

The Mysterious Case of the Purple Pod-thing

Paul and Nathan stood in the middle of the purple pod-thing forest and stared, dumbstruck, at one particular ten-foot high bulbous specimen. They had studied a variety of new and wonderful flora during their exploration of Puppis IV, but this one defied pure simple logic.

“Well,” Nathan said, smiling triumphantly, “what did I tell you?”

Paul took a half step closer and leaned forward. “It’s singing.”

“Yep.”

Paul listened for several seconds. “Is that...”

“Yep.”

“But it can’t be.”

“It is,” Nathan said.

“But it sounds like...”

“Dancing Queen. I know.”

Paul blinked. Then he blinked again. “Nathan. The plant-”

“Is singing ABBA,” Nathan said.

“I tried to tell you.”

Paul and Nathan listened some more.

*“... the beat from the tambouriiiine... ”*

Ike Quigley

Paul stroked the top of his bald head--it was a habit he'd developed over the years anytime the universe reminded him he had no business trying to understand it. "There has to be a reasonable explanation."

"I've got a couple of theories," Nathan said.

*"... the time of your liiiife..."*

Paul studied the pink sandy ground and wondered, not for the first time, if his entire life wasn't actually the complex hallucination of a hopelessly lost asylum inmate. "This is... weird."

"Want to hear my theory?" Nathan asked.

Nathan might be a gifted microbiologist, but he also frequently asserted the notion that the ancient Egyptians had invented space travel.

Nathan cleared his throat. "Well..."

"No."

"What? You're not even going to listen?"

Paul squatted in the pink sand and studied the purple pod-thing's stalk. "No."

Nathan chewed on his lower lip.

"It's a good theory."

*"...when you get the chance..."*

"Okay, what? Tell me."

Nathan cleared his throat again. "Well, you see... old radio stations used to broadcast in analog signals, and these signals just went everywhere - I mean, just way out in space. We're, what... ninety light-years from Earth, which means this giant pod plant here would just now be receiving those signals. The timeline fits perfectly, Paul. Ninety

Ike Quigley

years ago would have been 1966, the same year ‘Dancing Queen’ was released. And maybe this plant has some natural attenuator...”

“1976.” Paul said.

“What?”

“Dancing Queen was released in 1976,” Paul said.

In the eight years it took to reach the Puppis System, the research team had an on-going trivia competition with the ship’s crew, during the last two years of which, they had focused almost exclusively on music trivia spanning a period from early 20<sup>th</sup> century jazz to modern nova super-pop. Paul was the current reigning champion.

But Nathan wasn’t one to let logic get in the way of a good argument. “But,” Nathan said, “what if there was a space density shift that let the waves travel faster than light?”

“Nathan, how long have you heard this plant-pod-thing sing Dancing Queen?”

*“...night and the lights are looow...”*

Nathan rubbed his chin and began muttering to himself. “Uh... about ten minutes to get up the ridge, grab you... maybe twenty-two, twenty-three minutes.”

“A twenty-three minute loop, huh? So you’re telling me, eighty years ago a DJ with a hard-on for Bjorn Ulvaeus broadcast a repeating radio signal that fell through a naturally occurring time-space warp to arrive eighty years later on Puppis IV, where it was then picked up by this... this giant pod-thing, and is now playing the song back through some weird alien biological speaker system.”

Nathan stared at Paul and considered.

Ike Quigley

“...you are the dancing queeeen...”

“It’s a working theory.”

Paul sighed and stood. He circled the giant purple pod, squeezing past the other pods surrounding it. “It seems to be coming from all sides.”

“Is it possible...” Nathan began.

Paul groaned.

“What?” Nathan crossed his arms.

Paul sucked in his breath and prepared himself. “Just... what?”

“Do you *want* me to tell you or not?”

“Please don’t.”

Nathan cleared his throat again. “Is it possible, that this plant is actually a sentient being that has telepathically picked up our thoughts and is now trying to communicate with us?”

“The plant is talking to us... with music?”

“Well, yeah,” Nathan said. “Sure. I mean, hey, wait. I just remembered! I had this exact same song in my head earlier today. I bet you a ga-billion bucks that’s what’s going on. It picked this song out of my subconscious and is trying to say ‘hello.’ ”

“You had *this* song stuck in your head earlier today?” Paul asked.

“Well, no, but one nearly like it.”

“... see that girrrrl...”

Paul shook his head. They continued to listen until Paul noticed Nathan humming along with the plant.

Ike Quigley

“Okay, that’s it,” Paul said. “More people have to look at this thing. Where’s Jorge? Wasn’t he with you?”

“Don’t know,” Nathan said as he tapped his foot. “Haven’t seen him.”

“Ridiculous.” Paul pulled out his comm unit, hit the alert button and got nothing back but a low beep.

“It doesn’t work from down here,” Nathan said. “You gotta go up on the ridge.”

Paul swore under his breath and turned to go up the hill. He made it about ten steps before he turned back around.

“You go,” Paul said.

“What? Why me?”

“Because,” Paul said, “If something weird, I mean... *weirder* happens, I want to be here to see it.”

Nathan stepped close to Paul and looked him straight in the eye.

“You really need to start finding a way...”

“Go!” Paul said. “No more talk about time rifts, or telekinetic plants.”

“Telepathic,” Nathan said.

“Now,” Paul said, pointing. “Up the hill!”

Nathan turned and made his way toward the ridge. “Telekinetic... pshaw... doesn’t even know the difference.”

When he was sure Nathan was out of earshot, Paul leaned in toward the giant purple pod-thing and put his head as close as he dared. It smelled like a mixture of cranberries and bad eggs. Paul glanced over his shoulder one last time just to make sure Nathan was far enough away before softly singing, “Youuu can dance...”

Ike Quigley

No response.

He coughed and started again, this time a little louder. “Yoouuuu can dance...”

Nothing.

“This is ridiculous,” he said to himself. Paul stepped away from the plant and just stared at it. “Maybe it *is* all just a hallu...”

Paul couldn’t finish his sentence because at that exact moment, the ground underneath his feet opened and another large purple pod-like thing shot out of the pink sandy ground and swallowed him whole. It happened so fast, Paul didn’t have time to cry out, let alone jump out of the way.

The next thing he knew, Paul was curled up inside a small bulbous space with slimy purple walls. The smell of rotten eggs and cranberries filled his senses. He quickly became disoriented and dizzy. The last thought he had before passing out was how very odd it was that he’d been lured into the plant’s trap by a hit single from the 1970’s. Paul’s body started to shut down: his heart rate slowed, his breathing became very shallow. His comm unit picked up the weakening vital signs and sounded the automatic distress alarm.

Except it didn’t sound the automatic distress alarm. The comm unit’s operating system went to the directory where the alarm sounds were supposed to be, but, inexplicably, found instead a collection of the greatest musical hits, ranging from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century jazz era, all the way up to modern nova super-pop, arranged alphabetically by artist; placed there, unbeknownst to Paul, by one of the research team members in an effort to bone up for their next trivia challenge against the ship’s crew. And with no other alarm file to play, the comm unit played the first one it could find.

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Nathan and Jenkins (the team's geologist) stood in the middle of the purple pod-thing forest and stared stupidly at the two purple pod-things as they sang two disjointed but identical renditions of "Dancing Queen."

"Well..." Nathan said, smiling triumphantly. "What did I tell you?"

"Weird," Jenkins whispered. "Has anyone else seen this?"

"Oh yeah. Paul was just... hey, where'd Paul go? Paul!"

Jenkins blinked. Then he blinked again. "Completely bizarre."

Nathan stepped closer. "I think this is the one that first started singing. Paul and me figured they're all connected..."

Nathan heard a large whooshing sound behind him, followed by what could have been a muffled scream. "Jenkins?"

Nathan turned around but the geologist was nowhere to be seen.

"Jenkins? Paul?... Anybody?"

Nathan had the odd sensation that the purple pod-things were now denser than before, and was put-off by the invasion of his personal space. Then he heard it, yet another pod started singing.

"Hey!" he said. "I think I figu..."

But Nathan didn't get to finish his sentence. The pink sandy ground underneath him opened up suddenly and Nathan found himself enclosed in a slimy purple bulbous space. As he drifted off to unconsciousness, Nathan heard his comm unit burst into song.

*"You can dance..."* And the muffled, staggered chorus of the song echoed around him, *"...having the time of your life..."*