

Commander Happyfrown Takes Command

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The crew of *the Lady Javelin* shifted uneasily at their battlestations as Commander Happyfrown was piped aboard. In the port engine, Octothorp grumbled a long low sigh and began to lumber towards the helm. Private Bartholomew Glover, the human pilot, remained at his battlestation and quietly cracked his gum. The fourth member of the crew, private Xed sauntered into the helm and stood at attention on point. That in itself isn't unusual for a xeloxian. Shaped something like a large version of a child's jack, xeloxians are nearly neutral bouyant and can actually fly in an atmosphere. Being at attention was highly unusual, however, for Xed who didn't care much for protocol. This disdain was evidenced by the fact that Xed spoke out before the captain did saying cryptically enough simply, "Exclamation Point."

"It is lovely to meet you, Exclamation Point!" Happyfrown's automated voicebox gushed, "But we should wait until the crew is assembled and command officially transferred before I review the crew!"

The *Javelin* wasn't a large ship by any stretch of the imagination. A size 5 scout of human registry, it barely outsized the shuttle that delivered the tentac commander and departed without fanfare. Even still, it seemed an eternity before the silicoid engineer entered the helm.

"Captain?" the sound of Octothorp's questioning introduction sounded like mixing concrete and was of low enough pitch to rattle loose a few of the bolts in the cramped helm. Like nearly all non-humans, the Silicoid carried the standard issue voicebox and like nearly all non-humans, Octothorp found the little metal box was unable to convey the nuances of their native "tongue". Octothorp's rumbling would have conveyed mockery and disdain amounting to fighting words to the ear of another Silicoid.

"Acting captain, yes, I'm commander Happyfrown! Very pleased to meet you!" Happyfrown's voicebox chirped, "I've never met a Silicoid before!"

"But your last ship was of Sil...", Glover's voice trailed off as he realized his faux pas.

"From what I've seen on the vids they were a fine crew, as well!" Happyfrown didn't skip a beat, "They've seen the vids as well of course and several of them have messaged me with congratulations on my appointment!"

"Unfortunate that none could manage to get assigned to your first command," Octothorp rumbled.

"Well let's get to meet the crew I do have!" said Happyfrown.

"Exclamation point," muttered Private Xed.

"Right! Of course! Unusual name, sounds more canosian or even silicoid than

xeloxian!”

“No, I mean your exclamation point button is stuck in the on position.”

Happyfrown regarded its voicebox and sure enough it was holding down the exclamation point button.

“My bad,” the new captain said after letting go of the button, “I’m still trying to get the hang of this thing.”

“Bartholomew Glover”, the pilot stretched out a hand toward the tentac and immediately regretted the gesture as Happyfrown engulfed the hand in a mass of tepid tentacles that had the look and feel of tongues.

“Fine, fine, fine.” Happyfrown hated that humans were so difficult to read. They spoke in such a linear fashion that it took forever for them to get where they were going. Aside from that, they used almost none of their bodies for communication. To a human, reshaping the corners of their eating orifices was about the extent of expression. Tentacs accustomed to speaking with their entire body in a gestalt sign language, found the tediousness of conversing in words instead of paragraphs excruciating.

One of the small pleasures of command is that Happyfrown was now able to determine the length of awkward silences. There was only a brief pause before Happyfrown asked the engineer for the perfunctory tour of the ship. The two left the helm in short order. Glover and Xed waited for the engineer and captain to disappear around a corner before the pilot broke the silence.

“How'd you know about his exclamation point button?”

“First of all, Tentacs are hermaphroditic so it would be 'it's'” instead of 'his'”, Xed began, “Secondly, I always make it a point to study the vids on new commanding officers. Happyfrown does that exclamation point thing every time it comes aboard a new ship.”

“Is it a psych-out thing? Trying to test us? I mean those voice thingy's take some getting used to but by now, it should have it sorted out.”

“Hardly. It's a fresh off the biomass freighter, bumpkin thing.”

“What? Then who did it er, whatever, to get posted as captain?”

“Our illustrious navy's policy is to reward those who are reincarnated in the line of duty. This “captain” has risen to the top the way fresh excrem...”

“I get it,” the pilot interrupted. “We can only hope his luck changes.”

“Its luck. Not his, its.”

“Whatever, I hope our luck changes, too.”

Happyfrown settled into its command over the next few days as the crew dug into some refits for *the Lady Javelin*. The helm and blast cannon modules were swapping places. Any captain worth its salt knew this increased the arc of fire by 120 degrees. The Universal Republican Senate approved design was inferior but official. As soon as possible, crews would make the swap. At any decent spacedock this would take an hour at most. At the tiny station orbiting New Africa, the crew had their hands full for the better part of two days and hadn't completed diagnostics when an urgent message missile warped in and hailed them with an “eyes only” message for Happyfrown who read the message secluded in the Science module. Moments later, Happyfrown emerged with its voicebox bleating orders as it made its way to the newly repositioned Helm.

“Private Octothorp, are we good to go?”

“We haven't completed diagnostics,” Octothorp growled back.

“We'll complete them en route in hyperspace. Get us full helm power.”

“Glover! Break orbit and bring us up to speed. Xed?” Happyfrown paused.

“Just getting the feel for the guns...sir,” Xed's voice came through the intercom. The pause was audible.

“Just get yourself to an engine and help Octothorp.”

Happyfrown took a seat at the helm and assisted as Glover adjusted the warp bubble around the ship. The crew were buffeted about as *the Lady Javelin* sprang into action. When they crossed the edge of New Africa's gravity well, Happyfrown made its way to the Hyperdrive and began programming.

The crew waited as Happyfrown made the calculations and flipped switches and dials. Dozens of tentacles all worked in unison and yet the crew continued to wait. After a few long moments, Bart Glover's voice came in clear over the intercom.

“Uh, cap... If that stuff's too much for you, just let me know and I'll drive us there old school style.”

“You don't even know where we're going!” Happyfrown snapped without thinking.

“Does anybody...sir?” Xed piped in with another pause.

Happyfrown had the Tentac equivalent of sweat running down its tentacles and turned something of a lavender color. The crew contained their snickers until Happyfrown announced, “I'm sorry, mates, this is my first time doing this.” Then all hell broke loose as the whole crew rolled and roared with laughter. The engine room echoed with the sounds of Octothorp's howls that sounded like a shovel being dragged across slate.

Xed, who'd made it back to the ship's cannon was the first to regain composure, “Laugh all you want, this is the science officer who'll also be warping us out of danger.”

That observation stopped the rest of the crew cold.

Happyfrown finished its work and the ship lost all connection with the universe outside as the Lady Javelin warped out of real space.

The Hyperdrive module systematically disconnects a ship from all of real space except for one tiny pinpoint of light coming from the target. The ship then hurtles through space towards the only object left in its newly and narrowly defined universe. The process of traveling along that pinpoint of light takes anywhere from a few weeks to a few months depending on the density of space between the departure point and the destination. In fact, it is sometimes faster to “go the long way 'round” by selecting a different reference point as a way station. The time spent between stations is often described as endless waiting punctuated by moments of panicked terror if you have the misfortune to encounter a navigation hazard or bizarre space anomaly.

On this particular occasion, the tediousness was well spent by the crew in completing the diagnostics on the new Helm and Cannon module positions. It was a good thing that they'd calibrated the cannon as they were about to need it very badly.

First Contact is serious business. You only get one chance to make a first impression and when that impression is going to characterize the entirety of your republic reflecting on scores of member nations and billions of inhabitants on hundreds of worlds you want to put your best foot forward. Of course, sometimes, you just have to send whomever is in the neighborhood. This was one of those times.

The Javelin's sealed orders informed Happyfrown of the discovery of a new planet loaded with sentients. Unfortunately, a splinter group of anti-republic rebels heard about the planet first and had made the jump to hyperspace. The Javelin was playing catch up in hyperspace.

One of the peculiarities of hyperspace travel is that two or more ships traveling to the same place anywhere near the same time (even within days) will tend to arrive at exactly the same time. The science theorists say it has something to do with the relative gravity of the ships drawing each other towards one another along their monodimensional universes. The tactical theorists say “whatever” and tend to advise crew to be at their battlestations when the ships return to realspace. Ships warp in (return to realspace) as close to the edge of the gravity well as their acumen with the nuances of the art of the hyperdrive module will allow and then the fireworks begin.

Happyfrown fared somewhat better on this end of the hyperspace jump than on the jump out. The Javelin warped in just a few billion kilometers from a shiny purple planet. Happyfrown was rather pleased with itself but the crew didn't respond with accolades. Instead, they pointed out another ship warping in on the far side of the planet and just slightly closer to it. The ship was of Silicoid registry but the serial number it was broadcasting was all wrong. It could only mean one thing: Rebels!

“Battlestations!” Happyfrown had always wanted to bark out that order. In fact, previous incarnations of Happyfrown had barked it out on 3 separate occasions. This crew wasn't any more impressed than the others had been. They were at their battlestations and Xed had already launched a missile targeting the rebel vessel.

Happyfrown's voicebox piped up again. “I need to get a reading from that planet! Glover! Hard about and get us in closer! Octothorp! More power to the helm! Xed! switch that gun over to a laser cannon! And Xed!”

“Yes, captain?”

Happyfrown paused for dramatic effect en route from the hyperdrive to the science bay, “This time I know I'm holding my exclamation point button down! It's intentional! Now let's get rolling!”

A light moment of humor always helps to raise the troops morale before a skirmish. At least that's what the manual says. Of course, the assumption is that the humor is well received. Sometimes a bit gets lost in the cultural barriers between the species. Happyfrown was hoping the same barriers would shield the crew from Happyfrown's own terror.

“The planet is broadcasting on several frequencies but none of them make any sense. I'll need to run some more scans at a closer range.” Happyfrown's voicebox chattered away as Happyfrown thought out loud about the problem while running scans of the planet which incidentally just launched a missile.

“Uh, captain?” Xed started, “Does your fancy science scan stuff tell you that planet has sent out a missile? And shouldn't we be powering up the shields in case the Silicoid ship opens up on us?”

“That's quite enough, Private,” The tentac captain knew full well there was a missile headed their direction and it was only half as deadly as allowing insubordination to find footing aboard the ship. At that moment it became difficult for anyone to find or keep footing as Private Glover manipulated the warp field surrounding the ship in such a fashion as to bring the ship about.

The Silicoid ship wasted no time in launching a missile of its own and closing to scan the planet.

Happyfrown and crew worked feverishly. Octothorp cranked the engines for all they were worth (which frankly still wasn't much). Happyfrown was running scan after scan until the science panel was actually hot to the touch. Glover spoke cryptically about “Putting the hammer down” as the Javelin hurtled forward much like its ancient namesake.

Everyone was busy save Xed who'd managed to flip the gun console into the laser position on the first try. Being idle is the worst of it in a fight. All right, it's the second

worst next to actually getting shot but it's still rough. Xed had too much time to think.

Glover had manipulated it so an asteroid was between the Javelin and the planet's missile but the missile took the long way around. "It's looking like a boarding missile," he grumbled as though every other eye aboard the ship wasn't watching the missile at that same moment.

Another missile left the planet's surface headed toward the Javelin. "Hey! Why don't the Rockheads get a welcoming missile?" Glover asked to nobody in particular then quickly added, "No offense, 'Thorp," to Octothorp in particular.

"None taken," Octothorp rumbled too busy concentrating on the engines to notice a politically incorrect faux pas.

"Change over the gun to a multi-gun, Private Xed" Happyfrown hollered out.

"But I just changed this thing and I haven't even fired it yet..." Xed's complaint was cut short by a shot from the Silicoid ship ripping into the starboard column of the Javelin breaking the hyperdrive, life support and the starboard engine.

"Damage report!" Happyfrown's voicebox tinnily whined. Happyfrown often wondered whether a deep baritone voice might command more authority.

A thick crunching sound nearly worse than the cannon impact rose out from the rubble of the engine room and articulated. "I'm all right. I'm hit but I've had worse."

"Good to hear you're still with us," the captain said, "My panel says Life Support is down. Get on it."

"pluZerp pz pluMing"[Fives and Sevens]!" Xed cursed into the intercom. "Thorp could have died!"

"We all will if Life Support doesn't come back on line in a hurry," the tentac shot back, "Don't you have work to do? You know getting killed in battle..."

"You're the expert," Xed interrupted.

"Getting killed in battle," the captain continued, "isn't as final as being shot back home after a court martial. They don't allow your clone to activate after that."

That pretty much shut Xed up.

You don't need be a rocket scientist to know Life Support is pretty important. Octothorp made its way into the L.S. module and began effecting repairs. Happyfrown continued his research. He'd checked each of the three frequencies they were broadcasting on but none of them responded to any known decryption algorithms.

Xed squeezed off a shot with the ship's gun at the Silicoid ship and ripped into its helm

just moments before the missile struck the same spot. The enemy helm was slagged but there was no time for cheers as *the Javelin* had two incoming missiles to face itself.

The first missile from the planet was closing in and that from the Silicoid ship wasn't far behind. Glover pulled an evasive maneuver to dodge the planet's missile but the other one slammed into the damaged hyperdrive destroying it and the midship engine. Fortunately, the damage from the Silicoid ship's gun hit on the Life Support module moments earlier had formed a conduit sending most of the collateral blast damage harmlessly out into space. The L.S. was still functioning. Octothorp, however was not. Despite all the protection a Silicoid has, the engineer laid unconscious on the deck of the Life Support module. Any other member of the crew would have been shredded.

The missile from the planet finally succeeded in slamming into the aft engine nearest the unconscious engineer without an explosion. As the crew had feared, this was a boarding missile and it disgorged two furry little creatures that would almost have been cute except for the excessive slobber they drooled and some dangerous looking weapons they carried.

The rebel silicoid ship was now careening toward the planet with no way of turning. It's pilot desperately tried to fix the badly broken helm as the Engineer scrambled forward but it was too late.

Happyfrown had a breakthrough in decoding. "It's not any of the three frequencies, It's ALL of them. Glover! get over here and as soon as the panel cools down, run this program. Xed! stay at your station until the Silicoid ship is eliminated."

"What do you think you're doing?" Xed asked incredulously while ignoring Happyfrown's order and racing across the ship toward the Life Support unit.

"I've got to get to Octothorp before anything our visitors do," Happyfrown was on the move as fast as tentacles could go leaving the Science Bay and heading aft.

"That was a direct order!" the captain's voicebox couldn't convey the urgency without a little bit of screeching. "Stay at your station until..." Happyfrown was interrupted by a shock wave given off when the un-steered Silicoid ship skipped off the purple planet's surface and shattered to bits.

"Belay that order," Xed smirked, and continued running without breaking stride.

Xed was quicker but had further to go than Happyfrown. They both arrived just in time to see one of the furry creatures straddling the Silicoid.

"Is it trying to kill or heal Octothorp?" Xed asked.

"It looks more like, er, mating," Happyfrown shuddered.

"Shklorp skhloor Kerb", the furry critter slobbered. It had plenty of tongues and lips but lacked any vocal cords.

Xed pulled a grenade. “You said it yourself captain. There are worse things than dying in the line of duty.”

“No violence against the newcomers! That's a direct order.” Happyfrown shouted waving several dozen tentacles emphatically.

Xed hurled the grenade onto the deck between the aliens anyway and popped back down the hall without a word.

Just then Bart Glover's voice crackled in over the intercom. “Captain! Your algorithm worked. When I combine all three frequencies we get, well, just listen to the translation.”

The ship's speakers sputtered a translation. “We are the kerbites. We've looked forward to meeting you.”

All this transpired while a grenade skittered to a stop right between the aliens and Happyfrown hurled itself forward screaming “NOOOOO!”

Happyfrown landed on the grenade just as it went off smothering the detonation with its own flesh. Tentacles splattered everywhere covering everything and everyone but captain Happyfrown was the only casualty.

Epilogue

The kerbite ambassadors were suitably impressed with the tentac's heroics and resolved to join the Universal Republic peacefully.

It wasn't hard for Xed to doctor the tapes on the trip home to remove a few choice moments such as the direct order not to use violence. Lots of information gets garbled when the backups are in a module that's been hit by a ship's cannon, a missile and been sprayed with the lifeless body of the tentac captain, commander Happyfrown.

Happyfrown and Octothorp weren't in any position to refute Xed's account and Glover didn't see a reason to argue. The kerbites didn't understand a word of what was said anyway so Xed got away scot-free.

A few weeks later, when Happyfrown's next incarnation was piped aboard, Xed stood again at attention but was considerably more polite this time.