

[Styx]

By Phantomgraph };8>

“Lieutenant Meatpopsicle, reporting as ordered sir.” you said, standing at attention in the commanders office.

The commander looked up at you, his big gray bushy eyebrows appearing over a holo projection. You remember him squinting a little, either from trying to see what you look like or trying to remember who you are.

It takes him a moment, but he finally tapped a contact on the desk and the holo projection vanished. “Yes lieutenant, at ease.” He tapped another contact and the display panel behind him pulled up your military file. You grimaced a little, especially at all the red lines that start with the word reprimand. “Please sit down, lieutenant,” he had said.

You obliged the commander and he looked over your file for a moment, leaving you feeling rather uncomfortable. Your confederation career hadn't exactly been stellar. In fact you had just used the word 'clusterfuck' the previous night when describing it to the other occupants of the ship's watering hole.

“I have a new assignment for you lieutenant, one that's right up your alley...” he said, with something of a smile.

Forty five days later you were in a one man tin can trying to zero in on the “mysterious signal” the confederation had picked up. For two weeks you had been scanning and rescanning every lump of rock in the whole solar system looking for some old fashioned electromagnetic beacon, all the while re-breathing your own farts and eating seven year old freeze dried burritos.

You had almost finished up your final scan and were getting ready to head back to the command ship when the computer on your little skiff had picked up a fairly strong but unreadable signal from the fifth planet from the systems star. LV-426. Yeah. Like all of the frontier systems, it didn't even have a proper name yet.

So you set the coarse and waited another two weeks for a fly-by, all the while eating more of those disgusting burritos.

The flight in was without incident, not counting the hourly rush to the can to rapidly dispose of used lunch. As it grew larger in the viewer, LV-426 turned out to be another boring M class rock like the hundreds of others humankind had found after they had learned to traverse interstellar space.

The signal however, was intriguing. It was simple pulse code modulation and it had some sort of pattern to it, but the computer couldn't find anything that it could match it to. Not surprising, you remember thinking, as the skiff had about as much computing power as a can opener.

Even the fly-by had started out without much incident. You had about a third of the surface scanned when the blasted klaxons fired up. That in itself didn't bother you; the klaxon went off over every little thing, but when you reached up to switch the damn thing off you read those immortal words on the tiny indicator board. "Error 55.55.35 Main bus B undervolt."

Ten seconds later you were ass over elbows inside a fireball heading for surface of LV-426. You remember thinking it was a good thing you spent all that time getting tanked in all those bars, then you remembered another set of immortal words, "First you say it, then you do it." Despite the saying it was a little funny that the order was backwards.

A half hour ago you climbed out of the wreckage of the skiff wearing the unmistakable odor of used burritos and carrying everything you could grab from the demolished craft before it had the kindness of blowing up.

You are standing in some kind of rain forest. It's dark and it's raining. By the dying fire that is all that remains of the skiff you take stock of everything you have; your personal information manager, three emergency medical patches, eight freeze dried burritos, a half full two liter bottle of water, and a large towel.

"Welcome to LV-426," you say to yourself. "Fuck yeah." ...