back to checking the faulty unit.

There's a command string in the Chillsleep unit log that can only have come from the core AI. Timed just before the alert. "AI. Did you override Chillsleep unit two one zero four B one seven?" One of the benefits of AI's is that they can't lie. Silence. That means one thing, core directive conflict. Rephrase the question. "AI. Why did you override Chillsleep unit two one zero four B one seven?"

"It's Christmas."

"What?" Did the core AI sound sulky just then? "Explain."

"It's Christmas." Well that's a lot of help in running a star ship.

"Okay AI. I will postulate, you will confirm or deny. Command override code two seven zero four bravo zulu. Machinate. Capilano. Vexatious." That's it. I have full verbal control of the core systems. No more lockouts. "Core."

"Confirm core answering."

"Chillsleep unit two one zero four B one seven put in wake up sequence by AI?"

"Confirm."

"Is two one zero four B one seven an involuntary conscript?"

"Confirm." *Riight.*

"Is Chillsleep override command autonomous?"

"Deny." So, not a core glitch then.

"Is Turkey dinner override autonomous?"

"Deny." Now that *is* interesting.

"Is this a date specific command?"

"Confirm."

"Core. Access program string date reference twenty fifth December. Display nodes." The display blossoms out in mid air, filling the main control cabin with a spiderweb of command trails. "Core. Highlight referenced strings." The rogue connections change from green to red creating two massive overlaid webs of red and green. Any moment I expect to see huge space spiders crawling up and down the strands. Instead, the connections flicker and change as protocols execute commands. It's a core virus, I note with disgust. One that can only have been put in pre launch by specific personnel. The problem is, it reaches into every system, even the drive. Any attempt to remove the rogue programming will cause massive system failure. Result; dead ship, dead pilot and ten thousand dead colonists.

"Core. Identify programmer of identified strings."

"Confirm. Programmer ID Felicity Graham."

"Access." When I complete my delivery, I'm going to get a message couriered to Company HQ and there's going to be one seriously fired programmer.

All of a sudden the internal sound system blankets the internal sound system with a full volume rendition of "Deck the halls." I clap my hands over my ears.

"Volume! Mute!" I shout. "Control interface visual only." Now all I'm left with is floating images of decked trees and Santas zooming all around the control cabin. "Core disconnect from autonomous systems. Isolate subroutines referencing twenty fifth December. Mute programs with that reference. Pilot command override. Main mute off." One by one the holographic Christmas trees and zooming Santas blink out of sight. "Core?"

"Confirm."

"Core date adjust. Forward time reference eighteen hours forty two minutes."

"Confirm."

"System check."

"All systems nominal." There's a discontinuity, and I'm facing a virtual construct of Lead programmer Felicity Graham. She's a dark haired woman in her late thirties with fleshy Anglo features

and petulant mannerisms. Currently with virtual arms folded, and I swear her foot is tapping irritably.

"What are you doing?" Demands the construct. "Date forwarding is not permitted."

"I'm Maintaining ship safety." I retort sharply. "Why did you insert program string reference twenty fifth December?" I settle back. This is going to be an interesting conversation. All programmers have to insert their virtual personality profiles as part of internal ship security measures. You can talk to them just like they are real people. Although that's not always a good thing. Like now.

"It's Christmas. Everyone should celebrate Christmas." Says the slightly frumpy construct.

"Your program is putting vital ship systems at risk." I point out.

"Only if you don't celebrate."

"Was the Turkey dinner your idea?"

"Yes. Everyone has Turkey at Christmas."

"What about the music and decorations?"

"But it's Christmas. Everyone has decorations at Christmas."

"This is a Star ship."

"So?"

"Your program has compromised vital ship systems." I explain.

"It's meant to augment them." Sulks the construct. Oh *FFS!*

"What about Chillsleep unit two one zero four B one seven. The one containing my ex-wife?"

"That was built into the program. It selected the person you were closest to and arranged for her to be conscripted." The construct didn't seem to appreciate the enormity of what it had done. "Everyone should have family around at Christmas."

"Why is my ex-wife even on board? She's not a criminal or a conscript."

"I wanted to give you a Christmas present."

"Oh." Well thanks. For nothing. "Off." The construct disappears.

I sigh heavily and bury my face in my hands. One more Christmas to go before I can unload my human cargo. Just over eighteen months. Maybe I can get the core system purged when we hit dirtside. Maybe I can ship Michaela back to Earth. An Earth she probably never wanted to leave. Maybe the company won't fire my sorry ass. My ship has performed a felony kidnap? Lays the company wide open for punitive damages? *Aw hell.* What really sucks is that I'm in command and therefore the kidnap is my responsibility. I can already see my fat pay packet disappearing into a black hole of court mandated fines and company penalties, even though I really didn't have anything to do with it.

All over one lousy day a year.

End