

Life with Althaar

Episode 11: The Merciless Errand

Draft 2.2, Recording Script, 10/6/19 - John & Lex (draft 2, BAJ)

Theme music.

ANNOUNCER

Gemini CollisionWorks presents...

Life With Althaar!

Episode 11:

The Merciless Errand

The Central Promenade of the Fairgrounds. Hustle and bustle. The p.a. system activates:

WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS-BOT

Attention all residents and visitors. This is your recreation director-bot. I have the distinct privilege to announce that The Fairgrounds' highly-anticipated annual Inter-Species Scavenger Hunt is at last upon us. Please be advised that both the Central Promenade and the first 3 floors of the Upper AND Lower concourses will be considered fair game for participants once the festivities commence. Non-participants: consult HECNET for alternate routes, or be consumed by the whimsical mayhem. That is all.

A door opens, and JOHN's footsteps and ALTHAAR's hideous appendage-steps can be heard as they exit the shuttle station.

TERMINAL VOICE

You are now entering the Central Promenade.

ALTHAAR

--And that is when Dave and room-mate Z'Wizzlinarp discovered that the Helpful Dessert Lady had said "cheese-CAKE," and not "cheese-steak!" And then the televisual screen played the Noise of Much Laughter, and Althaar was pleased to participate! Oh! And then, in episode seven-TEEN, room-mate /Dave was

JOHN

Yeah, I'm, uh, glad you like Z'wizzlinarp and Dave so much, Althaar, but you know I've seen all the episodes, right? I recommended the show to *you*. Also, if you could never mention cheesesteaks again to me, that'd be great.

ALTHAAR

FriendJohn does not enjoy the cheese-steak? But they are a most celebrated Human dish!

JOHN

Well, I used to, but, uh... Listen, I don't really want to get into it, but you definitely shouldn't order one at Sammy's Whiches, ok?

ALTHAAR

Oh! But Althaar has savored on many occasions the most authentic Earth cheese-steak of Sammy! And the exudations of his delightful non-sapient companion Chee! (*grossed-out noise from JOHN*) But if FriendJohn believes this to be inadvisable, then Althaar will cease immediately!

JOHN

No, that's... uh, if Chee doesn't bother you, then... you do you, I guess.

ALTHAAR

Yes, Althaar is always doing Althaar as much as he possibly can! FriendJohn, it seems that the new blinder goggles Althaar has secured for you are functioning as intended. FriendJohn has not yet expelled fluids on his trip to the Central Promenade with Althaar! Indeed, FriendJohn has only made the noise of the oogy stomach once! It is a progress, yes?

JOHN

Yeah, they're working fine, thanks. I don't have any peripheral vision, but as long as I... OW!

Bonk as JOHN trips over something (someone, really).

TINY VOICE

Watch it, pal!

JOHN

Sorry!

ALTHAAR

Oh! Please excuse us, friend Bronsonian! The companion of Althaar is not perceiving you because of his vision-impeding device! May Althaar make amends?

TINY VOICE

Nah, forget it. (*muttering as they depart*) Every time with these clumsy bipeds...

JOHN

(*calling after them*) Sorry! (*back to ALTHAAR*) So, Althaar, what's the story with this "diplomatic mission" of yours? I thought you were just here to study Humans. How'd you get roped into this? Is it, like, a life-or-death situation, or, what are we talking about here?

ALTHAAR

It is most perilous, FriendJohn, yes! Althaar must congeal all of his charisma together into one roiling, glutinous mass in order to ensure the success of this most weighty of missions!

JOHN

Do you... how do you congeal charisma?

ALTHAAR

Oh, Althaar has learned to congeal many things over the course of his studies! Does FriendJohn wish Althaar to prepare a list of/ all possible solidifications that--

JOHN

Uh, yeah, no that's... that's really okay. So, you're in charge of peace negotiations for these... people?

ALTHAAR

Yes! The Montaguians and the Capuloids have been locked in eternal quarrel since the previous Veronal equinox! But they have at long last agreed to hold discussion here in Human territory! So their Iltorian friends have requested intervention of Althaar! That there may be negotiated a de-tente, and one day lasting peace will be achieved between their worlds!

JOHN

Well, if anyone can do it, Althaar, everyone tells me that you can.

ALTHAAR

FriendJohn's confidence is very appreciated! Althaar has a great quantity of the nerves, as this will be a most delicate negotiation indeed! The contention bone is that both the Montaguians and the Capuloids lay claim to a most precious energy source, the Star Cross, able to generate enough aeon flux to keep their warp cores at maximum operational capacity for the next two thousand metristals!

JOHN

I, uh, understood "precious" and "energy source." So, they're fighting over some kind of generator, is that the upshot?

ALTHAAR

Indeed, FriendJohn, many many Capuloids and Montaguians have been shot up over the course of this unfortunate hostility! It is a great sorrow that Iltor has been unable to prevent these upshootings.

JOHN

Er... right. So, who has this Star Cross now?

ALTHAAR

Althaar does! The Star Cross was long ago en-trusted to Iltor as a condition of the Twenty Eons' Peace. And so, when it was agreed that Althaar would host the renegotiations this day, the Star Cross was given to the keeping of Althaar! This is a very great honor for an Iltorian who has yet to achieve even a second-name! Although it is true that Althaar is the only Iltorian here in Human space, so the options open to Iltor were not many. But Althaar is very much hoping to reward the trust his people have shown in him! Oh, the honor and trust give Althaar a pleasant tingling sensation in his left pneumothoracic cloaca! *(happy burbling)*

JOHN

Ugh... So, hang on, we've had a priceless alien artifact sitting around in our apartment?

ALTHAAR

Oh no, FriendJohn! Nothing so priceless as the Star Cross could be secured anywhere but the Human Exchange Concourse Office for the Protection and Holding of Invaluable Things!

JOHN

Oh right, the HECOPHIT.

ALTHAAR

AND! Althaar believes--and his friends on Iltor are agreeing!--that he has at last formulated a solution that will allow the Star Cross to be shared by both houses!

JOHN

Both houses?

ALTHAAR

Ah! Althaar is mis-speaking. Not both... All! Yes, Althaar is meaning all houses on both the planet Montague and the moon Capulet will be able to have benefit of the Star Cross. Also apartments. And temporary housing structures. But, yes, FriendJohn! If the Montaguians and the Capuloids can be brought to agreement that their precious Star Cross may be shared, Althaar anticipates he will make the successful renegotiating of the Mercutian CEESE-Fire of 2207! Perhaps even a treaty of true and lasting peace! If not, all of Althaar's most fervent congealings will have been in vain. But enough speaking of the activities of Althaar! What is this package that FriendJohn intends to retrieve? Has FriendJohn perhaps ordered a new Ottoman for the Turkish bath?

JOHN

No, uh, you'd keep an Ottoman in the living room, Althaar, not the bath.

ALTHAAR

FriendJohn, Althaar has a confusion. Would it not be more /appropriate--

JOHN

Yeah, I... I get where you're going, but no. I actually bought us a pet.

ALTHAAR

Oh! A pet! As people are saying to Althaar that FriendJohn is! This is the most intriguing of news!

JOHN

Wh... who says I'm your pet?

ALTHAAR

Has FriendJohn perhaps obtained a Sia-MEESE? Oh! Or another of the Dog-Cow hybrids that FriendJohn was keeping on Earth?

JOHN

It was, uh, an English Bulldog. Yeah, no--I thought we'd start out with something smaller, so I got us a goldfish.

ALTHAAR

FLUEEBELBLELLEGGHGH!!! Exuberance! Was FriendJohn knowing that Althaar is fluent in gold-fish?

JOHN

Of course you are. Uh, no, I wasn't aware of that. Or that that was a thing. But I'm sure you two will have plenty to talk about.

ALTHAAR

When FriendJohn meets this gold-fish, please to tell them that Althaar wishes to say, "blpblpblp!" (*the noise Frank Black makes when the fish speaks in Where is My Mind*)

JOHN

Will do.

ALTHAAR

Oh, no, this is incorrect! Althaar did not mean to use the past participle. Althaar meant to say, "blpblpblp-bp!"

JOHN

Got/ it.

ALTHAAR

Always Althaar is having difficulty with the subjunctive! Althaar must make the "brushing up" when he has a free moment!

TRAVEL HUB VOICE

You are now entering the Deosil Travel Hub--access to docking arms Fehu through Kaunan, and Inbound Freight Processing. Have a pleasant and relaxing cycle.

The hubbub of aliens and travellers becomes less mall-like and more bus-station-like as we move into the Travel Hub area.

ALTHAAR

And now Althaar must part ways with FriendJohn if he is to make it to the Ansuz receiving area to welcome the representatives. Althaar is wishing FriendJohn great success in his mission of goldfish retrieval!

JOHN

Thanks, Althaar. Good luck with your mission of staving off interplanetary warfare.

ALTHAAR

Thanking you, FriendJohn!

ALTHAAR heads off. JOHN joins the longggggg line for commercial package retrieval, perhaps practicing his goldfish. On the other side of the freight area, someone is trying to get a llama into a packing crate. It is not going well.

JOHN

Eesh. This is going to take forever. (*a distant camellid shriek*) ...Is that a llama?

STEM-BRO IN FRONT OF JOHN ON LINE 1

Nah, bro, that's an alpaca.

STEM-BRO IN FRONT OF JOHN ON LINE 2

Heh. You said "packa".

Obnoxious bro-y giggling.

JOHN

(more to himself than to the bros)

Why is the line always this long? It's never not ridiculous. I come up here at three in the morning, there's a line. Is there like, a scheduling subroutine set up to make sure they're never accidentally not understaffed?

STEM-BRO 1

No shness. We've been in line for like, an hour, dude.

STEM-BRO 2

When we come back, there's gonna be a lot of changes.

STEM-BRO 1

And flager-bombs.

JOHN

...okay cool?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(fronds shaking)

Oh Johnny! Johnny!

JOHN

Oh, hi Mrs. F. Whatcha got there?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, I joined this mulch-of-the-month-like-interval club a while back. It's been a joy so far! Last month was anti-matter mulch! This month is red mulch! Very exotic!

JOHN

Sounds like... fun?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

You don't know the half of it! And what brings you down to Inbound Freight, dear boy?

JOHN

Oh, I'm picking up a goldfish.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Ooh! Sounds expensive! You must be doing quite well for yourself these days!

JOHN

Oh. No, it's just a...n orange fish.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh! One of those false advertising dealies, eh?

JOHN

...Yes. Let's go with that. So... mulch, huh?...

STEM BRO 1

More like DULCH amirite?

The STEM-bros laugh uproariously at this non-joke.

STEM BRO 2

Nice, bro! That's hilarious. I'm serious, we need to like, start a vlog...

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Don't get me started on mulch, Johnny-Boy.

JOHN

Okay.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

There are seventeen distinct categories of organic mulch, you know, although of course they're making great strides with inorganic too, these days, but I do think there's still quite a way to go before there's any real competition! But any pot in a mudslide, as they say! I did try quite a piquant crusher dust a few years back that wasn't half bad! But organic is still the way to go. You've got straw, leaves, bark, not to mention...

JOHN sighs as we fade down on MRS. F, and we move over to another line in the package pickup area. The llama-wrangling is more clearly audible.

SHIPPING BOT

The tracking system says your delivery is on its way, Gesin (*pron. "Geh-seen"*), and should arrive within the next twenty-eight hours. You'll receive a notification once it clears Customs.

HAPLESS CUSTOMER

But I already *got* the notification! It said they tried to deliver it today, which they didn't, by the way, because I was at home *specifically* waiting for this package, and my doorbell never rang, and I also checked the doorbell and it's working just fine, so you tell me what's going on there, although I have my suspicions, but anyway the notification said I could pick it up here. So please, just give me my package!

SHIPPING BOT

It should arrive tomorrow, Gesin. *(raising their voice, to the llama-wrangler)* Ma'am, I already told you, you're going to need a livestock crate for that!

LLAMA-WRANGLER

(in the middle distance)

I'm not paying extra for no livestock crate!

HAPLESS CUSTOMER

It should *not* arrive tomorrow, because it's already here!

SHIPPING BOT

(to the llama-wrangler)

Please, ma'am! At least go up a size!

LLAMA-WRANGLER

No!

Truculent llama noises as she redoubles her attempts.

SHIPPING BOT

Our records show your package still in transit. Are you sure you have the right tracking number?

HAPLESS CUSTOMER

YES I have the right tracking-- Look, it's right there! I can see it! It's that blue crate there! All you have to do is walk over there, pick it up, and bring it over to the counter! Please!

SHIPPING BOT

GalaxBudget Shipping Services thanks you for your patience, Gesin. Your delivery is on its way and should arrive within the next twenty-eight hours. If you'd like more updates, you can use your tracking number to follow the progress of your delivery with our convenient GalaxTrax software!

HAPLESS CUSTOMER

It's. Right. THERE.

SHIPPING BOT

And with the latest update, you'll have access to our new GalaxTrax Moments™ feature, which will allow you to share your GalaxBudget Shipping Story with other satisfied customers!

HAPLESS CUSTOMER

(storming off)

Aaaaaaaagh!

The SHIPPING BOT chuckles quietly to itself. In the background, both the llama and its wrangler are starting to tire.

SHIPPING BOT

Next!

ANOTHER HAPLESS CUSTOMER

Hi, yeah, I ordered this Retroactive Pot last week, and for some reason I got charged for two extra dimensions? But it was a standard four-dimensional shipping container, so, can I like, appeal the fee, or...

We move back over to JOHN's line, where MRS. F is still holding forth.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Now, cocoa bean hulls are lightweight, easy to handle, and appropriate for all planting areas. But you'll have to pay out the stomata for them! And *that's* why most guides will still point you to the hardwood, despite the vulgar name. But oh! Looks like you're up, dearie! You enjoy that silverfish, now!

JOHN

No, it's-- ...Thanks, Mrs. F. Have a great cycle.

CHRISTOPHER WALKEN-BOT

Hello... If... your package... Is.... In the loading dock.... I could get.. it... for you. If you have... your... slip.

JOHN

Thanks, it's right here.

CHRISTOPHER WALKEN-BOT

Hold on... let me... read... the numbers... to make sure... I can... procure... the right package.

JOHN

I think I've figured out why the wait was so long...

CHRISTOPHER WALKEN-BOT

First number... is four. What a beautiful /number.

JOHN

Uh, so I'm actually in kind of a rush, if you wouldn't mind...

CHRISTOPHER WALKEN-BOT

Okay... okay... no need... to give me the third degree... burns.... A package... will be handed over... to you, John B, who I've never seen before in my life.... This gold fish.

JOHN

Great, thanks.

WALKEN-BOT retrieves a heavy box and plops it on the counter.

JOHN

This... seems like a lot of box for one fish?

JOHN opens the package.

JOHN

Okay, yeah, this is definitely not a fish.

PARROT HEAD 1

Awk! And you are definitely not a success in life.

JOHN

This is definitely a... rude?... three headed space lizard parrot. Okay, how do I return this?

CHRISTOPHER WALKEN-BOT

Well, now... that you've opened the box, I can't... take it... back. You'll need to take it... to... Outbound Freight... Processing.

JOHN

Ok, where's that?

CHRISTOPHER WALKEN-BOT

In the Widdershins... Travel Hub... on the other... side... of the Central Promenade.

JOHN

Great.

CHRISTOPHER WALKEN-BOT

And I have... to let you know... that the Promenade... is hosting... the Inter-Species... Scavenger... Hunt ... for this cycle... So you'll probably want... to go... around.

JOHN

I was just in line for like half an hour! I had to sit through a lecture about 28 different kinds of mulch! And I didn't retain any of it.

CHRISTOPHER WALKEN-BOT

And I should also... warn you... that... the Outbound... Freight Office... will be closing... in... {#} minutes [REAL-TIME ALTHAAR EPISODE!]... for the paintball... tournament. I'm... sixth... in the league.

JOHN

Congratulations, I guess. I really can't just go through you?

CHRISTOPHER WALKEN-BOT

Those are... the rules... of interstellar post... Although, if you'd like... to file a... complaint... you could... take this slip here...

JOHN

Yeah, I will, actually!

CHRISTOPHER WALKEN-BOT

...And wear it... up your ass...

JOHN

Never mind.

PARROT HEAD 1

Awk! What kind of meat-head can't even pick up a package without whiffing it?

JOHN

That's a...really specific thing you've learned to say. Ok, let's see... where am I?

TRAVEL HUB VOICE

You are in the Deosil Travel Hub.

JOHN

That thing can hear me when I mutter to myself?

TRAVEL HUB VOICE

Yes.

JOHN

Huh. ...So if I want to stay out of the Central Promenade, then... Right, if I take the Kaf local elevator to Upper 1, then jog around the atrium to Vav, I should be able to get another local back up to the Hub. *(sigh)* Whose genius idea was it to hold a scavenger hunt smack dab in the busiest part of the station?

Running hoofbeats approach.

SCAVENGER 1

Hey, bud, you a Human?

JOHN

Uh, well, that's kind of a complicated question...

SCAVENGER 1

Yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah. We're on this scavenger hunt, and we need to get a holo of a Human doing something called "The Worm." Any idea what that means?

JOHN

Heh. Yeah, it's a... it's a dance move.

SCAVENGER 2

Sweet! Think you could do the Worm for us?

JOHN

Uh... I'd rather not.

SCAVENGER 1

C'mon, please? We get a fifty-credit gift certificate to the Electric Egg if we win!

JOHN

Uh...

SCAVENGER 2

C'mon! What if we shoot you a couple credits? It's only take a few seconds!

JOHN

You know what? Sure. Why not.

Sound of JOHN struggling to do the worm.

SCAVENGER 1

Oh yeah! Work those dance moves, Human! Or Human equivalent!

SCAVENGER 2

That *is* worm-like. Or maybe it's just something about his face or personality. At any rate, I can see where the name came from!

JOHN

Oof. Alright. Got what you needed?

SCAVENGER 1

And then some!

SCAVENGER 2

Thanks, buddy!

Commerce noise as one of them shoot JOHN his two credits with their phone. They run off, whooping with excitement.

JOHN

Well, at least someone in this place is enjoying themselves.

Elevator door opening.

ELEVATOR VOICE

Welcome to the elevator. (*doors shut*) Please indicate your desired concourse and floor.

JOHN

Upper Concourse, Floor 1.

ELEVATOR VOICE

Thank you. Now departing for Upper 1.

The elevator begins moving. The elevator continues moving for a while.

JOHN

Uh... shouldn't we be there by now?

PARROT HEAD 1

Your sense of time is matched only by your sense of fashion.

JOHN

...Thanks?

PARROT HEAD 1

That wasn't a compliment.

JOHN

Who the hell chose your vocabulary?

PARROT HEAD 1

Oh, are we still clinging to the feeble hope that my remarks are the rote repetitions of a dumb animal? I guess that makes sense, why wouldn't you want to be among your own kind?

JOHN

Great. Of course when I try to get a nice, relaxing, QUIET pet fish, I end up with an evil feathered mini-hydra that hates me. I don't suppose your other heads are any nicer.

PARROT HEAD 2

Oh, I am. Your sense of fashion is top notch. Love the ironic... I want to say... "norm-core"?

JOHN

Uh, sure, let's go with that.

ELEVATOR VOICE

Now arriving at: The Bridge.

JOHN

The *Bridge*?

Elevator door opens.

FRALL

--and they refuse to commence any negotiations until the Star Cross has been recovered.

COMMANDER

Well, duh. Isn't it the source of energy for their entire planet, or something?

FRALL

That's a somewhat reductive analysis, but a close enough approximation, yes.

COMMANDER

How did the thing go missing from the HECOPHIT in the first place?

FRALL

If you'll take a look at the schematics of the Fairgrounds as it was first built, sir, you can see that in its original configuration, that facility was intended as a locker room for visitors to the Galactic Fair to store their flip-flops and fanny packs.

COMMANDER

Typical. Are you telling me that we kept an invaluable symbol of interplanetary peace locked in the same place where I keep my collection of vintage pool noodles? Send someone up there immediately to look for any evidence of /a break-in. And then--

FRALL

Commander, before you continue any further, you should be aware that we're not alone.

JOHN

(who's been muttering shitshitshit to himself quietly and trying to encourage the elevator to change floors)

Uh... hi! Hi there. I was just trying to get to floor one and the elevator brought me up here? For some reason? Sorry. FLOOR ONE!

ELEVATOR VOICE

Thank you. Now departing for Upper 1.

Elevator doors close. No movement sound.

ELEVATOR VOICE

Now arriving at the Bridge.

JOHN

Goddammit.

Doors open again.

TORIANNA

--Just so as long as they don't know how valuable a thing it is that they're looking for, we should be able to keep the scavenger hunters searching for the Star Cross without anyone being the wiser!

FRALL

I've already added it to their digital lists, between "a Human sneaker" and "over the shoulder boulder holder." I'd also suggest increasing the value of the prize to add some urgency.

JOHN

Uh...

TORIANNA

What the hell?

JOHN

Sorry, I don't know what's going on.

FRALL does their information retrieval shimmer.

FRALL

A priority override has been deployed by Sanitation on floors Lower 21 through 33 and Upper 1 through 16, due to vent-biter activity. Any elevator requests to this area will be redirected, and all shuttles will be skipping the affected stops until further notice. I would advise you to take the stairs up to Vav 59--you should be able to catch a local elevator to whatever non-interdicted level is nearest to your destination, and proceed via stair and/or escalator from there. Careful on those escalators, now.

JOHN

Great, thanks. *(as he moves through the Bridge)* Sorry, sorry, so sorry.

Stair door opens. Footsteps on stairs.

PARROT HEAD 1

Awk. Those your supervisors?

JOHN

Not...really. They're the Commander and Lieutenant Commander of the Fairgrounds, so I guess they're kind of everyone's supervisors? But I actually work for WS-- uh, for an independant corporate entity. I honestly think I have way too much interaction with command staff for a maintenance subcontractor, but...

PARROT HEAD 1

Still, you really made a fool of yourself in front of em just now, huh?

JOHN

I mean. It's not my fault the elevator's been re-routed, so--

PARROT HEAD 2

Now, now. It seems like they understand his special circumstance and are very accepting, all things considered.

JOHN

My special...?

PARROT HEAD 2

Oh, aren't you... don't they know you're on work release?

JOHN

On WHAT?

PARROT HEAD 2

Oh, I just assumed. From your clothes. And the way you talk. And your, you know, ghastly pallor. That you were imprisoned away from society for a long time?

JOHN

I... think I like the mean bird lizard head more.

PARROT HEAD 1

We're not a bird-lizard, chump threads.

PARROT HEAD 2

Or a mini hydra.

PARROT HEAD 1

We... are a cockathreece.

JOHN

Okay, fine. Well, whatever you are, learn some manners or I'm chucking you down a ventilation shaft.

PARROT HEAD 1

Ooh, what's down there? An even schlubbier maintenance man?

JOHN

You don't want to know.

PARROT HEAD 2

Honestly, if it gets us out of this cage--

PARROT HEAD 3

It would be a dream come true.

PARROT HEAD 1

He must mean it. Harry over there never talks.

They reach the next floor and exit the stairway, to the approaching whirr of little bot wheels. A gaggle of (co-ed) Bot Scouts roll up to JOHN and block his path.

BOT-SCOUT 1

Sir? Sir? Excuse me sir.

JOHN

Oh, what now?

BOT-SCOUT 1

Would you like to buy some cookies? They're not the tracking kind, I swear!

BOT-SCOUT 2

No, siw. Just fuwwy edibwe cookies, fweshwy-baked this cyewe fwom a humbwe industwial culinawy factowy wun by a mom-and-pop facewess cowpowate behemof.

BOT-SCOUT 3

We've got cookies for every digestive system on the station. What are you, a Human?

JOHN

I... yeah?

BOT-SCOUT 1

Okay, for you we got DOS-Si-/Does,

JOHN

I don't want any cookies, /I'm just-

BOT-SCOUT 1

Caramel Chocolate Microchip,

JOHN

-trying to get /to-

BOT-SCOUT 1

Silicon /Smiles,

JOHN

The elevator.

BOT-SCOUT 1

And Trefoils.

JOHN

Trefoils? Gross. Don't you have like, Thin Mints or Samoas?

BOT-SCOUT 3

We... stopped making those, sir. After... the Troubles.

JOHN

Oh. Well, sorry. I don't think I want any of those cookies, then.

BOT-SCOUT 2

Oh, pwease, siw?

BOT-SCOUT 3

We're raising money to send our troop on a trip to the Uncanny Valley.

JOHN

Well, that sounds really great. Good luck with that. But I--

BOT-SCOUT 1

Hey, mister, cool bird. Does Polly want a cookie?

PARROT HEAD 1

Polly does not.

JOHN

Aw, look, kids. Bots. Kid-bots. I'm in kind of a hurry right now, ok? I don't have time for this. Do you know where the elevator--

BOT-SCOUT 2

I'm afwaid we awen't pwogwammed to take no fow an answeu.

JOHN

I'm... I'm sorry?

BOT-SCOUT 1

You should think very seriously about buying at least one box, mister. Very seriously.

JOHN

Ok, uh, someone really needs to have a talk with you kids about the fine line between salesbeingship and menace, but that's not going to be me, because like I said, I'm really busy. So please, just get out of my way--

BOT-SCOUT 3

I'm sorry, John. I'm afraid I can't do that.

BOT-SCOUT 2

It would be a shame if someone wewe to bwweak one of youw fwagiwe Human patewwas, mistew.

JOHN

Jesus. Uh. I'll get the Trefoils, I guess.

BOT-SCOUT 1

That's what we thought.

JOHN

I guess can use them to... absorb oil spills, or something.

BOT SCOUT 3

You should get a box for your Iltorian roommate, too. That would be nice. You like being nice, don't you?

JOHN

Uh... I wanna get out of here, so... sure? (*remembering!*) As long as it wasn't made near any chocolate.

BOT-SCOUT 1

Take the Hashtag-alongs.

JOHN

You're sure they're safe for Iltorians?

BOT-SCOUT 2

Of couse. We'd never dweam of huwting an Iltowian. We've not monstews.

BOT-SCOUT 3

It's on the up and up. (*bloop of commerce*) Pleasure doing business with you.

BOT-SCOUT 2

Considew youwsewf wucky.

They roll away. Zoom!

JOHN

Jeez. That was... unsettling.

PARROT HEAD 1

I agree. It's truly frightening that you can't even defend yourself against children.

PARROT HEAD 2

Also, I've changed my mind. Polly does want a cookie.

JOHN

Feel free to help yourself to the Trefoils.

PARROT HEAD 2

I said a cookie, not sawdust.

PARROT HEAD 1

Yeah, nobody likes those things. Oh! Something you have in common!

JOHN

Yeah, fine. Uh... I think there's an elevator down this way...

We hear H.F. and GEORGE FOREMAN-BOT as he walks past them down the hallway. The conversation fades in at the top and out at the bottom.

GEORGE FOREMAN-BOT

SOPHISTRY! Man, you're really burnin' my grill!

H.F.

I TOLD you, it's 15-point-nine-repeating, which is *under* sixteen, which makes it your problem! So just replace the damn wire so I can get on with my day!

GEORGE FOREMAN-BOT

15-point-nine repeating *is* sixteen, buddy! You're really gonna pull that old dodge? Don't make me get Cesar Chavez-Bot down here. (*spots JOHN*) Oh-ho! Backup is it? Nice try, but Johnny here's a Probationary Robot Union member now! B, tell your supervisor to quit grinding my brake shoes and stop shemping his jobs off on the Union!

JOHN

I, uh...

H.F.

Now wait a second, this young man is *my* Probationary Under-Assistant, and according to *our* airtight contract, he doesn't have to take any crap from anyone outside WSS (*WSS jingle*) Corporate oh for the love of tiny green gherkins!

FOREMAN-BOT

Oh, so now you're a contract expert?

JOHN

...I'm, uh, yeah, I'm just gonna find the elevator...

H.F.

(*deep fucking sigh*) Well until we get this settled, will you put the thing on Shabbas-mode so neither of us gets reamed by the high-priority floors, *please?*

They fade out.

PARROT HEAD 2

So I was right! You are on probation! I don't know why you bothered to lie about it.

PARROT HEAD 1

What kind of pathetic nothingburger lies to his own pet? Streez.

JOHN

It's not that kind of probation. Can you just--

PARROT HEAD 2

There's no need to be ashamed, John, I'm sure everyone recognizes how horribly difficult it is for you to fit in with a society that can't help but cruelly reject you at every turn.

JOHN

Yeah, great, thanks. Oh! Finally! An elevator!

Elevator doors open.

ELEVATOR VOICE

Welcome to the elevator.

Doors shut.

ELEVATOR VOICE

Please indicate your desired concourse and floor.

PARROT HEAD 1

Awk! The Bridge!

JOHN

Oh, *come* on!

Doors open.

COMMANDER

--which means that if it comes down to it, we'll have to be prepared to sacrifice at least 60% of our petty officers to... yes, John B? Was there something you needed?

JOHN

Uh, sorry, there was, uh--it was the parrot. Well, it's not a parrot, /really, it's--

FRALL

John. Just take the service elevator.

JOHN

Right. (*beat*) Uh, sorry, excuse me, it's, uh... where is it?

COMMANDER

Oh, by Simone's variegated whiskers! Go out to the corridor, it's the big green button on the left.

JOHN

Thanks. Sorry. Sorry. Again, it was the bird that said "Bridge," obviously I wouldn't--

PARROT HEAD 2

Awk!

JOHN

No, it--it talks. I swear.

PARROT HEAD 1

(whistles)

COMMANDER

Of... course it does, John. Now go away.

Door whoosh as JOHN leaves the bridge.

JOHN

“Just take the service elevator.” Yeah, sure. Would have been nice if someone had told me there was a service elevator, some time in, oh, the last several *months*.

He presses the button. We hear janky metal chains rattling.

JOHN

Is th... how old is this thing?

PARROT HEAD 1

About ten years older than you look.

JOHN

You be quiet.

Doors opening. Footsteps on the metal elevator floor. Doors closing. Elevator starts moving, jankily.

JOHN

Wait--I didn't press anything!

Elevator sounds for a long time. They're going all the way to the Lower Concourse. Over this:

JOHN

Ohhhhhh. Shabbas mode. Well that's inconvenient.

PARROT HEAD 1

Wow. Anti-Semitic much?

JOHN

What? Of course not!

PARROT HEAD 2

Yeah! From the look of your complexion, I'm sure you hate all minorities equally!

JOHN

...I promise you, the category of beings I hate is very small, and is largely confined to this elevator. ...Isn't Shabbas-mode supposed to make it stop at every floor? This is taking forever.

PARROT HEAD 1

Try travelling in a *cage* in a *box* by way of an interstellar postal shipment!

JOHN

Ok, I guess that's fair.

PARROT HEAD 2

When you can FLY!

JOHN

What were you doing in the inventory of an interplanetary mail-order pet store anyway? You don't seem like something *anyone* would want as a pet.

PARROT HEAD 1

Ah! A tragic and edifying tale! When we were tiny cockathreeslets, we were orphaned in the mountains of our home planet Cuttlebone Seven.

PARROT HEAD 2

We were discovered by a travelling band of auto-harp merchants who took us to the nearest planetoid to trade for credits!

PARROT HEAD 1

We hadn't yet acquired our adult plumage, so we couldn't yet fly. There was no escape.

PARROT HEAD 2

The merchants sold us to a brothel, where we were displayed in the drawing room, able to observe the... smorgasbord of debauchery practiced by the many lascivious travellers to our new home planet, Rawhide.

PARROT HEAD 1

Whether we wanted to or not.

JOHN

Explains your vocabulary. And your attitude.

PARROT HEAD 2

We became fond of our owners, but dreamed always of freedom.

PARROT HEAD 3

Freedom!

PARROT HEAD 1

Not yet, Harry. Maybe not ever.

PARROT HEAD 2

Imagine having the ability to fly, yet being confined to a cramped, unpleasant enclosure, seemingly built for the sole purpose of crushing your dreams.

JOHN

Wow. I... don't have to imagine. Well, I mean, I can't fly, but I /am trapped--

PARROT HEAD 1

OH HOW WE LONGED to escape.

PARROT HEAD 2

But we remained in our cage. For though evolution has endowed the cockathreecce with many gifts, opposable thumbs are not among them.

PARROT HEAD 1

Then, two months ago, the brothel was raided, when the Rawhidians' new, more puritanical regime declared it "unsavory to the point of excess, and excessive to the point of being bad."

PARROT HEAD 2

We were shoved in this smaller cage, then a box, then a *ship*, and the first thing we saw after two weeks of darkness--

PARROT HEAD 1

Was your ugly punim.

*Elevator doors open. Sounds of approaching footsteps off in the distance.
ALTHAAR's voice slowly getting nearer...*

JOHN

(sotto voce during the following)

Oh no, where is he, which way are they coming from, crap crap crap *etc.*

ALTHAAR

--and thus Althaar believes it can be held equally in usufruct by your two wonderful worlds!

MONTAGUIAN EMISSARY

But, friend Iltorian, as ingenious as this plan be, and as charming and handsome as thou art, we must regretfully question whether the Capuloids will adhere to their end of the bargain. Let us forget not their shattered promises in dealing with the Apothecarium mines, /and the ensuing--

CAPULOID EMISSARY

Oh, thou *wouldst* bring that up. Trust a Montaguian to only remember something when it's convenient to them. And I hope thou dost not forget what /started the--

ALTHAAR

Please do not be casting the aspersions, gentlebeings! Althaar assures both the Capuloid and Montaguian emissaries that Althaar believes them both to be alike in dignity! But, to alleviate such concerns, Althaar has implemented a trigger inside of this contract which he believes-- Oh! Greeting, FriendJohn!

JOHN vomits.

ALTHAAR

Oh! Distress! Althaar is very sorry, FriendJohn! Althaar will compress himself behind this support beam until FriendJohn is recovered! Althaar is alerting the Fairgrounds cleaning-bot corps! (*bloop*) Please do not be discommoded, gentlebeings! ...This is Althaar's dear Human friend John B! He and Althaar are room-mates!

MONTAGUIAN EMISSARY

I say! Is he alright?

JOHN

I'm... I'll be fine. I'm okay. Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt your, uh, conference. I'll, uh... I'm just trying to get back to the Travel Hub, and it's been-- Where are we?

ALTHAAR

You have arrived at Mem 41, FriendJohn!

JOHN

What the hell? How'd I end up in the Lower Concourse? This elevator was supposed to be on Shabbas mode!

ALTHAAR

Ah, yes! It is the Ramanujan Sabbath!

JOHN

The who now?

ALTHAAR

Oh, the Ramanuji are a people of great perspicacity, FriendJohn! And much devoted to their spiritual and mathematical practices! Indeed, there is little distinction between the two! On their Sabbath-days, the only activities that may be undertaken are those that can be described with prime numbers.

JOHN

...Great. I guess I'll just wait for this rust box to automatically take me to, uh...

PARROT HEAD 2

37.

PARROT HEAD 1

Dummy.

ALTHAAR

Althaar is wishing safe travels to his dear friend John! Althaar apologizes again for the disruption, gentlebeings. As Althaar was saying, , the contract assures mutual cooperation by establishing the penalties for tardiness in the sharing of the Star Cross, in the form of massive donations to the opposing home worlds' many charitable organizations!

CAPULOID EMISSARY

Oh, I say! What a splendid idea!

MONTAGUIAN EMISSARY

Truly my cup doth runneth over!

CAPULOID EMISSARY

Then perhaps thou shouldst get a larger cup.

MONTAGUIAN EMISSARY

Bite me.

Doors close.

PARROT HEAD 2

(re: Althaar) He seemed nice.

JOHN

He is. Super nice. *(awkward pause)* So, 1 is a prime number, right? That's good... eventual news.

Doors open on floor 37.

SCAVENGER HUNTER 1

A HUMAN!

SCAVENGER HUNTER 2

GET'M!

JOHN

Oh, hey guys-- oof!

Sounds of JOHN being tackled by some people.

JOHN

Aaigh!

SCAVENGER HUNTER 3

TAKE HIS SHOES!!

JOHN

Wait - oof - hey - ow - knock it off - ugh *(etc.)*

SCAVENGER HUNTER 1

Sorry mang, the prize is super valuable now.

SCAVENGER HUNTER 2

Free travel passes out of Human space!

SCAVENGER HUNTER 3

We can get the hell offa this dump!

JOHN

Ow! Hey!

SCAVENGER HUNTER 1

I got his left shoe!

SCAVENGER HUNTER 2

Is it a sneaker?

SCAVENGER HUNTER 1

Yeah!

SCAVENGER HUNTER 3

That's all we need - let's hoof it!

They literally hoof off. JOHN gasps for breath. The parrots laugh at him. Doors close. (Whenever JOHN walks from now to the end, he's only got one shoe on.)

JOHN

What (*gasp*) the (*gasp*) hell? (*wheeze*)

PARROT HEAD 1

Serves you right for wearing clothes, you prudish freak.

PARROT HEAD 2

I like his clothes. They're an efficient, economical way of concealing his hairy, shapeless body.

PARROT HEAD 1

You've got a point.

JOHN

They... only took one shoe. That's somehow worse than if they took both.

It's quiet for a second. Doors open on floor 31. A massive noisy battle is going on between the vent-biters and sanitation. Laser guns and metal screeching and alien shrieks and macho grunting and all that.

JOHN

Holy hell!

SANITATION WORKER 1

Cover me! Watch his back!

SANITATION WORKER 2

There's too many of them!

STELLA

The elevator! Ramirez--take cover behind that bulkhead and keep those little bastards back! Full auto! Fr'thollowarp, regroup and reload, then take over! And watch the ammo levels on the auto-guns in the auxiliary shaft! I've got an idea--hold this position and wait for my signal!

STELLA swings into the elevator on a zip line. Lands with a thud, followed by what we can only assume is an impressively dexterous landing roll.

STELLA

(panting) You shouldn't be here, civilian. Sanitation has this sector interdicted for a reason.

She smashes the "Close Doors" button on the elevator. Doors close.

JOHN

Yeah, I can see that. ...Oh, hey! It's you!

STELLA

Yup, It's me. Oh, hey! John B, right?

JOHN

Uh, yes! Yeah I... wasn't sure you'd remember me.

STELLA

You think I'd forget the only Human with the cojones to keep an Iltorian roommate? You're practically a legend down in the Tav 49 Day Room. Heads up!

JOHN

Oh my God!

We hear rasping noises and shrieks as a VENT-BITER busts its way into the elevator. STELLA casually breaks its neck during the following line:

STELLA

So, yeah, it's good to see you ughh--*CRACK*--again! Love the one-shoe look. Very European.

JOHN

Th... thanks. Did... did you just break that thing's neck with your bare hands?

STELLA

Sometimes you gotta go with the classics. *(she tosses the corpse aside)* So, listen, in about 12 seconds, these doors are gonna open. I don't know how many more of these jeckers might be out there, but I'm going to make a dash for the main intake vent, and you're going to want to pound that "Close Doors" button like your life depends on it. Well, not "like," I guess, more "because."

JOHN

Y...eah okay.

STELLA

3...2... (doors open) Good talking to you, John B!

She kicks open a vent on level 29 and scoots through it. JOHN mashes the "Close Doors" button. Doors close. Elevator moves. In the sudden quiet:

PARROT HEAD 2

She seemed nice.

JOHN

Did you see that? She just kicked open a vent and went sliding down it like in Brazil 5: Tuttle's Revenge! I can't believe she remembers me.

PARROT HEAD 1

Neither can we.

PARROT HEAD 2

Truly.

PARROT HEAD 1

She's out of your league.

PARROT HEAD 2

She's out of your planetary system. You're almost different species.

JOHN

I... can't argue with you there. Ok, let's get a move on before any vent-biters show up. Where are we? Ah, "Floor 23." I think we're okay taking the local elevator from here. But where...is it?

FIDORIAN 1

Excuse me! Are you lost? I am trained to assist those who cannot find their way! I have studied under the greatest navigators in the Fido system!

JOHN

Uh, yeah, I guess--I'm just trying to find an elevator that'll take me back towards the Travel Hub?

FIDORIAN 2

Oh! Oh! I know! I know the way! Please let me lead you there!

FIDORIAN 3

Yes! Please! Follow me!

FIDORIAN 1

Yes! Yes! Together we will lead you to the Travel Hub so that you may no longer be lost! Please follow us!

JOHN

Aw, thanks guys. You're so /helpf--

FIDORIAN 1

Please do not touch me while I am working.

JOHN

Oh, sorry.

FIDORIAN 1

When I am finished working, I will allow you to give me a pat on the head or a skritch behind the ear. Possibly the right ear, for it is itchy.

FIDORIAN 2

Please follow us!

FIDORIAN 3

Yes! Yes! Oh, this is exciting! Follow us!

FIDORIANS begin sniffing. Sounds of pawsteps/footsteps.

PARROT HEAD 2

Well, you can't accuse these creatures of being unhelpful.

PARROT HEAD 1

Why they're helping you, though... that's anyone's guess.

PARROT HEAD 2

They probably see how... disadvantaged he is. Spatially, of course.

PARROT HEAD 1

Among other things.

JOHN

If you don't stop this now, I'm putting a towel over your cage.

PARROT HEAD 3

The Darkness!

FIDORIANS

It is here! Here it is! The elevator! Oh boy! Oh boy! Etc.

JOHN

Thanks! Good boys!

FIDORIANS

Yes! Yes we are good boys! Yes we are yes we are! Good boys good boys! Yes! (*etc.*)

FIDORIAN 1

(pleasure noise as he is skritchd) Ah. Thank you for your skritches, wandering stranger. I wish you and your prisoner pleasant travels to your destination.

JOHN

Prisoner?

FIDORIAN 2

The small bird-lizard is your prisoner, are they not?

FIDORIAN 3

That is why you have placed them inside the crate of much shaming?

JOHN

Oh, no--it came this way from a pet store.

FIDORIAN 1

Pet store!

FIDORIAN 2

Pet store!

FIDORIAN 3

I don't like pet stores!

FIDORIAN 1

We were once almost sent to a pet store! They came after us with nets!

FIDORIAN 2

They, too, kept us in the Crates of Shame.

FIDORIAN 3

They put me inside of what they called a "Dog Par-Ka." I do not like this "Dog Par-Ka"

FIDORIAN 1

Not to mention what they intended for our testicles...

JOHN

Uh, well, it's been fun. Thanks again for the help. I, uh, apologize on behalf of Humanity. Gotta run!

ELEVATOR VOICE

(underneath JOHN's line)

Welcome to the elevator.

Elevator doors close.

JOHN

Streez.

ELEVATOR VOICE

Please indicate your desired concourse and floor.

JOHN

(to parrot) Don't you dare. *(to elevator)* Uh... Central Promenade.

ELEVATOR VOICE

That floor is unavailable at this time. Please make another selection.

JOHN

(sigh) Lower Concourse, Floor 1.

ELEVATOR VOICE

That floor is unavailable at this time. Please make another selection.

JOHN

Lower 2?

ELEVATOR VOICE

That floor is unavailable at/ this time. Plea--

JOHN

Lower 3.

ELEVATOR VOICE

That floor is /unavailable--

JOHN

Lower 4.

ELEVATOR VOICE

That/ floor--

JOHN

Lower 5!

ELEVATOR VOICE

Thank you. Now departing for Lower 5.

PARROT HEAD 1

Wow, is that the kind of creative problem-solving you use on the job? No wonder this place is falling apart.

JOHN

(very tired)

Please stop talking.

PARROT HEAD 1

Those dog-monsters are right, you know. Anyone who keeps a pet in a cage?

PARROT HEAD 2

Basically evil.

JOHN

I'm not trying to keep you at all! I'm trying to send you back!

PARROT VOICE 2

Or you could just open the latch and let us fly out of here.

PARROT HEAD 3

(suuuuper earnest and daunting)

You have a choice, John B.

JOHN

Yikes. *You* definitely need to stop talking.

*Doors open. Sounds of a meadow. Birds chirping, a lakeshore lapping, maybe.
Summer-on-the-Great-Lawn-y, people having a nice time.*

JOHN

...What the hell?

CHIP

Oh, hey John!

DEE

What's up, John?

XTOPPS

Johnny-O! Lay some derm on me, clutcher.

JOHN

What are you all doing down here?

CHIP

What, you think I just live in the bar? Like I don't have my own life? I guess we can't have any more picnics, gang. Pack it up!

JOHN

No, no, that's not what I meant, it's just... you're all here, together. Like... *everyone* from the Egg.

BUBBLES

It's called friendship, John.

JOHN

Now wait. YOU definitely live in the bar.

BUBBLES

I'm not Bubbles. I'm her twin sister, Dubbles.

JOHN

Oh! Sorry, uh-- Nice to meet you?

BUBBLES

Nah, I'm just messing with you. I'm Bubbles. But even a bar-bot enjoys some fresh air once in a while. Or a decent approximation of fresh air.

CHIP

Yeah, Hydroponics really went all out on this sector. You'd almost think you were on Earth.

DEE

The projection of an almost-clear blue sky is a nice touch--just the right number of little puffy clouds.

JOHN

Did they--did they rip the truss welds off the ceiling? I'm surprised the Robot Union went along with that.

WINSTON CHURCHILL-BOT

It's as I always say, old sport, if you're going through welds, keep going!

JOHN

So you're all here. Together. Almost everyone I know. Just... hanging out. Without me.

SOPON

What's it to ya?

JOHN

Oh, I dunno. I guess I just thought I was becoming, you know, part of the group.

DEE

It's not that we didn't think of you, John. It's just that we assumed you were working.

XTOPPS

Yeah, aren't you supposed to be boguing it at the old mill, zood?

JOHN

The... what?

XTOPPS

Yeah aren't you like. A miller?

JOHN

I come in to fix the Egg's seltzer machine like once every two weeks!

XTOPPS

Or a milliner?

JOHN

I... fix drinks machines...

XTOPPS

Ohhhhhh. A haberdasher. Patic, mang.

JOHN

S... sure.

ALIEN BARFLY

You tell 'em, sister!

JOHN

You even invited her?!

CHIP

Eh, she goes where the party is.

XTOPPS

You seem nerved-out, zood. Have a finger sandwich.

DEE

Or maybe a spot of tea?

BUBBLES

I'm fully stocked, John. Want me to whip us up some frozen margs? The contents of my torso are at your disposal!

JOHN

Uh, pass, thanks.

CHIP

Anyway, you're here now, right? Pull up some blanket. We're playing Zero-G Twister.

JOHN

Zero-G twister? Don't you need to go to the Anti-Grav Gym for that?

DEE

Streez, John, we're not playing at the professional level! It's just the home game. See?

JOHN

...How does it work?

CHIP

Step on the mat and find out!

JOHN

I can't, I've got to get to--

DEE

So, you've got a vonch about not being invited, but when we do invite you, you don't want to play? Make up your mind, c'mon.

XTOPPS

Hurf the FOMO, bro-mo.

JOHN

Okay, I guess I have time for one ...round, is it?

CHIP

Great, Johnny's in. Everyone, step on the mat. On three.

EVERYONE BUT JOHN

One, two, three!

Mat attaches to everyone's feet and levitates. JOHN is the only one surprised; the others giggle or otherwise react happily.

JOHN

Gah!

CHIP

As Spinmaster General I'll just read the rules, and then we can get started.

General enthusiasm from everyone but JOHN.

CHIP

By now all participants should be locked in to the mat's gravitational field--

JOHN

Oh, so it's not exactly *zero* Gra-

WINSTON CHURCHILL-BOT

No pedantry!

DEE

Yeah, John. There's no gravity, so lighten up.

JOHN

Har har.

BUBBLES

The point is, it can be *played* in zero gravity. On account of the mat creating its own field, get it?

JOHN

So I'm stuck here now?

DEE

Yup!

CHIP

RULE two. The dots will release pull long enough for the players to move their assigned appendages to the designated orbs.

JOHN

I... okay.

CHIP

RULE three: once the orbs are all occupied, the mat will invert orientation and level two will commence.

JOHN

WHAT? You're going to flip us upside down?

XTOPPS

Hey, it's all a matter of perspective, palomino. On the Upper Concourse, we'd be upside down already.

ALIEN BARFLY

You tell 'em, sister!

CHIP

RULE FOUR: I am the spinmaster and I make up the rules. Here we go!

Spinner is spun.

CHIP

Right leg yellow!

Merriment.

CHIP

Left hand jubilo!

JOHN

What?

CHIP

Oh, sorry, that's from the stomatopod rules... Uh... Left hand chartreuse!

Laughter and struggling.

CHIP

4th ancillary vocal appendage indigo!

JOHN

I don't think I have one of those!

CHIP

Just use whatever's closest to the middle of your bod--uh--never mind. Right leg. Let's say your right leg.

JOHN

(makes sounds of effort)

PARROT HEAD 2

Boy, you're about as flexible as you are handsome!

PARROT HEAD 1

Again, he didn't mean that as a compliment.

XTOPPS

Woah, mang. Did your pants just squawk?

JOHN

Wh--no, it's... I have to get this... Cockathreec... to the Outbound Freight Office before it closes in {# *however long it's going to be*}. And it's taking forever! I've been trying to get to the Widdershins Travel Hub for the last {# *however long it's been*}!

CHIP

So, John, are you gonna move your right leg, or are you out?

JOHN

Uh... okay. I'll just, uh, move my...

SOPON

Whoa! Mind my pyloric gangliae, would ya? Boo-tay!

JOHN

Sorry. Ok, yeah, this has been fun, but... Uh, Chip? How do I leave the mat?

CHIP

Oh. Technically you can't until someone wins.

JOHN

...Oh.

CHIP

Yeah...

JOHN

Can everyone just voluntarily fall for me, please?

Sounds of EVERYONE but XTOPPS and DEE acquiescing.

JOHN

Uh... Xtopps? Dee? Any time now.

DEE

Sure, I'll fall... as long as Xtopps here falls at the exact. Same. Time.

XTOPPS

Ready when you are, Dee.

DEE

On the count of three.

One...

Smooshing noises.

DEE

Hey!

XTOPPS

That's my soloin' elbow, mang! Bletch!

JOHN

Oh, look at that, you both fell.

DEE

You pushed us!

JOHN

Yeah, well, life's full of disappointments.

PARROT HEAD 2

Awk! He would know!

PARROT HEAD 1

He's one of them!

ZERO-G TWISTER GAME VOICE

Awww, snap! Game over, duderinos!

JOHN

(over the previous)

And no more out of you three! All I want is to--AAIGH!

Sounds of forcefield ending, JOHN flopping gracefully on to the floor.

ZERO-G TWISTER GAME VOICE

Make sure you come back soon for more zero-gravity fun!

(voice changes to pharmaceutical announcer-voice)

"Fun" is not a legally binding term this game is for recreational use only any unlawful copying and/or distribution of this game without the express written consent of Quarker Brothers can result up to fourteen-thousand-solar-cycle imprisonment and/or immediate ejection into the nearest class O star.

JOHN

Sorry to spoil the game, folks, but I'm on a tight schedule here. And I still haven't figured out how to get past the Central Promenade to Outbound Freight without getting hodie-ringed by scavenger hunters.

CHIP

Oof, yeah, I feel ya. Love the post-hunt drinking crowd, but no way am I getting anywhere near 'em till it's over.

DEE

Yeah, those drifters take it wayyyy too seriously. That's why we're camped out down here.

JOHN

So does anyone know how I can get to the Widdershins Travel Hub from here?

WINSTON CHURCHILL-BOT

Keep going!

JOHN

You know what? It was esoteric before, and it's unhelpful now.

ALIEN BARFLY

You tell 'em, sister!

JOHN

What I meant was a shortcut, or something.

XTOPPS

There's a hatch just past the writhing pines over there. You don't want any hunters peeping you, you can cut through there and you'll be spry all the way to Tsade. Sometimes Xtopps needs to stay slippery, you chom me?

JOHN

That sounds like it could work. Thanks Xtopps! Sorry again about the Twister, everyone. See you at the Egg later?

ALL

Later, John. Bye! See ya! Hasta la vista! Cheerio! Ruined the game, wonders why we don't invite him places (*etc.*)

PARROT HEAD 2

Gosh, your friends seem really nice.

JOHN

Yeah, they are.

PARROT HEAD 2

To each other.

JOHN

No! We're friends. They just thought I was working.

PARROT HEAD 1

"A lie oft repeated becomes the truth." I forget who said that. Someone much smarter than you are, I'm sure. 'Course that's a pretty low bar.

Sounds of walking.

JOHN

I think I'm getting a blister.

PARROT HEAD 2

I'm sure with all the other stuff wrong with your feet, people will barely notice.

JOHN

Gee, thanks. Okay, what's behind this door?

Creaking.

JOHN

Oh. A... normal hallway. Huh. Looks pretty long, too. This could be it! Thank you, Xtopps, you beautiful brittle brain! Tsade, here I come!

More walking. Sounds of... rushing water? Apparently getting closer...

JOHN

Hm, sounds like there's a pretty big leak down here... I should probably report it to Maintenance. Although I don't know if I'm supposed to have access to... wherever this is. Can you make anonymous reports to Maintenance? It sounds like it's coming from right around this-- *(emerges into a large cavernous area and stops)* ...Oh. It's... a gigantic lake. Thank you Xtopps, you lumbering loofah face. *(sighs)* Yeah, I guess I'd call this a shortcut too if I had twelve arms to doggy paddle with.

PARROT HEAD 2

I'm sure you'll be able to swim it, no problem! All that fatty tissue in your head should increase your buoyancy quite a bit.

JOHN

Ugh, now I'm going to have to double back...

PARROT HEAD 1

Hey, idiot. Look literally three feet to your left.

JOHN

What? Oh! I guess I can take this... rickety old rowboat? Across? Wh... where the hell am I?

Creaking. Oars dragging the water. Exertion from JOHN as he rows. Sounds... ominous. Bats?

JOHN

(with some effort) Who... puts a lake... in a space station!? ...You know, I'm surprised... I've never had a call... down here. ...Wouldn't put it past... the Robot Union... to classify a lake... as a water fountain.

PARROT HEAD 2

We could probably fly to the other side, check it out for you. Just saying.

JOHN

(straining at the oars)

You know... I have to get you back... where you belong.

PARROT HEAD 1

(dejected, pointedly)

Sure. Where we belong.

JOHN

Oh we're almost there anyway. *(water lapping)* No way. Is that...? What?!

Boat bumps against the shore. The sounds of a giant, rusty windmill lazily spinning, despite there being no wind inside this space station. A fly buzzes, maybe. The water laps the shore. The windmill squeaks around. A rocking chair thumps against the wooden porch outside the mill.

JOHN

(freaked out)

Holy shit. There is an old mill.

OLD CARETAKER

Bout time you arrived, John B.

JOHN

You.. know my name?

OLD CARETAKER

I've always known your name. Why not set a spell? Help yourself to some hardtack and nettle tea.

JOHN

(getting out of the boat)

Oh, thanks, I'm good, actually.

OLD CARETAKER

You've always been good, John B. And you will be, until the day of your death. Which, just so you know, will be /on February--

JOHN

Right. Well, gotta go. Xtopps *(to himself, sotto voce: Xtopps!)* said this leads out to Tsade Sector?

OLD CARETAKER

Oh, it's...

OLD CARETAKER AND JOHN

...always lead out to Tsade Sector.

JOHN

Got it. Can you tell me how? Or where? Or anything not super distressing?

OLD CARETAKER

I can tell you how to fashion a bundle of straw into a good old-fashioned onion sack!

JOHN

That... technically counts, I guess.

PARROT HEAD 1

Yeeesh.

PARROT HEAD 2

Well, I hope you're getting a good ol' glimpse of your future.

OLD CARETAKER

Why very astute, old threece! I *am* John B in the future!

JOHN

Wha-- no you're not!

PARROT HEAD 1

Nope, it checks out.

PARROT HEAD 2

Friendless.

PARROT HEAD 1

Decrepit.

PARROT HEAD 2

Alone in a swamp.

PARROT HEAD 1

Ranting about onion sacks.

JOHN

Look, mister...

OLD CARETAKER

B.

JOHN

No. Can you just tell me how to get to Tsade?

OLD CARETAKER

"If you're going through weld, keep going." It's straight through, John B.

JOHN

O...kay. Thanks?

*JOHN slowly backs away as **the CARETAKER hums tunelessly to himself.**
Continues down another hallway.*

JOHN

(*shudders*) That was. Well, not the most disturbing thing I've seen on this station, obviously, but weirdly close.

PARROT HEAD 1

Oh yeah, we figured you've got a mirror.

JOHN

Ha. ha. I actually live with an Iltorian, remember?

PARROT HEAD 2

So why couldn't he pick us up?

JOHN

Oh hey, is that another elevator? ... "Express Elevator: Travel Hub." No flotting way. (*presses button, doors open, gets in*) That old caretaker actually steered us right? I thought I was going to end up in a wormhole to like my childhood bedroom or something.

Elevator arrives.

TRAVEL HUB VOICE

You are now entering the Widdershins Travel Hub--access to docking arms Ihwaz through Berkanan and Outbound Freight Processing. Have a pleasant and relaxing cycle.

JOHN

HA! Ok, where... yes! "Outbound Freight Office!" I made it!

The door whooshes open and we hear postal-type noises.

JOHN

I can finally return you.

PARROT HEAD 1

Don't do us any favors.

PARROT HEAD 2

Why start now?

JOHN

Oh man, of course there's a line. But I'm so close. And look, it's not my fault you're a captive., ok? It's not like I asked for you. I wanted a goldfish. So I've got to send you back.

PARROT HEAD 2

Oh, no no. Sure. You do what you've gotta do.

JOHN passes by FRALL, TORIANNA & ALTHAAR as he heads for the line.

ALTHAAR

...will be most welcome news! The return of this revered object will be the linch-pinning of the peace treaty!

TORIANNA

I'm just happy we managed to retrieve it before the Montaguian and Capuloid delegations could slaughter each other. I'd love to get a look at this famous artifact before it leaves the station, but, well, obviously I'll be keeping my blindfold on, given the circumstances.

FRALL

I can see it, Commander. It's... okay.

ALTHAAR

Althaar is most fortunate that his back was had by Commander Torianna and Lieutenant Commander Frallen-Br'ar! He regrets that his presence forestalls viewing by the Commander of the most splendid Star Cross!

SCAVENGER HUNTER 1

And here's all the other stuff on the list!

TORIANNA

Huh? Oh, yes, just throw all that in the garb... garage. The winner's... garage...circle.

SCAVENGER HUNTER 2

Where do we get our prizes?

SCAVENGER HUNTER 3

Yeah? When can we blow this cryo-pop stand?

TORIANNA

Oh, uh, talk to the Lieutenant about that. They've handled all the details, right Frall?

FRALL

Of course, Commander. (*shimmer*) Gentlebeings, you can retrieve your travel passes at any ticket kiosk in the Central Promenade.

HUNTERS

Yay! Woo! (*etc.*)

TORIANNA

Well, Frall, I'd say we've done a good cycle's work! The Star Cross has been recovered, we've prevented an interplanetary bloodbath, and all it cost us was the promise of a free one-way travel pass to those chumps.

HUNTERS

Huh?

TORIANNA

Champs. To you champs. Congratulations again! (*muttering*) Stupid blindfold.

JOHN

Hey, my shoe! Gimme that!

Yoinking noise.

WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS-BOT

Attention all Fairgrounds-goers. The scavenger hunt has been successfully concluded. Congratulations to the winning team, Kuiper's Finders. (*Hunters: Woo!*) Residents may now traverse the Central Promenade with only a normal amount of tsuris. But the panoply of recreational activities will continue, gentlebeings: coming up in {#} minutes, the Outbound Freight Office will be the location of this month's Planck League Paintball Tournament. Participants, please be advised that going forward, all combatants will be marked with a single white paint splotch, in order to avoid a repeat of last year's diplomatic incident with the Acrylicons of Chromacryl 7. That is all.

JOHN

Crap, I've only got {#} minutes. But the line's moving... I think we're gonna make it!

PARROT HEAD 1

And then... a lifetime in captivity.

PARROT HEAD 2

At least we enjoyed the company of a disheveled, hapless janitor all day as he shepherded us to our re-enslavement.

PARROT HEAD 1

SIGH.

PARROT HEAD 2

SIGH.

PARROT HEAD 3

Freedom!

JOHN

(dismayed)

Oh, come on now, that's...

PARROT HEAD 1

Oh, no no. Don't worry about us.

PARROT HEAD 2

We're used to disappointment.

PARROT HEAD 1

After all, we've been hanging around you.

PARROT HEAD 3

John B?

JOHN

W...yes Harry?

PARROT HEAD 3

You said before that you knew what it was like to feel trapped.

JOHN

I didn't know you heard that. Your other heads cut me off immediately.

PARROT HEAD 3

I am always listening.

JOHN

That's... unsettling.

PARROT HEAD 3

Imagine if someone had the power to make you feel, but for a moment, that you were free. Just one shining moment and then... a lifetime in a cage. But the memory... the memory of that moment would sustain you.

JOHN

Oh man. I mean.... Gah okay. I've probably got a minute before I get to the front of the line. I guess I can't begrudge you what might be your only chance to fly. For ONE. MINUTE. Okay?

PARROTS 1 & 2

Okay!

PARROT HEAD 3

Oh, John B. You have my word as a sentient bird-lizard. We will remember you in our darkest hours as the being who granted us our only taste of liberty.

JOHN

And you'll meet me at that window right there?

PARROT HEAD 3

It is a great gift you give us, John B. And we are humbled.

JOHN

Okay.

JOHN unlocks the cage. The door swings on squeaky hinge.

PARROT HEAD 3

LATER, LOSER!

PARROT HEAD 1

WHEE!

PARROT HEAD 2

See ya never, clown shoes!

PARROT HEAD 3
FREEDOM!!!

That sound of a wild giant bird, I feel like it's from Northern Exposure, maybe a hawk? Anyway, that sound as the cockathreecce flies away. (and now lives at the Fairgrounds)

JOHN
Gods dammit.

A SPLAT!

JOHN
Gods *dammit!* Talk about a crappy day. (*deep sigh*) Guess I'm not getting that goldfish...

A loud obnoxious buzzer sounds.

TRAVEL HUB VOICE

Attention valued Fairgrounds shipping and freight clients! The Outbound Freight Processing Office is now closed! Have a pleasant and relaxing cycle somewhere else.

***JOHN sighs.** A team of paintball participants runs up, **shouting to each other,** shooting paintballs.*

PAINTBALL PARTICIPANT 1

Over here! Target acquired!

CHRISTOPHER WALKEN-BOT

Aim... for his head!

JOHN

Wha? No! I'm not playing! Leave me alone!

PAINTBALL PARTICIPANT 1

You can't fool us! You've got the white mark! /Fire when ready!

JOHN

No! That's just birdsh--

Sound of paintballs pummelling JOHN.

JOHN

Oof, gah, ouch *etc.*

*The **PAINTBALLERS** run off, whooping in warlike fashion.*

JOHN

Sure. Why not.

End credits music.

ANNOUNCER

You've been listening to *Life with Althaar*, episode eleven...

The Merciless Errand

This episode was written by John Amir and Lex Friedman

featuring

John Amir as John B

Berit Johnson as Althaar

Ivanna Cullinan as Commander Torianna

Alyssa Simon as Lieutenant-Commander Frall

Amanda La Pergola as Mrs. Frondrinax

Philip Cruise as Hardyfox Fornes

Christopher Lee as Chip Frinkel

Zuri Washington as Dee

{etc. with other parts}

and Ian W. Hill as your announcer, William S. Burroughs-bot, {etc.}

Life with Althaar was created by Berit Johnson and Ian W. Hill

This has been an audio production from Gemini CollisionWorks.

Tune in again in two weeks for our next episode, but first, a {personal message from all of us here at GCW Central:}

{Ian and Berit do a promo}