

Chasing a Ghost
Episode 7 - Station to Station

written by

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INT. STUDIO/RIGBY ARRAY WHITELINE CONTROL CENTER

The Ghost's "Wayfaring Stranger" recording plays, before fading behind Lennon's voice.

LENNON MERLO (V.O.)

You may remember that back in episode 2, my friend Iris said this about interpreting the Banjo Ghost's redline signals:

IRIS ANTIĆ

(clip from previous episode)

You'd have to talk to a redline technician if you want the details-

LENNON MERLO (V.O.)

And that Chima Baardson said this about the YuKon server [they'd] liberated on Lang:

CHIMA BAARDSON

(clip from previous episode)

The technical details are a little beyond me, but this server is supposed to sit on the broadcast network, listening to redline, blueline, uh, any transmissions it can find-

LENNON MERLO (V.O.)

To be frank, the technical side of this story has always been pretty out of my grasp, too. I might have a degree and experience in redline production, but redline production and redline engineering are entirely different skill sets. So it is frankly a little embarrassing that the idea of finding a redline engineer to talk to about the Ghost... never actually occurred to either me or Jax. That is, until we received this... interesting message.

RILEY RILEY

(over comms, nervous)

Uh, hi. My name is Riley Riley.
I'm a broadcast engineer working
on the Calvin Array near Neptune,
and... uh... um, if you're looking for
the Banjo Ghost, I think... I think
I might be partially responsible?

LENNON MERLO (V.O.)

I'm Lennon Merlo, and this is
Chasing A Ghost.

Intro plays.

LENNON MERLO (V.O.)

We were intrigued by the message,
but while there is a SPACE Stop
relatively near the Calvin Array
and we could technically get
there, the current positions of
Jupiter and Neptune mean that the
trip would take several months,
and even blueline messages would
take hours to travel from them to
us and back. However, when we sent
a message outlining these
obstacles to them, the message we
got back, nearly twelve hours
later, was even more mysterious.

RILEY RILEY

(over comms)

If you're on Ganymede... Um... Huh.
Could you get to the Rigby Array?
It's in Ganymede orbit, right? If
you can, contact the station
operation office and tell them,
uhh...tell them Riley Riley asked
you to assist with Procedure
802WL-CR-LT. They'll tell you what
to do from there.

LENNON MERLO (V.O.)

Both Jax and I had... our concerns
about this.

Apartment room tone, Jax and Lennon sitting at a small dining room table.

JAX ABRAHAMS

Do you think it's, like, spy stuff?

LENNON MERLO

I don't know.

JAX ABRAHAMS

Or, like, some kind of criminal underground thing?

LENNON MERLO

I doubt it, but I really don't know, Jax. I have no idea if this Riley Riley person is trying to pull us into something, or if this is some kind of prank. I... I don't know. I don't know.

A silent moment.

JAX ABRAHAMS

(slowly)

We... are going to call them, though, aren't we?

LENNON MERLO

(reluctantly)

Yeah..... Of course we are.

The room tone goes away.

LENNON MERLO (V.O.)

So... we called them! And after putting us on hold for a few minutes, they gave us an airlock number, an approach code, and a time to get to the Rigby Array the next morning. And, because far be it from us to turn down an invitation, the next morning we took a rented STS shuttle to the Rigby Array.

Sounds of muffled shuttle docking and airlock noises under the next VO line.

LENNON MERLO (V.O.)
We were met at the airlock by...
well, by someone. They wore a
technician's jumpsuit with no
nameplate and a poker face of an
expression.

LENNON MERLO
(cautiously)
Hello, I'm... Lennon Merlo.

NAMELESS
(with flat affect
covering moderate
distrust)
I assumed so, yes, that's why I'm
here to meet you. And you? You
are...?

JAX ABRAHAMS
Oh, I'm Jax Abrahams, producer.

NAMELESS
Good. Also expected. Take this.
(hands them each
something)
Follow me, please.

The sounds of footsteps on metal, sci-fi doors opening and
closing under the next bit.

LENNON MERLO (V.O.)
This... individual handed us a
pair of brightly colored "Visitor"
badges and then lead us into the
array, down one corridor after
another, through doors and hatches
with increasingly serious-looking
signage; "authorized personnel
only", "no admittance without
prior authorization", "station
staff only beyond this point,
violators will be detained and
prosecuted".

LENNON MERLO
(half-whispered)

Is this... Like... Are we supposed to be here? Is this, like, legal?

NAMELESS
Are you a Marshal?

LENNON MERLO
Uh... Well... No?

NAMELESS
It's probably fine, then. Here. Go ahead, just through there. There will be instructions for activating the 802WL module on the desk. Everything should be clearly marked. Just follow the steps.

LENNON MERLO
Okay... Thank you, Mx...?

NAMELESS
This button on the wall here will activate the intercom. Use it to call me when you're finished and I will take you back to your ship. You won't be locked in, just... don't go wandering around unattended.

Receding footsteps, and then we pass through another door and into a room with a continuous low electric hum.

LENNON MERLO (V.O.)
We went through one last door, emblazoned with black and yellow stripes and a sign reading "for emergency use only"; the room inside was small and dimly-lit, the walls covered in a grid of gauges, lights, equipment racks, and power relays. A desk with two chairs sat in the middle of the room, with a bank of switches and controls next to a heavy-looking desktop terminal with an oddly small screen. Taped to the desk next to the terminal was a page of hand-written instructions.

JAX ABRAHAMS

So, I guess we just...

(sound of paper being
handled)

...follow the steps?

LENNON MERLO

I guess. What do we do first?

Noises of clicks, beeps, switches, sliders, etc. being individually and deliberately adjusted in the background of the next several lines.

JAX ABRAHAMS

We... Turn the knob labeled "mode" to "pre-sync", then press and hold the... Alice button? No, the align button, until the console beeps. Stars, this person's handwriting...

LENNON MERLO (V.O.)

As we went through the list of steps, a suspicion about what we were configuring started to form in my mind. Just about everyone is familiar with the most common transmission protocols in the system, the big 3: redline, used for mass media and information broadcasting; blueline, for personal point-to-point communications; and greenline, used for local emergency messages and distress signals. Most have probably also heard of blackline, the line-of-sight narrow-beam secure communication protocol used by militaries, outlaws, and any character on Tidal Heat who has a secret to hide, which is to say, all of them.

But unless you're deep in the communications industry or in a very specific position in one of the largest corporations or governments in the system, you're probably not familiar with

whiteline. There are good reasons for that: whiteline transceivers are finicky, temperamental and enormously expensive; they have to be manufactured in pairs, and can only ever communicate with their paired device; the signal is low-bandwidth and prone to errors and glitches.

JAX ABRAHAMS

Move the sliders for Marzel vanes one through six to between eight and eleven nanometers, then lower Marzel vane four to below zero point five but NOT all the way to zero.

LENNON MERLO

Not to zero?

JAX ABRAHAMS

The word "not" is all capitalized, even.

LENNON MERLO

Ok, not to zero.

LENNON MERLO (V.O.)

But whiteline does have two advantages over every other communication method in use in the system: one, it is absolutely impossible to intercept or jam a white line transmission by any means.

LENNON MERLO

Ok, anything else?

JAX ABRAHAMS

Verify the following values are set to the numbers listed here...

LENNON MERLO

Hmm... 7.2, check. That's set to "colorless", check. Device type:

conifer, check. I think we're good.

JAX ABRAHAMS

Then we just... flip the "link" switch to "on".

LENNON MERLO

Ok. Here goes nothing.

A clunky switch is flipped, the electronic hum in the background slowly raises in pitch.

LENNON MERLO (V.O.)

And two: transmissions sent over whiteline arrive at their destination instantly, enabling real-time communication at any distance, faster even than the speed of light.

The pitch of the humming plateaus, there is a low and distant "clunk", followed by a confirmation beep.

RILEY RILEY

(over whiteline)

Okay... And Darla's set at 1.1... Wait... Wait, why are you on? Oh, oh! Uh, oh god the whiteline's connected. Hey, uh, hi! Hey, uh, can you hear me?

LENNON MERLO (V.O.)

And I was going to use one of these ungodly expensive devices to... have a friendly chat.

RILEY RILEY

Uh, oh, sure. My name is Riley Riley, and I am the current on-site system technician for the Kate Calvin Communications Array.

LENNON MERLO

And your name is really Riley Riley?

RILEY RILEY

So nice, they named me twice.

(chuckles)

Ok, the name is true, but that technically isn't. I was born Riley Silver, but my partner's name was Sterling Riley when we met, and when we got married we couldn't decide whether it would be funnier if he took my name or I took his, so we traded instead.

LENNON MERLO

So now he's Sterling Silver...

RILEY RILEY

And I'm really, really Riley Riley.

LENNON MERLO (V.O.)

I will admit that this exchange immediately made me feel about ten percent less anxious about this whole thing. But even so, I was still pretty out of my element.

LENNON MERLO

Sorry, I'm not usually this... out of sorts, it's just...

RILEY RILEY

No, no, no, I get it, I realize that I kinda dropped a lot of weird shit in your lap all at once. And I bet the welcome wagon over there probably didn't help.

LENNON MERLO

Yeah, yeah, your... coworker. They were... Yeah, yeah, they were... I think they deliberately didn't give me their name?

RILEY RILEY

Oh, yeah, that sounds like them. I've been working with them off and on for a good ten years now, and even I don't know if they actually have a name. I usually just call them "Nameless", or "the

technician on Rigby Array" if I'm being formal. They must have gotten you set up all right, though, given that we're talking right now at all.

LENNON MERLO

I suppose so. The instructions they left us seem to have worked, anyway.

RILEY RILEY

Instructions? Hah! Yeah, that's Nameless. Probably spent a whole hour longer writing the whole process out than it would have taken them just to, you know, make the connection for you.

LENNON MERLO

Are you... sure it's okay that we're doing this? The signs in here are pretty explicit about it being for emergency use only. You're not going to get in trouble for setting all this up, are you?

RILEY RILEY

Uh, well, um, for one, uh, okay, if I'd asked my boss if I could do something like this a year ago, she'd have told me "no" and made me move my bunk into the airlock for a week to prove she was serious. Again. But I'm not even sure I have a boss any more at this point? Though I am still getting paid. I think.

Anyway. Two, better to ask forgiveness than permission. And three, you are actually helping me do my job right now. We are legitimately required to fire up the whitelink for at least ten minutes every six months or so, just to make sure it's in good working order. We've been coming

up on the deadline for the next test, and frankly this conversation has already been way more interesting than any conversation I've ever had with Nameless.

LENNON MERLO

Okay. You've seriously worked with them for ten years and never learned their name?

RILEY RILEY

Yeah, so, the thing is, being a lone technician on an array like these... I don't know if it makes you go weird, or if it's just that weirdos are the only ones who'll take the job. It's probably both. You take folks who are decently bright and won't miss living in among their fellow man so much, put them in an environment where there's nobody to get embarrassed in front of? Their eccentricities will tend to start to compound upon themselves, in my experience.

LENNON MERLO

I guess that might be true. You seem relatively normal, though, at least to me. I mean, I'm, I'm sorry-

RILEY RILEY

No, no, it's, it's a compliment! I mean 'cause I'm okay at faking, uh, normal. I mean I've got Sterling on Triton and I've got to be able to carry half a conversation with him on a fairly regular basis, but I'm as oddball as anyone. Which is, in some sense, why I reached out to you in the first place.

LENNON MERLO

Yes! Right. And thank you for pulling me back on topic. The Banjo Ghost.

RILEY RILEY

The Banjo Ghost.

LENNON MERLO

In your message, you said you thought you might be "partially responsible". What did you mean by that?

RILEY RILEY

OK, so there's this... this thing we do.

LENNON MERLO

We?

RILEY RILEY

The folks like Nameless and me. Array technicians. There's a couple dozen of us around the system, give or take, and we... well, we're all pretty isolated, even me, alone for months at a stretch. And, ironically, despite sitting on the comms traffic of a significant percentage of the entire solar system, we don't really have anybody to talk to.

LENNON MERLO

You can't blueline people from a communications array?

RILEY RILEY

Well, I mean, technically you can, but those connections we have to access those systems all get routed through our employee accounts, and nobody is more prone to paranoia about the privacy of their personal communications than somebody who's worked a long time in communications. So by and

large, we don't. I'm... yeah... I wonder if...

Oh, uh, sorry, but redline is different; it doesn't have that problem. Our tools for redline management are specifically designed not to modify the signals that come through unless we specifically want them to, so as long as we don't make waves, nobody has a reason to look at 'em too closely.

LENNON MERLO

Which means...?

RILEY RILEY

Which means, we can use redline to send each other things. Don't want to send out anything especially personal, of course, these are work colleagues, but we can send simple debug text and standard redline transmissions, so you see something interesting come through on an obscure feed, think other folks might enjoy it, you just tag the broadcast data with an identifier that only we know to look for, find a redline channel that wasn't running anything at the moment, drop it in the slot, and blast it off across the system again.

LENNON MERLO

So it's like... a party line? A chat group? In plain view of everyone?

RILEY RILEY

Yeah, something like that. There's more than a thousand redline channels and most folks are watching less than, like, twenty of them, there's plenty of places to slip in, like, five or ten

minutes of something worth
sending, so... Or there was,
anyway, but we'll get to that.

So, one day a few years back, I
get a ping on one of the baby
birds- uh, the smaller satellites
in my "flock", so to speak. It
says it's seeing a redline audio
broadcast that didn't come from
the array, so I open it up and I
take a listen. And it's this...
somebody. Some random person, just
singin' a song. Not a great
musician, mind, but, you know,
listenable. It's a weak signal,
probably a tiny transmitter, but
this one comm sat has picked it up
well enough. More than anything,
it's a novelty, and so I do what
we do with interesting novelties.

LENNON MERLO

...you sent it off across the
system...

RILEY RILEY

Yep. And then one of the other
techs sends back that she's heard
them too. Sends back another
that's definitely the same singer,
singing a different tune. We all
agree it's a funny thing, this
person sending this music out on a
little hobby transmitter or
whatever, but, I mean, good for
whoever they are. And the next
time one of us sees another of
these transmissions somewhere else
in the system?

LENNON MERLO

You send it on. And broadcast it
to everyone else, in the process.

Sorry, yeah, hah! Do you- Do you-
Do you remember what those first

broadcasts were? The contents, I mean.

RILEY RILEY

Oh, uh, hmm... I seem to recall that the one I sent out was them singing... Oh! Uh, The Streets of Europa, maybe?

LENNON MERLO

I... I haven't heard that one.

RILEY RILEY

And the one I got back was, uh, it was Wayfaring Stranger.

LENNON MERLO

Ah, now that one I have heard.

Wayfaring Stranger plays for a few lines, then fades into the background as the interview resumes.

LENNON MERLO

So the Banjo Ghost's recordings get broadcast to the whole system, because you're broadcasting them to each other.

RILEY RILEY

That, yeah, that's about the size of it. And we don't think that much more about it; they're not the only thing we're sending around, after all, just one piece of the potpourri, so to speak. And because nobody's telling us to do otherwise and habits are tough to break, we keep doing it even after all those popular redline stations we'd been sneaking our signals in between suddenly up and evaporate overnight.

LENNON MERLO

You must have known people would start noticing.

RILEY RILEY

I'm not going to say the thought never crossed any of our minds. We'd always known the transmissions weren't secret or anything, always figured a handful of folks who weren't us might stumble on a few of them, maybe even piece together what was going on, but as long as it wasn't coming back on us, we were fine, right? We didn't fully realize how much things had changed, well, until you entered the picture.

LENNON MERLO

Until I...? Oh, of course. You heard me.

RILEY RILEY

Uh, yeah, one of us. Probably Nameless, actually, they're the one near Ganymede... One of us tags and rebroadcasts the first episode of this new GPB show called "Chasing a Ghost", and they tag it with a debug message that says "are they talking about us?"

LENNON MERLO

Which... I guess I was, in a way. Sort of shining a spotlight on your whole... thing.

RILEY RILEY

Sort of, yeah.

LENNON MERLO (V.O.)

At this point in our conversation, I started feeling a sort of... not 'dread', exactly, but something like it. By making this show, by searching for the Ghost, by having this conversation and exposing the reason these errant signals had been crisscrossing the system, would I be forcing them to stop?

Thankfully, Riley Riley assured me that they, at least, had no plan to cease their transmissions.

RILEY RILEY

No, definitely not, no. I won't lie, there was a pretty aggressive flurry of debug messages in the backchannel about what we were going to do about, well, about this.

(chuckles)

But at the end of the day, each of us is our own person, we're going to do what we're going to do, and it's not like any of us can do anything to make any of the others do anything they don't want to. I wonder if I could...

Oh uh, sorry, as for me, I haven't seen any sign so far that anyone higher up the ladder has tried to put the kibosh on our, uh, "unauthorized broadcasts"; like I said before, I think my only boss at this point might be an automated payroll database somewhere, and I don't think it's gonna notice. And, you know what, personally, I feel like at this point we're doing the system a service. Folks don't exactly have "Lo-Fi Beats To Redline And Chill To" any more; if they want to listen in on whatever tickles our random fancies, I say let them.

LENNON MERLO (V.O.)

While our conversation with Riley Riley was really really illuminating about some aspects of the Banjo Ghost's mystery, the technical information we were originally hoping for was... less than promising.

LENNON MERLO

So if you're responsible for sending the signals out there, you must know where they're coming from, right? You must be able to point us toward the original source.

RILEY RILEY

Sorry, but... no, not really, no. I know that they don't all come from one place, and I know that some of the transmissions came from within this array's sphere of influence, but only some, and I haven't exactly been keeping notes about which satellite sends me which transmission. And, I mean, but even if I was, I don't even know where half the things on that list are. Like, physically, apart from "near Neptune" I don't know if they're near a station, or in low orbit, or all the way out at one of the L's. And the flags we use don't include any information about the sender, so once it's off into the wider network it's impossible to say where it came from to begin with.

LENNON MERLO

But... okay, a few weeks ago, we had a conversation with someone about this content management server that YuKon used to use to monitor the network.

RILEY RILEY

Huh. Interesting. Who'd you talk to? One of the other array techs, maybe?

LENNON MERLO

No, uh, it was... it was actually a musician? Chima Baardson?

RILEY RILEY

Really? Oh shit, oh god, I loved
Fever Season's first album. That's
really cool, actually.

LENNON MERLO

Yeah, it kinda was.

But this server's whole job was to
sit on the network, monitor the
contents of transmissions, and
track down the sender so YuKon
could harass them if they found
something it didn't like. If YuKon
could do that, surely it must be
possible to do the same kind of
thing for the Banjo Ghost, right?

RILEY RILEY

Well, um, okay, so, sure, it was
sort of possible for YuKon to do
that, sometimes, but that's
because YuKon had YuKon-owned
hardware, software, or both on
more than half of the
communication nodes in the system,
including all the major relays.
When they could trace a message
back to its origin, it was because
they'd had eyes on every jump that
message took along the way. And
that's when it worked at all,
which it frequently didn't. Dang
things blocked YuKon's own
broadcasts as often as they did
unauthorized ones.

LENNON MERLO

I see. Is there... Is there
anything you could give us that
might help us track the source
down? Anyone you know of who might
still have even some of that kind
of capability?

RILEY RILEY

I don't know of anybody who would,
no. We relay techs deliberately

don't have that kind of ability, because we don't want there to be a temptation to use it, either for us or for someone who might want to coerce us into using it for them.

Huh. The one thing I could give you would be the transmission flags we've been using. The identifiers are hidden in the transmissions' formatting data, so they're invisible to most folks' receivers, but if you did manage to find someone with some fraction of the kind of subnet that YuKon had, they might be able to use those flags to pull the signal you're looking for out of the noise. Give you some kind of direction, maybe.

LENNON MERLO

Thanks. It's something, I guess.

RILEY RILEY

No problem. I hope it ends up being helpful.

Oh, um, sorry, and for any of my fellow technicians, who will be listening, and who might be displeased with me for sharing that information: by the time GPB airs any of this conversation, I promise you that we will have had a conversation about this and come up with a new and sneakier set of flags and tags, so don't worry. I've already got some ideas. Nobody will be able to use the codes to tie anything that's out there back to any of, of us.

LENNON MERLO

Uhh... sure, sure. And I promise not to do anything funny with them either.

RILEY RILEY
See? No funny business.
Everything's golden, yay!

Wayfaring Stranger fades back in.

LENNON MERLO (V.O.)
I'm honestly not sure if this
conversation left me with more
questions than I had before or
not. If the Ghost wasn't
responsible for sending their own
signal out across the redline
network... did they even know it
was happening? Did they pick up
their own broadcasts, reflected
back to them? If their original
signal was just a low-range
transmission and wasn't meant to
go out to everyone, who was it
meant for? And if they were at all
like these array technicians...
would they even want to be found?

The last line of Wayfaring Stranger plays, and the song
ends.

Outro music plays.

LENNON MERLO (V.O.)
Next time: we go somewhere even I
never expected.

ETIENNE
Amity Archer was a lover of poetry
and a poet herself, and many of
the Peregrination's most
dearly-held traditions have had
music or verse at the heart of
them.

LENNON MERLO (V.O.)
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Lennon Merlo, and edited and
produced by Lennon Merlo and Jax
Abrahams.

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